

Twilight of virtualities: Imagining and playfulness in an ambiguous virtual reality

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**Twilight of Virtualities:
Imagining and Playfulness in an Ambiguous Virtual Reality**

By

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MA

This thesis is submitted to the University of Wolverhampton in partial
fulfilment for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

April 2023

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Abstract

This thesis aims to challenge current critical visions of virtual reality and their drive for immersive experiences. Academic literature and popular culture are predominantly interested in how the technology of virtual reality can convince users they are in a different world. This steers contemporary technological design, improving the VR experience, as that it supports futuristic fantasies of for instance the Metaverse, with Mark Zuckerberg being one of its latest advocates. To virtually exist elsewhere. This thesis argues that the immersive goals of virtual reality rely on a problematic conceptual leap of the imagination: virtual realms and experiences are persistently imagined to be somewhere else, completely disconnected from *being here*. This separative thinking, which is shaped by modern ideas about technology and the imagination, creates a rift between virtual experiences and everyday experiences.

To address this discrepancy, this thesis looks to reconceptualise virtual reality and ask what virtual technology can do for imagining in everyday life. Its conceptual analysis uses the historical framework of modernity to show alternative modes of virtual thinking. It presents the idea of a phenomenological virtual reality, which, based on the philosophical definition of the virtual, describes the ambiguous way consciousness and everyday surroundings interconnect with each other. To virtually exist *here*. Through the novel concept of aspersion, an alternative to immersion, the thesis argues for a cognitive sprinkling, in which imagining fleetingly overlaps with memory and sensory impressions. Virtual technology can playfully support such an aspersion experience and help us becoming closer to our everyday surroundings. This conceptual approach is furthermore strongly transcultural: Japanese technological, cultural, and philosophical perspectives are used to reconsider virtual reality. They help to deepen the conceptual language of this thesis's alternative virtual framework, as that they bring about a better symbiosis of cognition and virtual technology in modern everyday life.

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Introduction

Story A

After a tiring day at the office and an overcrowded commute I'm finally home. I put on my state-of-the-art virtual reality headset, cover my ears with noise-cancelling headphones, and instantly I'm transported to a realm of spectacular adventures and splendid existences. Over the course of a few hours I'm an intergalactic pilot, fending off an alien invasion; playing a couple of rounds of golf on a tropical island; exploring Atlantis with my yellow submarine; sharpening my enchanted blade and lead an army of elves into a final stand against the army of the dead; and finally, after victory, the last hour I continue my on-going construction project of a skyscraper town on the moon, named after myself, with Earth as its background, deciding if the next skyscraper will be in the form of a cone or a screwdriver. All the graphics are so lifelike, it's amazing, it's as if I'm there.

Then it goes dark: I've turned off the headset and I'm back in my bedroom. I need some time to process all that I have experienced. Where everyday life is mundane and stressful, over there I'm immersed into existences in which I'm the hero and where I can create at will. Every fantasy is at my doorstep – like having a golden ticket to enter the worlds of my dreams.

Story B

I've downloaded Pokémon GO this morning with a colleague. During our lunchbreak we walk with our smartphones out and find a Pokémon in front of a dodgy sandwich place where it's always greasy, smelly, and my colleague is pretty sure he got food poisoning there. We aim our smartphone cameras at the shop and laughter ensues: the ugliest, slimiest Pokémon pops up on our screens. While deciding to rename the sandwich place after the Pokémon (Grimer) we notice little flowers are growing underneath the digital creature and there is a colony of ants coming from under the pavement. We make up a story on the spot, where Grimer is a city overcome by dark magic and the ants are saving the last flowers to break the spell.

After work I'm standing in a fully packed train. As the city goes by, I try to imagine which Pokémon are invisibly roaming the busy roads, patches of city green, and maybe even inhabiting the many rooftops. The mind-wandering gets interrupted every now and then by people bumping into me as they're getting off the train. I used to play the Pokémon games on my Gameboy during family holidays. Where was it again? Spain? Portugal? I can't quite remember. For a while I'm not really looking at anything in particular, my memories, the Pokémon and the story of Grimer vaguely blend together. I notice I'm at my stop and get off.

When talking about virtual reality, it is Story A that will be associated with its promise: the idea of putting on a headset to immerse oneself in wholly digital worlds in which everything imagined is possible and we – or our avatars – can be whoever we want to be. The potential of the human imagination unlocked by the power of the computer and the virtual reality (VR) headset; to feel like one is somewhere else, escaping the boredom and difficulties of everyday life. This thesis will argue the opposite: Story B is more ambitious in its approach to the imagination in everyday life when talking about virtual reality. This seems to be a strange claim. First, from a technological perspective *Pokémon GO* (2016) is an example of augmented reality,¹ which places virtual objects in physical reality, and not VR, which is a completely digital environment. Second, how can Story B be more ambitious, given the marvellous experiences of Story A?

It depends on the perspective one wants to take when talking about virtual reality. Marie-Laure Ryan, discussing the history of virtual reality, notes that when “virtual reality technology” for the first time captured the general public’s imagination in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was less through a revolutionary computer system than through “a grand flourish of rhetoric”.² Virtual reality and its beliefs “sprang fully formed from the brain of its prophets”, not so much the technology itself was the lead actor.³ Ryan’s observation that virtual reality has foremost been a rhetorical device is the basis for this thesis: it will argue that virtual reality is indeed just as much a rhetorical construct, with implicit ideas and beliefs about what virtual reality can be or should do, especially when it comes to the role of the imagination in everyday life. Therefore, virtual reality needs to be reconsidered, conceptually, and it should be shown how the current rhetoric of virtual reality has been built on modern ideas and assumptions about technology which are narrow and are not as straightforward as they seem initially.

With the concept of virtual reality at its core, this thesis will put forward an alternative rhetoric in which virtual technologies playfully support imagining in everyday life (story B), instead of following modern fantasies of completely immersing the human mind (Story A). In the alternative rhetoric of virtual reality, Story B, as said, is deemed to be more ambitious. Where Story A represents the current rhetoric of virtual reality and how the specific technology of VR harbours the promise of completely overwhelming us, tricking us into feeling as if we are somewhere else, Story B represents a virtual reality, based on its philosophical definition, that is much more in tune with the conscious experience of everyday life. This alternative perspective is not bound to a

specific virtual technology, like a VR headset, but can also include augmented reality, mixed reality,⁴ or even smartphones and video game consoles.

To answer the main question of this thesis – what does it mean to imagine in the alternative rhetoric of virtual reality, and how can virtual technology support such an imagining? – the first part of this thesis will take the shape of a diagnosis and ask the following questions: What constitutes the alternative rhetoric of virtual reality? What does it mean to imagine and be playful in such a virtual reality? And how does it differ from the current rhetoric of virtual reality? The second part of the thesis is transcultural and shifts to Japanese perspectives in engaging these questions. The use of *Pokémon GO* in Story B is a deliberate one: it serves as a symbol of how Japanese philosophical, cultural, technological, and religious perspectives can help rethink virtual reality, the role of the imagination in everyday life, and move towards a more playful symbiosis of virtual technology and the embodied cognitive experience of one's immediate surroundings. Part two, therefore, will ask: how can Japanese perspectives deepen the alternative rhetoric of virtual reality, and, lastly, from the perspective of this alternative rhetoric, how can virtual technology support a playful imagining in everyday life?

The Current Rhetoric of (Digital-)Virtual Reality

Before moving on to these questions, first the current rhetoric of virtual reality should be conceptually and historically situated. Although the concept of the virtual has both a computational and a philosophical meaning, it is the computational definition that underpins the current rhetoric of virtual reality. The computational meaning Ryan describes in a straightforward manner as “the virtual as computer mediated”.⁵ This computational basis remains when furthermore defining virtual reality. To for instance Grigore Burdea and Philippe Coiffet “virtual reality is a high-end user-computer interface that involves real-time simulation and interaction through multiple sensorial channels”,⁶ whereas William Sherman and Alan Craig define virtual reality as “a new medium brought about by technological advances in which much experimentation is taking place to find practical applications and effective ways to communicate”.⁷ This thesis will use the concepts of the *digital-virtual* and/or *digital-virtual reality* to describe this computational/technological meaning, and from here on will speak of *the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality* to emphasise its computational basis.

To understand how the current rhetoric is dominated by digital-virtual beliefs it needs to be furthermore situated in the wider historical context of modernity. This will

show how at the heart of the current rhetoric lies a paradox: digital-virtual reality is strongly rooted in a modern technological mindset, in which computational power is used to analyse and rationalise the world around us, however, this same computational power has the promise to enchantingly transport the human imagination out of this rationalised reality. When this thesis speaks of modernity, it will follow Mihaela Irimia's idea of "Long Modernity", in which the pillars of modernity are, as Irimia argues, secularisation, rationalisation, and disenchantment, that come together in "a new way thinking about the world".⁸ Irimia summarises modernity's pathway from the seventeenth century until the present as follows:

What we now call Early Modernity becomes irreversibly engaged in a future-oriented project valorizing a secular vision and adjacent practices. [...] In my critical vocabulary this is Classic Modernity originating in the eighteenth century with its newly erected public sphere and physio-scientific scaffolding rising on the *correct* as its central value. High Modernity and its offspring, Late Modernity, give full vent to technological evaluation and place at the centre of their pragmatic scrutiny the value called the *efficient*. The irreversible fall from the supreme good of the Classic Antiquity into the various forms of approximation cultivated by one phase after another of modernity – *the Long Modernity* [...].⁹

Modernity, in short, from the seventeenth century on, is a historically morphing project of present-mindedness and future-mindedness that tries to be correct about the fabric of reality and uses this fabric as efficiently as possible.

In the context of the digital-virtual, especially important is the "technological evaluation" that Irimia speaks of, and its efficiency goals, for the computer as a tool is part of this modern technological mindset. Irimia's observation is in line with Martin Heidegger's argument that modernity is about pulling apart the world, followed by a remaking to one's liking: "Man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is."¹⁰ Pulling apart the world happens through modern science, which is Heidegger's overarching "theory of the real". This theory of the real happens through modern scientific compartmentalisation: only by methodically branching knowledge of the world and "delimit these areas over against one and another and localize them", a picture of the world can be created which then can be remade.¹¹ Heidegger explains the latter

tendency of modern science and technology through the concept of “enframing”, which “demands that nature is orderable as standing-reserve”. With this idea Heidegger nods to the modern belief that everything is identifiable through calculation and can be placed within a larger structure of information. He believes that “the technological age” is about revealing, in which nature is revealed “as the chief storehouse of the standing energy reserve”. Enframing to Heidegger “is nothing technological, nothing on the order of a machine”, but is “the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve”.¹²

Heidegger says this idea of technology – a mode of revealing so truth can come forward – is the original meaning of the Greek word *technē*. The philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Aristoteles sprang from “the fundamental Greek experience of reality”, which was to master this revealing of a true state.¹³ Even though finding its etymological roots in this Greek idea, says Heidegger, modern technology has a different notion of what revealing should entail and bring forward. He explains that in the old Greek philosophies *technē* wasn’t concerned with revealing nature as a storehouse of energy, it was much more tied to the high arts, as *technē* was about experiencing these truths. Not to use the world, but to be closer to it.¹⁴ In modernity the opposite has happened. Bruno Latour agrees with Heidegger and argues that in modern times a forced distinction between society and nature has come about. Throughout the centuries, says Latour, a “process of partitioning has been accompanied by a coherent and continuous front of radical revolutions in science, technology, administration, economy and religion”.¹⁵ This process of partitioning has made it possible in modernity to “distinguish between the laws of external nature and the conventions of society”, in which “economic rationality, scientific truth, technological efficiency” have put nonhuman nature – and the exploitation of it for societal progress – at an intellectual distance.¹⁶

Summarised, when talking about the digital-virtual, its computational basis is underpinned by a modern technological mindset that seeks to compartmentalise/partition reality so it can be remade to one’s liking. This pulling apart of the world is what Max Weber calls the “disenchantment” of modernity, in which “the growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does not imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live”.¹⁷ Instead, it is the belief “that if *only we wished* to understand them we *could* do so at any time”, and that “we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*”. To Weber this means “the disenchantment of the world”: moderns no longer need “magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them” but can

use modern technology and calculations to control and improve the world.¹⁸ Furthermore, all three concepts – compartmentalisation, partitioning, disenchantment – are underpinned by an important drive of modernity: to create. Marshall Berman argues there is an innate modern drive to create and to constantly replace the new with the even newer:

The innate dynamism of the modern economy, and of the culture that grows from this economy, annihilates everything that it creates – physical environments, social institutions, artistic visions, moral values – in order to create more, to go on endlessly creating the world anew. This drive draws all modern men and women into its orbit, and forces us all to grapple with the question of what is essential, what is meaningful, what is real in the maelstrom in which we move and live.¹⁹

By pulling the world apart, creating more and more information (or in the language of computers: data), the promise is that moderns can go on “endlessly creating the world anew”.

Heidegger, Latour, and Weber focus on the intellectual and technological separation of modern human culture from the nonhuman. What interests this thesis, however, is that in the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality a different kind of separative thinking is in place: physical reality versus digital-virtual reality. Digital-virtual reality, wholly digital and anthropocentric, promises the powerful illusion of being in an alternative reality. Jaron Lanier, for instance, says that “through VR we learn to sense what makes physical reality real” and VR’s goal is “to sway the nervous system over a threshold so that the brain believes in the virtual world”.²⁰ Mel Slater, talking about digital-virtual reality, says the real power of the technology “is the illusion of being there” even “you know for sure that you are not”.²¹ Jeremy Bailenson agrees and says that what is “unique” to digital-virtual reality is the sense of “being there”, and describes how his research subjects “just stand slack-jawed with wonder, gazing down, up, and around, amazed to see themselves suddenly surrounded by a digitally rendered world that nevertheless feels, in crucial ways, real”.²²

In the context of this illusion of realness, a separate digital-virtual reality that feels just as real as real reality, Mario Gutierrez, Frédéric Vexo, and Daniel Thalmann note that “VR is about simulating reality” and even though other sensory input is important, “sight is the dominant perceptual sense and the principal means for acquiring

information”.²³ Hence, it is vision-oriented. This is in line with Hannah Arendt’s observation that modernity – with ancient Greek philosophy as its roots – has created a strong “ocularcentric” paradigm for understanding reality, and that ever since the old Greeks sight has predominated the other senses in Western culture. The main question in modernity, according to Arendt, is: Is what I see real? Vision is an absolute necessity in both truth-seeking as in language: through visually dominated metaphors moderns try to capture the world.²⁴ Marshall McLuhan, talking about technological media, adds that “all media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical”,²⁵ and with them being extensions of our faculties, change the way we think about and act in the world.²⁶ Combining Arendt and McLuhan, and reflecting on the above authors and their ideas on digital-virtual reality, the current rhetoric is an extension of the ocularcentric paradigm as found in modernity. What all the above authors on digital-virtual reality get at, are the impressive *technological capabilities to create* digital-virtual realities to convince users, with visual illusions being dominant, that they are *somewhere else*.

From here on the thesis will speak of a dialectical relationship between *everyday reality* and digital-virtual reality. Everyday reality is close to the notion of everyday life, however using the first whenever there is a matter of ontology involved, whereas using the second when it refers to day-to-day experience and the ontological component is of less importance. Then, showing how digital-virtual reality can be interpreted as a rhetoric, next to being a technology, one can observe the idea of a separate digital-virtual reality in discussions of other digital-virtual technologies as well. One example is one of Ryan’s original prophets:²⁷ Kevin Kelly, the co-founder of the popular technological magazine *WIRED*. In a 2019 cover piece for that same magazine Kelly writes how the computer screen is going to be replaced by augmented reality glasses, in which users are no longer staring at a screen, but are looking *through* it, actively merging the physical and digital-virtual. Kelly speaks of “the mirrorworld”, in which every space or object will have a digital-virtual counterpart and the user can switch back and forth:

Mirrorworlds immerse you without removing you from the space. You are still present, but on a different plane of reality. [...] Time is a dimension in the mirrorworld that can be adjusted. Unlike the real world, but very much like the world of software apps, you will be able to scroll back. History will be a verb. With a swipe of your hand, you will be

able to go back in time, at any location, and see what came before. [...] To visit an earlier time at a location, you simply revert to a previous version kept in the log. The entire mirrorworld will be like a Word or Photoshop file that you can keep 'undoing'.²⁸

Three things stand out from Kelly's mirrorworld. First, Kelly says users will be "on a different plane of reality" that is "unlike the real world" and with that separates everyday reality and digital-virtual reality. They obey different laws: both space and the flow of time are in control of the user in the mirrorworld. Second, it is a progression of modernity's pursuit to capture the world in an informational structure, remaking it to one's liking. Third, it is the modern logic of ongoingly *creating* information/data that can ongoingly *recreate* this different plane of reality. Or in Berman's words: to endlessly create the world anew. The main point to take from this, is that the current rhetoric allows one to *imagine* digital-virtual reality as if it exists somewhere outside of everyday reality. Although it may seem like the separation of realities and illusion of being somewhere else come through the persuasive power of technology, it is just as much a consequence of rhetorical language. Furthermore, this rhetorical language shows anthropocentric tendencies, for humans are completely in control *over there*.

The ability to imagine digital-virtual reality as a separate entity, actively positioning it outside of everyday reality, underlies the second part of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality according to this thesis: the importance of a particular kind of modern imagination, which this thesis will call an *overzealous imagination*, in combination with modern debates on disenchantment and enchantment. Once more the historical framework of modernity can help one understand the concept of virtual reality as not merely a recent computational technology. Peter Otto argues that the beginnings of virtual reality as an imaginative or intellectual construct can be found in the Romantic Period (1780-1830), when there was "an unprecedented interaction between the virtual and the actual", "the relation between real and fictional worlds", and the virtual as a concept for the first time became understood "as the space of emergence of the new, the unthought, the unrealized".²⁹ To Romantic authors like Samuel Taylor Coleridge the imagination was the essential human faculty, as it allowed for creation and a deeper understanding of the world. Art was on the one hand the expression of the imagination that "opened the space of the emergent, the possible, and the new", and on the other hand the powerful imagination was vital in immersing oneself in such a virtual reality.³⁰

Michael Saler agrees with Otto, situating the intellectual cornerstones of virtual reality in the Romantic period. That said, Saler focuses more on the development of fictional worlds from the end of the nineteenth century on, for he argues “today’s technological virtual worlds are direct descendants” of textual fictional worlds, which “helped acclimatize their adherents to virtual reality long before the creation of data gloves, headsets, and other VR technologies in the late twentieth century”.³¹ Fictional worlds such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth became, says Saler, antidotes for the rationalisation and intellectualisation of the modern world and were seen as a way to (re-)enchant a disenchanted everyday reality.³² Saler explains this binary system of disenchantment-enchantment is still an important fuel for fictional worlds *and* the “virtual worlds” of digital-virtual reality: there one can find magic, gods, and all those irrational things that can’t exist in a disenchanted reality. Saler says it is however only a binary system at the surface, for “modernity remains enchanted in a disenchanted way, rendering the imagination compatible with reason, the spiritual with secular trends”.³³ Fictional worlds and digital-virtual reality are neatly compartmentalised spaces where the human imagination can perpetually create and escape everyday life. One can observe here the earlier mentioned paradox: they are a consequence of disenchanted modernity yet positioned as an escape from it.

Otto and Saler show how virtual reality is more than just a technology or a technological concept: it also is an imaginative construct rooted in modernity. Yet, this thesis deviates in one aspect from the above authors as it sees those ideas of virtual reality, and more specific the imagination, as part of Long Modernity, in which the Romantic period shouldn’t be treated as a clear starting point. Alan Richardson, for instance, argues that “running from Descartes to Coleridge, imagination long inspired remarkable ambivalence among philosophers and literary writers alike”.³⁴ These debates didn’t just start in the Romantic period. Furthermore, Richardson says about the latter that “the rough half century extending from the 1780s into the 1830s” can’t be reduced “to an ‘age’ of imagination”, just as it wouldn’t be correct to make it “the age of sensibility, or revolution, or empire, or, for that matter, romanticism”.³⁵ Alexander Schlutz, on that part, highlights how especially modern debates of imagination and subjectivity overlapped “from the seventeenth century onward”, with at their heart questions of “the autonomy and ultimate rationality of the self”.³⁶ Authors such as Immanuel Kant tried to “exclude imagination altogether from their philosophical speculations about the subject”, or ensured that it was controlled “by the mind’s rational

faculties”.³⁷ It was to these kinds of debates, says Schlutz, that contemporary “Early German Romantic” authors like Johann Gottlieb Fichte or Friedrich von Hardenberg responded when they made the imagination “one of the central principles for the unity of subjectivity, philosophical systems, and indeed the creation of reality itself”.³⁸

It is outside the scope of this thesis to reconstruct these historical debates, yet it is important to stress how the Romantic discussions of the imagination, as positioned by Otto and Saler, didn’t happen in a vacuum but were part of longer and diffuse intellectual debates of modernity. This is not to dispute their overall analysis of the modern imagination being a key component of the history of virtual reality, which this thesis does follow. Hence, when this thesis speaks of an overzealous imagination in the context of virtual reality, there are two main aspects to consider. First, it follows Otto’s and Saler’s argument that virtual reality is deeply connected to the perceived power of the imagination and modern desires of (re-)enchantment. Virtual reality is just as much an imaginative construct as it is a technology. Second, this thesis situates the overzealous imagination in the historical context of Long Modernity. The thesis doesn’t claim there is a singular moment this kind of imagination came about, but as will be later shown, one can observe discussions of an overzealous imagination in the early seventeenth century already.

When looking at the connection between an overzealous imagination and desires of (re-)enchantment, Chris Goto-Jones explains it is important to distinguish between a) imagination and b) belief. According to Goto-Jones “magical *imagination* and even magical *thinking* are alive and well”, but “no matter how popular or apparently pervasive become the worlds of Harry Potter, Frodo, or Ged, it remains deeply controversial to *believe* in dragons, cloaks of invisibility, or raising people from the dead”.³⁹ Goto-Jones states this ability “to differentiate between the real role of magical imagination and the alleged reality of magical beliefs is an important cultural marker in Western modernity”.⁴⁰ Marina Warner, importantly, adds that an interplay between the imagination and modern technology has developed as well. She argues that “new technologies for seeing, recording, and picturing” have constantly reconfigured the ways to “communicate the imagination’s make-believe, its desires and terrors, and shape them through the latest telecommunications and imaging techniques”.⁴¹ Warner argues these modern technologies “have revealed to us the sensory boundaries which we inhabit” and how “our cognitive range exists perpetually in play between these powers and these limits”. Lastly, she states: “The faculties of what used to be called soul –

fantasy, memory, sensations, emotions – now exist in symbiosis with televisual communications.”⁴²

The relationship between modern technology and the imagination is therefore crucial when analysing virtual reality. Warner’s last observation can help explain why for instance Lanier says that “the destiny for virtual reality” is “postsymbolic communication”, where “instead of telling a ghost story, you make a haunted house”, and that “virtual reality will be like imagination in that it will engender unbounded variety”.⁴³ Or how Samuel Greengard posits, in the case of digital-virtual reality *and* augmented reality: “Make no mistake, the possibilities are limited only by our imaginations.”⁴⁴ Or Sherman and Craig, who argue that “imagination is where virtual worlds begin” and “the power of imagination can allow us to dwell where we choose, when we choose, and with whom we choose”, for “we are limited only by what we can imagine”.⁴⁵ Following Otto, Saler, Goto-Jones, and Warner, it becomes apparent how the technological promise of digital-virtual reality is positioned as a tool that can unlock the infinite potential of the human imagination and will offer enchanting escapism.

Hence, the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality has continuously been shaped by the implicit assumptions of a technological modernity: digital-virtual reality promises, in the spirit of compartmentalisation/partitioning, a completely anthropocentric realm in which the wildest fantasies of the human imagination can be experienced. The current rhetoric, as seen in Story A, can be summarised via two central statements. One, shaped by a modern technological mindset, it is a computational technology that wants to convince users they are somewhere else and sets up a dialectical relationship between everyday reality and digital-virtual reality. Two, shaped by diffuse modern debates of the imagination, this illusion of being somewhere else relies on an overzealous imagination, as that digital-virtual reality has the promise to further unlock the infinite potential of this all-powerful human imagination. As a result, the current rhetoric is overly separative and inward-looking; it creates schisms within everyday life, encourages one to disregard one’s immediate surroundings in favour of being *over there*.

This thesis wishes to present an alternative rhetoric of virtual reality – as presented in Story B – which addresses these issues of the current rhetoric and provides a more potent idea of virtuality. In it, virtual reality, as a concept, is an intimate part of everyday life, not a dialectic digital-virtual realm. It shows how one virtually exists *here*. The thesis combines two methodological approaches in making its case: first, through conceptual analysis it will use philosophical discussions of the virtual to redefine virtual

reality and its place in everyday reality and everyday life. Additionally, it will rethink the role of the imagination in such a redefined virtual reality. Second, it shall introduce a transcultural approach by using modern Japanese perspectives to deepen the conceptual framework of this alternative rhetoric. Through its transcultural conceptual analysis this thesis looks to contribute a redefined conceptual language when speaking of virtual reality, introducing novel concepts such as aspersion along the way, as that it will show the benefits of using Japanese perspectives in redefining this conceptual language.

Phenomenological Virtual Reality

The computational meaning of the virtual has been discussed, as well as how it, problematically, underpins the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. What then is the philosophical definition of the virtual? The answer here is less straightforward and needs a broader introduction, for different authors tend to highlight different aspects of virtuality. Through the writings of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Gaston Bachelard, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty this thesis will eventually coin the philosophical virtual as *the phenomenological virtual*. After having discussed and introduced this concept, from there on this thesis will speak of *the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality*, emphasising its philosophical basis, as opposed to the current rhetoric and its technological basis. Central to this alternative conceptual framework will be that virtual reality as a concept refers to the interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings.

When looking to understand the philosophical interpretations of the virtual, the writings of Bergson are a good place to start. First, Bergson shows how the virtual a) is paired with the actual and b) how it is tied to cognition. He explains that when people perceive an object (the actual) that is distinct from their bodies or is separated by an interval, it “never expresses anything but a virtual action”.⁴⁶ Virtual action is perception, according to Bergson, but the more the object and body near each other, “the more does virtual action tend to pass into real action”. When the object collides with the body, this is what Bergson sees as “real action”: one interacts with *actual* matter. Or as he summarises it: “Virtual action concerns other objects and is manifested within those objects; real action concerns itself and is manifested within those objects.”⁴⁷ Bergson sees the virtual as an exploration of intuition, how the actual is perceived, and asks how interior life relates to an external world. It is foremost the flux of time, he argues,

the ever-changing reality around us, that human intuition understands.⁴⁸ Virtuality is therefore fundamentally temporal in Bergson, with an essential role for memory: “There is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience.”⁴⁹

Our present moment is many moments at once and if anyone wants to understand human conscious experience, how it is present and how it intuitively perceives temporality, the interaction of matter and memory – the actual and virtual – is fundamental. Gilles Deleuze explains in more detail the Bergsonian idea of intuition, central to the virtual, “which primarily denotes an immediate knowledge (*connaissance*)”, and is both a simple holistic act in its immediacy, as that it brings about a “plurality of meanings and irreducible multiple aspects”.⁵⁰ In other words, the immediate intuitive experience is one of totality in which the senses and memory form a unified experience, but under closer inspection this experience of reality is mixed and “offers nothing but composites”. These temporal composites in Bergson, Deleuze says, therefore in the end are defined by an inherent ambiguity when they come together in immediate experience, for “we do not recognize what goes back to perception and what goes back to recollection”.⁵¹

Next to *connaissance* being the basis of the virtual, strongly temporal, with past and present coexisting in each flicker of experience, Deleuze makes another important observation about Bergson’s concept of the virtual: it is, like the actual, something that is open to discovery, for it already exists. This is different from “invention”, which brings into existence something that did not exist before.⁵² The virtual, therefore, is not a synonym for the potential: the opposition of actual-potential differs from actual-virtual, for the potential has no reality, it is not here yet and needs to be invented. As Deleuze says: “Every possible is not realized, realization involves a limitation by which some possibles are supposed to be repulsed or thwarted, while others ‘pass’ into the real.”⁵³ The virtual, however, is not actual but still *is* a part of reality.⁵⁴ It is for example the past that we, as subjects, carry with us in every present moment and allows for the above-mentioned mix of perception and recollection.

In Bergson’s thought, and Deleuze’s reading of it, the virtual does not have to be invented but is waiting to be discovered. This distinction between the virtual and potential is an important one, for in the literature on the virtual it at times gets mixed up. For example, Ryan retraces the etymology of the virtual and gives it the following philosophical meaning: “Later uses of the term, beginning in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, turn this dialectical relation into a binary opposition to the real: the virtual becomes the fictive and non-existent.”⁵⁵ In Bergson, who wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the virtual, however, *does* exist. While Ryan acknowledges that the virtual and actual are closely aligned, she still moves on to say: “For convenience’s sake I will refer to one pole of the virtual as fake and the other as potential.”⁵⁶ This, from the perspective of Bergson and Deleuze, turns the virtual into something it is not. A similar idea can be observed with for instance Pierre Lévy, who states: “In its philosophical sense, the virtual is *that which exists potentially rather than actually*, the field of forces and problems that is resolved through *actualization*.”⁵⁷ Although later on Lévy does situate the virtual within everyday reality and states that the “the virtual is nonetheless real”,⁵⁸ it is still important to stress that the virtual is not the potential, as seen in Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, and these concepts should therefore remain distinct from each other.

That is not to say that the two are not close to each other, for the virtual can be considered as the air strip from which the potential can take off. To better understand the relation between the virtual and the potential, one can look at Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenology of the imagination. Bachelard believes the imagination is the most prominent faculty and explicitly steers away from Bergson’s focus on memory,⁵⁹ for while Bachelard sees the importance of memory in human experience, he argues it serves the imagination. Where memory introduces the past in the present, Bachelard notes “the imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future”. If we cannot imagine, says Bachelard, “we cannot foresee”.⁶⁰ Hence, the imagination is the virtual action that is able to consider the potential of the present or future, and with that “augments the values of reality”⁶¹ and regularly will go “to a point well beyond reality, in its task of enlargement, for in order to surpass, one must first enlarge”.⁶²

Bachelard looks at the spaces in which people use their imagination: “shelters” in which one can live and retreat. Shelters, he says, will provide the safety to daydream: only when there is an illusion of protection the imagination can “build walls of impalpable shadows”⁶³ and truly flourish. Bachelard believes houses to be the ultimate shelter:

The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. [...] The places in which we have *experienced* daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former

dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us all the time.⁶⁴

If one retreats in the house, and daydreams in such a shelter, one “experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams”.⁶⁵ Bachelard calls this “coexistentialism” in which two kinds of space eventually blend: world space and the space of intimacy.⁶⁶ People paint spaces with their consciousness and the more they are protected in imagining, the more their colours will merge with the world. Hence, with Bachelard one sees the interconnection of conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings, the way they inform each other.

Both Bergson and Bachelard speak of coexistence when talking about the virtual. Bergson’s coexistence is a temporal one where, through memory, the past constantly coexists with the – experienced – present; Bachelard’s coexistence is a spatial one in which a virtual landscape overlays the spaces people inhabit. But where Bergson and Bachelard are both focusing on the brain or the mind when dealing with the virtual, Maurice Merleau-Ponty explores the embodied nature of the virtual. According to Merleau-Ponty “abstract movement hollows out a zone of reflection and of subjectivity”, and “superimposes a virtual human space over physical space”.⁶⁷ The creation of this virtual human space, constituted by memory and imagination, should be seen as an act by the body as a whole, and all the faculties and senses should be taken in consideration when thinking about how the virtual body situates itself in space. “The spatial level,” Merleau-Ponty says, “normally appears at the intersection of my motor intentions and my perceptual fields, that is, when my actual body comes to coincide with the virtual body”.⁶⁸ This latter remark may not seem to differ too much from Bergson’s idea of virtual action, however with the latter perception and anticipation are dominated by the eye. Only when, as Bergson says, “the object collides with the body” the other senses come into play. To Merleau-Ponty, however, the body and all its senses are equally important in the anticipation of the virtual state.

Merleau-Ponty gives the philosophical virtual an embodied form and steers it away from solely being a product of the mind: he makes it truly phenomenological. Hence, the philosophical virtual will from here on be called: the phenomenological virtual. Memory and imagination are not abstract faculties, but embodied ones, and it is the whole body that shapes experience. As for instance David Abram says in his analysis of Merleau-Ponty: “Considering phenomenologically – that is, as we actually

experience and *live* it – the body is a creative, shape-shifting entity.”⁶⁹ Therefore, phenomenological virtual experiences will end and begin with the “bodily organism”.⁷⁰ Memory and imagination are an “attribute of the senses themselves” and never independently operating faculties.⁷¹ The virtual can’t fly off to another realm because it never leaves the sensing body. Summarised, the phenomenological virtual experience is embodied; spatial and temporal; sometimes dormant, sometimes emergent; constantly being made and remade through a coexistence of the senses, memory, and imagination.

The question can be asked whether all the above isn’t just a description of conscious experience. Isn’t the phenomenological virtual just a synonym for consciousness? Although consciousness is indeed the basis of the phenomenological virtual, it can only be understood in its interconnection with one’s immediate surroundings, as already briefly discussed through Bachelard’s shelters. Take the example of the bedroom: it is not just filled with objects (a bed, a drawer, a mirror et cetera), but also filled with dreams, memories, particular smells, the ambiguous blend that makes it *feel* that it is *our* bedroom. Where on the one hand its phenomenological virtual layer is formed by an ambiguous blend of faculties and senses, on the other hand the virtual state of the bedroom will vice versa influence one’s experience of this bedroom. Hence, a *phenomenological virtual reality*. It is this kind of interconnecting, in which conscious experience and immediate surroundings are intimately linked, that is the basis of *the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality*. To further understand this conceptual basis, and where it differs from the current rhetoric, a discussion of different cognitive frameworks can help show what kind of conceptual language the alternative rhetoric looks to use when describing the phenomenological virtual experience and its interconnection with one’s immediate surroundings.

Helpful first is David Chalmers’s distinction between a) easy problems of consciousness and b) hard problems of consciousness. The easy problems of consciousness, according to Chalmers, are the ones that seemingly can be resolved by the methods of the cognitive sciences, in which a phenomenon is explained in terms of computational or neural mechanisms. One looks for example which region of the brain is active at what time during a particular act or task.⁷² The word “easy” is deceptive, for Chalmers admits that such problems will still take “a century or two” of empirical work. What is not so much in doubt, he says, is that the methods of the cognitive sciences should be adequate in answering these questions over time.⁷³ Chalmers’s hard

problems of consciousness, on the other hand, says Philip Goff, revolve around the challenge of figuring out and explaining how these processes in the brain “give rise to *experience*: feelings, emotions, sensations, the inner subjective world each of us knows in her or his own case”.⁷⁴ The question here to Chalmers is not *how* these processes work or *what* happens in the brain, but “*why* is all this processing accompanied by an experienced inner life?”⁷⁵

An example of this highly subjective experience is what Daniel Dennett would call “qualia”:

The *ways things seem to us*. [...] Look at a glass of milk at sunset; *the way it looks to you* - the particular, personal, subjective visual quality of the glass of milk is the *quale* of your visual experience at the moment. The *way the milk tastes to you then* is another, gustatory *quale*, and *how it sounds to you* as you swallow is an auditory *quale*; these various “properties of conscious experience” are prime examples of *qualia*. Nothing, it seems, could you know more intimately than your own qualia.⁷⁶

Antonio Damasio distinguishes two types of qualia. The first are – rather mild – feelings that are an “obligate part” of any subjective experience, such as “a shade of pleasure” or a “shade of discomfort”. These qualia are in the background, feelings people are not completely aware of. The second qualia are the ones Dennett describes and go beyond immediate subjective experience. They provide, says Damasio, the following question: “Why should the construction of perceptual maps, which are physical, neuro-chemical events, feel like something? Why should they feel like anything at all?”⁷⁷

Both qualia are part of Chalmers’s hard problems of consciousness: how to understand intrinsic conscious experience; and can current methods of the cognitive sciences answer such questions? Goff says there are three approaches to these hard problems and the understanding of intrinsic conscious experience: i) naturalistic dualism, of which Chalmers is a proponent; ii) materialism, of which Dennett and Damasio are proponents; and iii) panpsychism, of which Goff himself is a proponent.⁷⁸ The naturalistic dualist position, first, tries to bring the non-physical mind into the realm of science. What makes naturalistic dualists different from the more historical notion of the dualist, is that they don’t conflate the non-physical mind with the idea of a soul given by a godlike entity, or a soul that is part of an eternal cycle of reincarnation. What the naturalistic dualist tries to accomplish, says Goff, is postulating special “psycho-

physical laws” – comparable to fundamental laws like gravity – that somehow guide the non-physical mind’s interrelationship with physical reality.⁷⁹

An example of this position is the extended mind theory of Chalmers and Andy Clark. They ask: where does the mind stop; where does the rest of the world begin? Clark and Chalmers propose an “active externalism” to this conundrum. Externalism means that part of consciousness exists outside of the subject’s brain, whereas active means that externalism is focused on the-here-and-now. Clark and Chalmers say: “The human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right.”⁸⁰ They give the example of a game of Scrabble as an active external process, or in other words: an extended cognition. When the player rearranges the letter tiles on his tray or lays them down on the board to form a word, one can explain this as an outcome of internal processes and a long series of “inputs” and “actions”. Clark and Chalmers, on the other hand, argue that these Scrabble tiles have become part of cognition: the player’s cognition has become – in the here-and-now – locked into a coupled system loop with the object.⁸¹ The thread that holds the internal and external mind together, could be described as a psycho-physical law: it guides the non-physical mind’s interrelationship of the brain and the Scrabble tiles.

The materialist position, however, rejects any kind of explanation that involves cognitive processes through non-physical elements. To go back to the Scrabble example of Clark and Chalmers: to the materialist all that happens is indeed nothing more than an outcome of internal processes and a complex series of inputs and actions in the brain. There is no coupled system in which cognition is outsourced through an immediate loop: everything happens under the hood of the subject’s skull. Moreover, a consequence of the materialist position is that there are no such things as easy and hard problems of consciousness and Dennett thinks this very distinction creates a “misdirection” and “illusion-generator” when talking about consciousness: “These are *all* ‘merely’ the ‘performance of functions’ or the manifestation of various complex dispositions to perform functions.”⁸² To Dennett *qualia* are for instance intriguing, but they can’t have any other explanation than a material one. Or to use Damasio’s words, “neurons in charge of conveying signals to the brain” are so intimate with those interior structures, that the conveyed signals “are not *about* the state of the flesh but are literally extensions of the flesh”.⁸³ In materialism experiences are not caused by brain-states, they are one and the same thing. That is consciousness.⁸⁴

Goff argues for a third position, panpsychism, which is critical of both naturalistic dualism and materialism. Like the materialist position, it doesn't accept the non-physical aspect of naturalistic dualism, but it is also critical of materialism, for panpsychists think it doesn't have the methodological tools to make *intrinsic* statements about consciousness. One way to understand this criticism is through Bertrand Russell's critique of physics and theoretical mathematics. Russell argues these disciplines and their methods are only able to explain the extrinsic: physical laws described by mathematics. Physics and theoretical mathematics can say very little about intrinsic nature, for that is simply not what their methods are for.⁸⁵ In other words: the physical sciences explain what nature *does*, through the language of mathematics, which is however not the same as telling us what it *is*.

When it comes to the cognitive sciences, this same argument can be made, say panpsychists.⁸⁶ Panpsychism (made up of *pan* = everything + *psyche* = mind) states that consciousness is a ubiquitous feature of reality: all objects are composed of elements that have a certain form of consciousness. This doesn't mean that every object – say, a pan or lamp – has a sophisticated conscious life and is identical to human consciousness. There are simple forms of consciousness (particles) and there are complex forms of consciousness (animals and humans).⁸⁷ Goff summarises in the end the fundamental difference between materialism and panpsychism: where the materialist needs to bridge the gap between *objective quantities* of physical science and the *subjective qualities* of consciousness, the panpsychist needs to bridge the gap “from *simple* subjective qualities to *complex* subjective qualities”.⁸⁸ There is, therefore, also a subjectivist element to consider in panpsychism: it asks the question whether human consciousness can truly understand nonhuman consciousness from an intrinsic perspective.

The current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality is based on a materialist worldview: a modern technological mindset, revealing the processes of the human brain in ever finer detail, with it developing digital-virtual technology that can trick one into believing one is somewhere else. However, the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality will, for two reasons, be closer to the panpsychist framework. First, being phenomenological, it is particularly interested in making qualitative statements about intrinsic conscious experience, for the phenomenological virtual experience is an ambiguous blend of memory, the imagination, and sensory impressions. Second, in the alternative rhetoric intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings

interconnect and reinforce one another. In that regard, the spectrum of simple to complex forms of consciousness will be of use. This second reason will be discussed in more depth in the second, transcultural part of this thesis, in which Japanese discussions on techno-animism are close to this panpsychist idea of simple and complex forms of consciousness.

Everyday Imagining and Aspersive Playfulness

Summarised, the alternative rhetoric concerns itself with the ambiguous interconnectedness of *being* and *here*, opposite to the current rhetoric's technological illusion of being somewhere else and blocking out one's immediate surroundings. From this ambiguous phenomenological virtual experience, the alternative rhetoric looks to highlight the act of imagining. Instead of the overzealous imagination of the current rhetoric, as seen in Story A, the imagination in the alternative rhetoric is more modest and blends with the intrinsic conscious experience of everyday life, as seen in Story B. To further deepen the second take on the imagination, of use is Edward Casey's phenomenological study of the imagination. First, Casey says it's more accurate to talk about "imagining" instead of "the imagination", as the latter is too static and at times grandiose a concept, and "imagining is very much alive" and manifests itself "in daily feats of fancy".⁸⁹ Casey criticises Bachelard's imagination on that part, which is too much connected to "the rarefied realm of poetry", whereas imagining, says Casey, takes place in the "quotidian world of everyday life".⁹⁰ In short, everyday imagining.

Everyday imagining is easily accessible and operates in very broad limits, "limits which only rarely impede us from summoning up precisely the imaginative scene or situation that is desired".⁹¹ Additionally, Casey points out that a phenomenological inquiry of imagining in everyday life needs to be built on "an initial recognition of the phenomenon's inherent ambiguity", in which it is not "superproductively world-generating" but a subtle and ambiguous process one flows in and out of.⁹² Such an imagining differs therefore from the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, in which an overzealous imagination has been married to the technological promise of digital-virtual reality and *is* considered to be a world-generating faculty. However, it should be noted here that this thesis will slightly deviate from Casey when using his concept of everyday imagining. Although Casey states imagining is ambiguous, he also states the "imagination is an autonomous mental act: independent in status and free in its action".⁹³ In

the phenomenological virtual experience imagining is not strictly autonomous and ambiguously overlaps with memory and sensory impressions.

Using the concept of everyday imagining, this thesis will signal two concepts that are important to the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality and the kind of imagining it argues for: a) aspersion; and b) playfulness. To begin with aspersion, it is an alternative to immersion, which is often used to describe the experience of digital-virtual reality. Therefore, before discussing aspersion, this thesis will first discuss immersion. Janet Murray compares the “immersive experience” to “a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool”, in which it is about “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air”.⁹⁴ Murray stresses furthermore that it’s too passive to only talk about the suspension of disbelief when immersed. One doesn’t only suspend a critical faculty, she argues, simultaneously one is exercising a creative faculty and therefore actively *creating* belief.⁹⁵ This act of creating belief is however not found in all types of immersion, argues Mark Wolf, and he distinguishes three different categories of immersion, of which the latter two will matter to this thesis.

The first type of immersion, according to Wolf, is physical immersion, in which one is surrounded by a structure that immerses one in an “elsewhere”.⁹⁶ For instance, a walk-in video installation. Second, there is sensual immersion, which focuses mostly on an audio-visual illusion, as with for instance the digital-virtual reality headset.⁹⁷ Sensual immersion is therefore vital to the current rhetoric. Gutierrez, Vexo, and Thalmann make however a distinction between immersion, “related to the physical configuration of the VR application”, and presence, “a state of consciousness, the (psychological) sense of being in the virtual environment”.⁹⁸ Sherman and Craig differentiate between immersion and presence as well, but state that “immersion is a principle goal” of digital-virtual reality, may it be physical or mental.⁹⁹ Although immersion and presence are pressed together in Wolf’s concept of sensual immersion, what should be clear is that both are tied to the technological illusion of being somewhere else.

Wolf, lastly, describes conceptual immersion, which relies solely on the imagination. Conceptual immersion is close to Saler’s idea of creating fictional worlds and *does* align with Murray’s idea of immersion suspending disbelief and actively creating belief. Wolf describes this two-way process through “absorption”: on the one hand someone’s imagination is being absorbed, “pulled into” the elsewhere; on the other hand, one becomes so invested that one actively absorbs this elsewhere. For instance,

one starts learning and remembering the places, characters, and events of a fictional world, “constructing the world within the imagination the same way that memory brings forth people, events, and objects when their names are mentioned”.¹⁰⁰ In conceptual immersion, this imaginary realm lets one mentally block out one’s immediate surroundings, at least to some degree, and the two-way process of being absorbed and absorbing is what keeps the engine of the imagination going. An example would be, again, *Lord of the Rings*, in which the reader’s imagination absorbs Tolkien’s expansive Middle-earth.¹⁰¹ This type of imagination is what Casey would describe as a “superproductively world-generating” one, and which this thesis calls an overzealous imagination.

The current rhetoric combines sensual immersion, which refers to the technology of digital-virtual reality, and conceptual immersion, which refers to the overzealous imagination and the conceptual leap needed to imagine digital-virtual reality existing outside of everyday reality. It is especially conceptual immersion this thesis looks to question. Using a different meaning of immersion, as a form of Christian baptism, it will now introduce aspersion as one of its alternatives. The interest lies not with their religious content. Instead, this thesis looks to borrow the metaphorical quality of these baptisms. When looking at the different forms of Christian baptism, there are three dominant ones: i) immersion, in which the baptised is fully plunged, doused with, or partially dipped into the water; ii) affusion, where water is poured over the head of the one being baptised; and iii) aspersion, the method that is of interest to this thesis. With aspersion – coming from the Latin *aspergere*, “to sprinkle” –¹⁰² the holy water is sprinkled on the head.¹⁰³

This thesis will use aspersion when describing the phenomenological virtual experience in the alternative rhetoric. The idea of being aspersed, rather than immersed, provides a more grounded experience, it will argue. With immersion there is the desire to be completely overwhelmed, may it be through all the senses, only audio-visual, or through the faculty of the (overzealous) imagination. In aspersion, as a contrast, there is a *sprinkling* of imagining that will blend with the rest of intrinsic conscious experience. Aspersion is furthermore compatible with the alternative rhetoric’s interest in the interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings. Where with immersion one tries to block out these surroundings, necessary for the illusion of being somewhere else, the idea of sprinkling doesn’t suggest such an escapism. It doesn’t look to set up a dialectical relationship between everyday reality and virtual reality.

Next to aspersion there is the quality of playfulness that will underpin the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality and its everyday imagining. To understand the concept of playfulness, it is first important to understand how it is connected to play and its meanings. In that regard Brian Sutton-Smith speaks of different rhetorical approaches to play and argues the most dominant ones nowadays are close to modern beliefs, especially propagating the development of the individual. Sutton-Smith highlights three currently popular types of rhetoric when talking about play: i) the rhetoric of progression; ii) the rhetoric of the imaginary; iii) and the rhetoric of the self.¹⁰⁴ With the progressive rhetoric the assumption is that when the complexity of play grows, may it be physically or mentally, it both stimulates and reflects a wider growth or evolution of the player; with the imaginary rhetoric the assumption is that the creative faculties of the player will develop through play; and with the rhetoric of self the main assumption is that through play the player will find the true self.¹⁰⁵ The improvement of the individual as the main goal, says Sutton-Smith, creates a narrow definition of play. It makes play a predestined act: one plays to develop, and the borders of play and games are well-defined in their narrowness.¹⁰⁶

Sutton-Smith juxtaposes this narrow definition with a broad one. The broad definition is close to Casey's everyday imagining and "encompasses all the mind materials of dreams, daydreams, tropes, and active play forms" as opposed to the narrow definition of play that only speaks "for the more limited rhetoric of progress, power, identity, and self". Sutton-Smith summarises it as follows: "In the broad version, everything is play that is clearly not of an immediate adaptive usefulness. In the narrow version, nothing is play unless contemporaneously so named."¹⁰⁷ This narrow definition is modern and suggests control over play, while the broad definition doubts control: "The broader definition, in which either the gods or our own brains influence us playfully beyond our control, has about it an externality not likely to be popular in modern everyday parlance." In the case of the brain Sutton-Smith calls this "neural fabulation", meaning that the brain is continuously creating "some kind of ceaseless inner fiction, or is at play with itself".¹⁰⁸ Play is something innate, part of intrinsic conscious experience. The narrow definition obscures the ambiguous core of play and the many forms it can take, whereas the broader definition of play does account for this ambiguity. Furthermore, it takes away the focus on the development of the player, and instead of creating strict borders in which play is allowed to take place (for instance a sandbox),

the broader definition leaves these borders opaque and stresses the ambiguity of play in everyday life.

This broad definition of play is what Miguel Sicart would call playfulness. He argues the main difference between the two is “that play is an *activity*, while playfulness is an *attitude*”.¹⁰⁹ To Sicart playfulness means engaging with contexts and objects that are quite similar to play, but focuses more on the playful person’s “physical, psychological, and emotional attitude toward things, people, and situations”. In playfulness some of the characteristics of play are “projected” on non-play activities, in which there is “an attempt to engage with the world in the mode of being of play but not playing”.¹¹⁰ In line with Sutton-Smith, Sicart stresses the importance of ambiguity in playfulness: “Playfulness reambiguates the world. Through the characteristics of play, it makes it less formalized, less explained, open to interpretation and wonder and manipulation. To be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity.”¹¹¹ Casey’s everyday imagining, Sutton-Smith’s broad definition of play, and Sicart’s playfulness all emphasise the inherent ambiguity of the intrinsic conscious experience of one’s immediate surroundings, as that they highlight the role of imagining in this ambiguity. It is this ambiguity of imagining, combined with the cognitive sprinkling of aspersion, that will form the basis of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality.

Story A and Story B can help clarify the distinctions being made. Story A shows the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality: the digital-virtual space is neatly compartmentalised/partitioned, sealed off from disenchanted everyday reality and, relying on sensual immersion and conceptual immersion, becomes the space for overwhelming experiences that can enchant modern life. At its core the current rhetoric is dialectic: it suggests an immersive escapism, being able to transport someone *outside* of everyday reality. This enchanted escape, as seen in Story A, is close to Sutton-Smith’s narrow definition of play: clearly demarcated zones where one is allowed to play. The alternative rhetoric, however, expressed through Story B, addresses the key issue with Story A and the current rhetoric, in which imagining is not an intuitive part of everyday life, but instead a grotesque antithesis of it. In Story B virtual reality’s basis is the phenomenological virtual, not the digital-virtual, in which the qualities of aspersion and playfulness define an everyday imagining: the narrator playfully wonders where the Pokémon may be hiding, as that this imagining aspersionally blends with sensory impressions and memory. It’s not about the illusion of being somewhere else, but about colouring the experience of being *here*.

Japanese Perspectives: An Intimate Orientation

The alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality is built on the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings. In addition, it foregrounds an everyday imagining that is defined by aspersion and playfulness. This thesis will now argue that modern Japanese perspectives¹¹² can further deepen the conceptual framework of the alternative rhetoric for two main reasons. First, modern Japanese thought and fiction are rooted in rich cultural and philosophical traditions that explore the ambiguous interconnection of consciousness and everyday reality. Especially the religious pillars of Zen Buddhism and Shintoism will matter to this thesis. Through their traditions and modern interpretations of these traditions, Japanese perspectives will help further establish the alternative rhetoric's conceptual basis. They will deepen the qualities of aspersion and playfulness, as that they will show the Japanese interest in the interlinking of human and *nonhuman* consciousness, as opposed to the anthropocentric tendencies of the current rhetoric. Second, Japanese perspectives can help better position digital-virtual technology in the framework of the alternative rhetoric, in which they will be tools that can *support* an aspersion playfulness in everyday life.

However, before further strengthening the alternative rhetoric, first the mentioned Japanese perspectives should be placed in a wider transcultural framework. This thesis will follow Bryan Van Norden's call for a multicultural philosophy. Van Norden argues that the philosophical discipline is still too Eurocentric in trying to find answers for modern life and would benefit from engaging more actively with Eastern philosophy and treat it as an *equal* interlocutor: "Philosophy is a dialogue about problems that we agree are important, but don't agree about the method for solving, where 'importance' ultimately gets its sense from the question of the way one should live."¹¹³ When discussing how this dialogue is unbalanced for now, disproportionately leaning on Eurocentric thinking, Van Norden uses the work of Heidegger as an example, for the latter thinks philosophy is ultimately Western.¹¹⁴ Heidegger argues "the essence of modern science [...] is grounded in the thinking of the Greeks, which since Plato has been called philosophy",¹¹⁵ and to grasp the influence of modern science on present-day knowing and reflecting, one must understand its historical and etymological roots, which are Western. But, as he goes on, this historical understanding is needed as "the precondition of the inevitable dialogue with the East Asian world".¹¹⁶ Van Norden's

critique of Heidegger, however, is that such a dialogue in the end wouldn't be on equal grounds. He points to another quote by Heidegger to prove his point, in which the latter says: "I am convinced that a change can only be prepared from the same place in the world where the modern technological world originated." Hence, Heidegger doesn't believe Eastern experiences of the world can really help solving modern problems: it ultimately must come through the traditions of European thinking. Van Norden believes this attitude to be illustrative of the academic discipline of philosophy in general.¹¹⁷

This thesis will use Van Norden's idea of a multicultural dialogue to avoid Eurocentric thinking. That said, it will use *transcultural* instead of multicultural as it looks specifically at a dialogue with Japanese perspectives to strengthen the alternative rhetoric. Another Eurocentric aspect that needs to be addressed in that regard, is the concept of modernity, for while Irimia's Long Modernity has been a useful framework for this thesis so far, a shortcoming is that it barely engages with non-Western modernities. In the case of Japanese modernity, if one would position it within the framework of Long Modernity, its pathway can be described as both an engaging with Western modern ideas, as that it has formed its own distinct modern conceptual frameworks. Japanese authors argue that although the historical project of modernity at its core is Western, nevertheless a distinct kind of Japanese modernity has come out of that. Takeuchi Yoshimi,¹¹⁸ for instance, says that Western powers, from the mid-nineteenth century on, brought over completely new "modes of production, social institutions, and the human consciousness that accompanied these" to Japan.¹¹⁹ The first stage of Japanese modernity, Takeuchi says, was about making sense of these new modes of thinking, in which modernisation and Westernisation were at times almost synonymous. Gradually however Japanese thinkers started to carve out their own modern identity and used foundations from their own intellectual history.¹²⁰ Iwabuchi Koichi agrees with Takeuchi, stating that in the Asian region as a whole "the experience of West-inflicted capitalist modernity" over time has given way to "various modes of indigenized modernities".¹²¹

Japanese modernity, therefore, should not be interpreted as Westernisation. It has morphed into its own, engaging in a dialogue with Western modes of thinking, while carving out its own paths. Looking at this thesis, and the importance of modernity for its context, it will speak of a *transcultural dialogue of modernities*. Furthermore, as this thesis wants to avoid a too narrow East-West narrative when discussing this transcultural dialogue, it will adopt a framework by Thomas Kasulis to understand how

cultural differences influence intellectual points of departure and show how it can also help compare the current and alternative rhetoric of virtual reality. Kasulis argues that cultural differences in intellectual interests do not “stem from fundamental forms of thinking” but lie “in what aspect of our humanness a cultural tradition tends to emphasize, enhance, and preserve as central”.¹²² What may be the central issue or question for one culture, can merely be background noise in another culture. Kasulis, himself having a background in Japanese philosophy, highlights some differences between his Japanese and Western colleagues that make him conclude they do not necessarily think “different”, it’s more that “they tend to think about different things – to pick out different aspects of a phenomenon as the part most worthy of attention”. He concludes that “culture shapes the way we experience the world of meanings, and the world of meanings developed through intellectual reflection (“philosophy”) becomes the stuff of cultural tradition”, in which culture and philosophy are conversational, constantly shaping each other.¹²³

Kasulis uses examples of Japanese and Western philosophy to come up with a framework that describes two main orientations through cultural differences: i) the orientation of integrity, to which Western thinkers are more accustomed; and ii) the orientation of intimacy, that is closer to the *modus operandi* of Japanese thinkers. These orientations, he stresses, are not polar opposites, and thinkers from both cultures might sometimes be closer to integrity or intimacy, but overall they reflect the different points of departure of different cultures engaging with philosophical themes.¹²⁴ To begin with Kasulis’s orientation of integrity: here the essential belief is that every individual component or person has its own integrity, meaning it is whole and indivisible, and is “able to stand alone, having a self-contained identity without dependence on, or infringement by, the outside”. Consequently, what is looked at is how these integrous elements *relate* to each other.¹²⁵ An example of an integrous orientation is the atomic model, where particles are both distinct, having their own integrity, as that they are also analysed in how they relate to other particles. Kasulis’s orientation of integrity is another way to describe Heidegger’s idea of compartmentalisation or Latour’s idea of partitioning, in which one pulls apart the world in ever smaller bits and pieces of information.

The orientation of integrity helps describe the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality: an integrous digital-virtual reality, conceptualised as existing outside of everyday reality. The second orientation of Kasulis is that of intimacy, which will be closer to the alternative rhetoric. The orientation of intimacy “involves an inseparability, a

belonging together, a sharing”. Where in an integrous orientation the question is how X and Y *relate*, the question in an intimate orientation is how and where X and Y *overlap*. As Kasulis explains, “integrity tends to think of the world as something external to be managed through knowledge”, whereas the intimate orientation “tends to see the self and world as interlinking – the goal being to develop a sense of belonging *with* the world, feeling at home in it”.¹²⁶ The idea of an intimate overlapping, may it be between humans or the human and nonhuman, is that “self and other belong together in a way that does not sharply distinguish the two”.¹²⁷ As a contrast, in the integrous orientation “the person is being conceived as intrinsically separate from the external world and separate from other human beings”.¹²⁸

An intimate orientation strongly values somatic knowledge, as that epistemology and aesthetics come together in it, for all “involve being responsive to the world, being self-consciously part of the world, working with the world in order to achieve the expression of the world”.¹²⁹ The emphasis with the intimate orientation lies on how to act in ambiguous overlaps, more than being strictly analytical. This doesn’t mean the analytical is ignored in intimate knowledge: it means that it blends with somatic knowledge, or that it can be expressed aesthetically. Following this perspective, the intimate orientation provides a valuable conceptual lens for the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. It is close to the fundamentals of phenomenological investigations, however most of all it provides an adequate language for this thesis, as it foregrounds the ambiguous overlap of intrinsic conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings. Summarised, the orientation of integrity and the orientation of intimacy a) provide a transcultural framework for this thesis; and b) these orientations help explain the different conceptual bases of the current rhetoric and the alternative rhetoric.

Impermanence

When wanting to further understand the intimate orientation in the context of the alternative rhetoric, an essential concept in Japanese intellectual history that needs to be discussed is *impermanence*, for it defines both consciousness and everyday reality. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, when discussing the concept of the virtual, observes that “a ‘Western idea’ of the virtual as something stable and unchanging can be opposed to the traditional Eastern idea of the virtual that aims at retrieving the ephemeral character of reality itself”.¹³⁰ On the one hand, this thesis would disagree with parts of this

statement, as for instance Bergson and Deleuze do address the strong temporal character of virtual experiences. On the other hand, the idea of the virtual being a concept that looks to retrieve “the ephemeral character of reality” is important to this thesis. As will be argued, recurring themes of ephemerality in Japanese intellectual debates can indeed help deepen the intimate understanding of virtual reality and especially deepen the concept of aspersion.

Impermanence begins with the Zen Buddhist concept of *mu*: nothingness. Kasulis explains there are two recurring themes in the Zen explorations of *mu*. First, it is argued that “words and the concepts based on them are ultimately empty”, meaning that the world of experience can’t be understood by understanding words, for the concept itself is part of a wider, holistic framework of experience. Second, nothingness is seen as the source from which experience “arises”, or even reality as a whole, but “cannot be described as Being or Nonbeing, form or no form”, because those are conceptualisations.¹³¹ The Zen idea of nothingness is less metaphysical and cosmological compared to for instance the ancient Chinese philosophical tradition of Taoism, where the *tao* or “the way” is both the source of reality as that it tells how to live one’s life in harmony with this source.¹³² Zen, on the other hand, explains Kasulis, is predominantly interested in the intrinsic experience of the universe, not the structure of the universe itself. Experience in this is the “inner nondiscriminating source of personhood”, and nothingness is the fabric from which experience springs.¹³³

A central element of Zen’s *mu* is impermanence: all things go. Abe Masao describes this sense of impermanence as follows: “There is absolutely nothing that is real and unchangeable apart from this changeable world, and everything in this changeable world is dependently related for its origination and for its ceasing to be.”¹³⁴ Bergson, in his work on the virtual, points out as well the constant changing of reality, but in *mu* there is a much bigger emphasis on ephemerality. Another way to understand this role of impermanence, is through the Zen aesthetic of *wabi sabi*. Where *wabi* expresses a life unbounded by the material world, finding harmony in the simplest existence, *sabi* is the acceptance of impermanence. *Wabi sabi* as an aesthetic finds a “melancholic beauty in the impermanence of all things”.¹³⁵ Following Kasulis’s intimate orientation, *wabi sabi* is just as much an epistemically loaded concept as that it is an aesthetic ideal: it is an intimate expression of an everyday reality defined by impermanence.

Impermanence and intrinsic consciousness are strongly linked in Zen, which can be understood through the word it originates from: *zazen*. Suzuki Daisetz explains

zazen can simply mean meditation or can refer to its wider definition of “intuitive knowledge”.¹³⁶ This intuitive knowledge of *zazen* implies, according to Dōgen, one of the main figures in Zen history, that you “think of not thinking”. Dōgen asks: “What is thinking of not thinking? Nonthinking. This, in and of itself, is the art of *zazen*.”¹³⁷ Dōgen says that practicing *zazen* and to reach a state of nonthinking, is to reach “a state of everydayness”.¹³⁸ What makes nonthinking everydayness? Nishitani Keiji, who studied under Heidegger, says that when “we take away self-consciousness that we usually call *mind*” it may seem “that nothing remains”. What remains, Nishitani argues, is however “subjective nothingness”, which is “true subjectivity that is within us as subjects”. This “subject-in-nothingness”, or “no-mind”, *mushin*, indeed based on *mu*, is when one transcends the construct of “the self” and “there is no cutting oneself off from the body and its natural world, or from the mind and its cultural world”.¹³⁹ Morita Shōma adds that once a person pays too much attention “to a fleeting experience, a world of image is established, and one becomes trapped in an illusory subjective world”. At that point one creates “misplaced knowledge” and what follows is “a state of confusion”.¹⁴⁰ Hence, *zazen*, Dōgen’s nonthinking/everydayness, and *mushin* imply an intuitive knowledge that is in synch with ephemeral everyday reality: consciousness that does not hold onto fleeting impressions.

This sense of ephemerality also underpins the aspersion quality of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. The sprinkling of everyday imagining, memory, and sensory impressions is to be understood within the fleeting and ambiguous context of intrinsic conscious experience and its interconnection to one’s immediate surroundings. However, before continuing to discuss Zen’s everydayness in the context of aspersion, it is worthwhile to first address the issue of Orientalism. Edward Said says that in Orientalism “the Orient” as a construct helps the West to define itself by being “its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience”. This construct of the Orient is not “merely imaginative”, says Said, it is “an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture”.¹⁴¹ In Said’s notion of Orientalism, Mina Shin explains, “the Orient is believed to have the spiritual mystic power to cure the West”, for in the process of modernisation and its rationalisation “the West has lost the ability to heal itself”. The “spiritual Orient” becomes “a mirror image of the West itself—the lost, innocent self”, in which “the Orient exists for the West for whatever purposes: in this case, for personal healing”.¹⁴² Goto-Jones argues a contemporary example of such Orientalism is the usage of Zen to give spiritual meaning to mundane, repetitive everyday

life activities, like “tying our shoelaces or driving a car”. Goto-Jones says these “auto-pilot” moments of everyday life are not the kind of moments that Zen speaks of when discussing everydayness.¹⁴³

It is important to acknowledge Goto-Jones’s criticism of Orientalist interpretations of Zen’s everydayness. That said, this thesis does argue Zen can help provide a different perspective on everyday experiences that will benefit the concept of aspersio. Kasulis explains that *zazen* and *mushin* – as seen in Suzuki, Dōgen, Nishitani, and Morita – are “not an unconscious state at all”, but are “an active, responsive awareness of the contents of experience as directly experienced”.¹⁴⁴ It is “a prereflective mode of consciousness”, he says, and that in everyday life “prereflective experiences are often only fleeting breaks in the continuity of thinking”. Kasulis gives the example of an exhausted man leaning on his lawnmower after mowing the lawn: the man gazes up at the sky and thinks of nothing, “he simply is as he is, with no intentional attitude at all”. The man can start to reflect on the sky and its connection to his life, but this state of reflection wasn’t constant: at the time of the act of simply gazing, prereflectively there “was no assumptive, unconscious intentional attitude”, just a mindless gazing.¹⁴⁵ This same state is addressed in Story B, where the narrator mindlessly gazes out of the train window with at times a sprinkling of imagery and memories.

To further understand Zen’s everydayness within the context of modern everyday life, one can analyse how it differs from Heidegger’s discussions on calculative thinking and meditative thinking. Calculative thinking, says Heidegger, is in line with the modern technological worldview, where one looks at the world’s conditions “with the calculated intention of their serving specific purposes”, and, furthermore, “calculative thinking computes [...] it computes ever new, ever more promising, and at the same time more economical possibilities”.¹⁴⁶ Meditative thinking, on the other hand, lacks this calculative predisposition and instead “contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is” and “dwells on what lies close and meditate on what lies closest”.¹⁴⁷ Heidegger says it would be “foolish to attack technology blindly”, as moderns rely on it, but technology should stimulate meditative thinking, not make humans adopt the calculative and computational.¹⁴⁸

Meditative thinking might seem similar to *zazen*, but this is not the case. Kasulis says the Zen perspective “would not agree with Heidegger’s implication that the dominance of calculative thinking is the result of recent technological development”, but is rather the human tendency “to restrict oneself to a bifurcated, intellectualized mode of

consciousness [...] in *any* time or place”.¹⁴⁹ The same can be said when looking at Heidegger’s meditative thinking, which relies on the *technē* of old Greek philosophy and its aim to reveal the true state of nature and becoming closer to it. From the perspective of Zen this idea is false, for meditative thinking and *technē* are still an intellectualisation of everyday reality and with that they are more illusory than true states of meditation. It should be noted that this thesis doesn’t follow the anti-intellectual approach of Zen, for that is not the point of the comparison. The main point for this thesis is that the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality is defined by an aspersive everyday imagining, in which its everydayness is based on Zen’s understanding of impermanence.

One final aspect of ephemerality to discuss, especially when considering its place in Japanese intellectual history, is how it influences modern conceptualisations of everyday reality. Federico Campagna uses the concept of “reality-settings” in that regard, which he defines as “the historically specific decision (witting or unwitting) over what criteria we use to understand the baffling experience of existing somewhere, somewhen”.¹⁵⁰ Tsujimura Kōichi discusses how modern Western and Japanese thought systems are underpinned by different reality-settings, for they have different intellectual histories. He does so by analysing Heidegger’s concept of *Machenschaft*, which is the idea that “everything is made and anything can be manipulated”. Tsujimura argues that in Western modernity creation and *creatio continua* are at the root of *Machenschaft*: there is a drive to ongoingly create.¹⁵¹ This is in line with Berman’s idea of perpetual creation being the motor of modernity, as well as Heidegger’s modern technological mindset and calculative thinking. This interpretation of *Machenschaft* defines furthermore the integrous orientation of the current rhetoric: computational power can remake everyday reality or create an integrous digital-virtual reality in which one can keep creating.

Tsujimura contrasts this with the *Machenschaft* of Japanese modernity, which is historically grounded in Zen and Shintoism. Because ephemeral thinking is at the heart of many Japanese thought systems, the creation of things is less important. Instead, Japanese *Machenschaft* concerns itself with “the cosmic realm of dependent origination keeping all things inexhaustibly connected to one another”. Here the question is not how to satisfy a drive to perpetually create and manipulate, says Tsujimura, but the question is how *connections are created* and how modern structures can be fitted into a wider framework of inexhaustible connections.¹⁵² Kurokawa Kisho argues

this focus on connections is rooted in Japanese intellectual traditions and their “consciousness-only” worldview, opposite to Western modernity’s “material-only” outlook.¹⁵³ This creates a different engagement with the world, he says, as in a consciousness-only tradition “outward form” matters less, for “everything we see is impermanent”. Kurokawa continues explaining how this differs from the “materialistic sense of order” of Western modernity and how Japanese engagement with “the invisible” differs from “the European way of thinking [...] rooted in materialistic civilization, so they are always talking about visible traditions”.¹⁵⁴ Such a worldview also underpins the alternative rhetoric’s intimate orientation then: conscious experience and everyday reality are to be understood within this continuous and *invisible* (re)making of connections.

With Kurokawa one does sense a hint of Self-Orientalisation, in which, says Goto-Jones, “Japan” itself accepts the role of the Other and presents itself in “quasi-mystical ways” to a Western audience, that caters to the stereotyping of Orientalism.¹⁵⁵ Iwabuchi agrees that in this Self-Orientalising discourse some Japanese authors use Orientalism to their own benefit and present Japan as “culturally exclusive, homogeneous, and uniquely particularistic through the operation of a strategic binary opposition between two imaginary cultural entities, ‘Japan’ and ‘the West’”.¹⁵⁶ Iwabuchi notes that European and American academics follow this self-image still too often and therefore perpetuate essentialist notions of “Japan as a great assimilator”, in which “Japan’s domestication of foreign culture [...] has successfully purged the impurity of foreign contamination”, making it temptingly modern and at the same time foreign (indeed, Oriental) to Western eyes.¹⁵⁷ Having noted this, the observations from Tsujimura and Kurokawa are a reminder that Japanese modernity has been shaped by its own intellectual traditions that accentuate different reality-settings.

When comparing the conceptual foundations of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality – Story A – and the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality – Story B – it shows the great contrast at this point. Story A, built on the orientation of integrity, relies on a sensual and conceptual immersion to stimulate the idea of being transported *outside* of everyday reality, blocking one’s immediate surroundings, traveling to a clearly demarcated anthropocentric digital-virtual reality where humans control time and space and an overzealous imagination can perpetually create. Story B shows the intimate orientation, in which a phenomenological virtual reality reflects the ambiguous and aspersive overlapping of intrinsic conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings, which are both defined by impermanence. It is about

becoming closer to these surroundings yet emphasising that these connections are temporary and inner and outer reality are constantly changing. In short, the alternative rhetoric's conceptual basis is aspersive with virtual reality situated *within* the parameters of everyday reality; the current rhetoric's conceptual basis is immersive with virtual reality situated *outside* of everyday reality.

Ontological Playfulness and Interstitial Imagining

Playfulness is the other quality of the alternative rhetoric that can be explored in more detail. This thesis argues Japanese perspectives provide specifically an *ontological playfulness* that can help to, in Sicart's words, ambiguate everyday life. This characteristic of ontological playfulness combines i) the intimate orientation's conceptualisation of the ambiguous overlap; and ii) Kurokawa's observation of the Japanese interest in the invisible. Fabio Rambelli, on that part, observes that "a striking aspect of Japanese contemporary culture" is a "split ontological outlook", in which "on the one hand there is Japan as the concrete place of their everyday lives; on the other, an invisible realm populated by all kinds of presences: ghosts, spirits, ancestors, gods...". This "invisible dimension of reality", says Rambelli, can be found in the whole cultural output: from philosophy to the arts; from ancient culture to contemporary popular culture.¹⁵⁸ Jolyon Baraka, agreeing with Rambelli, says that even though "contemporary Japanese society is notoriously nonreligious" and "few Japanese people admit to religious belief [...] many acknowledge the existence of ghosts, spirits, or deities".¹⁵⁹ The thesis will not focus on what constitutes the invisible dimension of reality, nor is it interested in the (non)existence of spirits, but instead will focus on the split ontological outlook that Rambelli speaks of, and how it provides an ontologically playful attitude in which a hidden world is just behind the edges of visibility in everyday reality, which at times will become barely and briefly visible in ambiguous overlaps that will be called *interstitial zones*.

An example of ontological playfulness and how it is interested in ambiguous overlaps can be seen in Tanizaki Junichirō's argument that Japanese culture has traditionally been defined by ambiguity, expressed through the aesthetics of the shadow. He contrasts this with Western modernity, which wishes to get everything into focus and looks to dispel darkness.¹⁶⁰ Important here to note, first, is Kasulis's observation that in the intimate orientation epistemology and aesthetics overlap: Tanizaki's shadow is both an epistemic and aesthetic statement, emphasising the ambiguous. Tanizaki

uses the metaphor of electrical light to argue how a traditional Japanese interest in ambiguity has come under pressure by the clarity of Western modernity: “So benumbed are we nowadays by electric lights that we have become utterly insensitive to the evils of excessive illumination.”¹⁶¹ In the days before electricity, Tanizaki argues, Japanese culture was “immersed in this suspension of ashen particles, soaked in it, but the man of today, long used to the electric light, has forgotten that such a darkness existed”, and he adds “it must have been simple for spectres to appear in a ‘visible darkness’, where always something seemed to be flickering and shimmering”.¹⁶²

One can again observe a tendency to Self-Orientalise here, but nevertheless Tanizaki’s idea of a visible darkness can help understand the connection between ontological playfulness and the ambiguous overlaps of the intimate orientation. First, understanding the element of ambiguity, a useful comparison can be made with Bachelard’s phenomenology of the imagination. Although the latter also criticises electrical light – “In our civilization, which has the same light everywhere, and puts electricity in its cellars, we no longer go to the cellar carrying a candle.”¹⁶³ – and laments the loss of shadowy light for the imagination, there is a key difference with Tanizaki: Bachelard’s thought is mostly dialectic. He looks at the miniature versus the immense; the outside versus the inside; “the dialectics of *yes* and *no* which decide everything”.¹⁶⁴ In Bachelard’s coexistentialism of intimate space and world space the rule is: the stronger the contrast, the stronger the imagination. Tanizaki, reflecting an intimate orientation, is much less occupied with dialecticism or clarity, but is interested in what one *may* encounter in the ambiguity of a visible darkness, where things are “flickering and shimmering”. He is interested in the shadowy region where the invisible and barely visible overlap.

Another way to describe this intimate overlap of the invisible (absolute darkness) and barely visible (visible darkness) would be the interstitial. The interstitial describes the space in which for instance Rambelli’s hidden world will briefly overlap with everyday reality. As said, such hidden worlds, filled with “all kinds of presences”, coexist with everyday life; they are not strictly separated and will temporarily flow in and out of each other. Michael Dylan Foster explains “there are many words” to describe these ambiguous zones of Japanese culture, such as “in-between, hybrid, ambiguous, liminal”, but he suggests the interstitial:

The quality of being interstitial relates to gaps, the zones of uncertainty between zones of certainty. [...] The interstitial is not an empty and meaningless space but just the opposite: a site of communication, combination, and contact. The zone of uncertainty is the space where meanings are made.¹⁶⁵

Gerald Figal, in his work on the importance of spiritual culture for the imagination in Japanese modernity, discusses furthermore an “interstitial imagination”, which operates “between a world of dreams and a world of wakefulness; between an unknown and uninscribed world” and a “known, inscribed world of urban reality”.¹⁶⁶ The idea is that via an interstitial imagining one can experience and navigate *interstitial zones* in everyday reality, in which temporarily a snippet of a hidden world will become barely visible. This ontologically playful attitude looks for the ambiguous within the parameters of everyday reality, as opposed to the overzealous imagination of the current rhetoric that looks to create distinct spaces for itself outside of everyday reality.

The interstitial and interstitial imagining can be further understood through Shintoism, which encompasses Japan’s indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Despite Baraka emphasising Japanese nonreligiousness, Ono Sokyo explains that traces of Shintoism can be found throughout all layers of Japanese culture: “In its general aspects Shinto is more than a religious faith. It is an amalgam of attitudes, ideas, and ways of doing things that through two millenniums and more have become an integral part of the way of the Japanese people.”¹⁶⁷ Kuroda Toshio doubts Ono’s historical continuity of Shintoism, but also notes “even today it is perpetuated latently in everyday conventions as the subconsciousness of the Japanese people”.¹⁶⁸ Important to this thesis’s framework is especially the following Shinto attitude: Kasulis argues, in line with Figal’s interstitial imagining, that “Shinto can be an antidote to an overly robust drive to explain everything and to assume that what cannot be fully explained must be unreal”. Shinto lets people ask, when dwelling in for instance interstitial zones, if they should deny an experience that can’t be wholly explained, or “simply accept the experience as unexplainable”.¹⁶⁹ Foster situates this attitude outside of Shintoism as well, and points towards the related Buddhist concept of *hanshin-hangi*, which he translates as “half-belief/half-doubt”. *Hanshin-hangi* doesn’t ask “for a decision one way or the other but combines two halves into a whole, a single attitude that recognizes that belief and doubt can live together harmoniously”.¹⁷⁰

This ambiguous attitude can be seen in for instance the conceptualisation of the Shinto shrine, which is positioned as an interstitial zone where the hidden world of spirits and ancestors and everyday reality can ambiguously overlap. Yamakage Motohisa says Shinto shrines “reflect the rhythms of everyday life” and respond to “immediate and practical concerns”, rather than providing a systemic “spiritual cultivation”.¹⁷¹ Ono stresses furthermore that a hidden world of spirits and ancestors also exists in these interstitial zones. This hidden world, he says, “does not transcend that of man, and man does not need to seek to enter a divine, transcendental world to attain salvation”.¹⁷² This is represented by the gateway of the shrine, the *torii*, which symbolically connects the coexisting worlds of everyday reality and the hidden world: when one steps through the gateway, one steps into a world in which different layers of existence merge. There is barely any theoretical occupation with what this hidden world would look like, Shinto’s interest lies where the hidden world and everyday reality intimately overlap and how one can experience such interstitial zones. These zones are temporal, with boundaries constantly shifting, in which visitors, in whatever form, are invited to come over to briefly experience each other’s existence.¹⁷³ In short, boundaries are constantly being renegotiated in Shinto shrines, implying that interstitial zones are impermanent as well, and part of interstitial imagining is the understanding of such an impermanence.

Combining this Shinto sensibility, reflected through its shrines, with Tanizaki’s visible darkness, the interstitial and interstitial imagining, and *hanshin-hangi*, all these symbolise the ontological playfulness of an intimate orientation. In it the accent lies on a hidden world that is just behind the edges of visibility in everyday reality, with its boundaries being fluid, and how the invisible will sometimes briefly come to the surface in an interstitial zone. This is not to say that the argument is – in an Orientalist fashion – that in day-to-day Japanese society there is a continuous mystic sensibility, but what can be said is that in these perspectives there is a certain openness to, and interest in, interstitial zones *within* the parameters of everyday reality and exploring their ambiguities via an interstitial imagining. In the context of this thesis what is mostly of importance is that where the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality – based on a modern technological mindset and an overzealous imagination – wants to create immersive and anthropocentric spaces that exist *outside* of everyday reality, the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality relies on interstitial imagining and the

ambiguous and temporary forming of interstitial zones within the parameters of everyday reality.

One can think of the Pokémon of Story B as an example. The Pokémon creatures are invisible most of the time, yet when someone fires up *Pokémon GO*, they will start to appear in interstitial zones. These interstitial zones are brief snippets of the hidden world of Pokémon, with that making the latter just barely and temporarily visible. Furthermore, from the perspective of interstitial imagining, it is not about believing this hidden world of Pokémon truly exists to the benefit of a conceptual immersion. Instead, it is about aspensively experiencing these interstitial zones and through them playfully reconsidering the familiar places of one's everyday life. Such an ontological playfulness shows therefore a passive acceptance of ambiguity within the parameters of everyday reality, as that it entails an active form of ambiguating through interstitial imagining. Ultimately, it is to be understood through the intimate orientation's *Machenschaft*: it is the experience of invisible connections continuously being made and remade in everyday life.

Techno-Animism and Digital-Virtual Technology

The final aspect of the alternative rhetoric to consider is its engagement with the non-human in everyday reality as opposed to the current rhetoric's anthropocentrism. This will also help understand the role of digital-virtual technology in its conceptual framework. In this it is essential to understand the ontological status of things created by humans, technological or imaginary, and how after their creation they are considered to have an intrinsic existence of their own. Using again the Pokémon of Story B, they can help further clarify the idea of ontological playfulness, as that they will also help understand the importance of the nonhuman in the intimate framework of the alternative rhetoric.

First, looking once more at the interstitial, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. observes that modern Japanese culture "delights in imagining interstitial beings". These interstitial beings are considered both manifestations of the interstitial, as that they can help to experience the ambiguity of interstitial zones.¹⁷⁴ Pokémon are just one example of such interstitial beings, as Figal notes a large variety of interstitial beings "have appeared conspicuously across the contemporary Japanese scene in 'lowbrow entertainments', 'middlebrow' edification, and 'highbrow' scholarship".¹⁷⁵ Foster, furthermore, highlights a specific branch of Japanese spirits, *yōkai*, of which Pokémon are modern

examples. He explains how they reflect *hanshin-hangi*, for there is an “essential ambiguity of belief in *yōkai*”, where “it is within the ambiguous ontological space [...] that *yōkai* thrive”.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, interstitial beings, like the Pokémon of Story B, are both suggesting there is a hidden world just behind the edges of visibility in everyday reality, as that they are interstitial embodiments and reflect the ambiguity of these interstitial zones.

The Pokémon of Story B are next to interstitial beings however also *digital-virtual* beings, as they are a form of augmented reality. They are with that an example of techno-animism, which as a concept will be important to the alternative rhetoric’s intimate framework and will also help understand the supportive role of digital-virtual technology in it. Shintoism can first help understand the animistic part of techno-animism. In Shinto thought all beings, may they be animate or inanimate objects, simple or complex, can potentially possess *kami* – a noble spirit – and with that contribute to a positive state of the world.¹⁷⁷ Inoue Nobutaka sees “*kami* worship as the characteristic that distinguishes Shinto from other religious traditions”,¹⁷⁸ as does Yamakage, who notes that “the essence of Shinto is found in our interdependence with *kami*”.¹⁷⁹ Ogura Kizo, emphasising the imaginative qualities of Shinto, says that whenever communities, small or large, “perceive some indication of life or anima in a stone”, the latter can be considered possessing *kami*, for in Shinto “validity” comes not from “above”, “but because people recognize its kami-ness on the grounds that they share certain subjective but common feelings” that *kami* resides in an object or (nonhuman) person.¹⁸⁰ Hence, it relies on humans acknowledging the nonhuman and its importance to them.

Anne Allison notes Shinto’s animism has in modern Japan been expanded to technology, making it *techno-animism*: animals, rocks, robots, water cookers, all of them can potentially possess *kami*.¹⁸¹ A modern form of animism is not unique to Japanese culture, with for instance Harry Garuba showing how “an animist unconsciousness is operative” in different contemporary African societies, of which he says the “primary characteristic is the continual re-enchantment of the world”.¹⁸² However, the incorporation of technology in an animistic framework does seem to be more fleshed out in Japanese perspectives. Yoneyama Shoko argues on that part that “Japan has experienced the full extent of modernity”, being strongly post-industrial, and in that regard presents a “particularly strong vantage point” in considering “animism in the context of modernity”,¹⁸³ and then points to the sociology of Tsurumi Kazuko, who believes animism should be the foundation of modern technological culture.¹⁸⁴ Allison

places Tsurumi's idea in a wider perspective. She says it's this "intermixture of the old (spirituality) with the new (digital/virtual media)" that reflects a wider characteristic of "Japanese sensibility (*yasashisa*)", in which spiritual culture, like Shinto, is adjusted to contemporary society.¹⁸⁵ Mori Masahiro, lastly, from a Zen perspective argues that "humans make superficial borders between all that exists", so they can decide "what is within and outside of these borders",¹⁸⁶ and there is therefore no valid reason to deny robots or computers "the Buddha nature", for this would only rely on a misguided human demarcating.¹⁸⁷

This techno-animistic attitude is close to panpsychism's cognitive framework of simple and complex forms of intrinsic consciousness, yet its spiritual basis sets it apart from the latter. What is furthermore of importance to this thesis is that, as Mauro Arrighi explains, techno-animism imagines everything human-made to have an intrinsic existence of its own after being created. From such a perspective human creation "ignites a relationship with a new entity", as that it suggests "otherworldly creative forces".¹⁸⁸ This applies for instance to the Pokémon of Story B, both as digital-virtual and interstitial beings: they might have originated from human imagination or programming, but from that point on their existence, in whatever form, intrinsically is their own, and it is about the relationship one can establish with this new entity that has become part of the interconnectedness of everyday reality and can potentially possess *kami*. Hence, techno-animism, like panpsychism, concerns itself with the subjectivist question to what extent one can understand intrinsic nonhuman existence, but it is predominantly interested in creating connections with the nonhuman, not so much solving questions of knowability.

The ontological playfulness of interstitial imagining is to be understood within this overarching techno-animistic framework, in which both imaginary and technological beings, or a combination of them, are seen as nonhuman entities that can help one becoming closer to one's immediate surroundings. Techno-animism, therefore, strongly differs from the modern technological culture of the current rhetoric and its anthropocentrism. However, having discussed these techno-animistic principles, an additional form of Orientalism should be addressed: the image of Japan as a blend of the spiritual and hypertechnological. Andrew McKevitt explains how in the "Japan Panic" of the 1980s, there was in the United States "a moment of intense, uncertain, and ultimately fleeting fear of and fixation on Japan" as it became an economic, technological, and cultural rival.¹⁸⁹ McKevitt continues that "Japan's rise to the status of

global economic superpower coincided with the increasing awareness of the concept of postmodernity”, which fuelled Western overinterpretations of “Japan” as *the* poster child for postmodernity.¹⁹⁰ Tatsumi Takayuki uses the term “Pax Japonica” to describe this image, in which, he says, there has been a persistent blending of hypertechnological and “postmodern” Japan.¹⁹¹ Ueno Toshiya calls this Techno-Orientalism: “If the Orient was constructed and invented by the West to build up its cultural identity, then the Techno-Orient has been invented to define the images and models of information capitalism and the information society.”¹⁹² In short, where in traditional Orientalism there is a mystic sensibility in the Orient that has historically been lost in Occidental modernity, in Techno-Orientalism this mystic sensibility is all of a sudden future-minded and implies a deeper understanding of technology the West (for now) just can’t comprehend.

From a Techno-Oriental perspective it would be all too attractive to position techno-animism as a spiritual counterpart to the disenchanting West, but that, however, is not the argument. As Rachael Hutchinson argues “deep-seated Japanese attitudes and values” are to be observed when analysing the Japanese use and positioning of technology, with that “giving great insight into Japanese culture”.¹⁹³ The main point for this thesis, therefore, is that certain modern Japanese perspectives, embedded in their own intellectual history and debates, present an alternative ontological system to the benefit of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality and its intimate orientation. This orientation doesn’t necessarily look to enchant a disenchanting modern life, as seen with the current rhetoric, but looks to playfully ambiguate everyday life and lets one become closer to one’s immediate, nonhuman surroundings. Such an attitude also decides the position of digital-virtual technologies themselves in the alternative rhetoric: may they be augmented reality glasses or a smartphone, ultimately, following Tsujimura’s *Machenschaft*, they are situated within an intimate and techno-animistic framework in which the human and nonhuman, may it be nature or technology, all ambiguously overlap in a vast interconnectedness. Or as Mori says, “instruments and machines may seem to exist outside of us”, but they are “an essential part of ourselves”.¹⁹⁴

In the alternative rhetoric, as seen with Story B’s use of the smartphone and augmented reality, digital-virtual technologies are ultimately tools that *support* an aspersive playfulness in everyday life. They are not the absolute centre, as with the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, nor are they about sensually and conceptually

immersing one in an anthropocentric digital-virtual reality. Instead, digital-virtual technologies can help form temporary interstitial zones in everyday reality, stimulate an interstitial imagining, and with that aspensively and playfully ambiguate the experience of one’s immediate, nonhuman surroundings. Moreover, where the current rhetoric mostly revolves around the technology of digital-virtual reality and its sensually immersive headset, the alternative rhetoric doesn’t focus on a specific digital-virtual technology. This doesn’t mean digital-virtual technologies are just an afterthought in the alternative rhetoric, but first and foremost they support the ambiguous overlap of intrinsic conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings, and they are to be considered from this perspective. This supportive role, then, is the final point of difference between the current and alternative rhetoric:

| Current rhetoric (Story A) | Alternative rhetoric (Story B) |
|---|---|
| Orientation of integrity | Orientation of intimacy |
| Overzealous imagination | Everyday imagining and interstitial imagining |
| Sensual and conceptual immersion | Aspersion and (ontological) playfulness |
| Materialism and anthropocentrism | Panpsychism and techno-animism |
| Digital-virtual technology as centrepiece | Digital-virtual technology as supportive tool |

Thesis Structure

To strengthen the conceptual and transcultural analyses of this thesis, as well as positioning the historical framework of Long Modernity, it will use an interdisciplinary, comparative approach with close readings of different forms of literature and Japanese animation. The latter encompasses both animation films and video games. Before outlining the chapters and detailing which texts, films, and games will be used, there are two main reasons for choosing a wide variety of examples, spanning different forms of media and genres, coming from different cultures, and ranging from the early seventeenth century to the twenty-first century. First, they all concern themselves with virtuality in one way another, both from a phenomenological and computational perspective. Second, by picking such a broad set of examples, it helps show how widespread these engagements with virtuality are, fortifying and justifying the transcultural Long Modern framework. The examples of a phenomenological virtuality, which are at the heart of this thesis, will especially benefit from this approach: together they will highlight the

transcultural and historical richness of trying to understand the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and everyday reality.

The thesis will not begin with an analysis of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, like it has done in the Introduction. Instead, it will first establish and explore the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, as that is its main goal. The first chapter will, therefore, focus on the phenomenological virtual experience and its interconnection with one's immediate surroundings. Literary works of Robert Walser (1878-1956) and W.G. Sebald (1944-2001) will be used to explore the ambiguous blend of imagining, memory, and the senses, while also noting that the alternative rhetoric will highlight an everyday imagining from this ambiguity. The second chapter will further discuss such an everyday imagining by looking at it through the lens of play. At the centre will be the notion of an *open game of make-believe*, which will help explain the differences between a) aspersive playfulness and b) conceptual immersion. Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) will be used to understand this aspersive playfulness, as her writings are very similar to those of Walser and Sebald, and for conceptual immersion Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605 & 1615) and James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1939) will be used.

The above examples will help emphasise the importance of the historical framework of Long Modernity when discussing different kinds of virtuality. The texts of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, covering the whole of the twentieth century, show a strong kinship with the philosophical virtual discussions of Bergson, Bachelard, and Merleau-Ponty. But instead of analysing the phenomenological virtual experience, they *narrate* it. Their literature reflects what Erich Auerbach would call a literary modernism that concerns itself with "the random occurrence" and tries to find "the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment"; finding "a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness".¹⁹⁵ Not all three writers can be considered strictly modernist writers, which will be addressed in the chapters, but this thesis is explicitly interested in the above aspect of their narratives. They help show the longevity of virtual discussions, the modern intermingling of questions of the imagination and subjectivism, and, again using Auerbach, how "synthetic and objective attempts at interpretation are produced and demolished every instant".¹⁹⁶ Moreover, they help show the strong and lasting overlap of *cultural* and *philosophical* explorations of the phenomenological virtual experience and especially the role of imagining.

As a contrast, the latter two examples of chapter two, *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*, will help discuss the long tradition of a different kind of imagination in Long Modernity. One that puts the faculty in a dialectical relationship with everyday reality. *Don Quixote*, especially, shows why discussions of the conceptual principles of virtual reality don't need to start with the Romantic period, as argued by Otto and Saler. Cervantes's novel looks at what happens when the imagination wants to create mental structures so convincing that they will remake everyday reality. This dialectical relationship between an overzealous imagination and one's immediate surroundings, captured in the concept of conceptual immersion, is also at the centre of *Walter Mitty*, a short story from the 1930s. What these examples therefore highlight, in the context of this thesis, is a *different modern relationship between human consciousness and everyday reality*, when compared to the phenomenological virtuality of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf (or Bergson, Bachelard, and Merleau-Ponty). They represent a dialectical virtuality, which, as will be shown, is an essential building block of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality.

The third chapter will then look at this current rhetoric in full, showing how it combines a modern technological mindset and an overzealous imagination. It seeks sensual and conceptual immersion, is anthropocentric, and sets up a negative dialecticism with everyday life. The analysis of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality will be supported by readings of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011). These sci-fi novels will help show the negative dialecticism of the current rhetoric in more detail and why an overzealous imagination and conceptual immersion are key to this dialecticism. The reason for choosing these sci-fi novels, instead of for instance sci-fi films about digital-virtual reality, is because they will serve as a contrast to the virtuality of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf. It will help show the differences between a computational virtuality and a phenomenological virtuality: these novels, coming from different modern traditions, produce wildly different views of cognition and everyday reality, and therefore also choose *different language* in their narratives when concerning themselves with virtual experiences. Walser, Sebald, and Woolf engage with the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings. The examples of chapter three, on the other hand, are strongly defined by i) the compartmentalising, technological worldview of Long Modernity, and ii) the dialectical discussions surrounding an overzealous imagination. They ask how *real* the digital-virtual experience is or can be and try to position it as an

enchanted escape from a disenchanting everyday life. Together with *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty* they form Story A, whereas Walser, Sebald, and Woolf help understand this thesis's alternative: Story B.

The fourth chapter will return to the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. It will transculturally deepen the alternative rhetoric's conceptual framework through modern Japanese perspectives and will help integrate digital-virtual technology in such a phenomenological virtual framework. Japanese perspectives will help put forward the intimate orientation of the alternative rhetoric and show how it deviates from the integrous orientation of the current rhetoric. The fourth chapter will explore the role of interstitial zones in the alternative rhetoric, as opposed to the dialectics of the current rhetoric, and how these interstitial zones can a) playfully ambiguate an impermanent everyday reality and b) suggest a hidden world just behind the borders of visibility. Additionally, this chapter will show how digital-virtual technologies are considered supportive tools that can help experience such an ontological playfulness. The analysis will use two examples of Japanese animation: the video game *Persona 5* (2016) and the animation film *Your Name* (2016), furthermore using Japanese concepts from these examples to deepen the alternative rhetoric. The fifth chapter, lastly, again through Japanese perspectives, will look at the *experience* of interstitial zones, relying on a combination of interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism, which can help becoming closer to the nonhuman and one's immediate surroundings. This chapter will be supported by the examples of the Studio Ghibli animation film *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) and the augmented reality game *Pokémon GO* (2016).

The above examples of Japanese animation have been chosen because they explore and blend the phenomenological virtual and digital-virtual. As Susan Napier explains, animation is in Japan “the most significant medium in which explorations of technology, identity, and reality versus unreality are being played out” and “suggests that the imagination, the real, and technology are bound together in increasingly complex ways”.¹⁹⁷ In that regard, although animation films and video games differ as forms of media, with film audiences and players having different roles, the above examples will show that their narratives have a similar approach to the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and everyday reality. They can therefore all be understood under the umbrella of *Japanese animation*. There are many overlaps with the literary works of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, yet, coming from different modern

traditions, as well as being visual media, these Japanese animation films and video games are to be understood within their own cultural-intellectual context. Furthermore, being more recent examples, they deal with both digital-virtual technology and the phenomenological virtual experience, which is essential to this thesis's alternative rhetoric.

These transcultural discussions will greatly enrich the scope of this thesis, as well as the historical framework of Long Modernity. The thesis aims to establish an innovative, creative-critical dialogue between the conceptual and the cultural. It wants to open up academic debates by showing just how widespread, multi-layered, and varied modern explorations of virtual reality are, yet how one-sided discussions of it have been. Story A has been dominant: the idea of virtual reality as an escapist and dialectical realm, filled with techno-anthropocentric fantasies. This thesis, through Story B, comes with a reality check. It shows an alternative, more fruitful approach to virtual reality, which deserves to be pulled out of the shadows. Its basis: to virtually exist *here*, not *over there*. Story B looks to diversify debates of virtual reality: it wants to steer them away from a technological determinism and let us reconsider which modern values should be the conceptual foundations of virtual reality. The long and broad view this thesis takes, though ambitious, is necessary. It helps to emphasise how the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and everyday reality is crucial to the modern human experience but is often forgotten in the modern impulse to divide and clarify. Virtual reality as a concept can help remember how the human and nonhuman ambiguously and continuously overlap in transient everyday life. Deepening the understanding of ambiguity will be an asset, not a liability, for it stays close to our everyday experiences. It is this existential richness the thesis looks for in a phenomenological virtual reality – and there are many imaginative corners in which it can be found.

Chapter 1

The Phenomenological Virtual and Watercolour Prose

With a boldly, and, if possible, ingeniously sketching pencil and some light, casual, snappy firing-up of some colors, I want to go over the trip quickly. My memory has faithfully retained: [...] a totally, odd, fantastic, curious, peculiar old town with a seventeenth-century flair, through whose narrow, hushed, languorous, fabulous alleys that swam in the movingly beautiful golden light of the summer evening I strode quietly as if through a dream.¹⁹⁸

– Robert Walser

The focus of this thesis will be to establish the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality and with it question the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. To better understand the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings, on which the alternative rhetoric is based, the first chapter will explore the phenomenological virtual experience through the literary works of Robert Walser and W.G. Sebald. As already mentioned in the Introduction, although Walser writes at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Sebald near the end of it, their narrations are similar when looking at the phenomenological virtual experience. Before moving on with these analyses, first the issue of genre needs to be addressed. The Introduction noted that modernist interpretations of Walser and Sebald are closest to the phenomenological virtual experience. It needs to be acknowledged however that Walser and Sebald are not unanimously considered modernist writers. For instance, Walser's works are also often considered as a variation on, or reaction to, the *bildungsroman*,¹⁹⁹ whereas Sebald's novels are, for instance, also interpreted as "post-modern narratives of disorientation".²⁰⁰ That said, the goal of this chapter is not to argue whether Walser and Sebald are or aren't modernist writers; the goal is to show how their literature engages with the phenomenological virtual experience. This chapter will therefore introduce its own concept, *watercolour prose*, to help explore and understand their narratives in this context.

The above quote of Walser can help introduce this concept of watercolour prose, additionally helping to explain why such literary narrations are useful when wanting to understand the conceptual framework behind the phenomenological virtual experience.

The main interest lies with two specific qualities of these literary narrations: exploring the intrinsic experience of the immediate present, as well as the experience of the transiency of these moments. Regarding the first part, the immediacy of the moment, Mikhail Bakhtin sees the literary novel as the art form that comes “into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present”.²⁰¹ Walser’s narrator shows this when trying to write down memories of his trip to the German town of Würzburg: the imagery that comes to him happens in the inconclusive present, for it is unclear which memory will come next in his “snappy firing-up of some colors”. Second, Porter Abbott argues literary narratives can show the workings of inner narration in everyday life, as it “is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time” and strings these moments of the inconclusive present together.²⁰² In literary and inner narration one finds the conscious awareness of transience, the stringing together of things having changed, are changing, and will change.²⁰³ This can also be observed in the above quote of Walser: it concerns retrieving sensory impressions from the past, reflecting transience, however these past impressions come and blend with the narrator’s immediate present.

This combination of immediacy and transience that can be found in such literary narratives is of use when considering the phenomenological virtual experience. It shows the Bergsonian temporality involved: past and present coexisting in an ambiguous way. Furthermore, the above quote highlights Casey’s concept of everyday imagining, with the imaginative “ingeniously sketching pencil” being the main instrument, yet always positioning it as part of the ambiguous totality of the phenomenological virtual experience. These characteristics form the basis of what this thesis calls watercolour prose: an ambiguous blend of fleeting imaginings, memories, and sensory impressions that leave a subtle mark on one’s immediate surroundings, like drops of paint that vanish in water and faintly colour one’s existence. It is “the snappy firing-up of some colors” that Walser describes himself, showing an attitude that looks to bring fleeting cognitive colours into play. Importantly, the reader can share in this experience. Maurice Natanson, for instance, considers the phenomenology of reading. He argues that when one reads, the momentary experience of the text blends with the reader’s momentary experience of everyday life.²⁰⁴ Therefore, when reading the above quote by Walser, the immediacy and transience of his watercolour prose can blend with the reader’s everyday experience. It can help the latter to reflect on everyday inner narration and how it interconnects with one’s immediate surroundings.

Hence, the opening quote and its brief discussion have initially helped introduce the basis for the remaining analyses of this chapter: watercolour prose that captures the ephemeral phenomenological virtual experience. It shows how a certain form of literature can *narrate* conscious experience instead of conceptualising it from a distance, which will be a welcome addition to the more analytical approach of the philosophical authors that were discussed in this thesis's Introduction. When looking to understand the phenomenological virtual experience, the literary works of Walser and Sebald will help explore different aspects. In Walser one can find especially explorations of everyday imagining, whereas Sebald's writings will be used to look at the importance of memory within the act of imagining. Additionally, the works of Sebald will help understand how both human architecture and nonhuman landscapes consist of phenomenological virtual overlays, in which imaginings, memories, but also knowledge, can steer the intrinsic conscious experience of one's immediate surroundings, showing moreover the ambiguous overlap of individual and intersubjective experience in these virtual structures. What the analyses of these authors will emphasise, in the end, is the Long Modern history of exploring a phenomenological kind of virtuality, in which cultural and philosophical engagements inform one another.

Robert Walser and Everyday Imagining

Walser's *The Walk* (1917) can first help discuss in more detail the role of everyday imagining when considering the phenomenological virtual experience. In this novella an unnamed narrator, a writer,²⁰⁵ decides to go for a long walk in the Swiss countryside and reports all the impressions and ideas that cross his mind. Two types of wandering are therefore at the centre of the narration: the physical act of wandering and mind-wandering. When looking to define the latter, Michael Corballis explains there are three types of mind-wandering to consider. First, a consciously controlled mind-wandering, when intentionally replaying memories or planning possible future activities.²⁰⁶ This type of mind-wandering could be observed in the opening quote of this chapter, with the narrator's act of trying to retrieve memories. Second, involuntary, as when dreaming or hallucinating, with little to no control over the process. Third, somewhere in-between those ends of the spectrum, when one is trying to complete a task, consider a dilemma, or finish a thought, but every now and then one's mind goes wandering off, letting one oscillate between paying attention and daydreaming.²⁰⁷

It is this ambiguous form of mind-wandering, somewhere in-between paying attention and drifting off, that is important to the narration of *The Walk*. As the narrator strolls through the countryside and takes in the scenery, he reflects loosely on the virtues of (mind-)wandering and muses how the pleasant combination of observing and daydreaming forms the basis of his everyday existence. The reader encounters an example of these reflections in a scene where Walser's narrator meets one of his acquaintances, the "superintendent or inspector of taxes",²⁰⁸ with whom he has a bone to pick regarding his tax rate. The narrator delivers a long plea to be granted the lowest rate of taxation possible, for he is hard-working yet poor, and mostly lives from gifts by patrons, which can't be seen as income. The baffled superintendent says he sees the narrator always to be out for a walk, questioning this noble image of the hard-working but poor artist. The narrator counters this observation by arguing for the professional necessity of (mind-)wandering:

'Walk,' was my answer, 'I definitely must, to invigorate myself and maintain contact with the living world, without perceiving which I could not write the half of one more single word, or produce the tiniest poem in verse or prose. Without walking, I would be dead, and my profession, which I love passionately, would be destroyed. [...] On a lovely and far-wandering walk a thousand usable and useful thoughts occur to me. Shut in at home, I would miserably decay and dry up. [...] A walk is always filled with significant phenomena, which are valuable to see and to feel. A pleasant walk most often teems with imageries and living poems, with enchantments and natural beauties, be they ever so small.'²⁰⁹

Walser's narrator, as seen in his plea, needs to physically wander to let his mind wander and become creative. This (mind-)wandering shows the embodied nature of the phenomenological virtual experience, as discussed before through Merleau-Ponty. Before then linking the narrator's (mind-)wandering to Casey's concept of everyday imagining, it is first important to establish how it differs from Bachelard's concept of daydreaming. As shown in the Introduction, Bachelard in his phenomenology of the imagination argues that effective daydreaming needs a strong shelter: a secluded world space (intimate space) stimulates the imagination. For Walser's narrator, on the other hand, the coexistence of world space and intimate space happens outside, not inside; it is outward-looking, not inward-looking. It is an associative (mind-)wandering that engages with an outside world that goes by. As the narrator says, "on a lovely and

far-wandering walk a thousand usable and useful thoughts” come to him, as it “often teems with imageries and living poems, with enchantments and natural beauties, be they ever so small”, whereas “shut in at home” the narrator will “miserably decay and dry up”. Therefore, what shines through, is that the narrator’s creative wandering mind relies on the transience of outer reality, as it provides him with an ongoing stream of small impressions.

Walter Benjamin says this sense of transience can be found in Walser’s whole body of work, as his prose is often “extraordinary delicate” and characterised by the “pure and vibrant mood of a convalescent”, in which “the only point of every sentence is to make the reader forget the previous one”.²¹⁰ Tamara Evans agrees, arguing how “the apparent ease of Walser’s lines” and “clean syntactic design” are almost deceptive in their engaging with the heaviness of everyday life.²¹¹ This fleetingness of Walser’s prose becomes more apparent a few pages later in *The Walk*, as the narrator is still busy delivering his plea to the superintendent or inspector of taxes and tries to explain the exact experience of (mind-)wandering:

Countryside and people, sounds and colours, faces and farms, clouds and sunlight swirl all around him like diagrams, and he must ask himself: ‘Where am I?’ Earth and heaven suddenly stream together and collide, rocking interlocked one upon the other into a flashing, shimmering, obscure nebular imagery; chaos begins, and the orders vanish. Convulsed he laboriously tries to retain his normal state of mind; he succeeds, and he walks on, full of confidence.²¹²

The “flashing, shimmering, obscure nebular imagery” captivates the narrator, making him stress that the world and the self are in continuous motion. It is here also that one can observe what this thesis calls watercolour prose: the narrator’s impressions are like drops of paint that are absorbed by the transient world around him, but their gentle, faint colours are felt.

Such a fleetingness is indeed what makes the narration of *The Walk* of interest to this thesis: Walser’s prose mimics the transience of intrinsic conscious experience and reflects on its interconnection with a transient outer world. Italo Calvino’s ideas on qualities specific to literature in modern life can be helpful in further understanding Walser’s watercolour prose and the role of everyday imagining.²¹³ First, there is the quality that Calvino calls lightness: the ability of an author to raise himself “above the

weight of the world, showing that with all this gravity he has the secret of lightness”.²¹⁴ Literary narrations, through their choice of words, can deflate the heaviness of our everyday experiences by providing a different viewpoint. This lightness is characterised by precision and determination, says Calvino, not the vague or haphazard: the author brings relief by draining exact feelings or objects from their heaviness. Such lightness can be seen in the above excerpts of Walser: in his fleetingness he is still very precise; they are aquarelles. Calvino sees in lightness furthermore a special connection between humour and melancholy: “A melancholy is a sadness that has taken on lightness, so humour is comedy that has lost its bodily weight. [...] It casts doubt on the self, on the world, and on the whole network of relationships that are at stake.”²¹⁵ This other aspect of lightness can be seen in Walser’s humorous description of the superintendent or inspector of taxes. By consistently giving him this title, Walser’s narrator shapes the superintendent or inspector of taxes with a brush of gentle absurdness, and while he considers the taxes to be burdensome, the narrator uses them most of all for his softly melancholic plea about the joys of (mind-)wandering.

The second quality of literature that Calvino explores – and like lightness relevant to Walser’s prose – is quickness, which at its core is a relationship between physical speed and speed of mind.²¹⁶ Calvino uses the economical style of folktales or fairy tales as an example of quickness, in which time and imagery are constantly in motion. Characters in these tales are allowed to travel seven years in one simple sentence, and every sentence after that presents the reader’s mind with a rapid sequence of events and imagery stripped down to its bare essentials. Only a few pages later, after the most outlandish adventures, the characters will live, if they are lucky, happily ever after. The sensation Calvino is interested in with the “zigzag pattern” of these tales, is that despite giving the bare minimum to readers in terms of description, the imagery is incredibly vivid and in constant motion.²¹⁷ However, this economical style of the folktale or fairy tale, wherein time, event, and image are sped up, isn’t the only way to create quickness. It can equally be found in “the pleasure of lingering” and the literary technique of digression, for quickness means above all “agility, mobility, and ease, all qualities that go with writing where it is natural to digress”.²¹⁸ As said, quickness is about the relationship between physical speed and speed of mind, but the author can both speed up or slow down time to create the same effect: the rapid motion of imagery that is enabled by the speed of mind.

Walser's fleeting prose and the (mind-)wanderings of his narrator show such a digressive style, defined by lightness and quickness. Valerie Heffeman notes Walser's prose "is filled with asides and marginal comments",²¹⁹ and Samuel Frederick describes these digressions of Walser as "perambulatory prose", where narrations "are freed from static determinations of beginning and ending to proliferate themselves in multiplicitous disunity".²²⁰ In an essay on Walser, Sebald also highlights this combination of lightness and quickness in his prose, calling him a "clairvoyant of the small" with an ideal "to overcome gravity".²²¹ Walser's prose, says Sebald, lets things instantly dissolve, replacing them with the next fragment or shimmer, letting everyday reality rush by like a daydream, upon which his narrators and characters tend to get overtaken by "an almost compulsive contemplation of strangely unreal creations appearing on the periphery of vision".²²² Susan Bernofsky agrees with Sebald, noting how Walser in his prose is "spinning tales around insignificance", preaching "a gospel of appreciation for the overlooked marvels that surround us", and manages to glorify "the modest and inconspicuous".²²³ Summarised, the above authors help explain how Walser's "perambulatory prose" mimics the ambiguities of intrinsic conscious experience and how it digressively reacts to the ongoing transience of outer reality.

The digressions of Walser, defined by lightness and quickness, are close to Casey's concept of an everyday imagining, with them taking place in (and blending with) everyday life. The associative mind-wandering of Walser does not overwhelm, but instead shows a mental state defined by i) an ambiguous flowing in and out of; and ii) a gentle responsiveness to its immediate surroundings. Imaginative impressions come and go, lightly and quickly, and dissolve, leaving their faint marks. Walser's watercolour prose with that shows a kind of imagining that is different from Bachelard's daydreaming and moreover the overzealous imagination discussed in the Introduction, in which imagining doesn't so much blend with one's immediate surroundings but instead tries to overrule and subvert it. Walser's digressive narrations, instead, show an everyday imagining in action: light and quick, outward-looking, it looks to engage and not retreat in shelters.

This latter observation is important for this thesis regarding the historical context of modernity in which it situates the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality: everyday imagining looks to engage with modern everyday life. In that regard the effects of modernity are more clearly to be found in bustling city centres, less so in the relatively quiet periphery. This makes using Walser's *The Walk* as an example

slightly problematic, for although the narrator's (mind-)wandering is outward-looking and worldly, there can also be found a sentiment similar to Bachelard's dialectic shelter. For instance, Walser's narrator reflects on the Swiss countryside and a past life in the metropolis, how a cosmopolitan lifestyle fascinated and "enchanted" him, but how the capitals of the world miss the "embellishments of trees, the embellishment and beneficence of friendly fields and many delicate leaves" that let his imagination breathe.²²⁴ The countryside can therefore itself be interpreted as a large Bachelardian shelter, blocking out the noise of modernity. It is in that sense important to look at other examples of Walser as well, in which one can observe the phenomenological virtual experience in the context of the modern city.

One such example is Walser's prose piece "Berlin and the Artist" (1910).²²⁵ In it he contrasts, once more, imagining in the city (Berlin) and the countryside (of Switzerland), but this time with more detail regarding the urban experience. Walser's narrator starts his comparison by first considering imagining in the countryside, which once more is in line with Bachelard's daydreaming and the need of a strong shelter: "Lost in thought, he sits at the secluded window of his medieval digs, a strange twilight flowing all about him, and without so much as stirring he sends his daydreams into the sweeping landscape."²²⁶ A sheltered imagining safely cut off from the noise of modern life, Walser evokes the imagery of "the secluded window" and "medieval digs". Then, however, the narrator moves on to an artist's life in Berlin, the rumbling metropolis, where "an artist has no choice but to pay attention" and is "not permitted to stop up his ears and sink into wilful ignorance", for "there is an incessant blurring together of various things, and this is good, this is Berlin, and Berlin is outstanding".²²⁷ So where the countryside brings quietude, the city centre provides an avalanche of impressions which the artist simply can't ignore and has to imaginatively engage with.

It is this "incessant blurring together" that is of interest to this thesis when further positioning everyday imagining as a concept useful to modern everyday life, instead of being something quaint or archaic. Walser's "In the Electric Tram" (1908), a short prose piece about his fascination with riding the electric trams of Berlin, can serve as a fine example for such a perspective. However, before analysing this piece, to first briefly look at the concepts of wandering and mind-wandering in the context of an urban landscape. Often these are approached via Benjamin's archetypical idea of "the flaneur": the artist as the urban wanderer, someone who discovers the riches of the metropolis by walking its streets and alleys.²²⁸ As James Wood says, "this figure is essentially a

stand-in for the author [...] intimately connected to the rise of urbanism". The flaneur is "the loafer" who "walks the streets with no great urgency, seeing, looking, reflecting",²²⁹ and is in that respect a personification of modernity and an astute conveyer of the modern everyday experience. Useful as the persona of the flaneur may be, it is also strongly tied to the act of walking. Given this chapter has already discussed the link between physical and imaginative wandering through *The Walk*, it might therefore be more interesting to look for a different perspective and show solely mind-wandering in the metropolitan machine.

Such a perspective can be observed in Walser's "In the Electric Tram", where the narrator is enjoying a tram ride, which is largely passive from a physical standpoint. Instead of portraying the tram as a vehicle of modernity, a clattering menace of steel and electricity, Walser's narrator is amused by the way his mind wanders during these trips: "Yes, it is really true: the human brain involuntarily starts composing songs in the electric tram, songs that in their involuntary nature and their rhythmic regularity are so very striking that it's hard to resist thinking of oneself as Mozart."²³⁰ Here the wandering mind is in tune with modernity, with the narrator seeing the rhythmic motion of the electric tram as the percussion section in the little orchestra that is the wandering mind, emphasising it is the motion of the modern vehicle that make songs bubble up in an involuntary nature. Next to the motion of the electric tram as a rhythm for the narrator's mind-wandering, he goes on to describe another intriguing feature: "Our car is constantly in motion. It is raining in the streets we glide through, and this constitutes one more added pleasantness." This pleasantness has to do with the comforting realisation that the passenger can enjoy the rain without getting wet and how "the image produced by a grey, wet street has something dreamy about it".²³¹ In a way the tram is a Bachelardian shelter, providing a safe space to imagine from, however it lacks any of its antimodern dialectics.

Walser's narrator goes on describing how he and other passengers spend their time:

People do, after all, tend to get somewhat bored on such trips, which often require twenty or thirty minutes or even more, and what do you do to provide yourself with some modicum of entertainment? You look straight ahead. To show by one's gaze and gestures that one is finding things a bit tedious fills a person with a quite peculiar pleasure. Now you return to studying the face of the conductor on duty, and now you content

yourself once more with merely, vacantly staring straight ahead. Isn't that nice? One thing and then another?²³²

In the above quote one can see the incessant blurring of urban impressions. In the electric tram the passenger's mind will wander from the dreamy landscape of the grey, wet streets to the faces and silhouettes that fill "the gaze straight ahead". They show a closeness to Casey's everyday imagining, with its ambiguous flowing in and out of, engaging with modernity, not sealing oneself off. Additionally, although the narrator's mind-wandering is predominantly vision-oriented, he makes it, thinking of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the virtual body, an embodied act as well. He shows to be bored through his gaze *and* gestures (and is quite delighted to show off this boredom). Boredom and mind-wandering become a performative art in Walser's prose: there is an act involved and the mind doesn't wander separately from the body. Even though this body is not physically wandering and slightly passive – the passenger sits or stands still, the tram is in motion – it will still act out.

The narrator's wandering mind engages imaginatively with the immediate, modern surroundings of Berlin. To go back once more to how Walser's mind-wandering goes beyond Bachelard's daydreaming, and how it's more in line with Casey's everyday imagining, this can also be observed when thinking of the electric tram as a symbol for modernity and the changing experience of time, with an emphasis on the present and future. Bachelard's phenomenology of the imagination is, in his own words, future-minded: with imagination people can foresee. However, it is important to understand how Bachelard's phenomenology starkly differs from a more dominant idea of future-mindedness in modernity: political-economical foreseeing. For instance, Reinhart Koselleck argues that an important trait of the modern experience of time, may it be by the individual or a socio-political body, is the dominance of prognosis and calculation, in which analysing the past is used to anticipate, predict, or manipulate the future. Or in other words: the past and its actions are introduced into the future by calculations or prognoses made in the present.²³³ Koselleck's ideas are closely related to Weber's ideas of the historical development of modern capitalism; a *Geist* that finds its roots in a rigorous Protestant discipline in which timewasting is considered a sin.²³⁴

Summarised: the individual; the socio-political; the economical; all these realms are shaped by foreseeing, but in a rationalised and calculated manner. From such a point of view foreseeing entails: one can (a) know the past; (b) control the present; and

(c) shape the future. This leads to the idea that one can “accelerate time”, of which the most tempting form, both politically and technologically, is the promise of the revolution.²³⁵ Person X wants to arrive earlier at (c), so therefore person X has to use his knowledge of (a) to speed up (b). The modern individual or society believes that if planning or prognosis doesn’t bring them to a desired state fast enough, the present moment can be accelerated by slamming the gas pedal. Hartmut Rosa notes that the consequence of all this accelerating on multiple levels, to reach the desired state that has been foreseen, is that the modern individual feels that the world around him is continuously changing at breakneck speed and, more importantly, these changes are evermore picking up speed. This gives one the nagging feeling that one is always short on time as well as constantly wasting time.²³⁶

These modern ideas of time, that it is controllable, constantly accelerating, and one has never enough of it, are also an important factor to consider when thinking once more about the act of mind-wandering in modern everyday life. In the academic literature the latter can have a negative connotation for it wastes one’s time. For instance, one psychological study states that “these incessant mental meanderings come at quite a cost, significantly disrupting performance on a great range of activities ranging from the banal [...] to the most demanding”,²³⁷ and another study notes how participants would often feel guilty and unhappy about mind-wandering in their everyday lives.²³⁸ Corballis, however, says the problem is not mind-wandering itself, which is an inherent and meaningful trait of human consciousness. The problem is feeling guilty about it because one feels as if one is wasting time, even though it is simply how our brains seem to work.²³⁹ Walser’s prose can in that regard help reflect on mind-wandering in modern life: his mind-wandering entangles itself with the rush of modernity, yet it acts as a soft kind of counterbalance. For example, the tram, a symbol of political-economical time, getting from A to B as fast as possible, becomes a vehicle for an unproblematic imagining. Even though the narrator is not necessarily completing a task, Walser’s prose shows the pleasantness of such an imagining/mind-wandering and how it is a meaningful part of everyday conscious experience.

The example of Walser shows with that how literature can help *imagine* how to experience something, in this case imagining itself. As Mark Currie argues, “the reading of fictional narratives is a kind of preparation for and repetition of the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life”.²⁴⁰ Northrop Frye, next to that, puts forward the idea that literature can educate the imagination, for in the literary world, as

Frye notes, “there is no reality except that of the human imagination”.²⁴¹ By training the imagination, says Frye, one learns to read images, what they convey, but one learns also, more importantly, to temper the imagination, not being overwhelmed or carried away by the possibilities that surround one in everyday life.²⁴² This mimicking and informing of imagining, making it modest and grounded, is also what defines Casey’s everyday imagining and Walser’s mind-wandering: an inherently ambiguous act one flows in and out of, often unassuming, blending itself with the experience of everyday life. Reading the watercolour prose of Walser, with its light and quick digressions, allows the reader to reconsider the role of imagining in modern everyday life and the small moments of comfort it can bring.

This can also be observed in the concluding observations of Walser’s narrator in “In the Electric Tram”. Nearing the end of his tram journey the narrator digresses into another incessant blurring of how “always new stations are arriving, new streets”, how it takes the passenger past “squares and bridges”, a department store or war ministry, and “all this while it is continuing to rain, and you continue to behave as if you were a tad bored, and you continue to find this conduct the most suitable”. In this haze, the tram to the narrator becomes a vehicle that drives forward an intimacy with the modern world, for it might be “that while you were riding along like that, you heard or saw something beautiful, gay, or sad, something you will never forget”.²⁴³ These final words of Walser’s prose piece emphasise what Sebald and Bernofsky mean when positioning Walser as a clairvoyant of the small: in his narratives he finds and conveys little, fleeting moments of pleasure or melancholy in whatever context, with that accomplishing a modest lightening up of everyday life. Or in the terminology of this thesis: his impressions are watercolours, leaving their faint marks. What’s more, Walser’s narrations show a crucial aspect of a phenomenological virtual *reality*: the wandering mind, with its everyday imagining, is strongly embedded in the transience of everyday life and its modern spaces. It is not a concept of shelter or separation; it is defined by a worldly engagement, in which imagining does not drastically alters one’s immediate surroundings, but instead ambiguously blends its colours, continuously dissolving as one goes along.

W.G. Sebald: Virtual Structures and Multiplicity

Having discussed the act of everyday imagining through Walser’s watercolour prose, this chapter will move on to explain how it is an ambiguous part of the

phenomenological virtual experience. As stated in the Introduction, while arguing for Casey's concept of everyday imagining, this thesis doesn't necessarily follow his idea of the imagination being an autonomous and independent faculty. Instead, it situates everyday imagining within a wider ambiguous overlap of memory and the sensory impressions of one's immediate surroundings. To further understand this interplay of imagining, memory, and sensory impressions, as also to look at the role of knowledge/information, the chapter will now turn to the writings of Sebald. The latter's prose is very similar to Walser's digressions, yet Sebald is more interested in how the past coexists with the present. Lynne Schwartz argues in that regard that like Walser the "Sebald narrator is a wanderer", both in the sense of the physical act, to walk, as that he wanders in his narratives, however in Sebald's narrations there is a much stronger emphasis on the visible and invisible lines of memory and history that surround us in everyday life.²⁴⁴ These visible and invisible lines are in Sebald's writings often explored through human-made structures in the form of architecture and/or informational structures. This prominence of architecture in Sebald provides an extra angle in examining the contextuality of the phenomenological virtual experience, as that the role of knowledge in his digressions can help further understand the inherent ambiguity of this experience.

In the case of architecture, it is worthwhile to first discuss Elizabeth Grosz's ideas on virtual architecture. Grosz argues that a philosophical understanding of architecture, and an architectural understanding of philosophy, can help one better understand the difference between a) the actual state of a structure; and b) the virtual state of a structure. Grosz appreciates, on the one hand, the practicality of architecture, for an architect can never get too abstract and needs to come up with spaces in which people can really exist,²⁴⁵ but, on the other hand, she does think that in the architectural discipline buildings are too often positioned as static entities. In that regard she argues a philosophical virtual framework can "help transform these rather static ways of understanding construction", as the act of building something is not merely a "movement of sedimentation and stabilization but also a way of opening space and living". Or in other words: "What happens to a structure once it already exists?"²⁴⁶ In architecture, to summarise, the material walls (the actual) are fixed, but the way humans live within and *with* the structure (the virtual) is continuously shifting. Grosz's observations are close to this thesis's idea of a phenomenological virtual reality: the interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings.

This theme of virtual structures can be explored through Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001), which demonstrates a strong intermingling of cognition and architecture. In the novel an unnamed narrator meets Jacques Austerlitz, a scholar of architectural history, in 1967 in a waiting-room²⁴⁷ of Antwerp's *Centraal Station*. They meet each other again twice, by accident, in those months in Belgium, first in Brussels, then in Zeebrugge, and during these encounters they become friends. In London the narrator visits Austerlitz on quite a regular basis at first, but the contact fizzles out and Austerlitz doesn't respond to the narrator's letters. For almost thirty years there is no contact between the two, until the narrator and Austerlitz bump into each other around London's Liverpool Street Station in 1996. From there on Austerlitz shares his life story with the narrator and explains how after a nervous breakdown he has been investigating his past. In that time he has learned that in 1939 his Jewish mother put him on a *Kindertransport* in Prague, after which he, as a five-year old, ended up in Wales, where he grew up.²⁴⁸ Austerlitz's journey, told through the narrator's voice, takes him across Europe, trying to unravel the mysteries of his own past, the fate of both his parents, while also facing the ghostly remains of post-war European history and asking how he can be at home in such a world. Austerlitz doesn't find a definitive answer and remains a wanderer that embodies this post-war European history, existing somewhere in the mists of past and present.

Two actual-virtual structures in *Austerlitz* are of particular interest to this thesis when exploring the phenomenological virtual experience: the waiting-room of Antwerp's *Centraal Station* and the waiting-room of London's Liverpool Street Station. To start with the Antwerpian space, the following quote is from the first few pages of the novel, only moments before the narrator will meet Austerlitz in the waiting-room he is entering. Here the narrator recounts, with a foggy memory, how he came straight from the Antwerp Zoo and the way it influenced his experience of the train station:

When I entered the great hall of the *Centraal Station* with its dome arching sixty meters high above it, my first thought, perhaps triggered by my visit to the zoo and the sight of the dromedary, was that this magnificent although then severely dilapidated foyer ought to have cages for lions and leopards let into its marble niches, and aquaria for sharks, octopuses and crocodiles. [...] It was probably because of ideas like these, occurring to me almost of their own accord there in Antwerp, that the waiting-room which, I know, has now been turned into a staff canteen struck me as another Nocturama, a curious

confusion which may of course have been the result of the sun's sinking behind the rooftops just as I entered the room. The gleam of gold and silver on the huge, half-obscured mirrors on the wall facing the windows was not yet entirely extinguished before a subterranean twilight filled the waiting-room, where a few travellers sat far apart, silent and motionless.²⁴⁹

There are two things to dissect from this quote when considering the phenomenological virtual experience. First, it is the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience. The narrator admits he is unclear if this was his actual experience, for in recounting this episode his memories of the zoo and train station have blended somewhat.²⁵⁰ This ambiguity can be seen and felt throughout the whole quote, as imagining, memory, and sensory impressions overlap and subtly alter the narrator's experience of the station hall. As the narrator, for instance, visited the zoo first, it makes that imagery of animals starts to seep into the architecture of the train station and the narrator imagines what this space could become if animals would be let into its "marble niches".²⁵¹ This phenomenological virtual experience of the station, coalescing with the earlier visited zoo, moves on in a very momentary fashion: as the sun sinks behind the rooftops and a "subterranean twilight" fills the waiting-room, the narrator starts reimagining it "as another Nocturama".²⁵² In effect the Antwerp Zoo and Antwerp's *Centraal Station* have overlapped in the phenomenological virtual experience of the narrator, and as he has been imagining all of this (ideas "occurring almost of their own accord", as the narrator says), it becomes a memory that he can call to life thirty years later, as he is writing down the experience.

The above quote highlights both similarities and differences regarding the watercolour prose of Sebald and Walser. Thinking of Calvino's concept of lightness, Ruth Franklin calls Sebald's writing "ephemeral", vanishing "almost as soon as it appears".²⁵³ Like Walser's sentences the reader will instantly forget them, mimicking the quality of intrinsic conscious experience and/or a wandering mind. Furthermore, Calvino's quickness of imagery, too, can be found in Sebald. Charles Simic notes digression is an important part of Sebald's prose, in which often narratives are endlessly interrupted by anecdotes and information that all come to his narrators through association.²⁵⁴ That said, Sebald's digressions are different from those of Walser as well. They are foggy, in Sebald's own words, reflecting on his own writing: "These kinds of natural phenomenon like fog, like mist, which render the environment and one's ability

to see it almost impossible, have always interested me greatly.”²⁵⁵ This concern with the inherent ambiguity of consciousness, how imagining, memory, and sensory impressions overlap in a kind of cognitive mist, is less apparent in the works of Walser.

The second aspect to highlight from the above scene, and relevant in the context of ambiguity, is the role of *knowledge* and how it guides the narrator’s phenomenological virtual experience of Antwerp’s *Centraal Station*. The narrator is aware he has entered a *waiting-room*. This piece of knowledge, the purpose of the architectural space, leads the narrator to juxtapose the twilight, in all its dynamism, with the travelers that sit “far apart, silent and motionless”. The narrator *knows* this is a space to wait in and his imagining instantly alters the course of his meanderings towards the motionlessness of the people. However, the *lack* of knowledge is equally important: he is uncertain about the exactitude of his memory, as that he knows the experience of the station hall was inherently ambiguous, momentary and, in many ways, uncontrolled. The constant cognitive remaking of the space is in interplay with both the narrator’s past, the here-and-now, and the future: it is informed by his earlier experiences (the zoo and his knowledge of what these spaces are); is guided by the senses (the sinking sun that creates a twilight); and finally the imagination that creates possibilities (‘what if this would become a station-zoo?’). Finally, thirty years later, the narrator revisits the architectural-virtual space in the form of a foggy memory, making him ask what is and isn’t imagined within this memory.

Sebald’s digressions and their use of knowledge hit upon another quality of literature discussed by Calvino: multiplicity. Multiplicity, according to Calvino, conveys that people are a “*combinatoria* of experiences, information, books we have read,” and “things imagined”. Each of our lives, says Calvino, is “an encyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable”.²⁵⁶ Literature, of all the arts, is best equipped to address this multiplicity of human existence, for it can take the form of the encyclopaedia and merge the bits and pieces of information with the networks between ourselves and the world that come into existence every day.²⁵⁷ Carole Angier sees multiplicity as one of the defining qualities of Sebald’s works, for his “books are uncategorisable” and let one ask: “Are they fiction or non-fiction? Are they travel writing, essays, books of history or natural history, biography, autobiography, encyclopaedias or arcane facts?”²⁵⁸ The way Sebald lets narrative and information intersect and overlap,

furthermore, comes through an intensive usage of black and white photography of people, architecture, nature, and objects that are scattered throughout his novels.²⁵⁹

The concept of multiplicity helps better understand Sebald's use of (the lack of) knowledge and how it influences the phenomenological virtual experience. From this perspective, knowledge is not a force of compartmentalisation/partitioning, as shown in the Introduction through Heidegger and Latour, in which a modern technological mindset cuts apart the world in ever smaller pieces of information for the sake of clarity. Instead, knowledge is part of the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience and its interconnection with one's immediate surroundings. A useful concept in this regard is Michael Jackson's notion of "the penumbral": a sense of experience "occurring on the threshold between what can and cannot be entirely grasped – intellectually, linguistically, or practically".²⁶⁰ For Jackson the penumbral conveys a "phenomenologically intermediate zone between regions of a complete shadow and complete illumination" and is "an outlying or peripheral region [...] an area in which something exists to a lesser or uncertain degree".²⁶¹ Jackson's description of the penumbral captures the narrator's ambiguous experience of Antwerp's *Centraal Station*. It is a phenomenologically intermediate zone, in which the narrator's memory tries to recapture and illuminate the immediate experience of the station hall, however ending up somewhere in the overlapping shadows of imagining, memory, and immediate sensory impressions. Knowledge is an important factor, as it informs the narrator where he is and it guides his musings, but it is not a clarifying force: it ambiguously blends with the rest of intrinsic conscious experience.

A second scene from *Austerlitz* can help further explore these penumbral aspects of the phenomenological virtual experience: the encounter of the narrator and Austerlitz at Liverpool Street Station in 1996. The architecture of Liverpool Street Station plays a vital role in the narration, like the Antwerp *Centraal Station* before. The below quote comes out of a section in which Austerlitz, being an architectural scholar, is telling the narrator about the time he was wandering through Liverpool Street Station as it was being renovated, years earlier. While reflecting on the architecture of the old and new Liverpool Street Station, unexpectedly long-buried memories from his past start to emerge. As said, of importance in the following scene will be the inherent ambiguity of the phenomenological virtual experience and its strong interlinking with Austerlitz's immediate surroundings:

Memories like this came back to me in the disused Ladies' Waiting-Room of Liverpool Street Station, memories behind and within which many things much further back in the past seemed to lie, all interlocking like the labyrinthine vaults I saw in the dusty grey light, and which seemed to go on and on for ever. In fact I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting-room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained, [...] As so often, said Austerlitz, I cannot give any precise description of the state of mind this realization induced; I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it [...] And certainly the words I had forgotten in a short space of time, and all that went with them, would have remained buried in the depths of my mind had I not, through a series of coincidences, entered the old waiting-room in Liverpool Street Station that Sunday morning, a few weeks at the most before it vanished for ever in the rebuilding.²⁶²

Against the backdrop of the construction site, a space in which both the new and the old Liverpool Street Station coexist, Austerlitz comes to embody a similar in-betweenness: past and present start to interact and overlap. His memories start to pick up momentum and startle Austerlitz, for he realises he has been here, in this exact waiting-room, when he was a child. But this realisation is not a clear one, it remains in line with the penumbral state: Austerlitz can't give a "precise description" of these realisations and figures it is something "inexpressible because we have no words for it". What he is certain of, however, in all this obscurity, is that something vital has come to the surface of his consciousness, brought about by these immediate, architectural surroundings. Once more the concept of knowledge is of importance: on the one hand there is the lack of knowledge when it comes to the inner workings of the phenomenological virtual experience, with its penumbral qualities, but on the other hand it is the knowledge that this momentary experience of the waiting-room is telling Austerlitz something essential about his own past.

The coexistence of the past and present in the phenomenological virtual experience is therefore captured by the metaphorical space that is the waiting-room of a train station. It is a space with a clear architectural idea: a traveller is in transition, but sometimes must wait before these transitions (trains) will connect. It is a place that suggests time stands still *and* is moving forward. When one zooms out, it is part of a transitional, architectural structure, if one zooms in, it suggests temporarily being

outside the movement of time. Additionally, the knowledge and experience of the waiting-room captures a certain paradox of time in the phenomenological virtual experience: it is both momentary, as it is driven forward through “a series of coincidences”, but simultaneously suggests a certain timelessness: dormant memories of long-gone times, coming to the surface after many years. Bergson’s ideas on the virtual coexistence of past and present, discussed in the Introduction, can serve as a further explanation of this paradox of the momentary and timelessness in the phenomenological virtual experience. For Bergson the virtual entails that one always carries the whole of one’s past, but it depends on the momentary nature of the present which elements of the virtual past will be actualised through memory.²⁶³ Hence, Austerlitz’s experience is Bergsonian: the momentary, present experience of Liverpool Street Station brings to the surface a long-buried past, and in that present moment his immediate experiences and memories go on actively coexisting and blending together.

The above scene from *Austerlitz* serves therefore as an example of how one’s immediate surroundings can bring forward a blend of imagining, memory, and sensory impressions. This is an inherently ambiguous experience, or in the words of Jackson, a penumbral zone of complete shadow and complete illumination. Building further on this penumbral aspect, Austerlitz has what in German would be called an *Aha-Erlebnis*: a sudden realisation or sudden understanding of something. What is implicit in the experience of the *Aha-Erlebnis*, is that there is an element of surprise in how this realisation has come to be. One is all of a sudden illuminated – Eureka! – but where this illumination *exactly* came from will partially remain in the shadows. Vital to the *Aha-Erlebnis* of Austerlitz is the connection with the architectural space he is in. It is the in-betweenness of the Liverpool Street Station waiting-room construction site that provokes the flow of Austerlitz’s realisations. Yet, these realisations also wrap themselves around the penumbral shape of this space: Austerlitz’s sudden realisations about his past remain stuck in an intermediate zone in which he sort of knows what is happening, just as he sort of doesn’t know what is happening. In the end, the phenomenological virtual state of Austerlitz and the Liverpool Street waiting-room have become inseparable.

The inherent ambiguity and contextuality of the phenomenological virtual experience have been discussed through *Austerlitz*. The remainder of this chapter will further analyse the quality of multiplicity in Sebald’s watercolour prose and will, additionally, once more return to the theme of (mind-)wandering. The basis for this remaining

analysis will be a scene from Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). In this novel, very reminiscent of Walser's *The Walk* and its (mind-)wanderings, an unnamed narrator, closely resembling the author itself, is walking through the English countryside, weaving together impressions in a meandering, rather aimless, overarching narrative. The narrator, as he wanders through the county of Suffolk, describes who and what he encounters on his long walks and in his digressions associatively jumps back and forth from momentary observations of the present to historical knowledge. Like in *Austerlitz* the narrator creates a world in which past and present coexist, however this time not explored via architectural structures but through the landscapes people inhabit.

Satarupa Sinha Roy argues that to understand the idea of wandering in *The Rings of Saturn*, one needs to consider what Heidegger calls "dwelling" and the question of whether modern people can be at home in the world.²⁶⁴ Dwelling to Heidegger means the way human beings cultivate and safeguard the world around themselves, so they can become accustomed to their surroundings and, if all goes well, they can feel at home.²⁶⁵ The concepts of building and dwelling are strongly connected, as through building things people connect themselves to their surroundings. But this connection, says Heidegger, is not rooted in architectural ideas nor rules for building. Building is essential to dwelling, but not every building is a dwelling. Heidegger gives the example of the railway station: this is not a dwelling in the strict sense of the word – a home – but it is a building in which dwelling can be felt. For instance, the traveller can experience the railway station as a dwelling, for it offers him a building that makes him *feel* at home in the world.²⁶⁶ (In the case of *Austerlitz* the waiting-room of Liverpool Street Station evokes the opposite in the character of Austerlitz: it is a building absent of dwelling; it is a building in which he suddenly realises his homelessness.)

In other words, going back to Grosz's observations on architecture and the virtual, where a building represents the actual object, dwelling is the virtual, ever-changing state that happens *within* these structures. However, dwelling and its virtual architecture are not bound to buildings per se, as Roy explores in his essay on *The Rings of Saturn*. Roy argues that the narrator's "aimless wanderings in the English countryside" are underpinned by an "ontological restlessness symptomatic of the dispossessed or unhoused".²⁶⁷ Yet, although Sebald's narrator's wanderings reflect an ontological restlessness, Roy observes this wandering around is also a means "whereby dwelling may be accomplished, a measure by which the *unheimlich* of homelessness is resolved into the *heimlich* of dwelling in the world". By figuring out routes, learning

about the surroundings, and revisiting places in the English countryside he has wandered before, the narrator creates a sense of dwelling.²⁶⁸ This combination of feeling (being at home) and knowledge (figuring out routes; learning about the surroundings), is what can be encountered in Calvino's concept of multiplicity as well: a patchwork of information, merging with the networks between ourselves and the world in everyday life.

Tying the themes of (mind-)wandering, knowledge, and the phenomenological virtual experience together, Monika Kaup says that in *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald's narrator manages a balancing act between "being a reader and being an embodied walker in the world".²⁶⁹ Indeed, Sebald, discussing the writing process of *The Rings of Saturn* and its meandering narrative, states he used "the walker's approach to viewing nature" as an inspiration, for he believes it "is a phenomenological one".²⁷⁰ Sebald describes that as a walker "you will find things by the wayside" or "buy a brochure written by a local historian, which is in a little tiny museum somewhere, which you would never find in London", and by this "unsystematic searching" the walker will find "odd details which lead you somewhere else" and as the materials "have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to strain your imagination in order to create a connection between the two things". Sebald argues there is a strength in this unsystematic, wandering approach, for "you have to take heterogeneous materials in order to get your mind to do something that it hasn't done before".²⁷¹ Hence, *The Rings of Saturn*, from the perspective of the phenomenological virtual experience, can show the potential spontaneity of knowledge, and how it blends itself with imagining, memory, and the sensory impressions of one's immediate surroundings.

An example of such a multiplicity in the novel, is the scene in which the narrator wanders the Suffolk coast and reaches the almost completely vanished port town of Dunwich. It tells how the narrator wanders along "the grey beach" of the Suffolk coast, observing the North Sea, when after a while a couple of tiled roofs start to emerge in the distance. He knows he has arrived at Dunwich, a once bustling port town, but nowadays no more than a hamlet. Accompanied in the narrative by black and white pictures of the coastline and two ruins the narrator starts to reflect on the town's rich past:

The Dunwich of the present day is what remains of a town that was one of the most important ports in Europe in the Middle Ages. There were more than fifty churches, monasteries and convents, and hospitals here; there were shipyards and fortifications

and a fisheries and merchant fleet of eighty vessels; and there were dozens of windmills. All of it has gone under, quite literally, and is now below the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel, over an area of two or three square miles. The parish churches of St James, St Leonard, St Martin, St Bartholomew, St Michael, St Patrick, St Mary, St John, St Peter, St Nicholas and St Felix, one after the other, toppled down the steadily receding cliff-face and sank in the depths, along with the earth and stone of which the town had been built.²⁷²

Sebald's narrator further digresses and, in line with Calvino's idea of quickness, starts to spoon up particular events in a rapid fashion: a fleet of hundreds of knights and horses, thousands of foot soldiers that set for Portsmouth in 1230; a storm on New Year's Eve, 1285, that devastated the lower town; another storm on the 14th of January, 1328, et cetera. His associative mind switches back to the present, to instantly retract to a different, more recent past: "If you look out from the cliff-top across the sea towards where the town must once have been, you can see the immense power of emptiness. Perhaps it was for this reason that Dunwich became a place of pilgrimage for melancholy poets in the Victorian age."²⁷³ This observation makes the narrator digress, again, into a biography of one of these Victorian melancholic poets, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), and to a lesser extent his companion Theodore Watts-Dunton (1832-1914). It follows the same narrational approach as with Dunwich: it gives the reader snippets of information about Swinburne, which come in an associative fashion, from time to time being interrupted by the narrator saying "I remember reading in a study of Swinburne" or "if I remember rightly",²⁷⁴ giving this recollection an immediacy, insinuating all this comes to him at the Dunwich cliff-top, still overlooking the "immense power of emptiness". Moreover, in remembering, and simultaneously observing the scenery, the narrator also relies on other people's memories, using for instance "Watts-Dunton reportedly said" when talking about Swinburne's life.²⁷⁵ With that the personal and intersubjective blend together, letting the reader wonder how many voices speak through the narrator.

Two aspects of the Dunwich scene matter most to this thesis's argument. First, the above multiplicity, reflecting the heterogeneous and unsystematic approach of *The Rings of Saturn*, shows a digressive style, where in an associative fashion thoughts and impressions come to the narrator. This is reminiscent of the watercolour prose of Walser. However, Sebald's prose shows in more depth how knowledge steers the

(mind-)wandering of the narrator. The Dunwich scene highlights, like the *Austerlitz* scenes before, how the role of knowledge differs when compared to the modern technological mindset and the act of compartmentalisation, in which informational structures try to reveal the inner workings of reality so people can remake it to their liking. In the multiplicity of *The Rings of Saturn* knowledge is not necessarily a clarifying force, but instead positioned as being part of the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience and its interconnection with one's immediate surroundings. Second, in the narrator's ambiguous experience of Dunwich the overlapping of imagining and memory becomes apparent, both on an individual and intersubjective level. The Dunwich scene is filled with a range of memories, some personal, some intersubjective, in which it is often unclear when it is a memory or when it is a product of the narrator's imagination, imagining the memories of someone else. So, although the narrator and his experience of Suffolk are the foundation of the narration, the question can be asked *whose* memories and/or imaginings form the true basis of the digressions in *The Rings of Saturn*.

In the novel the whole of a virtual, *intersubjective* past coexists with the *individual* present moment of the narrator. He might be alone, wandering along the coast of Dunwich, but virtually the voices of the dead and the knowledge of a now vanished landscape are still very much present. Sebald's narrator is using the memories of others, which then make him *imagine* how for instance the Victorian poets roamed the emptiness of Dunwich. Sebald emphasises this by letting his narrator's voice constantly merge with the voices of others: it is not only him, in a sense, who is narrating his (mind-)wanderings, it is just as much the voices of others that sound through his voice. As Sebald says about the role of the dead and their voices in his fiction: "These people aren't really gone, they just hover somewhere at the perimeter of our lives and keep coming in on brief visits."²⁷⁶ The dead, therefore, are part of the invisible lines of memory that Sebald explores in his novels, and with that one can still consider them as being present. They are both timeless, for they are dead, as that they are momentary, for they "keep coming in brief visits" whenever they cross our minds.

Looking at this blending of memory and imagining, or the personal and the intersubjective, the element of invisibility is important. For instance, Richard Gray observes *The Rings of Saturn* asks what it means to reproduce something that no longer empirically exists and has vanished into air: can such a memory be more than a product of the human imagination?²⁷⁷ Roy agrees the theme of evanescence is essential in *The Rings of Saturn*, with the narrator reflecting on how people and buildings are

doomed to vanish from a landscape, as seen with Dunwich, and only memories (and sometimes ruins) will remain.²⁷⁸ These invisible layers, however, if one is aware of them, will still have a strong influence on one's personal experience. Benjamin Morris, talking about the sunken town of Dunwich and cultural heritage sites in general, argues that places of absence or abandonment are powerful catalysts for human imagining and investigations: one tries to imagine what these sites were like; one tries to reconstruct through investigations what these sites were like.²⁷⁹ This imagining and investigating can clearly be seen in *The Rings of Saturn*, for the narrator uses historical and archaeological knowledge to imagine the sunken city of Dunwich and the experiences of Victorian poets.

As said, much of what the narrator learns about the county of Suffolk is no longer visible in its landscape. Therefore, the multiplicity in *The Rings of Saturn* tells something about the way imagining, memory, and knowledge can set up invisible, indeed virtual, structures, influencing the intrinsic conscious experience of one's immediate surroundings. In Sebald's *Austerlitz* one can find a similar example of the effect of a vanished place, in this case the Welsh village of Llanwddyn that was submerged in 1888 after the completion of Lake Vyrnwy, a reservoir that would provide fresh water for the city of Liverpool. Below the character of Austerlitz tells the narrator about a moment in his childhood where he and his Welsh caretaker, a priest called Elias, were standing on the Vyrnwy dam, and this caretaker told Austerlitz about his family home that lay "about a hundred feet under the dark water":

In the years before its submersion, so Elias had told him, said Austerlitz, Llanwddyn had been particularly famous for its games of football on the village green when the full moon shone in summer, often lasting all night and played by over ten dozen youths and men of almost every age, some of them from neighbouring villages. The story of the football games of Llanwddyn occupied my imagination for a long time, said Austerlitz, first and foremost, I am sure, because Elias never told me anything else about his own life either before or afterwards. At this one moment on the Vyrnwy dam when, intentionally or unintentionally, he allowed me a glimpse into his clerical heart, I felt for him so much that he, the righteous man seemed to me like the only survivor of the deluge which had destroyed Llanwddyn, while I imagined all the others – his parents, his brothers and sisters, his relations, their neighbours, all the other villagers – still down in the depths, sitting in their houses and walking along the road, but unable to speak and with their eyes opened far too wide.²⁸⁰

In the above scene one can observe the same penumbral qualities discussed in the Dunwich scene. First, there is a blending of personal and intersubjective memory, as the character of Austerlitz is switching between his own memories and those of Elias. Second, as Austerlitz himself observes, the lines between memory and imagining are blurry, for the memories of Tobias and the submerged Llanwddyn are letting Austerlitz *imagine* what Llanwddyn was like. Third, multiplicity is of importance as well, as the information of the 1888 engineering project of Lake Vyrnwy and the subsequent submerging of Llanwddyn are bits of knowledge that influence this blend of memory and imagining.

The Dunwich and Llanwddyn scenes highlight similarities in the watercolour prose of Sebald and Walser: everything comes to their narrators/characters in an associative fashion, mimicking the fleeting quality of intrinsic conscious experience. Furthermore, both Sebald and Walser don't look for Bachelardian shelters in their narrations, but instead engage with the places of modernity, like an electric tram in Berlin, the bustling train stations of Antwerp and London, or the human-made Lake Vyrnwy, and then try to feel at home in these places, creating a sense of dwelling. Next to these similarities, Sebald, as shown through *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*, explores the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience, both when looking at i) the role of knowledge and ii) the overlapping of memory/imagining and the personal/intersubjective. Together these aspects create invisible, virtual layers that affect the intrinsic conscious experience of one's immediate surroundings in everyday life.

Concluding the first chapter, its goal was to establish the phenomenological virtual experience and its interconnection with one's immediate surroundings. To do so it explored the literary narrations of Walser and Sebald and analysed their watercolour prose defined by lightness, quickness, and multiplicity. Spanning the whole twentieth century, these authors exemplify the earlier identified modern tradition of exploring the phenomenological virtual experience, as well as showing the strong overlap of cultural and philosophical investigations of it. The first chapter showed the phenomenological virtual experience in action, how it continuously colours one's present in fleeting and elusive ways, with imagining, memory, and impressions quickly dissolving into an ever-so transient world. The importance of an everyday imagining was explained, as well as situated in the wider inherent ambiguity of the phenomenological virtual experience.

Adding to this ambiguity, the chapter looked at the penumbral role of knowledge and the thin line between the personal and the intersubjective.

That said, as argued in the Introduction, despite the inherent ambiguity of the phenomenological virtual experience, this thesis will from here on put an emphasis on everyday imagining in the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. The next chapter will further establish such an imagining, show how it relies on a playful attitude and with that differs from an immersive, overzealous kind of imagination, which defines the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. Additionally, building further on the *fleeting* watercolour prose of Walser, it will introduce the concept of aspersion as a contrast to immersion, and will show how the aspersion playfulness of everyday imagining can help one engage with one's modern everyday surroundings. Lastly, it will further cement the historical framework of Long Modernity, in which these explorations of virtuality are to be understood.

Chapter 2

Aspersion and Playfulness

As argued in the first chapter, the conceptual basis of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality is the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings. The second chapter will move on to further analyse its main faculty, everyday imagining, and show how it differs from an overzealous kind of imagination that is one of the pillars of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. This latter form of imagination tries to overrule one's immediate surroundings, not blend with them. Two characteristics will help further understand everyday imagining and its role in the alternative rhetoric: aspersion and playfulness. After their analyses, aspersion and playfulness will then be compared to immersion, showing their conceptual differences. Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) will help discuss the aspersive and playful qualities of everyday imagining. Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605 & 1615) and James Thurber's short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1939) are used as contrasting examples, showing the overzealous imagination and immersion.

The reason for choosing such a varied set of examples, as said, is to place discussions of virtuality within the historical framework of Long Modernity. Two elements need some further clarification. First, Woolf will be tied to Walser and Sebald, yet what sets her apart from the other two is that in general Woolf is considered an explicit exponent of literary modernism. Joshua Kavaloski, for instance, explains how Woolf is an essential part of "high modernism", together with writers such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Musil, representing "the artistic culmination of modern literature during the 1920s".²⁸¹ That said, Woolf's narrations will also be analysed through this thesis's concept of watercolour prose. The goal of these comparisons is, as said, not to argue that all mentioned authors are modernists; the goal is to show the long literary tradition of engaging with a phenomenological kind of virtuality, which is closest to modernist interpretations of their literary works. Walser, Sebald, and Woolf *narrate* the ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience and how it interconnects with one's immediate surroundings. Their literary explorations of virtuality

supplement the philosophical virtual investigations of for instance Bergson, Bachelard, and Merleau-Ponty.

Second, when looking at the historical framework of Long Modernity, *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty* serve as contrasts to such a virtuality. They are part of a different modern tradition, one that sets up a strongly dialectical relationship between human consciousness and everyday reality. Both literary texts, although more than three hundred years apart, show the reader the workings of an overzealous imagination that tries to overrule one's immediate surroundings. Why does that matter? Because it is this overzealous imagination, understood as conceptual immersion, that forms one of the building blocks of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. It is a strongly dialectic virtuality, which, as explained in the Introduction, is influenced by the coinciding discussions of imagination and subjectivism in Long Modernity. Hence, what *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty* highlight for this thesis, is that one needs to understand the long conceptual history that is tied to virtual reality and how it goes beyond being merely a technological concept.

Well-Played Open Games of Make-Believe

Before moving on to this chapter's literary analyses, first two key concepts of everyday imagining need to be revisited and expanded on. The first concept, aspersion, was positioned in the Introduction as an alternative to immersion by using the metaphorical quality of baptisms. Where with immersion the head is put completely underwater, aspersion is merely a sprinkling of water on the head. As said, immersion is the ideal in the current rhetoric, which will be discussed in the next chapter, as it looks to submerge one completely in a digital-virtual environment. The alternative rhetoric is however based on aspersion, as the idea of sprinkling resembles intrinsic conscious experience as discussed in the first chapter through the watercolour prose of Walser and Sebald. The goal of being aspersed in the alternative rhetoric is more modest when compared to immersion: instead of being completely overwhelmed, it aims to unassumingly blend with one's immediate surroundings. The concept of aspersion is therefore in line with Casey's everyday imagining, for it blends with everyday life instead of suggesting an overzealous imagination that looks to overrule one's immediate surroundings to the benefit of immersion.

The second quality, playfulness, needs to be discussed more at length, especially in its connection to the concept of play. The Introduction used the work of Sicart

to show how playfulness, an *attitude*, differs from play, an *activity*. With Sicart's playfulness one will take the play mentality into everyday life and project it on non-play activities. Through being playful one can ambiguate the world by letting imaginings seep into the experiences of everyday life. To understand playfulness Sutton-Smith's distinction between two definitions of play was furthermore used: a narrow one, in which the borders of play are well-defined and the players are in control of the borders; and a broad one, in which the borders of play are ambiguous, the boundaries are less clear and reflect how the human brain continuously creates inner fiction and is at play with itself. Therefore, from a broad perspective the mind-wandering of for instance Walser can just as well be considered as a form of play.

To get a more thorough understanding of Sicart's playful attitude and Sutton-Smith's broad definition of play, it should be better defined what it means to play, but also how it relates to the concept of a game. Hence, what does it mean to play a game, what is the difference between the two concepts, and what type of play and games are of interest to this chapter? To begin with the definition of playing a game, Bernard Suits describes it as follows:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. [...] Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.²⁸²

Play refers to the act; games are the rules in which the act of play takes place. What does Suits mean when speaking of the efficiency and the created inefficiency of games? Efficiency is to him "the least expenditure of a limited resource necessary to achieve a goal".²⁸³ In the context of play there is a neat balancing act going on, in which game rules can deliberately make things more inefficient but should not dismantle the fluidity of a game too much. For example, take basketball. Instead of just clinging on to the ball and sprinting towards the opponent's basket, there are rules in place that force the player a) to dribble; and b) if the player stops dribbling, disallow him to start a new dribble; and c) limit the player, now in a static position, to take more than a few steps. These rules may make the journey to the other team's basket more inefficient but are accepted because they make the act of playing more enjoyable: they force

players to pass the ball to each other and think up strategies to creatively “overcome unnecessary obstacles”.

That said, rules shouldn’t become too inefficient, for they may torpedo the enjoyment of the game. According to Bernard de Koven the relationship of play and games is a rather delicate balancing act between the “game-as-it-is-being-played” and the “game-as-we-intend-it-to-be”, in which there is a continuous flow between “control and release, lightness and heaviness, concentration and spontaneity”.²⁸⁴ The function of what De Koven calls a “play community” – a group of people that is looking through play to create moments of togetherness – is to find that particular balance while playing a game and maintain it: “On the one hand we have the playing mind – innovative, magical, boundless. On the other is the gaming mind – concentrated, determined, intelligent. And on the hand that holds them both together we have the notion of playing well.”²⁸⁵ Playing well means to De Koven that a game is at its core about having an enjoyable experience together – keeping the fluidity of play going in the form of a play community.²⁸⁶ However, says De Koven, often play communities evolve into game communities in which the dominant idea becomes that a game should be won. When “to connect” is replaced by “to win”, the act of play will have lost its essence.²⁸⁷

Suits describes these differences of De Koven through a distinction between open and closed games. Open games, Suits says, are “games which have no inherent goal whose achievement ends the game”, like crossing a finish line or mating a king. Games that do have such goals are closed games.²⁸⁸ Open games have no clear ending, however, and the goal is quite the opposite from the goal of closed games: open games are about postponing the “unwanted denouement” of the act of playing the game. Instead of setting up rules and parameters that come down to deciding who wins in the end, the rules and parameters of open games are created in such a way that they simply need to keep things going. Or in Suits’s words: “I would define an open game generically as a system of reciprocally enabling moves whose purpose is the continued operation of the system.”²⁸⁹ Suits’s idea of play as a “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” therefore also has a different meaning when applied to open games. If the goal is to keep playing, as it is in open games, the unnecessary obstacles are put in place to simply expand the playtime. Plenty of games can be played in both an open or closed state, and the boundaries differ per played game, but for this thesis the interest lies with well-played open games.

Another way to think of the balance between play and game, open or closed, is through Roger Caillois's concepts of *paidia* and *ludus*. Where *paidia* reflects "improvisation and carefree gaiety" and "manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy", *ludus* is the opposite of "this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance", as there "is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions".²⁹⁰ *Paidia* is closely related to play and its spontaneity, while *ludus* describes when game rules are made up to demarcate the playing zone in two ways: a) physically, setting up a border where the playing zone ends; and b) mentally, deciding on the borders of play-acts themselves.²⁹¹ With *paidia* and *ludus* in mind Caillois distinguishes four types of games,²⁹² of which games of mimicry are of interest to this thesis. In games of mimicry the player tries to escape oneself and become another. Caillois says that although "all play presupposes the temporary acceptance [...] of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe", in mimicry this illusion-seeking makes the player itself the transformative zone: one acts as if one is someone or something else.²⁹³ This thesis is mostly interested in the quality of *paidia*, as its spontaneity is closest to Sicart's playfulness, Sutton-Smith's broad definition of play, and the open games of Suits. Furthermore, games of mimicry are of interest to this thesis, for these games make, in the words of Caillois, the player itself the zone of play(fulness).

However, as a final tweak, Suits criticises Caillois's games of mimicry for being too narrow in their scope and instead suggests "games of make-believe" to encompass more varieties of imaginary play. Although many make-believe games contain an act of mimicry, it is not a necessary component, argues Suits. For instance, if two people are staring at a hill and start a spontaneous back-and-forth game of imagining a fairy-tale realm that lies behind that hill, one can say these two people, in the spirit of *paidia*, are involved in a spontaneous and inventive game of make-believe, yet there is no mimicking involved.²⁹⁴ To summarise, this chapter will look at *well-played open games of make-believe*, with at their core the spontaneous quality of *paidia*. It will now move on to analysing literary examples of such games played in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. *The Waves* will be analysed first, despite *Don Quixote* being the much older text. Establishing the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality is the main goal of this thesis and therefore dictates the chronology. What will be at the centre of the comparison between these two novels is how *The Waves* is an example of everyday imagining, in which an aspersive playfulness ambiguously blends with the intrinsic conscious experience of one's immediate

surroundings, whereas *Don Quixote* is an example of an immersive, overzealous imagination that wishes to subvert these immediate surroundings and creates a dialectical relationship with everyday reality.

***The Waves* and Aspersive Playfulness**

In Woolf's *The Waves* the reader follows the lives and interior voices of six protagonists – Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis – who according to Jane Goldman produce a “collectively voiced elegy” of the silent seventh character, Percival. To speak of separate people is somewhat missing the point, however, says Goldman, for in the novel each character “is stained by the others”. The way the characters’ voices flow in and out of each other is an example of Woolf’s approach to the narrative: not guided by plot but narrational rhythms “in harmony with the painters”.²⁹⁵ Through a weaving together of interior voices, Woolf’s narrational rhythms let the protagonists flow in and out of each other; the reader encounters different moments from their child- and adulthood and gets to learn how these are experienced from the perspective of intrinsic conscious experience. Auerbach says a “transfer of confidence” happens in the writing of Woolf, in which less importance is placed on “great exterior turning points and blows of fate” and what they tell the reader about the protagonists of a novel. Instead, there is the sense that any “random fragment plucked from the course of a life” can portray a life in its totality, with narratives exploring “syntheses gained through the full exploitation of an everyday occurrence”.²⁹⁶

Before looking at the qualities of aspersion and playfulness in *The Waves*, it is first of use to analyse in more detail the role of consciousness in the novel through the cognitive framework of panpsychism. In panpsychism, discussed in the Introduction, the idea is that consciousness is a ubiquitous feature of physical reality, in which there are simple forms of consciousness, like a rock, and there are (more) complex forms of consciousness, like that of animals. A similar idea of consciousness can be found in *The Waves*, although it would be more exact to describe it through Bertrand Russell’s concept of neutral monism, for Joanne Wood argues it is essential in understanding consciousness in the novel.²⁹⁷ As mentioned in the Introduction, contemporary panpsychist thought is partially based on Russell’s critique that the methods of physics and mathematics can only make claims about the extrinsic aspects of the physical world, not so much the intrinsic. Panpsychism is also closely aligned with Russell’s neutral monism, which is the idea that “mental” and “physical” are two different

categorisations that describe “neutral” elements, “the primary stuff” that the universe is made of. These categories help humans understand internal and external nature, but it would be a false dichotomy to consider mind and matter as radically different.²⁹⁸

Wood explains that Russell’s philosophy of neutral monism is expanded in scope by Woolf through the form of the novel. At the centre of Wood’s argument is the “sensing body”. She notes *The Waves* may seem to be “entirely disembodied”, consisting of an “uninterrupted lyric of six voices narrating their lives”, but, Wood argues, it is a completely embodied text, for the voices are guided and moulded by bodily sensations. The mental and physical are interchangeable in Woolf’s writing.²⁹⁹ Wood explains how in the philosophy of Russell “events” constitute fundamental reality, but in the language of Woolf these events are more “moments of being”, in which “imagined bodies” rely most of all on sensation “to narrate a reality that is never merely material”. Neutral monism, “theorized by Russell [...] practiced by Woolf”, sees “the outward and the inward to be the same”. The sensing body is not a symbol of materialism, but of neutral monism.³⁰⁰ Melba Cuddy-Keane agrees with Wood, asserting that *The Waves* is a good example of how fictional narratives can offer “an embodied understanding of cognition”, “a feeling of knowing what bodily cognition is like” and how inner and outer reality blend together.³⁰¹ One can also find this notion in one of Woolf’s own essays, in which she criticises materialistic tendencies of the modern novel and argues that an ordinary mind on an ordinary day “receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel”. The novelist’s task, according to Woolf, is to portray life, which is a “semi-transparent envelope” that surrounds us “from the beginning of consciousness to the end”.³⁰²

An example from *The Waves* that highlights the above, is when the inner voice of the character of (adulthood) Bernard narrates himself walking through “the roar of the traffic”³⁰³ of London and “its passage of undifferentiated faces”:

I will let myself be carried on by the general impulse. The surface of my mind slips along like a pale-grey stream reflecting what passes. [...] It is, however, true that my dreaming, my tentative advance like one carried beneath the surface of a stream is interrupted, torn, pricked and plucked at by sensations, spontaneous and irrelevant [...].³⁰⁴

Inner and outer reality are constantly interacting and overlapping during Bernard’s London walk. Like the watercolour prose of Walser and Sebald, it shows how cognition

leaves its faint colours, in this case “like a pale-grey stream”. The narration hops from larger reflections on the ephemerality of human life, to describing the momentary state of Bernard’s embodied existence, “making a passage for myself between people’s bodies”, encountering the “engrossed flocks”, “starers and trippers”, “errand-boys”, and “furtive and fugitive girls who, ignoring their doom, look in at shop-windows”.³⁰⁵ This blending of the inside and outside can be considered as an example of aspersion: impressions are sprinkling over Bernard, ambiguously blending together in his intrinsic conscious experience of London.

Furthermore, near the end of his associative monologue in bustling London, Bernard’s inner voice considers once more the ephemerality of his existence and says: “We are for ever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities.”³⁰⁶ Here the narration hits upon important ambiguities for this thesis. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a question to what extent one’s inner voice is formed by those of others, which reminds one of Sebald’s blending of the individual and the intersubjective. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a question where the sensing *human* body ends, where the *nonhuman* begins, and how they interconnect with each other. The power in Woolf’s writing, says Wood, is how the voices and senses of the world are just as much given a podium.³⁰⁷ The prelude of *The Waves*, little over a page long, is a good example of this, for the first lines of the novel are not actually concerned with human conscious experience. Instead, the narration concerns itself with how a multi-layered worldly consciousness is awakening, jumping from element to element, making clear that without the context of the nonhuman world, the sensing bodies and inner voices of the protagonists simply can’t exist.³⁰⁸

Jaakko Hintikka argues in that regard that “truth-finding” in Woolf’s novels revolves around understanding the riches of intersubjective conscious experience, which includes the nonhuman as well.³⁰⁹ The emphasis on the “inner world of sense-experiences” in Woolf’s novels is not “to disparage everyday reality”, Hintikka says, but to make the reader leave her novels with a sense of how these myriad impressions lightly infuse meaning into the ordinary or the abstract.³¹⁰ The intersubjectivity that Woolf explores in *The Waves* is not anthropocentric, but shows how the inner voices and sensing bodies of the protagonists are constantly merging with the nonhuman world around them, offering an insight into the multi-layered aspects of consciousness. It is therefore that Wood argues, as said earlier, that Woolf, the writer, can exploit the freedom of the novel in exploring neutral monism and this entangling of human and nonhuman

consciousness, as opposed to for instance Russell, the philosopher, who is in the corset of analytical philosophy. It is specifically the quality of the novel that enables Woolf to narrate these complexities, as opposed to analysing them from a distance.³¹¹

This difference between the tools of Woolf and Russell invites once more a brief reflection on how philosophy and literature are positioned in this thesis, as it will also be relevant in the coming discussion of play(fulness) in *The Waves*. In the light of this chapter's interest in play, Calvino's positioning of philosophy and literature as different games of truth-finding can be helpful. The philosopher, says Calvino, tries to "see through the opaqueness of the world" and reduce it to "a spider's web of relationships between general ideas" and tries to establish, where possible, an amount of fixed rules; the writer tries to anthropomorphise these abstractions, or introduce them through dialogues, so they become meaningful on an emotional level.³¹² When reflecting on this through the earlier discussions of play, the novelist has more tools to describe the spontaneous experiences of *padia*, while the philosopher is closer to the rulemaking of *ludus*. These differences of approach highlight how the philosophical framework of a phenomenological virtual reality forms the conceptual basis of this thesis, whereas literature can help show the way the phenomenological virtual experience manifests itself in the inconclusive present.

As argued earlier in this chapter, of especial interest are the spontaneous experiences of *padia*, given the fleeting and momentary nature of the phenomenological virtual experience. A clear example of *padia* in *The Waves*, with it showing the qualities of aspersion and playfulness, can be observed in the first pages of the novel. Immediately after the prelude, in which a multi-layered nonhuman consciousness awakens, the six protagonists are introduced in their childhood whilst playing a game in the garden:

'I see a ring,' said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.'

'I see a slab of pale yellow,' said Susan, 'spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.'

'I hear a sound,' said Rhoda, 'cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.'

'I see a globe,' said Neville, 'hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.'

'I see a crimson tassel,' said Jinny, 'twisted with gold threads.'

'I hear something stamping,' said Louis. 'A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.'

'Look at the spider's web on the corner of the balcony,' said Bernard. 'It has beads of water on it, drops of white light.'

'The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears,' said Susan.

'A shadow falls on the path,' said Louis, 'like an elbow bent.'

[...]

'Stones are cold to my feet,' said Neville. 'I feel each one, round or pointed, separately.'

'The back of my hand burns,' said Jinny, 'but the palm is clammy and damp with dew.'

'Now the cock crows like a spurt of hard, red water in the white tide,' said Bernard.

'Birds are singing up and down and in and out all round us,' said Susan.

'The beast stamps; the elephant with its foot chained; the great brute on the beach stamps,' said Louis.³¹³

The game doesn't end there, it goes on for another three-quarter of a page, but for this thesis's analysis the above will suffice. The game played by the six protagonists is a rudimentary one and introduces Woolf's narrational approach for the rest of the novel: the voices report what their senses pick up, or, in the case of Louis, infuse a bit of imagining into the chain. Bare as it all may be, nevertheless it is a game understood through the quality of *padia*: there is a strong sense of improvisation in the above passage, in which the players on the spot single out one of their sensory experiences and intersubjectively keep that rhythm going. Moreover, it is also a well-played open game, combining the terminology of De Koven and Suits, for the purpose of the game is to feed off each other's observations and keep the chain going for as long as possible. Additionally, it fits Sutton-Smith's broad definition of play, for it is unclear where the borders of play begin and end. Lastly, it can be categorised as a game of make-believe, again using Suits, thanks to especially the character of Louis and his image of elephants stamping on the beach, which he hasn't actually observed, but imagines a noise in the distance to be. There is also the more subtle example of Susan and Louis coming up with similes, imaginatively responding to one another.

The above game, which is deeply connected to intrinsic conscious experience, serves as a good example of both aspersions and playfulness. In the case of aspersions there are two observations to be made. First, the game shows how the characters sprinkle their sensory impressions over each other, highlighting different snippets of their immediate surroundings, all coming together in one penumbral intersubjective experience. Second, it shows how the imaginings of Louis and Susan subtly blend with the sensory impressions of the others. Thinking again of Casey's concept of everyday imagining, what the above example shows is how imagining is often subtle and doesn't overtake the other faculties. Furthermore, playfulness shines through in the above example as well: the characters are shown to have a playful *attitude*, in which potentially everything around them can become part of their improvised game. In Sicart's words, this playfulness also helps to ambiguate their immediate surroundings, for the protagonists engage with everyday reality in novel ways.

This aspersive playfulness, central to the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, helps the characters to become closer to their immediate surroundings. Thinking once more of Heidegger's concept of dwelling, it shows how play, too, can be a way for humans to feel at home in the world. Another way to approach this human need to situate oneself is to look at the difference between the concepts of space and place, which Yi-Fu Tuan describes as follows: "Enclosed and humanized space is place."³¹⁴ Places are not necessarily visible, Tuan says, neither to ourselves or others, instead one *feels* they are there.³¹⁵ This feeling of place relies on the whole of conscious experience: "An object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind."³¹⁶ It is this holistic experience, Tuan says, that will humanise space, infuse it with meaning, turn it into place.³¹⁷ Georges Perec is also interested in the question of how space turns into place. He asks: "Is to live in a place to take possession of it? What does taking possession of a place mean? As from when does somewhere become truly yours?"³¹⁸ One way Perec tries to accomplish making place out of space, is to record for instance every mundane little thing that happens around him on a Parisian boulevard.³¹⁹ But however much attention one pays, Perec thinks places are ultimately ephemeral as they fade away when one starts paying attention to something else.³²⁰

Where Heidegger's concept of dwelling describes feeling at home mostly through built structures, place is more nebulous, something people carry inside

themselves and lives somewhere in the overlap of imagining, memory, and the senses. Or in the words of this thesis: the phenomenological virtual experience. What both Tuan and Perec convey is that place above all is an ambiguous feeling that can only really be described as “I feel this is a place” and that it is ephemeral. This impermanence and ambivalence of place can also be seen in the game that is being played by the protagonists of *The Waves*: they do not take actual possession of the garden in which they play, but what can be argued is that through aspersive play(fulness) they take a certain ownership, become closer to their surroundings, however fleeting and undefined it may be. What matters to the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, is that this kind of spontaneous play(fulness) aspersively blends with the many other cognitive colours in the narration. Moreover, the game also shows a sense of temporality, for although it is unclear where and when the game begins and ends, it is definitely during playtime that the characters notice these details of the world around them. Once the game ends, at least part of this awareness of their immediate surroundings will fade away.

However, the temporality of this childhood game is more ambiguous from an aspersive perspective, as memories of it return in a spotty fashion throughout the novel. These memories blend unassumingly with the protagonists’ experiences of their immediate surroundings in adulthood. An example is the below passage of Louis’s voice, many years after the game of the opening pages:

‘Now we are off,’ said Louis. ‘Now I hang suspended without attachments. We are nowhere. We are passing through England in a train. England slips by the window, always changing from hill wood, from rivers and willows to towns again.’ [...] But now disembodied, passing over fields without lodgement – (there is a river; a man fishes; there is a spire, there is the village street with its bow-windowed inn) – all is dreamlike and dim to me. [...] I am the ghost of Louis, an ephemeral passer-by, in whose mind dreams have power, and garden sounds when in the early morning petals float on fathomless depths and the birds sing. I dash and sprinkle myself with the bright waters of childhood. Its thin veil quivers. But the chained beast stamps and stamps on the shore.³²¹

The above quote is the phenomenological virtual experience in a nutshell: Louis sitting in a train, observing the English landscape, with a subtle blending of memory and imagining.

What is first of interest, is that Louis describes his experience as “disembodied”, imagining himself to be a ghost. But this ghostliness entails what could be considered embodied waves of aspersion: Louis “sprinkles” himself with the “bright waters of childhood”, letting the memories (of imaginings) aspersionally blend with his train ride. This aftermath of the act of play, the aspersion effects that one sees with Louis, interest this thesis. It puts into question whether the open game of make-believe in the garden has truly ever ended. It is years later in the novel, but still fragments of the game manage to pierce the everyday lives of the characters. Louis’s voice in the above quote, for example, brings up once more “the chained beast stamps and stamps on the shore”, and what is striking, is that this statement is in the present tense. Like years earlier this is an imaginative act (of play) in the moment, yet simultaneously it is a memory from a distant past.

Two elements of Sebald’s analyses can therefore be observed in the above scene as well. First, there is a thin line between imagining and memory. Second, it shows the ambiguous temporality involved, with the phenomenological virtual experience being both momentary as that it involves long-buried memories. Furthermore, also showing this temporal ambiguity, although one can state that the event of the game has ended in *The Waves*, it is also true that it is still playfully affecting embodied cognition and therefore hasn’t really ended yet. What for sure hasn’t ended is the core element of the game: inner voices paying attention to their immediate surroundings. The game of *The Waves* shows the many ambiguities involved: it is both unclear where the spatial and temporal borders of play are, nor are the borders of personal and intersubjective intrinsic conscious experience demarcated in a clear manner. Next to that, what *The Waves* adds to the earlier discussed watercolour prose of Walser and Sebald, is its framing of intrinsic consciousness: in a panpsychist fashion the novel positions the inner voices of its protagonists in a multi-layered worldly consciousness, emphasising the importance of the nonhuman.

In the context of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, *The Waves* has helped explain the concepts of aspersion and playfulness and how they are to be understood in the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings. Thinking once more about Casey’s concept of everyday imagining, the novel shows how imagining is a modest part of everyday experience. It doesn’t look to overrule the other faculties and senses, but instead helps trying to make place out of space. However, the aspersion and playful qualities

of the above game also show where the phenomenological virtual experience differs from Casey's notion of everyday imagining: instead of seeing imagining as an autonomous faculty, it overlaps with memory and sensory impressions.

***Don Quixote*: The Dialectics of Conceptual Immersion**

To better understand the aspersive playfulness of everyday imagining, this chapter will now move on to a famous *immersive* open game of make-believe in modern literature: *Don Quixote*. It will show the overzealous imagination in action: overruling other faculties, not blending with immediate surroundings but instead trying to subvert them to one's liking. To first briefly revisit the concept of immersion, as discussed in the Introduction, this thesis uses the distinction that Wolf makes between three types of immersion: physical immersion, in which one is entirely surrounded by a structure, like an art installation; sensual immersion, which focuses on the eyes and ears, like for instance a digital-virtual reality headset; and conceptual immersion, where it is the imagination, with few external stimuli, that both suspends disbelief and actively creates belief. Another word for this conceptual immersion, says Wolf, is absorption: one is absorbed, which means suspending disbelief, as being so absorbed that one's own imagination starts to actively create belief. More will be said on sensual immersion and digital-virtual technology in the next chapter, but in the context of open games of make-believe it is especially conceptual immersion that is of interest.

To look now at *Don Quixote* and its conceptual immersion. Ryan³²² argues that from a literary perspective the character of Don Quixote remains the prime example of what happens when someone gets too immersed by products of the imagination and drifts further and further away from everyday reality.³²³ Indeed, in the first chapter of *Don Quixote* the narrator introduces the condition of its protagonist as follows:

In short, our gentleman became so caught up in reading that he spent his nights reading from dusk till dawn and his days reading from sunrise to sunset, and so with too little sleep and too much reading his brains dried up, causing him to lose his mind. His fantasy filled up with everything he had read in his books, enchantments as well as combats, battles, challenges, wounds, courtings, loves, torments, and other impossible foolishness, and he became so convinced in his imagination of the truth of all the countless grandiloquent and false inventions he read that for him no history in the world was truer.³²⁴

Don Quixote, being so immersed in these chivalric adventures, decides to leave his home village to become a knight himself and manages to convince Sancho Panza, a farmer in his village, to be his squire with the promise that he will eventually be rewarded with the governorship of an *ínsula* for his loyal services. The two set off and, as with Walser's *The Walk* and Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the physical act of wandering is at the centre of the novel. Don Quixote roams the Spanish countryside, otherwise rather dull, but he experiences it as a world full of knights, damsels in distress, monsters, and mischievous wizards that constantly trap him and Sancho, who plays along, in webs of dark enchantments. An inn becomes a castle; windmills become giants; a flock of sheep becomes an army that, following the rules of chivalry, must be beaten.

In short, the journey of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza can be interpreted as an open game of make-believe, in which the goal is to simply keep going. To focus on the act of play in the novel, Auerbach notes Sancho and many others assume roles and transform themselves to play along with Don Quixote's imaginings. Also, if the passers-by on the journey of the knight and his squire "do not submit to the metamorphosis of their own free will", which happens just as often, Don Quixote and the persistence of his "madness" will force them into their roles. Play is always at the centre of the novel, says Auerbach and "all that is resolved in Don Quixote's madness", is that "it transforms the real everyday world into a gay stage".³²⁵ The many people that Don Quixote and Sancho meet on their journey quickly – sometimes willingly, sometimes unwillingly, sometimes for entertainment, sometimes out of necessity – adapt to their open game of make-believe. Everyone, in one way or another, plays along in the form of Caillois's *paidia*: they are spontaneous acts of play, mostly decided by Don Quixote's interpretations of situations.

But whoever may play along, at the forefront is always the understanding between Don Quixote and Sancho. The interactions of the knight and the squire can be structured as follows, says Howard Mancing: Don Quixote provides Sancho with a script based on chivalric novels, which Sancho needs to interpret so he can eventually understand how he can satisfy his master's imagination or needs in particular situations and in their journey as a whole.³²⁶ Mancing puts this in a wider framework of the "theory of mind" (or "mind-reading"): guessing what other people may be thinking, feeling or believing, and as a result of this understand that their mental constructs are

different from our own.³²⁷ In that regard, within the framework of the open game of make-believe Don Quixote and Sancho qualify for De Koven's idea of a well-played game: the two keep it going and are the nucleus of an open game of make-believe that especially Don Quixote forces upon others.

Part of Sancho's participation in the open game of make-believe is protecting Don Quixote from himself. One example is a scene in which his master says an army is approaching, for he hears in the distance "the neighing of the horses, the call of the clarions, the sound of the drums". Sancho listens attentively but says he doesn't hear anything "except the bleating of lots of sheep". Don Quixote is convinced otherwise and decides to charge this army head on. Sancho goes after him, shouting in agony: "Your grace, come back, Señor Don Quixote, I swear to God you're charging sheep!" Don Quixote doesn't stop and, indeed, attacking a flock of sheep, hurts himself in the process.³²⁸ The scene gives an insight into Sancho's role and attitude. He is aware of Don Quixote being deluded and tries to protect him from himself, yet still calls him "your grace", implying he is actively participating in this open game of make-believe. Sancho protects Don Quixote because that is his role as a loyal squire and only by being a loyal squire he will eventually become a governor. Though less apparent at first, Sancho is fully absorbed by a certain fantasy as well.

The appeal of this open game of make-believe is long-lasting, both to Don Quixote and Sancho. For instance, in the first book the barber and the priest of their home village set out to make Don Quixote and Sancho return to their homes and families. They eventually succeed, but at the beginning of the second book the barber and priest immediately realise that this return of the knight and squire shall be a short one:

Sancho came in, and the priest and the barber took their leave of Don Quixote, in despair over his health, for they saw how fixed his foolish ideas were and how enthralled he was by the nonsense of the calamitously errant chivalry; and so, the priest said to the barber:

'You'll see, compadre, that when we least expect it, our gentleman will leave again and beat the bushes, putting all the birds to flight.'

'I have no doubt about that,' responded the barber, 'but I'm not as much astounded by the madness of the knight as I am by the simplicity of the squire, who has so much faith in the story of the *ínsula* that I don't believe all the disappointments imaginable will ever get it out of his head.'³²⁹

Sancho, like Don Quixote, is absorbed by a fantasy, and even though knowing Don Quixote is constantly warping everyday reality with his imagination, Sancho is fiercely loyal and believes he will in the end be granted his lusory goal: a governorship of an *ínsula*. Anthony Close sees Sancho as the wise fool: his character is a self-admitted simpleton, who gets carried away by the promises of Don Quixote, but at the same time knows many moments of unlettered wit and a type of common sense that pierces through the folly of both his master and the people they meet on their journey.³³⁰ Auerbach asks if it is out contempt that Sancho indulges Don Quixote in his fantasies, even though knowing the madness of his master: “Not at all. He deceives him only because he sees no other way out. He loves and reveres him, although he is half conscious (and sometimes fully conscious) of his madness.”³³¹ In short, while Sancho might be slightly more conflicted at times, he is absorbed by his own fantasy of becoming a governor.

When comparing the grand open game of make-believe in *Don Quixote* to the game played in *The Waves*, what should become initially clear is the difference between an aspersive, everyday imagining and an overzealous imagination with its conceptual immersion. Where both Don Quixote and Sancho are examples of how an overzealous imagination tries to overrule everyday reality and/or everyday life, prolonging a conceptual immersion, in *The Waves* everyday imagining is a modest and ambiguous part of wider intrinsic conscious experience. Furthermore, through an aspersive playfulness the players of *The Waves* are actively trying to get closer to their immediate surroundings, not overrule them, whereas especially Don Quixote *is* doing such a thing: he tries to convince himself and other they are somewhere or someone else. What, lastly, is important to note, is that in *The Waves* intrinsic consciousness and aspersive playfulness are actively placed within a wider, multi-layered nonhuman world. The immersive, overzealous imagination of *Don Quixote*, as a contrast, paints a much more anthropocentric picture. The latter resembles Heidegger’s idea of the modern technological mind that wants to remake reality to one’s liking, for the conceptually immersed imagination looks to build mental *human* structures that overrule everyday reality.

Another way to understand this difference between the aspersive playful experience and the dialectical immersive experience, is through D.W. Winnicott’s distinction between creative play and fantasizing. Where creative play manages, says Winnicott, a back-and-forth between “inner and outer reality”, fantasizing is unable to find a

balance and becomes an inward act. Fantasying, says Winnicott, is “an isolated phenomenon, absorbing energy”: an act that doesn’t let the imagination engage with outer reality, but propels a dissociative process in which inner reality ignores outer reality as much as possible.³³² Winnicott’s ideas help further describe the comparison of *The Waves* and *Don Quixote*. The first is an example of creative play in which the players let inner and outer reality interact. The knight and squire, however, lose themselves in an immersive fantasying, creating a dialectical interaction with outer reality. An overzealous imagination tries to subvert reality and ultimately needs to be considered as inward-looking, not outward-looking.

Of particular interest to this thesis, having shown the initial difference between aspersive playfulness and conceptual immersion, is the way *Don Quixote*’s open game of make-believe is often discussed in terms of realness. For instance Howard Young observes that readings of *Don Quixote* from the 1940s on, mainly through academic and societal fads, have put a lot of emphasis on “topics as the nature of madness, the mutability of reality, and the phenomenon of artistic self-awareness”, instead of “the loving, irascible relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho”.³³³ Edith Grossman agrees with Young that too much emphasis has been placed on topics such as madness and realness in discussions of the *Don Quixote*: “So I circle back to my question: Does the Knight believe his own story? It makes little sense to answer either ‘yes’ or ‘no’, so the question must be wrong.”³³⁴ Very little comes out of questions such as “is Don Quixote mad?” or “does Don Quixote believe all of this is real?”, except for if the reader believes him to believe this.

The narrator, too, addresses these questions of realness and madness in the last pages of the novel – and what they overshadow. When Don Quixote is on his deathbed, he says to his nieces that his “judgment has been restored”, and he is once more “free and clear of the dark shadows of ignorance” that were imposed on him by his obsession with books of chivalry. He now recognises “their absurdities and deceptions” and his “sole regret is that this realization has come so late”.³³⁵ He then says: “I was mad, and now I am sane; I was Don Quixote of La Mancha, and now I am, as I have said, Alonso Quixano the Good.”³³⁶ The narrator reflects that “the truth is, that whether Don Quixote was simply Alonso Quixano the Good, or whether he was Don Quixote of La Mancha”, more attention should be paid to him having always a “gentle disposition” and “was kind in his treatment of others, and for this reason he was dearly loved not only by those in his household, but by everyone who know him”.³³⁷ His

actions were real and compassionate, the narrator states, and overruling this with questions of realness and belief are mere distractions.

What is noteworthy, is that these questions of belief and realness resemble language in the theories of play when talking about the position of play in everyday reality. For instance Caillois, when talking about his games of mimicry, says that “in one way or another, one escapes the real world and creates another”,³³⁸ and in this idea of “escaping the real world” the player is aware of “the basic unreality” of the involved behaviour.³³⁹ This relationship of the real and unreal in play is not exclusively questioned in games of mimicry, Caillois says, but happens in most games on a basic level: once people accept the arbitrary rules of a game, they accept the imaginary, for “rules create fictions”.³⁴⁰ Another description of this perceived unreality one can find in the work of De Koven, who thinks of games as “social fictions, performances, like works of art, which exist only as long as they are continuously created”. Games “are not intended to replace reality but to suspend consequences” while being played. De Koven concludes: “What connects games with reality is that they are lifelike. What separates them is that they are not real. [...] Play is the enactment of anything that is not real. Play is to be without consequence.”³⁴¹

In line with Sutton-Smith’s narrow definition of play, in which the borders of play are rigidly defined and controlled, with Caillois and De Koven there is the following belief: play, or played games, have a quality of unrealness to them and are without consequence in the real world. But what does this mean? What makes an act of play *not* real; what makes an act of play without consequence? This unreality or non-consequentiality of play seems highly doubtful. One can use the example of an early scene in *Don Quixote*, where Don Quixote turns a simple inn into a glorious castle and asks the “lord” – a.k.a. the innkeeper – to grant him a knighthood. This is necessary, Don Quixote argues, for without this knighthood he can’t possibly start his very necessary chivalrous adventures. The innkeeper is amused and decides to play along “in order to have something to laugh about that night”.³⁴² Or in the words of this thesis: he participates for his own pleasure in an open game of make-believe. The innkeeper orders Don Quixote to stand vigil in the courtyard for the whole night and as a reward will make him a knight the next morning. He tells everyone in the inn about the strange man and his vigilance, and they marvel in delight, but it soon spirals out of control: Don Quixote attacks multiple innocent muleteers to defend the castle and wrecks mayhem. The now not so amused innkeeper, to avoid further damage, grants Don Quixote a

knighthood with an improvised ceremony and makes sure “the knight” leaves as soon as possible, in this case at dawn.³⁴³ Now even if one would cast doubt on if Don Quixote is or isn’t playing, the innkeeper and the guests are most definitely playing along. In that regard it is obvious that due to the real damage being done to the muleteers during the act of play, how imaginary it all may be, it is all the same based in reality and has consequences. One can argue about the amount of delusion, or to what extent people freely participate in the act of play, but it is impossible to talk about unreality or an absence of consequences.

Next to the example of *Don Quixote*, one can also briefly return to the game in *The Waves* to question this unreality of play. In De Koven’s own words, it is a well-played game: Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis are all successfully and fluidly cooperating, feeding off each other’s attention, and imagining. So, let’s establish the unreality of this game – where is it? Given that the game is about guiding the attention of the players to everyday reality, as processed by the senses, that can’t be it. Louis’s contributions, with his imaginary stamping beasts on the beach, are the only ones that could qualify as unreal. However, that would be a misreading of play. For yes, the stamping beasts on the beach are imaginary, but the act of playing – the imagining itself – cannot be described as unreal. Even if one would accept the imaginative play of Louis as an unreal act, the other five players are unmistakably engaging with reality: it is both a game of attention and a game of make-believe, and Louis’s imagining is fluidly incorporated. Next to that, the game can hardly be called without consequences, as it flows in the form of a memory through the characters’ lives and voices.

That said, what is even more important when positioning the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, is that these questions of realness are never a concern in *The Waves* anyway. This is a vital difference for this thesis when comparing its aspersive playfulness to *Don Quixote*’s conceptually immersive open game of make-believe. In *The Waves* one encounters a modest everyday imagining that ambiguously blends with the other faculties, as with the nonhuman. It is not meant to subvert everyday reality or one’s immediate surroundings, but to become playfully closer to them. In that regard there is also little need for boundaries, as there is no interest to place play(fulness) outside of everyday reality. With the conceptual immersion of *Don Quixote*, on the other hand, in which an overzealous imagination tries to overrule everyday reality, questions about the realness of play and its imaginary

constructs are inevitable. For in the end, Don Quixote, Sancho, and everyone that decides to participate in their open game of make-believe, see play as an immersive escape from everyday life. This creates a dialectical relationship between the imagination and everyday reality: instead of blending together, as with an aspersive playfulness, the products of the overzealous imagination are awkwardly placed outside of everyday reality. Paradoxically, however, these products of the imagination need to feel as real as possible, for otherwise the conceptual immersion won't succeed. As a result, with immersive play being both unreal as well as needing to feel as real as possible, fruitless ontological discussions on realness take over, like a dog catching its own tail.

***The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* and a Conceptually Immersive Mind-Wandering**

Don Quixote won't suffice as the only example when discussing the difference between aspersive playfulness and immersive fantasizing for this thesis. This is for two reasons. First, although *Don Quixote* is part of this thesis's historical context of Long Modernity, it can be argued that it lacks a modern setting that is familiar to contemporary modern existence. As the thesis wishes to show how an aspersive playfulness can help with making place out of space in modern everyday life, it should also be shown how immersive fantasizing doesn't accomplish this feat in a similar setting. Second, thinking of Sutton-Smith's broad definition of play, with play being inherent to intrinsic conscious experience, this also encompasses an associative imagining, for example mind-wandering, which is not really addressed in *Don Quixote*. Furthermore, considering Sicart's observation that playfulness is an *attitude*, the example of *Don Quixote* relies mostly on the *act* of playing an open game of make-believe. In that regard, to get a broader understanding of immersive fantasizing and the dialectical relationship it creates with everyday reality, the remainder of this chapter will move on to James Thurber's short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*³⁴⁴ as an example of a conceptually immersive mind-wandering.

Before analysing the latter, however, to first revisit the concept of mind-wandering. As shown in the first chapter, the negative explanation sees it as timewasting, creating feelings of unhappiness and guilt, frustrating people in everyday life. This negative explanation is part of a larger discussion on the modern desire to control time. However, the positive explanation of mind-wandering sees it as an inherent quality of intrinsic conscious experience, with the human mind going from paying attention to

wandering off and can help one engage associatively with everyday life. Corballis compares mind-wandering in that regard to play, for he argues it creates a “feedback system” with the outer world “that enhances our need for further creative play” and he speculates it is this “cognitive loop that might be the base for both mind-wandering and our storytelling capacities”.³⁴⁵ Corballis’s creative idea of mind-wandering is therefore complementary to Sutton-Smith’s broad definition of play, that sees play as an intimate part of consciousness, in which the human mind creates an inner fiction to engage with outer reality.

An example of Corballis’s creative mind-wandering would be Walser’s musings in the electric tram, analysed in the first chapter. It shows an everyday imagining that aspersively and playfully engages with modern immediate surroundings. *Walter Mitty* will now be used as an example of an immersive form of mind-wandering, defined by a fantasizing that creates a draining dialectical relationship between inner and outer reality. In Thurber’s short story, originally published in *The New Yorker*, the reader follows the wandering mind of Walter Mitty. Taking place in the 1930s in a medium-sized Connecticut town, Mitty drives him and his wife into the city centre for their weekly errands, with his wife also having an appointment at a beauty salon. It becomes clear Mitty is dissatisfied with this mundane day trip, really with his life as a whole, and uses his imagination to escape it. From beginning to end the story follows this dialectical relationship of Mitty’s immersive fantasizing and his unimaginative daily life, with him being stuck somewhere in the middle.

The dialecticism of *Walter Mitty* is immediately established in the first lines of the story, showing the reader the inner workings of Mitty’s wandering mind:

‘The Commander stared at the ice forming on the pilot window. He walked over and twisted a row of complicated dials. ‘Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!’ he shouted. ‘Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!’ repeated Lieutenant Berg. ‘Full strength in No. 3 turret!’ shouted the Commander. ‘Full strength in No. 3 turret!’ The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. ‘The Old Man’ll get us through,’ they said to one another. ‘The Old Man ain’t afraid of Hell!’ . . .

‘Not so fast! You’re driving too fast!’ said Mrs. Mitty. ‘What are you driving so fast for?’

'Hmm?' said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd.³⁴⁶

The above narrational pattern will continue: Mitty's mind bouncing from fantasy to everyday life. In this he switches between multiple fantasies: steering a hydroplane through a storm; being a brilliant surgeon; being a murderer who boldly confesses in the courtroom and punches a district attorney in the face; being a war pilot, flying a bomber; and finally, facing a firing squad without a hint of fear. However, all these fantasies are interrupted by episodes in his mundane everyday life, in which Mitty is driving his wife, waiting for his wife, running errands for his wife.

Carl Lindner explains that in that sense Mitty's active bemoaning of his wife is an almost necessary result of the "juvenile imagination" of the modern man, "nurtured on puerile fantasies propagated by films and pulp fiction". Mitty, as a modern man, tries to escape in deluded self-projections, constantly shattered by "real life", which he childishly blames on his wife.³⁴⁷ Ann Ferguson Mann agrees, saying the character of the wife is made into the unsympathetic mirror that is "real life", frustrating Mitty, for he is inadequate in it, in contrast to the "secret world" of his fantasies.³⁴⁸ James Ellis sees in Mitty "the estrangement of a twentieth-century man and his consequent withdrawal in phantasies",³⁴⁹ with which Carl Sundell agrees, arguing that Mitty suffers from a "gradual mental disintegration", has "an obvious antipathy for the real world", and borrows objects from this "real world" as props for his fantasizing.³⁵⁰ Terry Thompson points to another obsession of the modern man: the way Mitty masters all different kinds of "intimidating machines of modernity" in his fantasies and subjugates them to his will.³⁵¹ George Cheatham, lastly, says Mitty desires an ultimate freedom through his daydreams; he doesn't only want to counter the mundanity of modern life, he quite simply seeks "transcendence". A transcendence that is impossible and therefore "Mitty, paradoxically, becomes increasingly constrained by his fantasies".³⁵²

Like in *Don Quixote* a dialectical relationship is created between inner and outer reality. However, the act of play is not involved. *Walter Mitty* shows instead an attitude. The character of Mitty is defined by a conceptually immersive mind-wandering that is far from playful and doesn't show the healthy creative capacities that Corballis sees in mind-wandering. It is negatively loaded, conveying frustration, a deep dissatisfaction with modern life that needs to be escaped. A way to describe Mitty's excessive mind-

wandering is through the concept of “maladaptive daydreaming”, a psychiatric condition where “extensive fantasy replaces human interaction” and the patient becomes stuck in cocoons of pathological fantasizing.³⁵³ In the created dialectics of imagination versus surroundings, there is a constant need for a negatively fuelled antithesis to justify the fantasies, in Mitty’s case his wife. The faculty of the imagination, as Cheatham observes, doesn’t free Mitty, but instead constrains him. Next to this negative fantasizing, what also becomes apparent in the short story and the above readings, is how, like in *Don Quixote* before, there is a constant tension between the real world/real life and the products of an overzealous imagination.

Another example of this tension is when Mitty is parking the car but is stuck in a fantasy about being a world-renowned surgeon:

They slipped a white gown on him; he adjusted a mask and drew on thin gloves; nurses hand him shining...

‘Back it up, Mac! Look out for that Buick!’ Walter Mitty jammed on the brakes. ‘Wrong lane, Mac,’ said the parking-lot attendant, looking at Mitty closely. ‘Gee. Yeh,’ muttered Mitty.³⁵⁴

The secret life of Mitty’s imagination is completely separated from his immediate surroundings: he blocks them out and tries to forget where he is. There is an ongoing discrepancy between inner and outer reality, in which the imagination tries to shield off everyday life but fails to do so. Looking at the above quotes through the lens of Calvino’s qualities of literature that were used to discuss watercolour prose – lightness, quickness, multiplicity – *Walter Mitty* possesses only one of these: quickness. Constantly the narration jumps from brightly coloured fantasy to colourless everyday life and the imagery alternates speedily between the two. But what the narration lacks is lightness: instead of making the act of imagining pleasant, the immersive fantasizing of Mitty’s mind-wandering creates a dialectical relationship that hinders him. Mitty is constantly being shaken by the disconnect of inner and outer reality³⁵⁵ and the grotesque inventions of his mind remind him time and time again that his everyday life is the opposite: unadventurous and unimaginative.

What Mitty lacks most of all is an aspersive playfulness. When one compares his immersive mind-wandering to Walser’s narrator’s mind-wandering in the electric

tram, one sees with the latter the appeal of the alternative rhetoric's everyday imagining. Walser's narration, in Sicart's terms, reambiguates the world: playful language and observations reveal a sprinkling of imagining – a watercolour prose that pleasantly leaves its faint marks and has no intention of overhauling immediate surroundings. In addition, looking at Thompson's view that the character of Mitty is about mastering the machinery of modernity through imagination, with Walser this gets a very different meaning as well. The latter's narrator is not intimidated by the tram, a symbol of cold machinery, but uses its rhythm to let his mind wander. Where the narration of *Walter Mitty* is negatively dialectic, with immersive fantasizing being frustrated by the immediate surroundings of Mitty, Walser's narration doesn't have this self-inflicted tension and creates a flowing symbiosis of inner and outer reality.

The aspersive playfulness that can be observed in Walser, and which is clearly absent in Thurber's short story, is not aloofness. Walser's narrator is, like the playing protagonists of *The Waves*, *paying attention* and *making place*. It is the very opposite of being distracted and/or trying to escape everyday life. Or in Walser's own words: "Everyday things are beautiful and rich enough that we can coax poetic sparks from them."³⁵⁶ This is then, bringing it back to the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, the great benefit of aspersive playfulness when compared to the conceptual immersion and fantasizing of *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*: it doesn't try to overrule one's immediate surroundings, coming up with fantasies that have to feel more real than reality itself. Instead, everyday imagining is deeply rooted in the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience and tries to playfully colour one's, non-human, immediate surroundings, however bland they may be.

In conclusion, the second chapter has discussed the differences between aspersive playfulness and the conceptual immersion of an overzealous imagination. The historical framework of Long Modernity has been crucial to its investigations, for it shows how discussions of virtuality are strongly rooted in modern investigations of human consciousness and the way it relates to everyday reality. Whereas the philosophical investigations have been discussed in the Introduction, the first two chapters have shown the *literary* explorations. Analysing the watercolour prose of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf has highlighted the ongoing modern engagements with a phenomenological kind of virtuality, as opposed to the dialectical virtuality shown through *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*. It shows the rich continuity of these virtual themes, how modern authors from different traditions engage with them, and how the philosophical and cultural

inform each other. As Calvino says, they are different forms of truth-finding, but nevertheless they overlap in their virtual investigations.

The following chapter will now turn to the technology of digital-virtual reality and the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. The current rhetoric relies on the conceptual immersion of an overzealous imagination to support the *sensual* immersion of the digital-virtual reality headset. By combining a modern technological mindset and an overzealous imagination, the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality is driven by the desire to create immersive spaces from both a technological and conceptual point of view. It is deeply situated in the historical framework of Long Modernity: the goal to convince users of digital-virtual reality they are somewhere else, effectively blocking out immediate surroundings and everyday life, continues the negative dialecticism observed in *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*. In the end, the next chapter will show the strongly different interpretations of virtual reality in the current rhetoric and alternative rhetoric and how they rely on different modern conceptual frameworks.

Chapter 3

The Current Rhetoric of (Digital-)Virtual Reality

The aspersive playfulness of an everyday imagining in the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality has been discussed. This chapter moves on to what it is an alternative to: the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. Revolving around the technology of digital-virtual reality, and based on the computational definition of the virtual, the current rhetoric brings together i) modernity's technological worldview and ii) the overzealous imagination discussed in the previous chapter. Instead of seeing virtual reality as part of everyday reality, with an emphasis on the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate (nonhuman) surroundings, the ideal of the current rhetoric is a conceptual and sensual immersion. It looks to block out one's immediate surroundings in favour of immersing one in an anthropocentric digital-virtual reality and suggests the human imagination is in control *over there*. Therefore, this thesis argues the current rhetoric is defined by the negative dialecticism already observed in *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*, sending people back and forth between a disenchanting modern everyday life and computationally supported realms of fantasizing.

An analysis of two sci-fi novels that use the setting of digital-virtual reality will help clarify the immersive fantasies behind the current rhetoric: Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1991), which introduced the idea of the Metaverse, and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011). What these sci-fi novels highlight for this thesis, when compared to Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, is that *they choose different language* to describe virtual experiences and the relationship between consciousness and everyday reality. This is because they rely on different cultural-intellectual traditions of Long Modernity when considering i) the virtual and ii) reality. *Snow Crash* will show how the positioning of digital-virtual reality continues the negative dialecticism of conceptual immersion, with the belief that computational technology can create a digital-virtual reality that exists *outside* of everyday reality, as that the novel is filled with questions of realness. It differs however from *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty* in combining this conceptual immersion with a sensual immersion. This immersive combination will be situated in a wider paradigm of the modern technological mindset, showing the belief that

computational technology can remake both outer reality and inner reality. The analysis of *Ready Player One* will also discuss this modern technological mindset and show how in the current rhetoric it is coupled with an overzealous imagination that is trying to maintain conceptual immersion through fictional worldbuilding. Instead of an aspersive playfulness that helps making place out of space, *Ready Player One* shows the current rhetoric's ideal of immersive play in an anthropocentric digital-virtual reality.

Before analysing the above two sci-fi novels, however, to first once more discuss sensual and conceptual immersion within the context of (a technological) modernity. Conceptual immersion is the sole act of the overzealous imagination, both suspending disbelief and actively creating belief. Sensual immersion is about overwhelming the eyes and ears through technology, convincing people they are somewhere else. Both forms of immersion, though different, are nevertheless defined by the modern technological mindset and its compartmentalising and partitioning: to see the fabric of reality as something that one can take apart and remake to one's liking. This modern technological mindset is *ocularcentric*, for, as shown in the Introduction, in modernity the eye trumps the other senses in empirically verifying the fabric of reality, with the main question being: Is what I see real? Following McLuhan's observation that every medium is an extension of a particular faculty, may it be physical or psychic, and influences how people in general look at the world, the technology of digital-virtual reality is of interest in two ways. First, being based on computational technology, it is defined by the informational and compartmentalised worldview of the modern technological mindset. Second, with sensual immersion relying on the digital-virtual headset and its visual persuasion, it becomes an extension of the ocularcentric approach to everyday reality.

In Stephenson's *Snow Crash* one can observe this combination of conceptual and sensual immersion and how it continues the negative dialecticism of *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*. The novel takes place in the city of Los Angeles, somewhere in the 21st century and introduces the reader to a bleak world devoured by rampant capitalism. Los Angeles – like many American territories – is effectively no longer part of the United States, for power and land have been transferred to private companies. To escape this dreary world, divided and controlled by big business, people escape into the Metaverse, a shared digital-virtual reality, that consists of the Street, an urban market street of over 65000 kilometres long and hundred meters in width. Here people dwell every day, living their digital-virtual lives. In the novel the reader follows Hiro, who is a delivery driver

for a pizza chain in everyday reality and a hacker in the Metaverse. Hiro sees how in the Metaverse a new drug in the form of a data file called Snow Crash is destroying the brains of its users, with especially hackers falling victim to it. Their brains have grown accustomed to processing information in the form of binary code and are therefore vulnerable to Snow Crash, a neurolinguistic metavirus that is able to insert its deadly code into the brain of a user through a computer and digital-virtual reality headset.

As the novel progresses it becomes clear Snow Crash was created by a media mogul to hack the brain of the general public and make it an audience under his control. Based on ancient Sumerian linguistic techniques that rewire the brain, the plan of the mogul has two components: a) the Snow Crash drug is released as a metavirus in the Metaverse, and b) in everyday reality a chemically processed blood serum of people infected by Snow Crash is physically distributed via a religious organisation by the name of Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates. Snow Crash is a virus, drug, and religion, all in one. Hiro, with the help of others, sets out to stop the media mogul, who hides near the American coast on his yacht, a former aircraft carrier of the U.S. army, surrounded by boats with infected and indoctrinated followers. These boats are part of the mogul's plan, as he wants to release his followers on American soil and spread the infection, like he wants to spread the metavirus in the Metaverse. However, Hiro manages to defeat the mogul, stop the Raft in its tracks, and with that prevents a mass infection in both the Metaverse and everyday reality.

Snow Crash sets up, as said, a dialectical relationship between everyday reality and digital-virtual reality. In that regard, Thomas Michaud explains *Snow Crash* is an important entry in the literary cyberpunk canon, which began with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Like other cyberpunk novels, it contrasts a societal dystopia with digital-virtual utopia, envisioning "the success of artificial paradises" and "networks of telecommunications" that allow "individuals to connect to parallel universes" and escape the perils of modern life.³⁵⁷ Cyberpunk novels such as *Snow Crash* and their libertarian "technopolitics", Michaud says, show how "faced with the technocratic organization of real societies, virtual territories are lands of freedom, without rules". Therefore, in "a reality ruled by multinationals" the heroes of the cyberpunk novel are "outsiders trying to find their place in technocratic societies by playing with new technologies" like digital-virtual reality.³⁵⁸ Gordon Calleja agrees, writing that "cyberpunk romanticism" is defined by the "ideal desire to delve into a virtual reality that replaces

the realm of physical existence”.³⁵⁹ The fantasizing of the Metaverse gives its users a line of escape. However, Elana Gomel says *Snow Crash* shows this to be an illusory escape, for “the topologies of cyberspace precisely replicate the topology of the post-industrial”, in which “both virtual and physical realms are ruled by the same networks of criminals and politicians”. The Metaverse doesn’t offer a way out, but simply in its own way “reveals the geometry of power there has been all along”.³⁶⁰

Nevertheless, *Snow Crash* imagines computational technology as being able to create a reality of its own, dialectically opposed to everyday reality and the hardships of modern everyday life. This idea of the Metaverse being a separate entity in which users can immerse themselves to escape everyday life can be observed throughout the novel, with immersion being both sensual and conceptual. An example of this is when early in the novel the narrator describes what happens when Hiro plugs into the Metaverse: “So Hiro’s not actually here at all. He’s in a computer-generated universe that his computer is drawing unto his goggles and pumping into his earphones. In the lingo, this imaginary place is known as the Metaverse.”³⁶¹ From the outset the Metaverse is positioned in *Snow Crash* as an “imaginary place” sealed off from everyday life. Thinking of the different types of immersion, what interests this thesis is that although the Metaverse mostly seems to rely on a sensual immersion, with the digital-virtual headset creating an audio-visual mirage, it moreover shows the importance of conceptual immersion and the mere ability to imagine this digital-virtual reality being elsewhere. It allows for the narrator’s statement that “Hiro’s not actually here”, as if he is truly somewhere else.

The idea of digital-virtual reality existing outside of everyday reality can furthermore be observed with the “gargoyles” of *Snow Crash*: people that in everyday life wear mobile computers and headsets so they can be constantly plugged into the Metaverse. They are ridiculous looking figures, mocked by the people around them, but as the narrator says the “pay-off for this self-imposed ostracism” is that the gargoyles can be in the Metaverse all the time.³⁶² This image of the gargoyle emphasises once more the idea of the divide between everyday reality and the digital-virtual reality of the Metaverse: people are believed to be able to exist in a digital-virtual reality that is somewhere else, neglecting their immediate surroundings. Again, although sensual immersion is important, with the headset enclosing its user audio-visually, the Metaverse is very similar to the conceptual immersion of *Don Quixote*’s open game of make-believe and *Walter Mitty*’s maladaptive mind-wandering: it is setting out the

parameters wherein somehow the rules of everyday reality are changed, with human fantasising becoming the rule-maker. The Metaverse is a technological entity, but without this conceptual leap it would not be the escapist haven it is believed to be by its users.

Consequently, in *Snow Crash* one encounters, like in *Don Quixote* before, discussions on how real these immersive experiences are. The narrator describes for instance the ontological state of “the Street” in the Metaverse as follows:

It does not really exist. But right now, millions of people are walking up and down it. [...] Like any place in Reality, the Street is subject to development [...] the only difference is that since the Street does not really exist – it’s just a computer-graphics protocol written down on a piece of paper somewhere – none of these things is being physically built. They are, rather, pieces of software, made available to the public over the worldwide fiber-optics network.³⁶³

What becomes apparent, is how the digital-virtual reality of the Metaverse is imagined not only to exist *outside* of everyday reality but is moreover imagined as *not existing at all*. Arendt’s ocularcentric question “Is what I see real?” comes to mind here: the Metaverse users, wearing their sensually immersive headsets, are believed to be computationally transported to somewhere else, but there is a strong coupling with the visual question if then this (digital-)virtual existence can be considered real. There is a continuous tension of Metaverse users wanting to believe what they see is real, so they can be immersed and fantasise, whilst also not truly believing digital-virtual reality is real.

The desire to establish the (un)real can be further understood through the concept of the avatar, which *Snow Crash* helped popularise in the 1990s.³⁶⁴ The narrator, explaining Hiro’s experiences in the Metaverse, introduces the avatar in the following way: “He is not seeing real people, of course. [...] The people are pieces of software called avatars. They are audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse.”³⁶⁵ Again one can observe a fixation on realness. This is further exemplified by a later classification of avatars in the Metaverse when the narrator explains that “it doesn’t pay to have a nice avatar on the Street, where it’s so crowded and all the avatars merge and flow into one and another”. However, in *The Black Sun*, an exclusive club in the Metaverse of which Hiro is a member, the avatars are a “much

classier piece of software". In there the avatars are "not allowed to collide", "everything is solid and opaque and realistic", and the most distinguished avatars "look like real people".³⁶⁶ So although there is a constant stressing of the unrealness of the Metaverse, simultaneously the more realistic an avatar will look and simulate physicality, the more prestigious it will become.

The dialectic positioning of the Metaverse, somehow existing outside of everyday reality, somehow not existing at all but at the same time needing to be as realistic as possible, can also be observed in some literary analyses of *Snow Crash*. One example is Lisa Swanstrom, who argues that "the outside world", defined by rampant capitalism, "forces individuals into narrow corridors of identity that are based upon principles of fragmentation, isolation, and encapsulation". The Metaverse, on the other hand, "allows its inhabitants to experiment with multiple identities".³⁶⁷ Swanstrom uses therefore a dialectical reasoning this thesis looks to question: the Metaverse apparently exists *outside* of "the outside world". Furthermore, reminiscent of the maladaptive mind-wandering of Mitty, in Swanstrom's words the Metaverse is defined by a negative fantasizing, as one can, through the avatar, be whoever one wants to be, and with that escape the self of everyday life. Even if such avatar identities are considered liberatory, this doesn't negate the underlying dialecticism regarding selfhood, for Metaverse users are ping-ponging between two extremes – everyday self and digital-virtual self – ongoingly pondering questions of realness.

When compared to the aspersive playfulness of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, the immersion of the Metaverse reveals a very different goal: it is not about becoming closer to one's immediate surroundings, to help making place out of space, but instead about escaping a disenchanting everyday life. A digital-virtual reality like the Metaverse is seen as if it exists i) *outside* of everyday reality, actively blocking one's immediate surroundings so one can immerse oneself in fantasies; and somehow simultaneously ii) doesn't exist at all, being completely fictional. As with the conceptually immersive fantasies of *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*, in *Snow Crash* one observes a negative dialecticism: the users of the Metaverse, too, are dissatisfied with their everyday lives and try to actively escape it by immersing themselves in fantasies about being someone else, being somewhere else. These fantasies, however, rely furthermore on a sensual immersion enabled by computational technology, which sets *Snow Crash* apart from the examples of chapter two. Ultimately, there is an important tension to be observed in the immersive goals of the Metaverse:

although there is an abundance of discussions of these fantasies not being real, at the same time these fantasies need to feel as real as possible, for otherwise the immersion won't work.

Thinking more about the role of the computer in *Snow Crash*, especially of interest to this thesis is the modern technological mindset that the novel brings into the equation. It positions the computer as a tool that can remake both outer and inner reality to one's liking, with the latter referring to the role of (computed) cognition. *Snow Crash* is with that defined by a *materialistic* interpretation of *exclusively* human cognition, in which all cognitive experiences are considered as an outcome of internal processes in the brain, waiting to be discovered by science. This is also the cognitive basis of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, as discussed in the Introduction. In line with the modern technological mindset and compartmentalisation, with the brain being understood in ever more detail, *Snow Crash* likens cognition to computational technology: by knowing the right codes of the brain, it can be hacked or controlled. An example of this attitude can be observed when looking at a scene in which Hiro and a gargoyle discuss the danger of the Snow Crash drug for hackers, with them comparing brain structures to computational structures:

'You're a hacker. That means you have deep structures to worry about, too.'

'Deep Structures?'

'Neurolinguistic pathways in your brain. Remember the first time you learned binary code? [...] You were forming pathways in your brain. Deep structures. Your nerves grow new connections as you use them – the axons split and push their way between the dividing glial cells – your bioware self-modifies – the software becomes part of the hardware.'³⁶⁸

This comparison might just be metaphorical, however still the quote is an example of Kelly Wisecup's argument that the main premise of *Snow Crash* is the "similarities between the information systems of humans and computers (minds and hardware, respectively)" and how they can be altered by knowing the right pieces of code/information.³⁶⁹ Judy Joshua observes this "brain-as-computer" theme of *Snow Crash* relies on a Cartesian worldview in which the mind and body are split, yet both are strongly grounded in the informational structure and are therefore "programmable".³⁷⁰ As with the modern technological mindset, where reality can be pulled apart in ever smaller

pieces and remade to one's liking, so too human cognition can be dissected into basic codes and be rewritten. This techno-materialistic attitude is not interested in the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience, but instead suggests modern science and technology can reveal its inner workings.

Nicholas Kelly argues in that regard that *Snow Crash* "valorizes computer code as the real way to make magic happen with computers".³⁷¹ Both the Snow Crash virus/drug and the way Hiro saves the Metaverse in the end, Kelly says, "suggest that users can only make real magic happen" if they understand the "basic codes" that underpin the computational technologies and the way they interact with human cognition.³⁷² Ed Finn agrees with Kelly that in *Snow Crash* "code" has an almost magical image, where "hackers are its shamans", being at the helm of "a symbolic system that operates at the intersection of cognition and reality". This is part satire, exaggerating the power of the hacker, however it does show the worldview that underpins *Snow Crash*: inner and outer reality as programmable.³⁷³ Jonathan Lewis argues furthermore that in *Snow Crash* Stephenson "privileges human cognition as the only instrument capable of overcoming the dystopic settings" of the novel.³⁷⁴ So although computational coding forms the basis of understanding reality, it is the perceived ingenuity of human cognition that is able to utilise it and manipulate both physical and digital-virtual reality.

This idea of computers being both tools of an informational reality *and* tools that will unlock the great potential of human cognition, can be further understood when thinking about the intellectual-historical cornerstones of the cyberpunk genre, and then more specifically the role of the computational metaphor. Fred Turner explains that until the mid-1960s "computers had been tools and emblems of an unfeeling industrial-era social machine", highly centralised and rationalised, with images of room-sized metallic boxes operated by anonymous bureaucratic and corporate faces.³⁷⁵ By the early 1990s, however, when *Snow Crash* was published, the computer and the network of the internet were considered by the cyberpunk genre as the harbingers of a decentralised, egalitarian, harmonious, and free world, empowering most of all the individual. The computer had become the ultimate tool of individual freedom, with that the opposite of the earlier image of centralisation and rationalisation. The reason for this shift of the computational metaphor, says Turner, was partly technological: the large computers of the cold war offices had been replaced by much smaller, interlinked personal computers that people brought into their homes. The computer had transformed from

an oversized calculator into a much more versatile communicative device that was able to become an extension of people's personalities.³⁷⁶

Turner argues that next to this technological change there was an equally important conceptual mixing of military-industrial research culture and American counter-culture from the 1960s on. Military-industrial researchers, says Turner, had created the conceptual basis of the computational metaphor by interpreting reality as an informational system waiting to be decoded by computers.³⁷⁷ Turner shows how this modern technological mindset was merged with countercultural ideas on cognition by certain thinkers and cyberpunk authors who went on to form the foundations of the cyberculture of the 1980s and 1990s. This countercultural ideal of cognition, especially found amongst people living in communes, was based on "mind-expansion" through "small-scale technology". The discourse around mind-expansion was heavily influenced by the experiences of hallucinogenic drugs, with the synthetic drug of LSD, a small-scale technology in itself, being the most prominent example. These experiences looked to unlock a pure kind of individual consciousness that moreover would help one realise that all and everyone were connected. As Turner shows, gradually the computer was believed to have these same mind-altering qualities, both amplifying undiluted individual cognition and stimulating open-minded communication between free individuals.³⁷⁸

Like Joshua earlier, Turner emphasises the Cartesian worldview that underpins cyberculture, where the "dream of disembodiment" is similar to the counterculture experience of LSD. Turner notes "LSD seemed to offer a risky passage to an out-of-body experience, an opportunity to feel a psychic union with others in the crowd [...] for cyberpunk authors, digital prostheses offered their users the opportunity to escape their bodies and enter cyberspace".³⁷⁹ This link becomes more apparent when one looks at, as said, arguably the first cyberpunk novel, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which introduced the idea of "cyberspace" through "the Matrix":

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, [...] A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data.³⁸⁰

In *Snow Crash* one can also observe this combination of an informational reality and mind-expansion through small-scale technology. The Metaverse is constantly given a

hallucinational aura, with it being convincingly real, yet not *really* real. Next to that, *Snow Crash* is a i) virus in the Metaverse; and ii) a drug in everyday reality, with that bringing together the techno-materialistic idea of the hackable brain and the mind-expansive qualities of a technological drug.

The cyberpunk novels of *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* are sometimes dated in their techno-fantasies, given they were written in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the above conceptualisations of digital-virtual reality are still relevant. For instance, Lanier, already discussed in the Introduction, believes the technology of digital-virtual reality “lets you feel consciousness in its pure form” and ultimately proves “you are real”. The sensual immersion of the headset makes the user “the fixed point in a system where everything else can change”, with that highlighting, says Lanier, “the existence of your subjective experience”.³⁸¹ Similar language can be found in Kelly’s ideas on “the mirrorworld”, also discussed in the Introduction, in which digital-virtual spaces are mirrorworlds that “immerse you without removing you from the space”, in which “you are still present, but on a different plane of reality” which is “unlike the real world”.³⁸² Both authors describe digital-virtual technologies and their ability to create immersive experiences in terms of hallucinatory drugs – to be present on a different plane of reality and via sensual immersion letting one feel consciousness in its “pure form”.

The idea of computational mind-expansion, found in the above cyberpunk novels, is an ongoing cornerstone of the current rhetoric of (digital)-virtual reality, in which the computer is imagined as being able to control and remake both inner and outer reality. *Snow Crash* puts forward what Finn calls an “algorithmic reality”. From a computational or mathematical standpoint, Finn argues, an algorithm consists of “an instruction set, a sequence of tasks to achieve a particular calculation or result”, however from a cultural perspective algorithms become “pieces of quotidian technical magic” that somehow can (re)create reality to the programmer’s liking.³⁸³ But this sense of algorithmic clarity and control is smoke and mirrors, for Finn believes algorithms deploy “concepts from the idealized space of computation in messy reality” and “enact theoretical ideas in pragmatic instructions, always leaving a gap between the two in the details of implementation”.³⁸⁴ Therefore, although an algorithmic reality suggests a certain clarity, under closer inspection it is much more ambiguous. This thesis agrees with Finn, and it is indeed this difference between the perceived clarity of the current rhetoric of (digital)-virtual reality, with its modern technological view of everyday reality and

cognition, that sets it apart from the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience in the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality.

It is also this element of conceptual clarity that can help better understand the positioning of digital-virtual reality *outside* of everyday reality in the current rhetoric. As the modern technological mindset is defined by compartmentalisation (Heidegger) or partitioning (Latour) and looks to set up a clearly demarcated framework of reality, a logical consequence is that it will conceptually also look to demarcate digital-virtual reality as a clearly outlined, separate entity. In such a worldview the statement “I am here”, with “here” meaning the ambiguous position of being *both* in everyday reality as in a digital-virtual reality when wearing a headset, is not ideal. Furthermore, this modern technological mindset can also be observed in the discussions on how real experiences are in such a separate digital-virtual reality. On the one hand these experiences are deemed as unreal, for digital-virtual reality is a computational simulation that relies on the sensual immersion of a digital-virtual headset fooling especially the eyes. On the other hand, there is the modern technological belief that ultimately, through technological and scientific progress, a man-made space like digital-virtual reality will unlock *real* human cognition, truly fulfilling its potential.

For this thesis Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* has highlighted two aspects of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. First, it has shown the negative dialecticism already observed in *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty*, in which virtual reality is explicitly positioned not as part of everyday life, but instead as an immersive escape from it. However, the difference with the two earlier examples is *Snow Crash*’s combination of conceptual *and* sensual immersion. The second element of importance to the current rhetoric has been *Snow Crash*’s portrayal of computational technology and the modern technological mindset behind it, effectively seeing both inner reality and outer reality as programmable. Hence, where a) the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality is about the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings, and foregrounds the aspersive playfulness of everyday imagining, the b) current rhetoric sees virtual reality as a technological and immersive entity that looks to *remove* users from their immediate surroundings.

***Ready Player One* and Fictional Worlds**

This chapter will now move on to analyse Cline’s *Ready Player One* and show how an overzealous modern imagination helps to sustain a conceptual immersion in digital-

virtual reality. In the novel a combination of two elements will reflect this overzealous imagination: immersive play and building fictional worlds. Together they will highlight the tendency of the current rhetoric to imagine digital-virtual realities *as if* they exist somewhere else and show how these anthropocentric elsewheres are seen as realms where the only limit is the human imagination. Before looking at immersive play and building fictional worlds, the first part of *Ready Player One*'s analysis will however compare it to *Snow Crash* and show the similarities and differences in the dialectical positioning of everyday reality and digital-virtual reality.

The story of *Ready Player One* takes place in 2045 and introduces like *Snow Crash* a world that is devastated by climate change and rampant capitalism. To escape this bleakness people live most of their lives in the OASIS – the Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation – a digital-virtual reality, consisting of “thousands of worlds”.³⁸⁵ The plot of the story: the creator of the OASIS, James Halliday, has died and has left the community of the OASIS, basically every world citizen, with a treasure hunt. The player who figures out his final clues will find an Easter Egg – which refers to hidden messages, images or objects in video games left by designers – that will grant the player full control over the OASIS and its thousands of worlds. The main question: will it be found by a corporation, making the OASIS another victim of capitalism, or will it be discovered by an independent player who shall keep the OASIS a decentralised and democratic haven, which Halliday intended it to be from the start. Players are logging in every day, trying to figure out Halliday's clues, in the background fighting an ideological battle over the future direction of their beloved digital-virtual reality.

The reader follows Wade Watts, a teenager who lives with his aunt outside of Oklohoma City in a so-called stack: trailer homes stacked upon each other, some of them twenty-two units high. The deeply estranged Wade escapes daily into the OASIS, under the moniker of Parzival, and is obsessed with the hunt for the Easter Egg. Years after Halliday's death no player has even been able to solve Halliday's first clue, however one day Wade does, putting him on top of the scoreboard and rekindling the race for the Easter Egg. He is quickly followed by four other players: Art3mis; Wade's future love interest; Aech, Wade's best friend in the OASIS; and Shoto and Daito, a Japanese duo. Whereas these players first compete for the ultimate prize, they start working together when players employed by Innovative Online Industries (IOI), a dystopic megacorporation, also get involved in the race. It soon becomes dangerous for Wade and

the other players, as IOI starts hunting them in everyday reality, even throwing one of the Japanese players, Daito, off a skyscraper. With the stakes getting higher and higher, Wade successfully stays out of the hands of IOI, solves Halliday's last clue, and with the help of his companions outcompetes the corporate players. Wade gains control over the OASIS and vows to preserve its decentralised and democratic basis, making sure it remains a haven for everyone.

Ready Player One positions digital-virtual reality like *Snow Crash* does: the OASIS is considered an enchanting oasis within disenchanting modern life. Reminiscent of Michaud's description of cyberpunk novels and their contrasting of societal dystopia and digital-virtual utopia, *Ready Player One*, too, follows such a pattern. This can be observed when the narrator, Wade, talks about being dissatisfied with modern everyday life and hails the escapism that the OASIS offers: "Luckily, I had access to the OASIS, which was like having an escape hatch into a better reality. The OASIS kept me sane. It was my playground and my preschool, a magical place where everything was possible." The narrator looks back on his early youth and how on a daily basis his mother, who has died in the meantime from a drug overdose, had "to force me to log out every night, because I never wanted to return to the real world [...] because the real world sucked".³⁸⁶ Summarised, in the quoted parts it becomes apparent how the narrator draws a line between "the real world" and the digital-virtual reality of the OASIS, wishing he could only exist in the latter.

In *Ready Player One* this negative dialecticism explicitly relies on a technologically induced sensual immersion, with the last three letters of OASIS standing for: Sensual Immersion Simulation. The digital-virtual reality headsets in the novel are called "immersion rigs" and enable the escapism of the players. With the state-of-the-art versions, says the narrator, the OASIS is practically indistinguishable from everyday reality.³⁸⁷ This highlights the ocularcentric tendencies of such a sensual immersion, however other sensory feedback is also important: for instance, during the story Wade uses a haptic suit, a haptic chair, and sometimes a treadmill.³⁸⁸ Nevertheless, most discussions on the realness of the OASIS revolve around the visual quality of the immersion rigs. This sensual immersion, with its ocularcentric focus, fuels in *Ready Player One* questions about how real digital-virtual reality is. Digital-virtual life is positioned as fictional, opposed to real life, but is also envisioned as almost indistinguishable from this real life. Wade, who spends all his time in the OASIS, sees the hour after he wakes up as his least favourite part of the day, for he spends it in "the real world",

with the “tedious business” of taking care of his physical body. The narrator says he hates this part of the day because it contradicts his “other life”, his “real life, inside the OASIS”. But when in that hour he looks at his digital-virtual reality gear, instead of wearing it, it is “a harsh reminder” that this real life inside the OASIS is “not, in fact, the real one”.³⁸⁹ Adequate sensual immersion convinces players to stay in the OASIS for as long as possible, even though they also think this digital-virtual life is not real and doesn’t really help them solving the issues of their everyday lives.

Ready Player One, more than *Snow Crash*, looks at the addictive qualities of sensual immersion. It paints a picture which Natasha Dow Schüll would call “the immersive zone of machine play”. Using Las Vegas slot machines as an example, Schüll shows how technological features such as video graphics, surround-sound acoustics, but also ergonomic consoles and touch screens with haptic feedback, create an immersive zone of machine play. In this zone, Schüll says, the aim of the player “is not to *win*, but simply to *continue*”.³⁹⁰ Slot machines provide the player with a “reliable mechanism” that secures “a zone of insulation”, which players to Schüll describe as “climbing into the screen and getting lost [...] you are not really there [...] you’re with the machine and that’s all your with”.³⁹¹ Schüll says the immersive zone of machine play, which relies on these sensually immersive tricks, offers the player an escape from the chaos outside of it: to forget one’s problems, to forget where one is.³⁹² This also applies to the OASIS and the way the narrator talks about the experience of digital-virtual technology: he wants to keep the sensual immersion going as long as possible, inevitably reaching the disappointing conclusion that once the digital-virtual reality headset goes dark he’s confronted with the unhappiness of his everyday life.

Having discussed the importance of sensual immersion in understanding the negative dialecticism of *Ready Player One*, the thesis will now return to the importance of conceptual immersion. In the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality the premise is that the players of the OASIS are transported to a *separate* digital-virtual reality, somehow existing *outside* of everyday reality, with the goal to ongoingly immerse themselves and block out the perils of everyday life. Where the analysis of *Snow Crash* and its Metaverse were used to show the importance of the modern technological mindset to allow for such a conceptual immersion, *Ready Player One* can help further explain the role of the overzealous imagination and show its interplay with the technology of digital-virtual reality. The analysis will look at the role of immersive play in the novel

and consequently show how this is combined with the modern tradition of building fictional worlds.

To first look at immersive play in *Ready Player One*, the novel reflects what Finn calls “the computation of play”, in which “the unconstrained play of imagination and creativity” are progressively “falling within the boundaries of effective computability and computation”.³⁹³ As seen earlier, the narrator of *Ready Player One* describes the OASIS as his “playground”.³⁹⁴ This is a specific term that Turner uses when explaining another aspect of 1960s counterculture that found its way into the evolution of cyberculture. Turner argues that the idea of cyberspaces being a potentially “playful social world” is based on the countercultural idea that people, especially in communes, could become closer to themselves and others if they would play more and let their innocence flow, instead of succumbing to numbing suburbia.³⁹⁵ This idea of being playful is different from the playfulness of Sicart, as it is not about ambiguating everyday life, but instead is closer to Sutton-Smith’s narrow definition of play where it is a means to find the true self. Where in *Snow Crash* the idea of the avatar reflected this being at play with one’s identity, the narrator in *Ready Player One* goes one step further and describes OASIS as a playground being a magical place where everything is possible. It is not contrasted with suburbia, but, more extremely, with a disenchanted “real world”.³⁹⁶

To further understand these dynamics of immersive play in *Ready Player One* – computational and escapist – central to the OASIS are *video games* and their culture. Jesper Juul defines video games as an umbrella term for games that are played on personal computers, consoles, arcade machines, and other computational machines.³⁹⁷ Justin Nordstrom argues these games form indeed the core of *Ready Player One* and underpin the structure of the OASIS: not only are video games the type of games that are explicitly played in the OASIS, says Nordstrom, but furthermore the digital-virtual reality itself is filled with references to video game history. Hence, both the act of immersive play and the structure of the OASIS are influenced by video games. Nordstrom goes on to argue that Cline’s novel presents both a utopian and dystopian vision of video games and digital-virtual reality. On the one hand, digital-virtual reality and video games “can be positive and engaging when experienced in moderate doses, but on the other hand can also reveal a destructive dystopian side, alienating players, even threatening the world itself”.³⁹⁸ *Ready Player One*, as said before, resembles a

cyberpunk novel: it contrasts a societal dystopia with a digital-virtual utopia. However, the novel also tries to problematise the immersive retreat of people into the OASIS.

Video games, given their prominence in the novel, can be used as a framework to better understand the OASIS and the overall trajectory of the novel's narrative. That said, before using video games to investigate *Ready Player One's* narrative, it is important to first consider Gonzalo Frasca's argument that although many video games revolve around a narrative, narratological structures do not "hold together" video games.³⁹⁹ Instead, Frasca says, *game mechanics* should be at the heart of an analysis, which are a combination of i) the game rules that outline what the player can and can't do, and ii) the way the video game responds to the input of the player via for instance a game controller or mouse and keyboard.⁴⁰⁰ Based on these game mechanics Frasca uses Caillois's distinction of *ludus* and *paidia* to explain the type of video games one finds in general. The concept of *ludus* applies to video games that simply produce winners and losers. *Paidia* has a more open-ended approach to video games, however, inviting players to figure out the game mechanics and improvise with them.⁴⁰¹ Looking at *Ready Player One*, both *ludus* and *paidia* are important when wanting to understand the novel. *Ludus* drives forward the story, as there will be one player (or corporation) that will win Halliday's competition and shall gain control of the OASIS, whereas *paidia* helps looking at moments in the novel when players engage in non-competitive situations, are playing around with the mechanics of the OASIS and participate in open games of make-believe.

As stated, the *ludus* aspect advances the plot of *Ready Player One* and can help understand something about the dialecticism of everyday reality and digital-virtual reality, also in terms of the latter's realness. Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson analyse the Easter Egg hunt in the OASIS in that regard through the lens of the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. They explain how the lusory goal of the novel changes: when read as a "Grail Romance" the final quest is not inside the digital-virtual reality of the OASIS, but outside of it.⁴⁰² They argue the initial meaning of the quest – winning Halliday's competition and becoming the leader of a non-corporate OASIS – shifts when Wade decides to use his newly gained riches and skills to improve the world *outside* of the OASIS. Aronstein and Thompson argue that Cline "offers his readers the Grail", which is "that true meaning, true *areté*, lies outside of the world of the game, in the meta-level of genuine human exchange".⁴⁰³ *Ready Player One*, they say, "paints our modern world as a wasteland in need of an Arthur to restore it, and no code, trick,

or joke - no magic, no memory, and no Merlin –” will be able to do that, “neither can any game”. Like in the old Arthurian tales it comes down to “the worthy knights who heal the land”.⁴⁰⁴

Indeed, after Wade finds Halliday’s Easter Egg, he meets the pre-programmed avatar of the deceased creator of the OASIS. The latter gives Wade this piece of wisdom:

‘I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn’t know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it’s also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*. Do you understand?’⁴⁰⁵

The ultimate prize is the knowledge that the OASIS is not real. In Halliday’s quote one finds an interesting combination of two ideas of realness in relation to play. First, it uses the demarcating of Caillois and De Koven, conceptualising the OASIS as a playing zone that exists outside of real reality. Secondly, tied to the playground ideology of cyber-counterculture, Andrew Monteith argues that there is the more implicit notion of personal authenticity underlying the idea of the real, with the question if “an avatar-mediated interaction in the OASIS” can ever be “more than a role-playing fiction”.⁴⁰⁶ This is reminiscent of Sutton-Smith’s critique of the modern, narrow framings of play, in which play is predestined to either make the self grow and progress, or the complete opposite: play as non-productive and meaningless. Both conclusions are true in *Ready Player One*: through the game of *ludus*, Halliday’s Easter Egg hunt, Wade grows as an individual, but the prize is knowing that in the end all this digital-virtual play is meaningless, and one can only be real, meaning authentic, by existing in real everyday reality and not hiding behind an ultimately inauthentic avatar. Such a duality shows the persistent questions of realness in *Ready Player One* and the dialectical relationship between the everyday self and the digital-virtual self of the OASIS. The novel’s discussions of play and its borders strongly mimic these questions of realness.

This separative thinking in *Ready Player One*, positioning zones of play outside of real reality, can often be observed in the academic literature on video games as well. Juul, for instance, argues video games are “half-real”, for they are “*real* in that they consist of real rules with which the players actually interact, and in that winning or

losing a game is a real event”, but this winning and losing takes place in a fictional digital-virtual world on a screen. Therefore, Juul says, a video game can be defined as both “a set of rules as well as a fictional world”.⁴⁰⁷ Juul quotes Caillois, arguing that “rules separate the game from the rest of the world by carving out an area where the rules apply”, and concludes with the observation that “the space of a game is *part of* the world in which it is played, but the space of a fiction is *outside* the world from which it is created”.⁴⁰⁸ Juul is not alone in these theorisations of the real in relation to video games. For instance, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman borrow from Johan Huizinga the concept of the magic circle to describe the boundary between the game and the world outside out of the game. Although in Huizinga the magic circle is just one example of a “playground”, other examples being the arena, the temple, the tennis court et cetera,⁴⁰⁹ Salen and Zimmerman believe the magic circle also to be appropriate when talking about video game design, because “there is in fact something genuinely magical when a game begins”, and this magic circle separates itself from “the real world”.⁴¹⁰

A similar sentiment can also be found in the video game theory of Jane McGonigal, who echoes the beliefs behind the OASIS when describing the ultimate appeal of video games:

The real world just doesn't offer up easily the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, and the powerful bonding afforded by virtual environments. Reality doesn't motivate us as effectively. Reality isn't engineered to maximize our potential. Reality wasn't designed from the bottom up to make us happy. [...] And so, there is a growing perception in the gaming community: Reality, compared to games, is broken.⁴¹¹

This way of looking at video games is strikingly in line with the earlier discussions on the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. First, McGonigal follows the modern technological mindset, claiming “reality isn't engineered” to maximise the potential of humans and argues digital-virtual environments *can* do such a thing. This line of reasoning is identical to for instance Kelly's concept of the mirrorworld, where humans control time and space. Second, McGonigal, like *Ready Player One*, makes a distinction between the “real world” and digital-virtual (gaming) environments. In short, in video game studies one can also observe a tendency to position zones of digital-virtual play outside of everyday reality as well as extensive discussions on the realness of such digital-virtual play.

Having discussed the *ludus* aspect of *Ready Player One*, the dialectic thinking of immersive video game play can also be observed in the case of *padia*. The latter as said refers to the day-to-day existence within the OASIS and how it stimulates open-ended games of make-believe. On that part the narrator explains how the OASIS is based on the video game genre of massive multiplayer online worlds (MMOW).⁴¹² In MMOW's, think of for instance *World of Warcraft*, vast numbers of players are free to explore an online digital-virtual world and do whatever comes to mind, given it is permitted by the gaming mechanics. Simultaneously, however, there are storylines the players can follow with each other, and by progressing these stories they will level up, discover new weapons or gear, or sometimes even unlock access to new parts of the world.⁴¹³ Celia Pearce calls this "ecosystems of play": computational environments that encourage players to go on missions together, play with the game mechanics, and play with their identities.⁴¹⁴ When comparing *Ready Player One* and *Snow Crash*, one can observe that both the OASIS and the Metaverse present such an ecosystem of play. In *Snow Crash* it is the Street, where avatars meet each other, and where Hiro and other hackers show off their skills by manipulating codes of the Metaverse. *Ready Player One*, on the other hand, has thousands of worlds that present players with a variety of options for spontaneous play.

The MMOW structure of the OASIS is furthermore based on an older (non-video) open game of make-believe: Wade, in his search for clues for Halliday's Easter Egg, stumbles upon the tabletop role-playing game of *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*, which Halliday played a lot during his youth. In *D&D* a group of players, gathered around a table, imagine themselves to be adventurers off on a fantasy quest. The quest is designed by the dungeon master: a player that sets up the rules of the game, creates the scenario, makes a map, sets traps, knows where the treasure is, where all the monsters are hidden, and so on. The other players, however, make the story: they decide where they go on the map, how they fight monsters, if they use deceit, and other tactics. The dungeon master is merely the referee at that point, deciding if an action can be done, and if so, will throw the dice to see if the action has succeeded. If the players make the right decisions, and the dice are in their favour, eventually they will finish the quest.⁴¹⁵ Wade becomes aware how the digital-virtual reality of the OASIS is very similar to this role-playing game from Halliday's youth:

As I learned more about how these early role-playing games worked, I realized that a D&D module was the primitive equivalent of a quest in the OASIS. In a way, these old role-playing games had been the first virtual-reality simulations, created long before computers were powerful enough to do the job. In those days, if you wanted to escape to another world, you had to create it yourself, using your brain, some paper, pencils, dice, and a few rule books.⁴¹⁶

This observation of *D&D* being a predecessor of “virtual-reality simulations” is not only to be found in *Ready Player One*, as it is also strongly represented in academic sources, with for instance Murray,⁴¹⁷ Ryan,⁴¹⁸ Pearce,⁴¹⁹ and Wolf⁴²⁰ emphasising the importance of *D&D* in the development of fictional, digital-virtual worlds.

What is furthermore of interest, is that although the above quote from *Ready Player One* does not explicitly mention immersion, it combines both sensual immersion (the perceived power of the technology of digital-virtual reality) and conceptual immersion (the perceived power of the human imagination). It drives home the point that these realms of fantasy are not just something that came about with the invention and evolution of digital-virtual technology and sensual immersion. Their appeal can only be understood by also considering conceptual immersion. When contrasting *D&D* for instance with the open game of make-believe in Woolf’s *The Waves*, it shows an important difference for this thesis. The latter represents the aspersive playfulness of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, in which imagining ambiguously blends with the rest of intrinsic conscious experience and one’s immediate surroundings. The open game of make-believe of *D&D*, however, shows the conceptual immersion of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. It looks to create extensive imaginary realms *over there*, instead of helping to experience the ambiguities of *here*.

To truly understand this imaginary layer, another theatre of the overzealous imagination needs to be understood: fictional worlds. These fictional worlds and their long modern history were discussed in the Introduction through the work of for instance Saler. He explains how from the late nineteenth century on fictional worlds have become enchanted responses to the disenchantments of modern life. To further understand what makes something a conceptually immersive fictional world, of use is Tolkien’s distinction between the “Primary World”, everyday reality, and the “Secondary World”, the fictional world. A “worldbuilder” builds a Secondary World, where both the imagination of the creator and its audience can enter.⁴²¹ These worlds, like Tolkien’s

Middle-earth, have their own laws, but they have to be believable within their own context, or otherwise the conceptual immersion will fail. Tolkien says: “The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.”⁴²² Wolf explains Secondary Worlds should not be interpreted as narratological superstructures, but as something distinct: “A world can have multiple stories set in it, and need not be dependent on any particular story for its existence.”⁴²³ These fictional worlds “extend beyond the stories that occur in them”, says Wolf, and he discusses how often the technique of worldbuilding “occurs as a background activity”, whereas narratives are at the foreground to advance the story.⁴²⁴ Wolf argues furthermore the grand appeal of fictional worlds is that they “are inevitably incomplete”, in contrast to narratives that are finished after THE END. Both the creator *and* a participatory audience can keep adding details and creations.⁴²⁵

Wolf says that an essential feature of conceptual immersion is the “encyclopaedic impulse”. Fictional worlds like Tolkien’s Middle-earth are often supported by detailed encyclopaedias that contain the history/histories of a world; ancient and contemporary maps of the world; provide a bestiary; explain magic spells; et cetera. When people build fictional worlds, says Wolf, they want to create knowledge to support it, and the more detailed a Secondary World becomes, the more conceptually immersive it becomes.⁴²⁶ In that regard, Secondary Worlds are a coming together of two modern drives this thesis is interested in: first, the drive of evermore compartmentalised knowledge; second, the modern drive of creation, discussed in the Introduction through Berman, who argues that modernity is propelled by the act of perpetually (re)creating. Secondary Worlds give worldbuilders and participatory audiences a framework in which they can indeed endlessly go on creating information, worlds, stories, and personas.

The encyclopaedic impulse, with its marriage of compartmentalisation and a modern drive to create, can also be observed in *Ready Player One* in the form of *The Anorak Almanac*, a collection of everything ever written by Halliday. Over a thousand pages long, the almanac is at the centre of the story and is constantly read and interpreted by Wade and the other players: if they want to truly understand the digital-virtual reality of the OASIS, and win the hunt for the Easter Egg, they need to learn everything they can about Halliday. Therefore, even though *Ready Player One* takes place in 2045, it is scattered with geek culture references, mostly from the 1980s, when Halliday

was a kid. Megan Condis argues these geek culture references make *Ready Player One* a “ludic novel”, for both the characters *and* readers of *Ready Player One* participate in a game of solving puzzles that requires a vast knowledge of geek culture.⁴²⁷ The encyclopaedic impulse is also important when reading *Ready Player One*: if readers of the novel are themselves well-versed in geek culture, it will be a more enjoyable and absorbing experience. Rares Moldovan agrees with Condis, calling *Ready Player One* a “geektopia”,⁴²⁸ and Valentina Romanzi argues “nostalgia” is the keyword for understanding “the utopic structure” of the OASIS, as it is a “retreat to an idealised past”, in which both the characters and audience of *Ready Player One* can immerse themselves in nostalgic geek culture.⁴²⁹

An example of this nostalgic geek culture in the novel is for instance a chat room created by Wade’s best friend, Aech, out of “Halliday lore”: “a large suburban rec room” from “circa the late 1980s” with old movie and comic book posters on wood-panelled walls, a VCR, vintage videogame consoles, and bookshelves “filled with role-playing game supplements and back issues of *Dragon* magazine”.⁴³⁰ The chat room symbolises how the role of knowledge differs greatly when comparing it to for instance the phenomenological virtual experience. For instance, in Sebald’s watercolour prose knowledge becomes part of the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience in everyday life. By gathering bits and pieces of information one becomes closer to one’s immediate surroundings and it stimulates the phenomenological virtual blend of imagining, memory, and sensory impressions. It helps, in short, to make place out of space. However, with the above example from *Ready Player One*, knowledge does little to nothing when it comes to one’s immediate surroundings. Instead, it is deeply embedded in the separative structures of both the modern technological mindset and the makeup of fictional worlds: knowledge is used to create a distance; knowledge is used to create at distance.

The chat room out of Halliday lore reflects furthermore how conceptual immersion is also a social act: players are in control of encyclopaedic knowledge together. Conceptual immersion is just as much an intersubjective endeavour, as that it can have solipsistic tendencies, as seen in for instance *Walter Mitty*. In that regard, Saler says most popular fictional worlds are reliant on public spheres of imagination: they create networks in everyday life of like-minded people that interact and live through these worlds.⁴³¹ Arjun Appadurai agrees and states how thanks to mass media the imagination and fantasising have become, on a global scale, vital parts of our social fabric.

Nowadays people, argues Appadurai, see their lives “through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms”, and because of that fantasizing binds people and has become a social practice.⁴³² The idea of a fictional world spread out over different forms of mass media, Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup would define as a “transmedial world” that becomes part of everyday life through a networked reception: people discuss the fictional worlds through different forms of media and these audiences of transmedial worlds are more than idle spectators – they shift between “the roles of reader, spectator, player, and interactor”.⁴³³ Tosca and Klastrup say that audiences and designers have an understanding of the defining features of a specific world and it is “always something imagined [...] transcending the concrete manifestations of the world as a media product which we engage with at a specific moment of time”.⁴³⁴

Hence, it is the imaginary layer behind these fictional worlds, not necessarily a specific medial manifestation that makes them so potent. Moreover, they are not solely about short bursts of immersion, Tosca and Klastrup say, but are scattered throughout everyday life:

Even more the transmedial experience is not only about immersing ourselves in worlds of fantasy, although it is also that in pure moments of consumption. Engagement with transmedial worlds is also expressed through big and small acts of vernacular creativity, such as making a meme [...] Furthermore, we have noted a new sort of meta-awareness where people become aware and interested in their own acts of consumption, which leads them to novel forms of audiencing, self-broadcasting and collaborative criticism.⁴³⁵

This role of the imagination in everyday life that Tosca and Klastrup envision is not the same as what this thesis has been talking about with watercolour prose, everyday imagining, and an aspersive playfulness. In the transmedial, fictional worlds of Tosca and Klastrup the focus lies on what is happening *over there*, in those worlds, and it has very little to do with what is happening *here*, the immediate surroundings of someone. This everydayness is a one-way street of attention: all the focus is on the fictional worlds. Worldbuilders and their participatory audiences are stuck in a self-referential loop, in which the perpetually creating human imagination is very much at the centre. Instead of making place out of space, it is about putting an overzealous imagination to work

and making worlds in which time and space are under human control. Also, where intersubjectivity in the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality revolves around how the imaginings and memories of others become part of personal intrinsic conscious experience, and can help becoming closer to one's immediate surroundings, in the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality intersubjectivity revolves around people endlessly creating fiction together in a conceptually distant elsewhere.

This emphasises also the last important aspect of fictional worlds: they are *anthropocentric*. Wolf explains how the “etymological roots” of world can be found in “the word *weorld* from Old German”, which refers to “all that concerns humans, as opposed to animals or gods”.⁴³⁶ This anthropocentric aspect is essential for understanding *Ready Player One*'s the OASIS, where the first two letters stand for “Ontologically Anthropocentric”. What can be seen with the users of the OASIS (and the Metaverse), is that they are not only actively trying to believe they are somewhere else, but time and time again it is emphasised how it is the omnipotent *human* mind or imagination that shapes this alternate reality. This belief of the omnipotent human imagination in connection to digital-virtual reality was also discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, where authors such as Greengard, Sherman, and Craig were shown to claim that the potential of digital-virtual reality is only limited by the human imagination, and whatever one imagines, can potentially be realised in digital-virtual reality. Regardless of the interpretation of the OASIS, as a digital-virtual reality or as a fictional world, the human mind and imagination are at the absolute centre.

To summarise, three aspects of fictional worlds have been relevant for understanding the current rhetoric. First, it tells something about where these worlds are imagined to be: they are always over there, never here. This ties in neatly with the separative thinking of the modern technological mindset and in a way fictional worlds are compartmentalised/partitioned entities in themselves, strictly cut off from everyday life. Second, looking at the role of the encyclopaedic impulse in worldbuilding, it reflects how in the current rhetoric knowledge is used to establish and further cement realms of an overzealous imagination. This is opposed to Sebald's use of knowledge, reflecting the alternative rhetoric, in which it ambiguously becomes part of the intrinsic conscious experience of one's immediate surroundings. Third, these fictional worlds are anthropocentric: they are realms for humans only, who can do what they like in there. Therefore, instead of helping to interact with the nonhuman, as seen with the playful and aspersive everyday imagining of the alternative rhetoric, an overzealous

imagination immerses itself conceptually in fictional worlds over there, where ideally it can go on endlessly creating.

In conclusion, having discussed the components of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality through *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One*, it should be clear how its conceptual foundations differ from the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. The latter is based on the philosophical meaning of the virtual and looks at the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings, promoting furthermore an everyday imagining that is defined by an aspersive playfulness. The current rhetoric, as a contrast, is based on the computational meaning of the virtual and combines a modern technological mindset with an overzealous imagination. Instead of digital-virtual technologies helping to support intrinsic conscious experience in everyday life and letting one engage with nonhuman surroundings, they become tools that create ever-growing immersive anthropocentric structures and set up a negative dialecticism with everyday life. The above sci-fi novels have furthermore helped to understand how the current rhetoric and alternative rhetoric rely on different cultural-intellectual pathways of Long Modernity when discussing virtuality. The cognitive language of these novels differs because of it. Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, with their watercolour prose, use literature to narrate the ambiguities of intrinsic conscious experience and how it interconnects with everyday reality. They represent Story B from this thesis's Introduction. *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One*, on the other hand, represent Story A. They are less concerned with cognitive ambiguities. They concern themselves with how *real* conceptual and sensual immersion can feel, how characters respond to the dialectics of self and world, and describe a modern technological view of human cognition, everyday reality, and digital-virtual reality. They look for boundaries, setting up clear demarcations, whereas Walser, Sebald, and Woolf explore in their language *the lack of* boundaries.

Having discussed the differences between the concepts of the digital-virtual and the phenomenological virtual – culturally, philosophically, and historically – this does not mean however that they are incompatible. In that regard, the fourth and fifth chapter of this thesis will turn to modern Japanese perspectives and show how these are able to provide a framework in which digital-virtual technologies support intrinsic conscious experience within the parameters of everyday reality and can foster an aspersive playfulness in everyday life. Additionally, the following chapters will also broaden the historical framework of Long Modernity, as they introduce modern Japanese explorations

of virtuality which are shaped by their own cultural-intellectual traditions, especially Shintoism and Zen Buddhism. As a result, these transcultural investigations will greatly strengthen the conceptual framework of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality.

Chapter 4

An Intimate Alternative

The third chapter discussed the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality and criticised its conceptual foundations. The remainder of this thesis will now continue its main argument: when talking of virtual reality, it is worthwhile to think of it as a *phenomenological* virtual reality, in which the focus lies on the inherently ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings, with an emphasis on an aspersive playfulness. As argued in the Introduction of this thesis, opting for a transcultural approach, Japanese perspectives will help further develop the alternative rhetoric for two reasons. First, modern Japanese thought and fiction, shaped by an intellectual history of Shintoism and Zen Buddhism, are interested in the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and everyday reality. This makes that these perspectives can help develop the alternative rhetoric's central concept of ambiguity, as that they will help further deepen the qualities of aspersion and playfulness. Second, Japanese perspectives can help better position digital-virtual technology in the framework of the alternative rhetoric, in which they are seen as *supportive* tools for an aspersive playfulness in everyday life, instead of being the absolute centre.

Two discussions from the Introduction are important to revisit before beginning the transcultural investigations of this chapter, as they are central to the conceptual language used in this and the next chapter. First, as discussed, Kasulis provides a general framework for contrasting intellectual discourses of modern Western thought and modern Japanese thought, also effectively describing the difference between the current rhetoric and the alternative rhetoric. Kasulis puts forward two orientations: first, the orientation of integrity, which is close to Heidegger's concept of compartmentalisation and Latour's idea of partitioning. With the orientation of integrity, the underlying assumption is that every individual component has its own integrity, meaning it is whole and indivisible and stands alone. The question is then how these integrous elements *relate* to one another. The example of the atomic model was used in the Introduction: particles are integrous entities but simultaneously studied in the way they react to each other. The second orientation of Kasulis, the orientation of intimacy, is closer to modern Japanese thought. Where in an integrous orientation the question is how A and B *relate*,

the question in an intimate orientation is how and where A and B *overlap*. Its point of departure is that a person overlaps with one's context, may it be human or nonhuman, and the question is how to act in these ambiguous overlaps. The conceptual is furthermore blended with somatic knowledge in the intimate orientation. This means the interest doesn't only lie with the concept itself, but also how it appears to human cognition: the world of abstraction is always understood within the limited world of the human senses, and where the orientation of integrity looks for clarity, the orientation of intimacy looks for the ambiguous.

The intimate orientation forms the conceptual basis of the coming analyses: it helps explain how Japanese perspectives look to understand and express the ambiguous overlaps of everyday reality. A second concept from the Introduction important to this chapter is *ontological playfulness*, which is both a passive acceptance of ambiguity, as well as an attitude that looks to actively ambiguate. Two ideas are essential to this ontological playfulness. First, Rambelli observes a split ontological outlook in Japanese contemporary culture, in which everyday life exists just next to a hidden world filled with a variety of entities. Second, Foster and Figal explain how parts of such a hidden world can ambiguously overlap with everyday reality, calling these border zones the interstitial. In Japanese perspectives interstitial zones exist somewhere in-between certainty and uncertainty, the known and unknown, and their meaning is to be found somewhere in the ambiguous. Ontological playfulness with that, as said, operates somewhere in-between the invisible (hidden worlds) and barely visible (interstitial zones) and is intimately situated *within* the parameters of everyday reality. This chapter aims to better understand these interstitial zones, their sense of temporality and ontological boundaries, and how they relate to the concept of a hidden world. Chapter five will look at the *experience* of these interstitial zones, and how concepts such as belief and the real are mostly irrelevant in such an experience, as opposed to the current rhetoric.

Two examples from Japanese animation will be used to discuss these themes, for, as explained in the Introduction, animation films and video games are the main media in which Japanese fiction explores the ambiguous experience(s) of everyday reality and the role of digital-virtual technology within this ambiguity. The first example will be the Japanese video game *Persona 5* (2016), as its narrative, too, revolves around the Metaverse. However, radically differing from *Snow Crash's* digital-virtual Metaverse, it imagines it as a *phenomenological* virtual reality. The analysis will show

how despite being different forms of media – *Snow Crash*, a sci-fi novel, *Persona 5*, a sci-fi video game – the conceptual, cultural, intellectual, and historical underpinnings of their Metaverses can be compared. Three aspects of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse will be relevant to this thesis: first, it will be shown how it is intimate and interstitial, ambiguously situated *within* everyday reality, and reflects the interconnection of consciousness and immediate surroundings; second, it will show the ontological playfulness it creates within the parameters of everyday reality; third, it will show the *supportive* role of digital-virtual technologies in such an intimate framework. The second example, the Japanese animation film *Your Name* (2016), shall be used to place the discussions of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse in a wider cultural context. It will also help discuss in more detail the fluidity of interstitial zones and how they imply the existence of a hidden world just behind the edges of visibility in everyday reality.

Some more needs to be said on the differences between these examples of Japanese animation, one being a video game, one being a film. What matters most in the context of this thesis, is the difference in how a narrative is presented and consumed. As Dawn Stobart says:

In a video game, the player's ludic success is crucial to the success and completion of the narrative. The player makes choices in the game, which drive the narrative forward. If play ceases, then the game stops and the story stops. [...] A film, on the other hand, can (and does) carry on, regardless of any interaction by the viewer; once begun, a film will carry on until the end, whether anyone is watching it or not. Interactivity changes the way that a video game player interacts with a narrative through identification with and as the played character in that narrative, effectively placing the player in the role of the protagonist.⁴³⁷

The video game uses ludic interactivity to forward a narrative, with the player being mostly in charge. A film audience, as a contrast, lacks such an interactivity. One can argue both have a pause button, at least when one is at home in front of a tv or computer screen, but the player has in general more options to influence the progress of the narrative.

Nevertheless, Michael Nitschse says that in the case of storytelling, what binds these media are "the parallels between the fictional worlds created by video games and film".⁴³⁸ This chapter will indeed argue that *Persona 5* and *Your Name* show strong

similarities in their fictional worlds, or narratives, which can be explained under *the umbrella of Japanese animation*. In that regard, a crucial similarity, as will be argued further on in the chapter, is how both the narratives of *Persona 5* and *Your Name* make use of *fantastical spaces*. In these spaces – temporal, fluid, and ontologically playful – the rules and experiences of everyday life and everyday reality are put into question. As a result, they let their respective audiences reassess the spaces they inhabit in their own everyday lives. Furthermore, like Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, both examples of Japanese animation engage with the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and everyday reality. However, they approach it through their own cultural-intellectual traditions. They don't use watercolour prose, close to literary modernism, but instead explore such ambiguities, *visually* and *spatially*, through animation. Ultimately, what *Persona 5* and *Your Name* help show, is the potency of a transcultural approach to Long Modernity. They help stress just how widespread and multifaceted these virtual explorations are; how different modern traditions and forms of media have been exploring the thesis's notion of a phenomenological virtual reality.

***Persona 5*: An Ambiguous Virtual Reality**

The chapter will now go on to analyse *Persona 5*, which is, as said, a video game. In the third chapter of this thesis the difference between the ludic and narratological position was explained when discussing video games. Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers argue, however, that one shouldn't always think of it as one or the other when considering an analytical approach. As they argue: "Ontologically, video games operate neither in the realm of narrative nor in the domain of game, exclusively. Instead, video games are – or, more accurately, can be (some are; some aren't) – *hybrid*, both narrative and game."⁴³⁹ This is especially true in the case of *Persona 5*, for it strongly combines gameplay and narrative, as will be shown below. The analysis will therefore discuss both the ludic framework and the narrative of the game and show how they inform each other. That said, there will be much more of an emphasis on the latter in two distinct ways. First, the analysis looks at how *Persona 5*'s narrative constructs the Metaverse; how it is an intimate phenomenological virtual reality that reflects the ambiguous interconnection of cognition and everyday reality. Second, when looking at the concept of an ontological playfulness, it will highlight how *Persona 5*'s fantastical narrative looks to ambiguate spatial boundaries.

Originally released on the Sony PlayStation 4, *Persona 5* is one of the latest instalments in the *Persona* franchise, which goes back to 1996 when *Revelations: Persona*⁴⁴⁰ was released on the original Sony PlayStation as an offshoot of another video game: *Shin Megami Tensei If...* (1994). Although the *Persona* franchise has evolved throughout the years, the direction of its narratives has remained the same: the player follows the lives of Japanese high school students in contemporary Japan, battling mysterious forces, while also trying to live a normal high school life. When looking at the ludic framework, especially *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* (2006) and *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4* (2008), both released on the PlayStation 2, established the core game mechanics that one also encounters in *Persona 5*, and which will be described in the next few paragraphs. In addition to these game mechanics, the *Persona* franchise relies *heavily* on narration and takes its time: on average it takes 87 hours to finish *Persona 3*,⁴⁴¹ over 80 hours to finish *Persona 4*,⁴⁴² and 110 hours in the case of *Persona 5*.⁴⁴³ *Persona* games can therefore, paradoxically, be considered as highly immersive, however this thesis is, as said, interested in how *Persona 5* presents virtual reality in its narrative, not so much the immersive experience of the game itself.

Like other *Persona* games, the expansive narrative of *Persona 5* relies on a ludic framework that combines two video game genres. First, it is an example of a “JRPG”, a *Japanese Role-Playing Game*, which Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Rachael Hutchinson say as a genre is defined by two elements: one, “the conventions and dynamics of the digital role-playing game”, and two, “the Japanese production context”.⁴⁴⁴ The role-playing element is in line with the tabletop game *Dungeon & Dragons (D&D)* analysed in the third chapter of this thesis. *Persona 5* is a game in which players take up a character which they uniquely mould throughout the game by making choices in the narrative and deciding on which character traits they wish to develop to what extent. In that regard, once more seeing the ongoing influence of *D&D* on the role-playing genre, it is also a “dungeon crawling game” in which the player has to find its way through labyrinthian environments.⁴⁴⁵ The second part, what makes it specifically a *Japanese* role-playing game, is less straightforward, as Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson explain that “Japaneseness”, although being “a seemingly valid interpretive strategy”, is not well defined and often tells little more than that it was produced in Japan. As a result, one can observe great “fluidity and liminality” when looking at the content that falls under the JRPG umbrella.⁴⁴⁶

The second video game genre of importance to *Persona 5*, Hutchinson explains, is the “realistic life simulation”, for the game takes place in “realistic town environments” of modern Tokyo, and the player controls “characters spending time in schools, movie theatres, cafés and their homes”.⁴⁴⁷ The player lives the everyday life of a Japanese high school student, doing exams, having a part-time job, going to see a film, play darts, having a drink or a bite with an acquaintance, et cetera. Hutchinson says that at its core the real-life simulator boils down to “the relationship between the individual character and the wider social environment”, showing how “the relationship between individual and society lies at the heart of the role-playing genre in Japan”.⁴⁴⁸ Douglas Schules agrees with Hutchinson, noting that the *Persona* series revolves around a “community system” in which the goal of the player is to befriend characters in the game, level them up socially, which makes them more powerful allies when battling supernatural forces.⁴⁴⁹ Frank Mondelli follows Hutchinson and Schules, adding that the ludic systems of *Persona 5* are designed in such a way that they come “to mimic an *everydayness*” that the player can relate to in everyday life. The real-life simulation mechanics of *Persona 5* are designed “to metaphorically embody the player’s own lived-in reality” and create a sense of shared everydayness. Mondelli argues that by trying to “offer an experience of reality” that combines “player experience” with “semiotics of the real”, *Persona 5* lets players contemplate their own everyday lives.⁴⁵⁰

The story of *Persona 5* is built on the foundation of the above game mechanics. It follows the protagonist – controlled by the player – and his life over the course of a year. After a false accusation of harassment from a drunk politician, a juvenile court sends the protagonist to Tokyo to be put under the care of a youth counsellor. The day he arrives in Tokyo he finds a mysterious app on his phone – a glowing red and black eye – which he never installed but also cannot delete. It is this app that sends him unknowingly to the Metaverse on the first day at his new high school and during the night, in a lifelike dream, a strange man called Igor explains that the protagonist is not only under probation in everyday life but is also being rehabilitated in the Metaverse. He explains this Metaverse exists somewhere “between dream and reality, mind and matter” and is formed by the ambiguous overlapping of cognitive Tokyo and everyday Tokyo (see fig. 4.1.). From that moment on, in everyday life the protagonist is a normal Tokyo high school student but next to that will use the smartphone app, called the Metaverse Navigator, to go into the cognitive depths of Tokyo. He learns he can infiltrate the distorted cognitions of bad societal actors in the Metaverse and can “change

their hearts”, which means defeating and dispelling the cognitive distortions that are the reason for a target’s wicked behaviour. When successful, the targets will change for the good in everyday reality and repent for earlier actions. (Here one can see the ludic framework: the real-life simulation in everyday Tokyo as a student; the dungeon crawling of a JRPG in the cognitive mazes of the Metaverse.)

Needing allies for his Metaverse adventures, reflecting Schules’s community system, the protagonist befriends and effectively recruits other students from his new high school. Together, plus Morgana, a mysterious talking cat, Yusuke, an art student, and Futaba, the secluded daughter of the protagonist’s counsellor, they form the Phantom Thieves, of which the protagonist, Joker, is the leader. Through their adventures the Phantom Thieves learn the Metaverse consists of two types of cognition: individual cognition and intersubjective cognition. Manifestations of individual cognition come in the form of “Palaces”, which are cognitive structures based on the distorted desires of targets of the Phantom Thieves. For instance, a gym teacher sees the high school he works at, and which the Phantom Thieves attend, as his own castle where the students are his prisoners (see fig. 4.2. and fig. 4.3.), or a zealous prosecutor sees the courthouse not as a place of justice, but as a casino in which she is allowed to rig the rules per game so she will win any game/case. Intersubjective cognition comes in the form of “Mementos”, which intimately overlaps with Tokyo’s subway system and is made up from the consciousness of the *whole* of Tokyo.

As the Phantom Thieves change their targets for the good in both Palaces and Mementos, slowly they unravel the mysteries behind the Metaverse and discover that nefarious actors for a while now have been manipulating it to further their interests in everyday Tokyo. This abuse of the Metaverse is part of a conspiracy that goes all the way to the heart of Japanese democracy: an ambitious politician, eventually prime minister, has been able to use the Metaverse to pursue the interests of him and his sponsors by altering the psyche of the public. Moreover, as the plot thickens, it is the same politician that disenfranchised Joker with his false charge of harassment. The Phantom Thieves believe at first their final mission is to stop this politician and his crime ring. This way they can rehabilitate Joker in the Metaverse and in everyday reality. However, as the story progresses, again the mystery of the Metaverse takes a different turn, as the Phantom Thieves discover that it also involves a supernatural force that wants to know if people are inherently complacent and immoral or caring and moral. The final part of the story changes therefore from the rehabilitation of Joker

to the Phantom Thieves needing to prove that humans have more good in them than bad.



Fig. 4.1. The interstitial



Fig. 4.2. School entrance in everyday Tokyo



Fig. 4.3. School entrance in the Metaverse

To get an initial understanding of *Persona 5's* Metaverse, and how it differs from *Snow Crash's* Metaverse, three questions can be asked: *what* is it; *where* is it; and *how* do you access it? First considering the *what* question, of use is Azuma Hiroki's concept of "*sekai-kei*" fiction, which refers to Japanese (animated) science fiction that is interested in the underlying psychology of its characters and wants to know where "the boundaries of the world are defined by the borders of individual consciousness".⁴⁵¹ Both the psychological and cognitive interests of *sekai-kei* fiction are relevant when considering *Persona 5's* Metaverse. The psychological aspect is relatively straightforward, with the *Persona* franchise named after the persona concept of Carl Jung.⁴⁵² Ashley Pearse says it is "the integration of the persona and the shadow" of "the Jungian self" and "the mutual integration of the conscious and unconscious" that forms the basis of *Persona* games and therefore also the Metaverse.⁴⁵³ In that regard, Anthony Stevens compares the persona-shadow interaction to Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde: the respectable doctor that presents itself to society (persona) and the hideous figure that tries to hide itself (shadow). Stevens explains often "the shadow comes to possess qualities opposite to those of the persona", in which the shadow compensates "the superficial pretensions of the persona" and the persona counters "the antisocial characteristics of the shadow".⁴⁵⁴ This is also the case in *Persona 5's* Metaverse: the mentioned cognitive distortions are called shadows, which are often Mr Hyde like deformations. They are the subconscious states of the targets of the Phantom Thieves who pretend to be upright citizens in everyday Tokyo. Therefore, the psychological

interpretation of what the Metaverse is, is that it sits somewhere in-between who people pretend to be and who people are.

The cognitive aspect of *Persona 5* is, however, the most dominant part of the Metaverse's conceptual basis and can better answer what it is and where it is. The Metaverse, in the words of Azuma, exists somewhere on "the borders" of "the world" and "consciousness" and is foremost an *intimate* entity, as it is said to exist somewhere in-between the ambiguous overlap of cognitive Tokyo and everyday Tokyo. That makes *Persona 5*'s Metaverse a *phenomenological* virtual reality, for as a structure it reflects the interconnection of cognition and everyday reality. Its fabric is made up from the ambiguous blend of the feelings, imaginings, and memories of everyday Tokyo, as will be analysed in more detail during this chapter, and it is often unclear where cognition ends and the outer world begins. This makes *Persona 5*'s Metaverse furthermore an example of the interstitial, as for instance can be seen when the character of Igor explains it to exist somewhere "between dream and reality, mind and matter". The Metaverse and everyday reality are constantly flowing in and out of each other in *Persona 5*'s narrative, overlapping somewhere in the interstitial, in which it is not purely A or B, but somewhere in the ambiguous middle of AB. This intimate and interstitial interpretation sets *Persona 5*'s Metaverse apart from the Metaverse of *Snow Crash*. The latter is to be understood through the current rhetoric, in which virtual reality is strictly technological, an integrous digital-virtual realm that conceptually exists outside of everyday reality. It looks to avoid ambiguity, creating a distinct framework of: A (everyday reality) and B (digital-virtual reality).

This cognitive-interstitial understanding of the Metaverse helps explain what it is and where it is, although ambiguity is at the centre of both answers. Thinking more about the third question, *how* to access the Metaverse, this can help explain another initial difference with *Snow Crash*'s Metaverse. As said, the mysterious smartphone app lets the Phantom Thieves access the interstitial, existing somewhere in-between the overlap of cognitive Tokyo and everyday Tokyo. This makes it both different from the sensual immersion and conceptual immersion of the digital-virtual Metaverse of *Snow Crash*. With the absence of a digital-virtual headset, no audio-visual immersion can take place. Instead, the role of digital-virtual technology in the framework of *Persona 5* is more ambiguous, which is also suggested by the lack of control: the app can be activated without someone's knowledge.⁴⁵⁵ This in contrast to *Snow Crash*, where the user is always in control when he decides to plug into the computational Metaverse.

Next to the absence of sensual immersion with *Persona 5*'s Metaverse, there is also no conceptual immersion involved, for it is ambiguously overlapping with everyday Tokyo, lacking the dialectical and separative belief that the Metaverse exists *outside* of everyday reality.

The conceptual basis of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse is ambiguous, intimate, and interstitial. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a phenomenological virtual reality for it reflects the ambiguous interconnection/overlap of cognitive Tokyo and everyday Tokyo. This thesis will now move on to explain how this intimate interpretation of the Metaverse can further deepen the two key concepts of the alternative rhetoric: aspersion and playfulness. Additionally, the analysis of *Persona 5* will look at the *supportive* role of digital-virtual technologies in its narrative, as opposed to the technocentric narratives of *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One*. This will help bring the phenomenological virtual and digital-virtual together into one framework. As said before, although being a video game, and the other two examples being sci-fi novels, it is not so much the form of media that is of interest to this thesis, but the conceptual make-up of their virtual realities. In that regard, it should also be once more explained how the analysis of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse will deepen the previous literary analyses of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf. The latter were analysed through the concept of watercolour prose; how their literary works *narrated* the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings. *Persona 5*, on the other hand, explores these ambiguities visually, spatially, and through worldbuilding. Being an example of Japanese animation, its Metaverse shows the player what a phenomenological virtual reality can look like.

To begin with the concept of aspersion. For this thesis's analysis there are two strands to consider in *Persona 5*. The first one is how its Metaverse revolves around *the heart*. When the Phantom Thieves roam the Metaverse, they can, as said, steal the heart of their targets, which means they take away the corrupted parts of someone's cognition. The result is that their targets will better their ways in everyday Tokyo. Furthermore, as the story progresses, the Phantom Thieves come to understand that the Metaverse itself can be understood as the heart of the whole of Tokyo. This notion of the heart reflecting the whole of cognition, from both a personal and intersubjective perspective, can be understood through the concept of *kokoro*. *Kokoro* translates as "heart", but also encompasses the mind and spirit, with James Heisig defining it as "a comprehensive term for the cognitive, affective, imaginative, and appetitive faculties,

or, alternatively, the field of responsiveness in which they function”.⁴⁵⁶ Toyoko Izutsu explains *kokoro* to be a “sort of psychic potentiality or dynamic of the subject to be activated – when stirred and stimulated by external things and events – to function by manifesting itself as thinking (including images and ideas) and feeling”.⁴⁵⁷ In the narrow sense *kokoro* points to a “particular domain of inner subjectivity”, mostly dependent on the context if it will lean more to thought or to feeling. Toyoko explains the broad interpretation of *kokoro*, however, to be more potent. It encompasses the *whole* domain of inner subjectivity, “covering both the not-yet-activated and the already-activated” and it “is both the ground and manifestation of images, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and emotions”.⁴⁵⁸

Nishida Kitarō, although not using the concept of *kokoro* himself, provides a useful analysis of “pure experience” when wanting to understand the mental compositions that underpin the broad interpretation of *kokoro*:

What kinds of mental phenomena are pure experience in this sense? Surely no one would object to including sensations and perceptions. I believe, though, that all mental phenomena appear in the form of pure experience. In the phenomenon of memory, past consciousness does not arise in us directly, so we do not intuit the past; to feel something as past is a feeling in the present. An abstract concept is never something that transcends experience, for it is always a form of present consciousness.⁴⁵⁹

With *kokoro*, as further explained by Nishida’s idea of pure experience, thought and feeling are never separated, the heart and the mind always ambiguously flow in and out of each other. As Nishida argues furthermore, it is always a form of “present consciousness” that defines pure experience, which also applies to *kokoro*. This is in line with the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, that stresses the importance of the sensory impressions of one’s immediate surroundings and its momentary effects on imagining and memory. Next to that, *kokoro* and pure experience are similar to Calvino’s multiplicity, earlier explored through the writings of Sebald, in which abstract knowledge is part of the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience.

It is the broad interpretation of *kokoro* that one encounters with *Persona 5*’s phenomenological virtual reality that is the Metaverse: it is an ambiguous amalgam of the images, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the inhabitants of everyday

Tokyo. In Heisig's words, the Metaverse is the field of responsiveness, the beating cognitive heart of Tokyo, and therefore it intimately overlaps with everyday reality. There are, as said, two distinct structures in the Metaverse consisting of the *kokoro* fabric. First, individual cognitive structures in the form of Palaces, which are manifestations of one person's distorted desires. Here one can think of the earlier mentioned gym teacher, whose cognition distorts the Phantom Thieves' high school and sees it as a castle of which he is the ruler. Second, there is a grand intersubjective cognitive structure called Mementos that intimately overlaps with the Tokyo subway system. Mementos responds to the *whole* of Tokyo – everyone's feelings, imaginings, memories, and so on. Hence, where the individual Palaces are somewhat straightforward, reflecting the cognitive distortions of an individual, the intersubjective structure of Mementos is more complex, which is also seen in the way its cognitive tunnels spiral ever deeper to a mysterious core (see fig. 4.4.), symbolising the great depths of Tokyo's (sub)consciousness.



Fig. 4.4. Mementos: the Tokyo subway in the Metaverse⁴⁶⁰

The second strand to consider with aspersions, next to the fabric of *kokoro*, is the *impermanence* of cognitive manifestations in the Metaverse. As discussed before, the fleetingness of intrinsic conscious experience is important when wanting to understand aspersions. In that regard, the Introduction discussed Japanese perspectives on the impermanence of everyday reality, using different concepts from Japanese religious and intellectual history, such as *mu(shin)*, *zazen*, and *wabi sabi*. It investigated the Zen Buddhist understanding of everydayness, with its notion that spiritual enlightenment

can only be reached when one intuitively learns to grasp the impermanence of everyday reality and with that the impermanence of oneself. Instead of creating abstract thought systems or looking for a permanently existing core of the self, the Zen idea of consciousness is that one is the ambiguous sum of continuous impressions. One should not hold onto such fleeting impressions and create a false sense of stability, but instead feel at home with the inevitability of impermanence.

This continuous state of flux is also the basis of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse, where both personal and intersubjective structures will change based on the state of *kokoro*. Looking first at the example of Mementos, it is said to be “the fused cognition” of many and therefore “constantly shifting” (see fig. 4.5.). For instance, when it rains, the emotions and feelings of the public will be affected, and in effect will change Mementos and the way it reacts to the Phantom Thieves roaming its tunnels. What's more, the Metaverse's Palaces, structures built out of the cognitive distortions of one individual, show what happens if one fails to accept the impermanence of everyday reality and intrinsic conscious experience. Morita, a psychoanalyst using Zen teachings, says modern anxieties, *shinkeishitsu*, in part come about “once a person focusses attention on a fleeting experience, a world of image is established, and one becomes trapped in an illusory subjective world”. After that, Morita says, the imagination has effectively created a “contradiction between ideas and reality”.⁴⁶¹ Peg LeVine, when analysing Morita's thought, says *shinkeishitsu* happens when one gets stuck in an introspective cycle and “excessive attention” is paid to a particular thought, feeling, or self-image.⁴⁶² This ignores the Zen state of *mushōjūshin*, which is literally translated as “the mind does not dwell anywhere”.⁴⁶³ Instead, with Palaces the mind *does* dwell, negatively, with one particular image becoming the illusory subjective world for someone.



Fig. 4.5. Mementos is constantly shifting

The Metaverse of *Persona 5* is therefore aspersive: first, it is the ambiguous sum of imaginings, memory, and sensory impressions, as captured by *kokoro*; and second, given it is an ambiguous product of consciousness intimately overlapping with everyday reality, it is ultimately defined by ephemerality. In that regard it is a structural extension of the watercolour prose of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, who as well explore the fleetingness of intrinsic conscious experience and the ambiguous interconnection with one's immediate surroundings. This intimate and impermanent approach to virtual reality differs furthermore from the conceptually immersive structures of *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One*. The latter two are defined by a modern technological mindset and overzealous imagination. One of the pulling factors of digital-virtual reality is that it suggests an immersive escape to an anthropocentric elsewhere, in which humans control time and space. In *Persona 5* one encounters a different conceptual basis: the Metaverse is situated ambiguously *within* the parameters of everyday reality and therefore follows its impermanence. In that regard, its Palaces symbolise what happens when one forgets about impermanence and clings on to a fragment of one's *kokoro*, immersing oneself in a cognitive distortion.

What, then, is the conceptual benefit of the aspersive alternative rhetoric when compared to the immersion of the current rhetoric? It shows how instead of creating a negative dialecticism, in which there is the problematic suggestion that one can escape everyday life and everyday reality, the phenomenological interpretation of virtual reality emphasises that one always remains intimately situated within everyday reality. It takes the watercolour prose of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, and uses it as a blueprint

for virtual reality. It reflects intrinsic conscious experience, its inherent ambiguity and fleetingness, and how it is deeply interconnected with one's immediate surroundings. Not a digital-virtual elsewhere where the human imagination can perpetually create, nor does it follow a materialistic and modern technological idea of cognition that can be manipulated via computational technology to one's liking. Instead, the alternative rhetoric considers how thoughts, feelings, imaginings, memories, et cetera, come and go, sometimes voluntary, sometimes involuntary, and how they form temporary mental structures that overlap ambiguously with the actual structures of everyday life.

The inherent ambiguity of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse and its intimate overlap with everyday reality can also help deepen the second quality of the alternative rhetoric: playfulness. Here the interest lies with an ontological playfulness within the parameters of everyday reality. The beginning of this chapter revisited the concepts of the hidden world and the interstitial, addressing how the intimate orientation is interested in the ambiguous spectrum of the invisible to the barely visible. These concepts are also essential when wanting to understand *Persona 5*'s Metaverse and the mentioned ontological playfulness. First, using Rambelli's notion of a split ontological outlook in Japanese perspectives, where a hidden world coexists next to everyday life, it is indeed implied the Metaverse is *always* around. Even when invisible it responds with its ambiguous *kokoro* fabric to what happens in everyday Tokyo. This suggestion of the Metaverse being a hidden world just behind the edges of visibility within everyday reality is paramount for the ontological playfulness of *Persona 5*: it gives the Phantom Thieves (or the player for that part) the idea that the Metaverse is fluctuating around them, responding to everything they do in everyday Tokyo. Theorising what this hidden world looks like, however, is not what *Persona 5*'s narrative is interested in. Instead, it focuses on how every now and then the Metaverse will become briefly and *barely* visible to the Phantom Thieves. Whenever the latter use their smartphone app, *interstitial zones* such as Palaces and Mementos are formed, in which temporarily a part of the Metaverse is pulled over to the side of visibility.

Palaces and Mementos, when interpreted as interstitial zones, reflect different aspects of ontological playfulness. Palaces exemplify how every time it is only just a snippet of the Metaverse that comes over to the side of visibility, for it is a personal cognitive distortion of a particular Tokyo building. The rest of the Metaverse remains playfully hidden, and does so throughout *Persona 5*'s story, with that emphasising that as an entity it is just only barely visible to the Phantom Thieves. Interstitial zones offer

glimpses at best. Mementos, on the other hand, reflects the ontological playfulness found within interstitial zones themselves. It does so first by simply being a mystery throughout most of the narrative, for although the Phantom Thieves know Mementos exists somewhere in-between an intimate overlap of cognitive Tokyo and the Tokyo subway system, they do not know how deep its tunnels go or what is at its heart. As the Phantom Thieves get closer to the heart of Mementos, its ontology starts to further ambiguate, for it becomes apparent there is also a supernatural layer to consider. They learn they are not only battling human adversaries, but moreover a supernatural one: a god named Yaldaboath,⁴⁶⁴ who, as Mondelli explains, finds its origins in “the apathy of humanity” and wants to prove through the Metaverse most people are indifferent to injustice as long as they’re comfortable themselves.⁴⁶⁵ That said, after introducing this supernatural element the narrative proceeds to be ambiguous, never truly explaining *when* or *how* the Metaverse was created, or what its fabric consists of *exactly*. It only reveals that Mementos, in all its ambiguities, is at its heart.

Persona 5’s intentional ambiguity – both suggesting a hidden world that lies just behind the edges of visibility, as well as exploring interstitial zones that include supernatural elements – highlights an important motif of Japanese fiction that can be understood through Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of “the fantastic”. Todorov explains that in fantastical narratives things happen that cannot be explained by natural laws, after which characters wonder if they are a) “the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are”; or b) “the event indeed has taken place” and “is an integral part of reality”, “but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown” to the characters.⁴⁶⁶ What is essential to Todorov is that “the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty” and involves the “hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event”. Therefore, the fantastical is not about resolving this tension, but about sustaining ambiguity “to the very end”.⁴⁶⁷ Additionally, it is foremost about the hesitation of *the reader* and “its own ambiguous perception of the events narrated”, says Todorov, but it’s necessary the reader can “identify with a particular character” when experiencing this hesitation.⁴⁶⁸ This can also be observed with *Persona 5*: the hidden world, although invisible, helps to ambiguate everyday reality by suggesting it is always around, whereas the interstitial manifestations of the Metaverse sustain a fantastical hesitation by being unclear about their ontological makeup. This hesitation is experienced by both the Phantom Thieves *and* the player.

Rebecca Suter observes that Japanese science fiction in general shows “a remarkable consistency” with narratives using “a fantastic hesitation between rational and supernatural, psychological and spiritual, personal and political explanations of the events they portray”.⁴⁶⁹ Mina Qiao, next to that, talks about the importance of the “fantastical space” in Japanese fiction, where “once accessed” it “both resembles and deviates from the experience of the everyday world”.⁴⁷⁰ Susan Napier highlights furthermore the relationship of Japanese fantastical fiction with “modernity”, in which the fantastic subverts Japanese modernity and takes on the “myths of constant progress, economic miracle, and social harmony; stereotypes which have dominated the thinking not only of those outside Japan but among the Japanese themselves”.⁴⁷¹ Napier says Japanese fantastic narratives can be considered “as a means to a final awareness of unknowability” and while it may seem “postmodern in its narrative effect [...] the ambiguous nature of truth, reality, and fantasy is an aspect that many Japanese writers work with”, with the main interest being the changeability of reality within the ambiguous.⁴⁷²

The reaction to the fantastic and the role of imagining will be discussed at length in the next chapter, whereas this chapter concerns itself specifically with how the fantastic playfully ambiguates ontological borders *within* everyday reality. The suggestion of a hidden world and the formation of interstitial zones build on the playfulness of Sicart and his idea of (re)ambiguating the world around us. This as a contrast to the current rhetoric, which relies on the conceptual immersion of fictional worlds. As shown through the works of Tolkien, Wolf, and Saler, conceptually these fictional worlds are placed *outside* of a disenchanted everyday reality, so they can be filled with magic, enchantments, and other supernatural aspects. Hence, the current rhetoric follows Kasulis’s orientation of integrity, in which an overzealous imagination is given a realm of its own where it can go on to perpetually create. *Persona 5*, on the other hand, shows instead how a fantastical hesitation relies on playfully allowing for ambiguity within everyday reality. A hidden world is implied; different ontological layers are allowed to ambiguously overlap in interstitial zones. This doesn’t mean one has to outright believe in the supernatural, nor does it require theorisations of a particular hidden world, which will be shown in more depth in the next chapter, but instead it focusses on the human experience of ambiguity within, not outside, everyday reality.

Mementos being an interstitial zone, existing in a playful fashion in-between different ontological layers, is furthermore to be understood through a third layer: it’s also

technological. Being for instance intimately connected to the subway system, the train runs at times through Mementos. However, much more important to this thesis is *Persona 5*'s use of digital-virtual technology. As already discussed, the Phantom Thieves can only access the Metaverse via their mysterious smartphone app, effectively making digital-virtual technology one of the intimate parts of the Metaverse's fabric. This intimate role becomes more apparent when looking at the important role of *networked* digital-virtual technology: the more the Tokyo public becomes aware of the Phantom Thieves during the story, especially through internet culture, the more Mementos opens up its vast network of subterranean tunnels, allowing the Phantom Thieves to descend further into the collective cognitive depths of Tokyo. Hence, there is a direct connection between the online presence of the Phantom Thieves, the people of Tokyo being aware of them, and their ability to descend into the *kokoro* of Mementos. Physical Tokyo, digital-virtual Tokyo, cognitive Tokyo, supernatural Tokyo, they are all playfully overlapping and ambiguously forming interstitial zones.

This ontological playfulness points also to the last important aspect of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse for this thesis and its alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality: the different role of digital-virtual technology when compared to for instance *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One*. With the latter digital-virtual technologies are the absolute centre, seen as tools that can help one remake inner and outer reality, and furthermore suggest immersive escapism, perpetual creation, and anthropocentric control. *Persona 5*, instead, positions digital-virtual technology within a wider intimate framework and ultimately sees them as *supportive* tools, being able to form interstitial zones that will briefly make a hidden world barely visible. They are an intricate part of the ambiguity of everyday reality, as that they can actively ambiguate it and support the experience of these ambiguities. Furthermore, whereas the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality is technology-specific, with it explicitly revolving around the technology of digital-virtual reality and the sensual immersion of its headset, in the alternative rhetoric there is not a specific digital-virtual technology at the centre. For instance, looking at *Persona 5*, although the smartphone is the digital-virtual device through which the characters experience the Metaverse, it is never suggested that it has anything to do with the technological specifics of the smartphone itself.

Persona 5 and its Metaverse have been used to discuss a vital conceptual difference between the current rhetoric and alternative rhetoric. The current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, built around the computational definition of the virtual and an

orientation of integrity, explicitly situates digital-virtual reality *outside* of everyday reality, and looks for a sensual and conceptual immersion in such a clearly demarcated, anthropocentric digital-virtual reality. The alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, as a contrast, relies on the philosophical definition of the virtual and reflects an intimate orientation, where virtual reality is ambiguously and interstitially situated *within* the parameters of an impermanent everyday reality. Using an ontological playfulness, it both suggests a hidden world just behind the edges of visibility in everyday reality, as that interstitial zones can be formed in which parts of this hidden world can be briefly experienced. Digital-virtual technologies are, lastly, not seen as the absolute centre of everything, but are supportive tools that can help experience these ambiguities.

***Your Name* and the Fluidity of Interstitial Zones**

To situate *Persona 5*'s Metaverse and the role of digital-virtual technologies in a wider cultural context, this thesis will now look at another example of Japanese animation: the film *Your Name*.⁴⁷³ A romantic fantasy, directed and written by Shinkai Makoto,⁴⁷⁴ *Your Name* is the third highest-grossing Japanese film in Japan ever, with only *Spirited Away* (2001)⁴⁷⁵ and *Demon Slayer the Movie: Mugen Train* (2020)⁴⁷⁶ in front of it. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, despite being different forms of media, with different forms of audience participation, *Persona 5* and *Your Name* show strong similarities in their fantastical, visual, and spatial explorations of especially interstitial zones. Although *Your Name* doesn't specifically deal with the topic of virtual reality, it is another example of Japanese animation exploring an ontological playfulness in an ephemeral everyday reality. It, too, shows the dynamics of hidden worlds and interstitial zones, as that it embeds digital-virtual technologies in an overarching intimate framework, ultimately seeing them as supportive tools. The example of *Your Name* will especially help better understand the continuous fluidity of interstitial zones themselves and explain why that is relevant to the alternative rhetoric.

Your Name follows the story of Mitsuha, a girl from rural Japan, and Taki, a boy from Tokyo, who start waking up in each other's bodies. For the duration of one day at a time they live the other person's life and have only a vague recollection of it afterwards, as if it was a strange, nebulous dream. The first half of *Your Name* zooms in on Mitsuha and Taki coming to terms with the body swapping, learning more about each other's lives, and experiencing the contrasts of a teenage life in rural Japan and busy

Tokyo. With them realising that the body swapping is not just a dream, Mitsuha and Taki start setting some ground rules for each other in their smartphones, what they can and can't do in each other's lives, and in addition leave logs with what they did each day, so they won't wake up to unexpected situations in their own lives. As they become more intimate with each other's lives, romantic feelings start to develop, but then the body swapping abruptly stops and Taki is unable to contact Mitsuha.

In the second half *Your Name* takes another fantastical turn. Taki finds out that Mitsuha died three years earlier when the fragment of a comet hit her rural town, meaning their body swapping entailed time-traveling too. Wanting to know more, Taki travels from Tokyo to the remains of Mitsuha's destroyed rural town. There he climbs to the top of a mountain with in it an ancient crater (also from a comet) and the ruin of a shrine that he vaguely remembers visiting back when he was in Mitsuha's body. Entering the shrine, Taki slips, falls on his head, and when he wakes up, he is once more Mitsuha on the faithful day of the comet fragment impact. Taki/Mitsuha manages to save the people of the town by evacuating everyone before the impact, and, moreover, during this sequence Taki and Mitsuha meet each other for the first time in the twilight around the old shrine. However, when he wakes up again as himself, Taki, three years forward, has forgotten everything and wonders what he is doing in this strange place. Moving on, years later Taki and Mitsuha bump into each other in Tokyo, both having forgotten everything. But a strange and strong familiarity takes hold of them, ending the film with them asking in unison: "What's your name?"

Your Name's narrative is woven around a fantastic hesitation: Taki and Mitsuha can, at best, vaguely remember their strange experiences, letting them wonder if they are dreaming or if it is all really happening. Nevertheless, they accept this newfound strangeness and start navigating its ambiguities. Muammar Kadafi and Shofi Mahmudah Budi Utami note that *Your Name* is a film of shifting boundaries: although it uses juxtapositions – boy/girl; city/periphery; dream/reality; past/present – instead of remaining binary, often "boundaries attempt to be reconstructed as fluid".⁴⁷⁷ John Maher puts it slightly different, arguing *Your Name* as a "real/unreal tragicomedy" explores a "confusion" of boundaries, for instance through the "comic language confusion of male-female", with both Taki and Mitsuha misusing words that are typically uttered by males or females when in each other's bodies.⁴⁷⁸ Stacey Jocoy, too, states the film "juxtaposes opposites of modernity and tradition, reality and dream, science and magic", and furthermore argues "cultural memory rises to the fore in this narrative as an answer

to the malaise and precarity of the modern world”.⁴⁷⁹ Timo Thelen disagrees however with Jocoy on the latter, saying *Your Name* “depicts a rather complex image of ‘the rural’ in contemporary Japan without falling into a binary of ‘the good village’ and ‘the bad city’”. Thelen says the film instead uses these juxtapositions to “establish a certain realism coexisting with its fantastic elements of spiritualism, time travel, and body swapping”.⁴⁸⁰

All the above authors observe that while *Your Name* consists of many juxtapositions, some of them fantastical, simultaneously boundaries are always unclear and blending somewhat together. This brings the film in line with Kasulis’s orientation of intimacy and the interstitial. Additionally, Thelen’s observations are especially of interest to this thesis, with *Your Name* being another example of Japanese animation presenting a realism that coexists with the fantastic. This ontological playfulness, defined by the suggestion of a hidden world and the ambiguity of interstitial zones, will be further explored in this chapter. Furthermore, the analysis of *Your Name* will highlight, as shown in *Persona 5* before, the supportive role of digital-virtual technology in such an ontological playfulness. But before moving on with these analyses, it is first important to note that in the Introduction Shintoism was discussed as a cornerstone of Japanese intellectual history next to Zen Buddhism. Whereas *Persona 5*’s analysis focused more on the latter, being interested in impermanence, *Your Name* will be used to further explore Shinto and show how it strengthens the framework of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. One element of Shinto thought will be of special interest to this chapter, which is its emphasis on constantly shifting ontological boundaries in everyday reality and how interstitial zones, such as shrines, suggest a hidden world of spirits and ancestors just behind the edges of visibility.

In *Your Name* two interstitial zones are important to its narrative: *tasogare* (twilight) and *kakuriyo* (underworld). They both highlight a different aspect of interstitial zones: where *tasogare* is close to *Persona 5*’s Metaverse, showing the ontological playfulness of interstitial zones, *kakuriyo* shall help explain how the boundaries of interstitial zones are always in flux. To begin with the interstitial zone of *tasogare*. In an early scene of *Your Name* Mitsuha finds out for the first time she has been acting very strange, according to her friends, but is not yet aware this is because of a body swap. That same day her teacher does a lesson on the origins of twilight: “*Tasokare*, ‘who goes there?’ This is the origin of the term *tasogare*, or twilight. [...] It’s evening, not quite day or night. It’s a window when outlines blur, making it hard to tell who people

are. When you might meet something that isn't human."⁴⁸¹ During the teacher's explanation Mitsuha is flipping through her notebook and stumbles upon the question "who are you?" in strange handwriting. She is puzzled, learning only later it was Taki in her body trying to leave a message.

In effect, what happens in the above scene, is that the body swapping of *Your Name* is placed within the framework of *tasogare*. The question of "who goes there?" (*tasokare*) is rephrased to "who are you?". Like *Persona 5*'s Metaverse *tasogare* is an interstitial area that implies a hidden world that is constantly coexisting just behind the edges of visibility. First, looking at the interstitial aspect, Kyōka Izumi describes *tasogare* as "neither darkness nor light, and nor is it a mixture of light and darkness", but instead is "a world of singularly subtle shades that exist solely in that momentary space of entering darkness from light, of entering night from day". The concept of *tasogare*, says Kyōka, in that sense differs from for instance "dusk", where "the sensation of the colour of night, the colour of darkness, becomes dominant".⁴⁸² Andrea Castiglioni, furthermore, highlights the ontological playfulness in *tasogare*, where "visible entities become invisible and hidden presences momentarily reveal themselves".⁴⁸³ The idea of *tasogare* is therefore close to Tanizaki's aesthetic of the shadow and notion of a visible darkness, discussed in the Introduction, as it conveys a sense of peripheral vision, playing around with (in)visibility, unsure who or what stands before one in twilight. This can be seen with Mitsuha being unsure who wrote "who are you?" in her notebook. That, however, makes it simultaneously possible to interpret *tasogare* as invisible, implying a hidden world: Mitsuha doesn't literally stand in a twilight, she sits in her normal classroom. Therefore, the state of *tasogare* is inherently ambiguous, fluctuating between the barely visible and invisible, implying it is always existing in one form or another, or somewhere in-between.

Alistair Swale explains furthermore the importance of temporality when considering *Your Name*'s *tasogare*, for it "is a quintessentially liminal space that transcends day and night" but "in Shinkai's adaptation" also "constitutes a zone that facilitates movement across the past, present, and future".⁴⁸⁴ Swale says *tasogare*'s complex and overlapping timelines are part of the film's overarching "time-image". To Swale "the key implication" of this time-image in *Your Name* is "that time can be sensed as the vast undercurrent" but simultaneously this "vastness can be concentrated into a symptomatic moment that just happens to permit a leap into different stages of that flow of time".⁴⁸⁵ Hence, with *Your Name* one encounters an important element

discussed through *Persona 5*'s Mementos before, which is the ontological playfulness within interstitial zones and their ambiguating effect. It involves a fantastical body swapping and time travel: like *Persona 5*'s Metaverse always being in flux, *tasogare* is even permitting different timelines to flow in and out of each other.

Your Name's *tasogare* reminds one of the Bergsonian temporality of the Liverpool Train Station scene in Sebald's *Austerlitz*, which also considers the ambiguous coexistence of past and present. Yet, the analyses also show their differences. Sebald's watercolour prose *narrates* the intrinsic conscious experience of these overlapping temporalities when the character of Austerlitz enters the Liverpool Street Station waiting-room and vaguely realises he was there before as a child. The scene investigates the paradoxical temporal character of the phenomenological virtual experience: momentary yet vast. *Your Name*, being a Japanese animation film, is shaped by its own cultural-intellectual traditions when it *visually* explores similar temporal coexistences. It *shows* the audience these ambiguities. Such a comparison, therefore, emphasises the great benefit of a transcultural approach to virtuality in the historical context of Long Modernity. *Austerlitz* and *Your Name* are in many ways far apart – in form, content, and setting – nevertheless both deal in their own way with these temporal-spatial ambiguities that are at the heart of phenomenological virtual discussions. The penumbral illuminations of the *Aha-Erlebnis* and *tasogare*: being somewhere in-between.

The second interstitial zone of interest in *Your Name*, *kakuriyo*, can help understand how different types of borders are constantly being renegotiated in the ontological playfulness of the interstitial, as that it also shows the continuous importance of the hidden world. Before being able to discuss *kakuriyo*, however, one first needs to look at *Your Name*'s use of Shintoism. The film explores Shinto thought and practices through the life of Mitsuha, as she is born into a family that for generations has provided the Shinto priest for her rural town. Where for the moment her grandmother represents the religious memory of the town, a problem has arisen: Mitsuha's mother passed away at a young age and her father is not interested in taking over the role of priest. Mitsuha and her younger sister are therefore taught about the specific Shinto traditions of their town, implying they will continue this generational chain. Kaitlyn Ugoretz and Erica Baffelli argue *Your Name* explaining Shinto to its audience is part of a wider trend in Japanese animation, in which an overlap of "religious consumption and consumption of manga and anime" are becoming "first touchstones" for "transnational Shinto

practitioners in digital communities”.⁴⁸⁶ Chaoyang Liao sees *Your Name* as part of the *jikogenkyū* practice of Japanese visual culture, in which it tries to inform “modern viewers how to perceive the visage of a world working by very much premodern procedures”.⁴⁸⁷ Tamaki Mihic states however that Mitsuha’s story is “an extremely exoticized portrayal” of Shinto, in which “shrine maidens such as Mitsuha and her sister continue to perform divine dances in traditional costume, craft intricate *kumihimo* ropes by hand and produce sake by chewing rice and mixing it with their virginal saliva in their mouths”, and shouldn’t be considered as a truthful depiction of Shinto in contemporary Japan.⁴⁸⁸

Your Name, although perhaps overly exotic in its portrayal of rural Japan and Shinto, can nevertheless help better understand Shinto’s conceptualisation of everyday reality and everyday life. Especially how they are filled with continuously shifting borders, which is expressed through both the practices *and* spaces of Shinto. In that regard, Jocoy points to the essential role of an early scene in *Your Name* when wanting to understand these ambiguously shifting boundaries. In it Mitsuha performs a *kagura* ceremony at her local Shinto shrine, which entails a dance and the chewing of rice to produce a ceremonial sake. The *kagura*, says Jocoy, “contains powerful but forgotten regional memories” and is furthermore the action that will “create the pivotal narrative time distortion upon which the remainder of the story rests”.⁴⁸⁹ Therefore, the strange knotting of past, present, and future, as described before by Swale, comes into being through a Shinto practice within a Shinto space.

The *kagura* ceremony combines therefore the important elements of the ritual and the shrine. Both are defined in Shinto thought by an ambiguous shifting of borders. Looking first at the ritual, E. Leslie Williams says that as a rule Shinto practices are focused on “transitional or boundary phenomena”.⁴⁹⁰ Williams himself looks at rituals that are performed as “celebratory” events, with celebratory being translated as “*medetai*”. These rituals, he says, are “firmly linked to the emergence from one dimension, or world, to another” and therefore most of all reflect “crossing a boundary”.⁴⁹¹ William continues that “*medetai* is routinely translated as ‘celebratory, auspicious, and desirable’”. He argues, however, that certain nuances get lost in translation and it’s much more ambiguous upon closer inspection, with *medetai* meaning an “occasion of boundary negotiation” in which it “signifies an event at which a complex set of human emotions are likely to be experienced”.⁴⁹² Hence, *Your Name*’s *kagura* ceremony should also be interpreted through this lens: Mitsuha performing the ritual tells the audience a renegotiation of borders has been initiated.

Second, the *kagura* ceremony takes place within the boundaries of a Shinto shrine. Already noted in the Introduction, the Shinto shrine is seen as an interstitial zone, for within its borders everyday reality overlaps with the hidden world of ancestors and spirits. As a space the Shinto shrine implies an intimate meeting of different ontological layers in the interstitial, and gives visitors, in whatever form that may be, the opportunity to feel each other's existence. On that part, going back to the observation of Sebald that the memories and imaginings of the dead are still living on in present-day reality, this sensibility can also be found in Shinto spaces. Umehara Takeshi, for instance, explains that "in the Shinto view, the souls of the dead go to the afterworld, where they live with their families more or less as they lived on earth", in which "furthermore the two worlds—the world of the living and the world of the dead—are not cut off from each other".⁴⁹³ Therefore, Mitsuha performs a ritual that renegotiates boundaries within the parameters of the interstitial shrine where ontological borders are also constantly shifting, with it being implied a hidden world of spirits and ancestors is fluctuating around her.

In *Your Name* the Shinto notion of (ever-)shifting boundaries, expressed through rituals and shrines, can be further analysed through its second interstitial zone: *kakuriyo* (underworld). Two scenes are relevant to this thesis when wanting to understand *kakuriyo*. The first one is an early scene, in which Taki is in Mitsuha's body and together with the latter's sister and grandmother visits the ruin of a Shinto shrine in a crater on top of a mountain. It is here that *kakuriyo* is located and it is where they offer the sake of the *kagura* ritual. The second scene is when Taki revisits the shrine and *kakuriyo*, this time in his own body, three years after the comet impact, drinking the sake that was placed there in the first scene. The drinking of the sake sets in motion a coming together of *tasogare* and *kakuriyo*, effectively making it the interstitial zone of two interstitial zones, in which Taki and Mitsuha meet for the first time.

These above two scenes will help show how interstitial zones are also defined by impermanence, as that *kakuriyo* will show once more the inherent ambiguity of interstitial zones and how there is an implied hidden world. The importance of ephemerality when interpreting interstitial zones and their borders becomes apparent in the first *kakuriyo* scene. While climbing the mountain, the grandmother talks to Mitsuha/Taki about the local art of *musubi*, which is the weaving of threads, but is "a word with several profound meanings, for "in the old language" *musubi* also refers to their "local

guardian deity”, meaning the “creator of spirits”.⁴⁹⁴ The grandmother goes on to explain the different “profound meanings” of *musubi*:

Joinin’ threads is called *musubi*. Joinin’ people is also *musubi*. The passage of time is *musubi* too. They all use the same word. It’s a name for our god, and the god’s power. It describes the braided cords we make, divine acts, and the flow of time itself. [...] Comin’ together to form a shape, twistin’ and tanglin’, sometimes comin’ undone, breakin’ off, then reunitin’. That’s a braided cord. That’s time. That’s *musubi*.⁴⁹⁵

Musubi is with that based on impermanence: it imagines the world, people, time, as threads that come together, entangle, disentangle, and drift apart, also representing the knotting of past, present, and future in *tasogare*.

This sense of impermanence is also important when wanting to understand the borders of everyday reality and the hidden world of *Your Name*, for they constantly change, also morphing the interstitial zones themselves. This can be observed when comparing the first and second scene. In the first scene Mitsuha/Taki and her family reach the top of the mountain, with the ruin of a shrine in the middle of its crater, after which the grandmother starts explaining how they have now come to the border, or “gate”, of *kakuriyo*, which is a small brook (see fig. 4.6.). They cross the border to “the hidden world, the next world”, followed by the grandmother saying that “in order to return to their own world” the two granddaughters need to leave behind “what’s most precious to you”, by which she means that the sake from the *kagura* ritual needs to be offered at the old shrine.⁴⁹⁶ Once again *Your Name* notifies the audience that borders are shifting: the *kagura* sake, representing the ritual and the shifting of boundaries, is taken from one Shinto shrine to the other, with it creating an ambiguous overlap of moving borders. However, simultaneously it remains mostly *invisible*, for the hidden world of spirits and ancestors is never shown to the audience.

The second scene shows how indeed borders have shifted. Whereas the gate of *kakuriyo* was first a small brook, the second time Taki visits, three years later, this brook has grown into a substantial pond (see fig. 4.7). What hasn’t changed, however, is that the implied hidden world remains invisible. Taki, finding and drinking the *kagura* sake, sets in motion a couple of fantastical plots, but the one important to the analysis is that it eventually lets *tasogare* and *kakuriyo* overlap, the *musubi* entangle, and with that Taki and Mitsuha meet each other for the first time (see fig. 4.8). Together, the

kakuriyo scenes highlight two things. First, borders of interstitial zones are constantly being renegotiated, with them even blending into *tasogare-kakuriyo* at the end. It is here also that the audience sees the complexities of *medetai* and the crossing of borders: as an extension of the ritual, Taki and Mitsuha are connected through the *kagura* sake, but after finally meeting each other after all these strange events, instead of a moment of ecstatic celebration, they are filled with a variety of emotions. In this reaction one also sees a human expression of *tasogare*: a hesitation of who stands there. The second important thing to note regarding both scenes, is how they keep implying a hidden world of fantastical forces, sitting just behind the edges of visibility in everyday reality, being there too in the interstitial zones, influencing these events, yet never showing themselves.



Fig. 4.6. *Kakuriyo* (i)



Fig. 4.7. *Kakuriyo* (ii)



Fig. 4.8. *Tasogare-kakuriyo*

Your Name's ambiguous fluctuating between the invisible (the hidden world) and barely visible (interstitial zones) strongly resembles *Persona 5*'s Metaverse. Its interstitial zones and their borders, characterised by the threads of *musubi*, are constantly in flux and reflect an inherently ambiguous reality. Furthermore, *tasogare* and *kakuriyo* show the ontological playfulness within these ambiguous parameters. *Your Name* follows *Persona 5* in another manner as well: its positioning of digital-virtual technology. First, smartphones are seen as supportive tools that can help experience the ambiguities of the interstitial. When Taki and Mitsuha are swapping bodies they try to navigate their strange new reality by leaving instructions on their phones in what they can and can't do in each other's lives, as well as leaving extensive logs describing what they did on a particular day, making sure they both know what has been going on in their lives. Through the support of the smartphone the two protagonists do not get rid of the deep ambiguities of their situation but help them to get some sort of grip. Second, next to being a supportive tool, like *Persona 5* before, *Your Name* positions the smartphone as an intimate part of the interstitial. When for instance Taki tries to find Mitsuha after the body swapping has stopped, he looks for clues in his phone. As he does so, aghast he notices that for no reason their messages and logs start deleting themselves: "It's as though an invisible man is holding DELETE."⁴⁹⁷ In *Your Name*, as in *Persona 5* before, the smartphone is on the one hand a device that will help its characters experience the interstitial; on the other hand, it is an intimate part of its fabric, for it is also affected by the interstitial and its shifting boundaries.

Like *Persona 5*'s Metaverse, and its overlapping of everyday reality, cognitive reality, the fantastical, and the technological, *Your Name* is defined by an ambiguous ontological framework. Thinking once more about Tsujimura's analysis of *Machenschaft*, discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, and Kasulis's orientations of integrity and intimacy, it can help further understand the different position of digital-virtual technology when comparing *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One* to *Persona 5* and *Your Name*. In the first two examples computational technology is strongly embedded in patterns of compartmentalisation and perpetual creation, reflecting the integrous idea of *Machenschaft*. In both novels the computer is positioned as a tool that can remake cognition and everyday reality, as well as being able to create an independent digital-virtual reality in which one can keep creating. The two examples of Japanese animation, on the other hand, follow the intimate interpretation of *Machenschaft*, which describes how connections are made and disappear again in everyday reality. In this framework digital-virtual devices are, passively, an intimate part of everyday reality, as well as being able to, actively, help one form temporary connections within it. This latter idea of *Machenschaft* is, as discussed in the Introduction, also the basis of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality.

Concluding, *Your Name* has helped contextualise *Persona 5*'s intimate interpretation of the Metaverse, while also creating a deeper understanding of the fluidity of interstitial zones *within* the parameters of everyday reality. Despite being a video game and a film, and therefore different forms of media, they highlight the similarities of Japanese animation: both examples are characterised by fantastical, visual-spatial explorations of the ambiguous. What has been essential to the thesis's overall analysis, furthermore, is that despite differing in many ways from the literary works of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, nevertheless *all examples* engage with phenomenological virtual themes. This chapter has therefore also helped show the benefit of a transcultural approach to Long Modernity when discussing and positioning the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. This is especially true when considering its conceptual language: *kokoro*, *mushojūshin*, *medetai*, *tasogare*, *kakuriyo*, *musubi*, these concepts and spaces all add extra layers of depth to the thesis's discussions. They help to better understand the ambiguous interconnection of consciousness and everyday reality.

The fifth chapter of this thesis, then, will work out the final specifics of the alternative rhetoric. It will look at the ambiguous *experience* of interstitial zones, again

through Japanese perspectives, and what it means for the alternative rhetoric. It will show the importance of interstitial imagining and the use of interstitial beings in such an ontological playfulness and how combined with techno-animism it enables one to become closer to one's *nonhuman* immediate surroundings. It will eventually return to the example of *Pokémon GO*, with which this thesis started, and show how it brings together all the discussed aspects of the alternative rhetoric, explaining the benefits of an aspersive playfulness that is supported by digital-virtual technology.

Chapter 5

Interstitial Imagining, Interstitial Beings, and Techno-Animism

The previous chapter showed through Japanese perspectives the ambiguous basis of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. It discussed the intimate orientation of virtual reality and deepened the central concepts of aspersion and playfulness. Building further on the concepts of the hidden world and interstitial zones, this chapter will zoom in on their *experience* and the supportive role of digital-virtual technology in these experiences. It will furthermore highlight that where the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality is anthropocentric, in the alternative rhetoric the nonhuman is just as important. Instead of being sensually and conceptually immersed in an anthropocentric digital-virtual reality, the focus is on an aspersion playfulness within the parameters of everyday reality, experiencing the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman, and through the help of digital-virtual technology becoming closer to one's immediate surroundings. This chapter will discuss two examples of Japanese animation: the animation film *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) and *Pokémon GO* (2016), an augmented reality game for the smartphone. These examples will help show how fantastical creatures can help experience interstitial zones and the above-mentioned interconnectedness.

Three concepts will be at the centre of their analyses: interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism, which were all discussed in the Introduction. Interstitial imagining, first, means that through an imaginative openness one can truly experience the meaningfulness of interstitial zones. In other words, one is open to the ambiguity of these in-between spaces and an imaginative engagement with them can potentially change one's perspective of everyday life. Akin to Casey's concept of everyday imagining, interstitial imagining looks to engage with one's immediate surroundings; this as opposed to the conceptual immersion of the current rhetoric's overzealous imagination. Next to interstitial imagining, also addressed in the Introduction, Japanese culture is full of interstitial beings that can help experience interstitial zones. One category of such interstitial beings, *yōkai*, was discussed to help show how these fantastical creatures from Japanese folklore symbolise an ontological playfulness by both

suggesting a hidden world that exists just behind the edges of visibility, as well as helping to stimulate an interstitial imagining.

Both *My Neighbour Totoro* and the Pokémon franchise are modern examples of interstitial beings and *yōkai* culture. They combine this with the third concept of importance: techno-animism. Going back to the Introduction, the following components of techno-animism were discussed. First, all that has come into existence can potentially possess the Shinto concept of *kami*: a noble spirit, both material and immaterial in its substance. This doesn't limit itself to the natural world: technological objects created by humans can as well possess *kami*. Hence: techno-animism. Close to panpsychism, it is interested in both human and nonhuman intrinsic consciousness yet differs from panpsychism because of its spiritual component. Second, techno-animism, being based on Shinto thought, reflects a Japanese openness to morph spiritual culture and the spirits themselves in such a way that they are not archaic but suit modern society. Third, there is also an element of Zen Buddhism to consider: the divide between the nonhuman and human is artificial and more attention should be paid to how the human and nonhuman intimately overlap.

This chapter, too, will compare an animation film and a video game, and argue they share core principles of Japanese animation. In many ways, as will be discussed throughout the chapter, *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Pokémon GO* are close to *Persona 5* and *Your Name*. However, because this chapter will focus on the *experience* of interstitial zones, their analyses will be different from the previous chapter. In the case of *My Neighbour Totoro*, when compared to *Your Name*, its analysis will take a much closer look at how its fantastical narrative binds the experiences of the film's characters and the film's audience. Where the analysis of *Pokémon GO* will deviate from that of *Persona 5*, is that it looks more specifically at the player's experience of interstitial zones and the imaginative effect of the hidden world. The analysis of *Persona 5*, in that regard, focused less on player experience and mainly discussed how its visual narrative spatially conceptualised the ambiguous interconnection of consciousness and everyday reality. The analyses of *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Pokémon GO* will eventually show how they, despite being different forms of media, are examples of Japanese animation using a combination of interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism. It is this combination, this thesis argues, that can stimulate forming connections with the nonhuman in ephemeral everyday life when considering the phenomenological virtual experience.

My Neighbour Totoro: An Imaginative Engaging with the Nonhuman

The chapter will first analyse the Japanese animation film *My Neighbour Totoro* and the way it combines interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism. At the centre of this analysis will be the film's director Miyazaki Hayao, who is arguably the single most renowned animation director of Japan, and is also known for films such as *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Princess Monokoke* (1997), and *Spirited Away* (2001). Napier, talking about Miyazaki's oeuvre, argues that the best way to describe it would be "Miyazakiworld", which is an "immersive animated realm that varies delightfully from film to film but is always marked by the director's unique imagination". Napier places Miyazaki amongst the "great fantasy world builders" like Tolkien and says we can visit his "imagined empires", "inhabit" them, and "mourn when we have to leave".⁴⁹⁸ Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro* therefore resembles *Persona 5* when it comes to a certain paradox: using an example that is deemed immersive and escapist for the deepening of an aspersive playfulness. However, this thesis believes that the contents of *My Neighbour Totoro* can offer such insights, despite this paradoxical connection to immersion and escapism.

My Neighbour Totoro is an impressionistic film, focussing less on a steady plot. Central to its narrative is the bonding of human and (mostly fantastical) nonhuman characters in everyday situations. The story, set in the 1950s, follows the two sisters Satsuki and Mei, who with their father move to an old house on the outskirts of Tokyo where they will be closer to their mother who is hospitalised with an unspecified long-term illness. Living in their new home, the sisters start to encounter spirits also occupying the home: shadowy sprites, rolling around the house like dust bunnies. There is nothing strange about this, the viewer intuitively comes to understand, this is just as much their home. Then Mei, the youngest of the two sisters, one morning follows a couple of spirits into the woods outside of their home. She ends up at a mysterious big camphor tree and decides to enter and explore it. At the centre of the tree, she finds a strange, fuzzy spirit snoring away, making a "to-to-ro" sound, letting Mei think he must be named Totoro. Mei crawls onto Totoro's belly and falls asleep as well. When Satsuki later goes out looking for Mei, however, she finds her little sister sleeping on the ground. Mei tries to show Satsuki and her father their new neighbour Totoro, but the camphor tree has disappeared, with the large spirit nowhere in sight. The father believes Mei's story and tells her Totoro will appear again whenever he likes to.

Indeed, some days later Satsuki and Mei are waiting for a bus on a rainy evening. Looking to her left, Satsuki notices a large shape that has come about, also waiting on the bus: Totoro. She lends her umbrella, the grateful spirit hands her seeds. The first bus that arrives is a large cat in the shape of a bus – the Catbus – which takes Totoro with him. The second bus is a normal one, containing their father. A few days later the sisters plant the seeds and Totoro comes at night, performing a fantastic ritual with them. The morning after they wake up and find the seeds have already started blooming. In the last part of the film, Mei misses their mother and she takes off to the hospital to bring her corn. Satsuki and a handful of villagers look for Mei but can't find her. Luckily the big camphor tree has appeared once again, where Satsuki finds Totoro. Together with the Catbus they go look for Mei and eventually find her, cold and lost. The Catbus flies the two sisters and Totoro to a tree next to their mother's hospital room, who at that moment is talking to their father, discussing how she will be able to return home soon. And indeed, as promised, when the credits start rolling, the mother returns and the family is whole again.

Raz Greenberg observes that the threat of losing their mother defines the characters of Mei and Satsuki, with the potential loss of a childlike innocence being especially important. Where Mei has an emotional response to this loss of innocence, for instance when she sets off to see her sick mother, Satsuki experiences a different response, in which her childlike innocence is on the verge of disappearing for having to act as an adult.⁴⁹⁹ Greenberg, looking at the role of the spiritual world, thinks “the fantasy” part of the story hands Satsuki and Mei “a tool to work through the crisis”: first it “provides an escape, a safe haven from the adult world”, yet later “it helps them to deal with the adult world”.⁵⁰⁰ Swale thinks the sisters' loss of innocence should be interpreted on a societal level, for, like other works of Miyazaki, *My Neighbour Totoro* is drenched “with the theme of lost identity and the malaise of contemporary culture”.⁵⁰¹ That said, Fujiki Kosuke argues that *My Neighbour Totoro* poignantly portrays the “co-existence of humans and nature by drawing effectively on the imagery of Japan's animistic religious traditions” with “adorable fictional creatures living in the dark forest and the cobwebbed corners of abandoned homes”.⁵⁰² Fujiki says that from this animistic perspective Satsuki and Mei “gain spiritual comfort and healing through their encounters with nature and its nonhuman inhabitants”.⁵⁰³ Totoro is their fantastical, nonhuman neighbour they can rely on.

With this interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman at the centre of the film, two scenes will help this thesis explore the combination of interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism: first, Satsuki, Mei, and Totoro waiting for the bus; and second, the performative ritual of planting the seeds and the morning after. To begin with the scene in which Satsuki, Mei, and Totoro meet at the bus stop. The two girls are waiting for their father, who is traveling by bus, to pick them up, but he is running late. Rain is pouring down and Mei goes exploring a little, finding hidden behind the bus stop a small shrine. It contains a red *torii* and a fox statue with a red scarf, indicating it is an interstitial zone of Shinto where *kami* are allowed to dwell (see fig. 5.1.). It turns dark, only a solitary streetlight provides some illumination for the girls. Mei is tired, Satsuki lets her crawl on her back so she can sleep a little. Then Satsuki hears footsteps and when she looks up the spirit of Totoro is standing next to her, apparently also waiting for a bus (see fig. 5.2.). Not wanting Totoro to become wet, Satsuki offers a spare umbrella. The spirit has no clue what this strange object could possibly be but is enthralled by the popping sounds of rain hitting the umbrella's surface. Totoro, exuberant, jumps as high and hard as he can, creating a waterfall of raindrops that crashes down on them from the trees. Totoro quiets down and a little bit later his ride arrives: the Catbus (see fig. 5.3.). He offers a small present to Satsuki and Mei, presumably for the umbrella, and Totoro and the Catbus take off. Almost immediately after a normal bus arrives with the girls' father in it, apologising for being late, explaining there were issues with his train before. Satsuki and Mei talk excitedly about Totoro and the Catbus, leaving the father slightly bewildered as they walk home.



Fig. 5.1. The hidden bus stop shrine



Fig. 5.2. Totoro and the sisters waiting for the bus



Fig. 5.3. The Catbus arrives

The bus stop of *My Neighbour Totoro* is one big interstitial nebula: it is situated next to a Shinto shrine; Mei's state of sleeping and awaking hints it might be somewhere in-between; and it visually exists on the borders of a visible darkness. Thinking furthermore of this setting of the bus stop, it fits into the wider pattern of this thesis using transportation for its analyses: Walser's tram; Sebald's train stations of Antwerp and London; the train ride of Louis in Woolf's *The Waves*; and the Tokyo subway of *Persona 5*. In this interstitial nebula *My Neighbour Totoro* looks at a sense of movement from the perspective of borders: borders between everyday reality and a hidden world of spirits; borders between the barely visible and invisible; and borders between the human and nonhuman experience. It expresses how for a short amount of time the different layers of existence come together at the bus stop. Like the *musubi* threads of

Your Name, threads tangle and untangle again, with for instance Totoro and the Cat-bus going back to their hidden world.

Looking in more detail at the interstitial zone of the bus stop, on fig. 5.2. one can see how Totoro stands on the border of light and darkness. This places him within the framework of Tanizaki's aesthetic of the shadow, which differs from the sharp contrast of light and darkness that can be found in for instance Kasulis's orientation of integrity. Indeed, talking about *My Neighbour Totoro*, Miyazaki says that "Westerners tend to think of dark and light in opposition", but in Japanese culture "the gods are in the darkness" and although they sometimes will "come out into the light", normally they reside in the deeper parts of forests and mountains.⁵⁰⁴ This is not only expressed with Totoro standing on the border of light and visible darkness but can furthermore be seen in the dark shrine behind the bus stop of *My Neighbour Totoro*: as Miyazaki explains "a shrine isn't in a bright, shining place, it's in an overgrown dark area where the silence is deep" and it reflects the awe of darkness and shadows.⁵⁰⁵ Miyazaki, talking about the interstitial qualities of these shrines, says he knows "these places exist" yet "I don't know what is there", and although not being a "believer of the occult", he believes "the deep forest is connected in some ways to the darkness deep in my heart" and if those forests would disappear, "then the darkness inside my heart would also disappear, and my existence would grow shallow".⁵⁰⁶ Miyazaki's interstitial bus stop therefore combines a variety of important points for this thesis: the ambiguity of interstitial spaces; the suggestion that everyday reality and the hidden world of spirits are very close to each other; and how Totoro as an interstitial being can help experience the ambiguities of the interstitial. Furthermore, in Miyazaki's own reflection one encounters the concept of *kokoro*, letting his heart intimately overlap with the "deep forest", as well as a fantastical sensibility, for he states these interstitial places exist, even though he doesn't know what exists there.

When wanting to further understand the bus stop scene, it is important to consider how the presence of the interstitial being of Totoro helps Satsuki experience the meaning of the interstitial. Satsuki's reaction to her first encounter with Totoro can first be interpreted through Kasulis's idea of "feeling Shinto". Kasulis explains feeling Shinto is connected to how certain "awe-inspiring experiences" can "intrigue, startle, or frighten" and "Shinto spirituality is about learning to feel at home with them – feeling we belong with them and them with us – even if we do not fully understand why". The way to and from this awesome mystery is "the *kami* path": the "*kami no michi*".⁵⁰⁷ From

this perspective, Satsuki is indeed feeling Shinto: her standing next to Totoro at first slightly startles her, but from there on she is immediately intrigued and starts to communicate non-verbally with Totoro. Satsuki feels at home with “the awesome mystery” that Totoro presents to her and follows the *kami no michi* that the interstitial being offers. Satsuki’s reaction reminds one furthermore of *medetai*, which was discussed in the previous chapter through the example of *Your Name*, as it, too, reflects the Shinto interest in the complexity of human experience and emotions when borders are renegotiated.

Imagining is key to feeling Shinto. Giorgio Hadi Curti argues in *Shinto* there is the idea that “through imagination and affect” one can establish a connection with one’s immediate surroundings and see for instance a landscape as “a living and becoming thing”.⁵⁰⁸ Graham Harvey notes in that regard that too often “the constitution of modernity, shaped by the European Christian reformation” influences religious interpretations by putting an emphasis on “belief, transcendence, spirituality, and interiority”.⁵⁰⁹ An example like Shinto shows, Harvey says, how religion is often “lived by people” that go about their everyday lives.⁵¹⁰ He follows Kasulis’s terminology, explaining it encourages social acts “between persons, not of all whom are human, but all of whom are participants in imagining ways of being in the world and seeking to bring imagination into intimate reality”.⁵¹¹ Hence, as Curti and Harvey observe, imagining is absolutely key in becoming closer to one’s immediate surroundings, both human and nonhuman. This kind of imagining is not about belief; it is about helping one to experience the temporary connections that are formed in everyday situations, like waiting for a bus. In interstitial imagining one can find a similar sensibility: it looks to experience the ambiguous areas of overlap through imagining, with it becoming closer to the nonhuman.

In that regard it is important to note that Shinto understands the world as one of perpetual connectedness, in which every person or thing “is part of the other”.⁵¹² This shows an intimate orientation: subjects and objects can only be understood in how they overlap with each other, as opposed to an orientation of integrity that regards them as radically individual components. Therefore, Satsuki should not only be understood through this lens: it also applies to the interstitial being of Totoro. When for instance Satsuki offers her spare umbrella to Totoro, he is absolutely awestruck, having no idea what to do with the object. This is something by design, as Miyazaki explains for Totoro many experiences are strange too: he doesn’t necessarily understand the implicit gestures or feelings of Satsuki and furthermore has no concept of lending or

borrowing,⁵¹³ hence for the interstitial being this experience is an awesome mystery as well. This is shown for instance when thick raindrops start dropping down from a tree on the umbrella and Totoro is absolutely mesmerised by their popping sounds. Being excited, he jumps and comes down with such force that the tree starts shaking and all the thicker drops fall on his umbrella at once. He makes a roaring sound of pleasure and Satsuki, once again, is slightly startled, not understanding what just happened. In short: the experience of feeling Shinto can be found in *the connectedness* of Totoro and Satsuki, with interstitial imagining being the main faculty that allows them to communicate.

In addition, Kasulis explains that feeling Shinto “is not limited to romantic naturalism” and can also entail “encounters with objects of human creation”.⁵¹⁴ If one zooms out a little bit, there is also something to be said about the characters of Totoro and Satsuki, for they are creations of Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli. They are fictional characters in an animated film. In that regard, the playful sense of mystery when Satsuki and Totoro interact, not necessarily understanding each other but nevertheless overlapping in their ambiguous experience of startlement and amazement, is an experience that also includes *the audience*. The latter can also experience feeling Shinto, for it encounters objects of human creation. By not explaining anything, Miyazaki guides the audience in being just as much awestruck, trying to figure out what is going on through an interstitial imagining. One can say these fictional characters are not real, however a belief in realness is irrelevant. The focus lies on how every person involved – Satsuki, Totoro, the audience – is experiencing the ambiguities of the interstitial and is forming temporary connections with one another.

Totoro, as an interstitial being, helps to experience the ambiguous, but is also a *representation* of the ambiguous. An interesting addition to this status of the interstitial being can be found in Miyazaki’s initial sketches of *My Neighbour Totoro* and the basic outline of Totoro. As said before, Totoro is the name that Mei comes up with mimicking some of the snoring sounds the spirit makes, but Miyazaki says about his own creation that, talking about totoro in the plural sense, “no one knows their real name” although “they have inhabited our country’s forests for eons”. The spirits “apparently live for over a thousand years, [...] abhor uproar and have never associated with humans; nonetheless they open their hearts to Satsuki and Mei”.⁵¹⁵ Eriko Ogihara-Schuck observes that in *My Neighbour Totoro* itself there is no actual statement that Totoro is a *kami*, however in later discussions of the film Miyazaki says Totoro is one.⁵¹⁶ But even when

acknowledging Totoro is a *kami* Miyazaki remains vague about what kind of *kami* this then would be. He says: “There is no purpose to it; [...] Totoro exists. Because of his existence, Satsuki and Mei aren’t isolated and helpless. I think that is sufficient.”⁵¹⁷ On the question of whether Totoro is a forest spirit or the forest itself, Miyazaki answers: “I’m often asked that question. And I can only reply: ‘It’s Totoro.’”⁵¹⁸ In another interview he says: “There’s no need to understand everything. When I’m asked what a totoro is, I don’t know myself.”⁵¹⁹

There are two important elements in these outlines of Miyazaki. First, even though he is the creator of the totoro, Miyazaki is unsure about how well he understands these interstitial beings himself, not knowing their true name and stressing that “apparently” they live for over a thousand years. Second, Miyazaki points out that the creatures called totoro have never associated with humans before, therefore making it clear that the purpose of these spirits is not to merely exist for humans and letting them experience the interstitial. They are simply existing, going on about their own everyday lives, sometimes encountering humans along the way. Miyazaki suggests therefore a form of animism, which next to interstitial imagining and interstitial beings is the other important aspect of the film this thesis looks to discuss.

When wanting to further understand this animistic aspect of *My Neighbour Totoro*, which was described by Fujiki earlier in this chapter, it is important to show how it combines spirituality and technology, effectively making it *techno*-animism. This latter stance can first be understood through Miyazaki’s views on the ontology of technology:

It’s too simplistic to consider them living beings, but I feel that we are making things that could be prototypes for living creatures. [...] If I consider that machines can regress or turn back, then it might be possible for a spirit to dwell in machines. [...] I don’t like guys who trade in their cars every two years for a new one. I prefer people who detect a kind of animistic power in the marvel of machines.⁵²⁰

Thinking once more of the Shinto concept of *kami*, in Miyazaki’s quote one sees the techno-animistic idea that all subjects and objects, both natural and technological, can possess a spirit. Additionally, as also discussed in the introduction, in Shinto it is about humans actively acknowledging that potentially *kami* resides in a subject or object. Therefore, this kind of animism also relies on the act of imagining.

The techno-animism of Miyazaki concerns itself with both complex machinery and simple(r) objects. About this sensibility he says: “My own children are a case in point, because when it came time to replace our old, leaky *ofuro* bathtub, both of them said that they ‘felt sorry for the *ofuro*’. And it’s probably because they felt that the old *ofuro* had some sort of personality, something like a spirit.”⁵²¹ Hence, all that has come into existence, may it be simple or complex, possesses potentially a form of *kami*. In that regard Miyazaki’s techno-animism shows a strong affinity with panpsychism and the interest in the intrinsic quality of cognition, as Miyazaki thinks us humans “can’t know what really lives in that something [...] because this is beyond our ability”.⁵²² This sense of unknowability could also be observed earlier with Miyazaki discussing the sketches of Totoro: even though he is the creator of Totoro, after its creation it has become an ultimately unknowable *nonhuman* entity to him.

Additionally, Miyazaki’s techno-animism is strongly influenced by his views on the spiritual world, which he sees as similar “to the modern world we live in”, therefore finding it important to “depict the world of spirits as one that is always so out of the ordinary”.⁵²³ This is for instance expressed by Totoro’s mundane act of waiting for the bus, but the most obvious example of techno-animism is the creature of the Catbus, being both a spirit and a bus. Miyazaki notes, when sketching out this Catbus, that because of Japan’s modernisation it made no sense to him “returning to the ghostly spirits” of older Japanese stories, but instead believed the spirits would also adapt to modern times and morph into its modern shapes.⁵²⁴ The Catbus, Miyazaki says, “is a Japanese spirit [...] it might love modern things, so I figured it could be like a bus”.⁵²⁵ In short, the Catbus represents the intimate connection between technological and animistic culture, again noting Miyazaki’s emphasis on that the spirit “might” love modern things, once more implying the ultimate unknowability of nonhuman consciousness, even when something is initially created by humans.

However, in *My Neighbour Totoro* Miyazaki’s techno-animism isn’t only expressed through the Catbus: just as important is the relatively simple object of the umbrella. The first moment of prominence for the latter is, as Napier notes, during the bus stop scene, when “Satsuki lends her father’s umbrella” and the way this demonstrates “kindness and courage, as well as of a human proactively engaging with the nonhuman”.⁵²⁶ The umbrella, though a simple object, can be considered as an intimate part of the interlinked techno-animistic structure in which the human and nonhuman overlap and interact. It both symbolises the temporary connection of Satsuki and

Totoro in the interstitial, as becoming a tool of interstitial imagining, helping them to playfully interact with each other and their immediate surroundings. For Satsuki (and the audience) this means for instance a new and playful perspective on the umbrella: not merely protecting from the rain, it can also invite it. Yet, she/we wouldn't have learnt this without the help of both Totoro *and* the umbrella. Ultimately, the true meaning of this scene, from a techno-animistic and intimate perspective, lies somewhere in the overlap of Satsuki, Totoro, the umbrella, and the audience.

Analysing a second scene of *My Neighbour Totoro* can help further understand the combination of interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism. In this scene Satsuki and Mei have planted the seeds that were gifted to them by Totoro for lending him the umbrella. They go to bed, but shortly after falling asleep some movement wakes up Satsuki. Outside she sees the totoro (Totoro and his smaller totoro friends) dancing and jumping around the ploughed patch of land. Instinctively Satsuki wakes up Mei and they join the totoro in their dance. Soon the seeds start to sprout and become one gigantic camphor tree (see fig. 5.4. and fig. 5.5.). What is of interest, considering a fantastic hesitation, is that in the background of fig. 5.5. one can see the father working behind his desk. During the scene there are multiple moments he seems to hear or feel something, but it remains unclear if he can see Totoro, his daughters, and the giant camphor tree. After completing the ritual, Totoro spins a strange device, resembling a spinning top, which allows the totoro and sisters to fly over the Japanese rural nightscape. Eventually they land on top of the camphor tree after which the scene cuts out. The morning after Satsuki and Mei wake up and quickly go outside. Although there is no camphor tree in sight, they notice the seeds have already started to sprout. "It was a dream!" Satsuki shouts. "But it wasn't a dream!" Mei counters (see 5.6).



Fig. 5.4. Totoro and the sisters perform a ritual (i)



Fig. 5.5. Totoro and the sisters perform a ritual (ii)



Fig. 5.6. "It was a dream. But it wasn't a dream."

Miyazaki explains how the above scene is an example of deliberately presenting the interactions of the sisters and Totoro in such a way that "it is unclear whether they were real or a dream" (to which Miyazaki adds: "Of course, I think they really happened."⁵²⁷ Hence, it shows a playful attitude, looking for the ambiguous, as well as showing a fantastic hesitation. It is furthermore reminiscent of Foster's discussion of *hanshin-hangi* (half-belief/half-doubt), which was discussed in the Introduction. *Hanshin-hangi* is not about either/or but rather believes that doubt and belief can co-exist in one harmonious and singular approach. The idea of *hanshin-hangi* can be seen in the morning after, with the sisters happily shouting, "it was a dream, but it wasn't a dream!". The above scene of *My Neighbour Totoro* presents with that a blend of interstitial imagining, feeling Shinto, and *hanshin-hangi*: the importance of mystery, imaginatively navigating its ambiguities, not needing to explain everything and establish realness. All of this is captured by the two sisters accepting that what happened at night with Totoro both was and wasn't a dream: no further explanation is needed for them, there is an acceptance of the ambiguity involved.

Looking at the ritual being performed in the scene, what is of further interest to this thesis is how the umbrella reinforces the playful attitude of Satsuki, Mei, and Totoro. The umbrella, as noted by Miyazaki earlier, is not an object that Totoro had ever encountered before the bus stop scene, yet in the second scene the umbrella has already become an intimate part of the fantastical ritual. Therefore, where in the bus stop scene Totoro used the umbrella to playfully invite the rain, this time he playfully makes it part of a ritual to grow seeds. This ritual relies furthermore on the playful attitude of Satsuki and Mei, with them playing along, as if it is an open game of make-believe. To the girls, the umbrella represents a playful opening up to the nonhuman and allows them to see their everyday lives in a different way. It supports an interstitial imagining, making them playfully exist somewhere in-between the overlap of the human and (fantastical) non-human, sometimes leaning more to the human, sometimes leaning more to the non-human. In that regard the techno-animism of *My Neighbour Totoro* envisions a different role for technology when compared to for instance *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One*: not creating anthropocentric structures but providing moments of playful overlapping between the human and nonhuman.

This is also reflected by the position of the umbrella in the wider framework of techno-animism. As said, in techno-animism all subjects and objects, even when man-made, can possess a form of *kami*. The umbrella in *My Neighbour Totoro* is also to be understood from this perspective. Where in the bus stop scene Satsuki handing over the umbrella to Totoro symbolises a connecting of the human and nonhuman, the second scene, argues Napier, further deepens this connection. She says the scene is “a gorgeously realized vision of natural, supernatural, and human community interacting to create growth and even life itself”, in which Satsuki’s and Mei’s ability “to trust Totoro allows them to gain a new and nearly godlike perspective over their daily world”.⁵²⁸ The most obvious role the umbrella plays in gaining this new perspective, is when it becomes a tool for flying and lets the sisters, hanging on to Totoro, see their daily surroundings from a bird-eye’s view. Allowing Totoro and the sisters to fly however is not what interests this thesis the most about the umbrella: it is the umbrella dance that shows the intimate connection between techno-animism and an ontological playfulness. As for instance Napier explains: “Totoro’s umbrella does not simply transform the seedlings into a tree but helps the seedlings transform themselves.”⁵²⁹ The umbrella is a tool that supports a form of (ontological) playfulness, but can furthermore be considered to be just as important an actor in a wider interaction between the human and nonhuman.

In that regard Casper Bruun Jensen and Anders Blok see *My Neighbour Totoro* and other films by Miyazaki as blueprints for techno-animism in the 21st century. They argue that, mostly focussing on ecological themes, Miyazaki’s way of fusing “Shinto imaginaries” with “modern-day environmentalist tropes”, suggests “experiences of wonder and intimate connectedness”, where “high-tech Shinto cosmograms for the 21st century are reinventing animistic attachments”.⁵³⁰ Indeed, using Napier’s earlier observations, *My Neighbour Totoro* follows this route of intimate connectedness, both from a technological and animistic perspective. It starts with Satsuki’s act of kindness and courage, handing over the spare umbrella to Totoro. What the sisters get in return is a whole new, playful perspective on the same umbrella: instead of merely protecting from the rain, it invites the rain; instead of being a lifeless object, it turns out to be an important part of a wider network of life and growth. The umbrella, ordinary as it is, becomes an intimately interlinking object in an imaginative playfulness of the human and nonhuman that knows no strict boundaries.

Essential to this thesis's alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality is how the playfulness of *My Neighbour Totoro* knows indeed no strict boundaries. Like the earlier examples of *Persona 5* and *Your Name*, it shows the role of an ontological playfulness in everyday situations. The interstitial imagining of Satsuki and Mei (and the audience) feeds on the ambiguity of the experiences, the coexistence of "it happened!" and "it didn't happen!", with no real need to resolve questions of realness. This can be contrasted with for instance Huizinga's magic circle, where a boundary is believed to separate the area of play and the outside world. Inside the circle there is the opportunity for a certain magic, allowed by the rules of play, and it exists outside of everyday reality. Similar kinds of boundaries were seen in *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One*: a divide between everyday reality and digital-virtual reality, with both narrators stating these digital-virtual realities are not real, yet they need to be as real as possible for otherwise immersion won't succeed. These rigid boundaries and questions of (un)realness are what this thesis has been questioning. *Persona 5*, *Your Name*, and *My Neighbour Totoro* have all helped show how an implied hidden world and interstitial zones can help support an aspersive playfulness within the parameters of everyday reality.

A lack of boundaries can also be observed with *My Neighbour Totoro*'s techno-animism. Not anthropocentric like the current rhetoric, the film serves as an example how the alternative rhetoric is grounded in the intimate overlapping of the human and nonhuman in everyday reality. Techno-animism, like the earlier discussed cognitive framework of panpsychism, shows an interest in intrinsic conscious experience of all subjects and objects, may they be simple or complex. All are situated in an overarching impermanent everyday reality where connections are constantly made and unmade. This techno-animistic worldview is also at the centre when experiencing interstitial zones: through imagining one becomes closer to the nonhuman, may it be natural, technological, or an imagined being such as Totoro. Different from the modern technological mindset of the current rhetoric, where technology is positioned in a wider modern belief that reality can be compartmentalised in ever smaller pieces and be remade to one's liking, technology is seen as a means to experience the ambiguity of border zones.

***Pokémon GO*: The Definitive Example of the Alternative Rhetoric**

The analysis of *My Neighbour Totoro* has helped explain the interplay of interstitial imagining and techno-animism in the alternative rhetoric. Furthermore, it has shown the role that interstitial beings can have in this interplay. Building further on this, the remainder of this chapter will look at the augmented reality game *Pokémon GO* for the smartphone, as well as situating it within the wider Pokémon franchise. The analysis will use once more interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism when discussing the franchise, with *Pokémon GO* showing furthermore the supportive role of digital-virtual technology in the alternative rhetoric. As this thesis will argue, *Pokémon GO* successfully forms interstitial zones of ontological playfulness in everyday life, stimulating an interstitial imagining, which like Casey's everyday imagining is an aspersive part of intrinsic conscious experience. It will show how digital-virtual technologies can support an engaging with one's immediate surroundings, both human and nonhuman, and becoming more intimate with them.

What kind of game is *Pokémon GO* and how do you play it? The game was developed for the smartphone by Niantic, an American augmented reality game company, the Pokémon Company, and Nintendo. Released in July 2016 as a free-to-play game, *Pokémon GO* has since been downloaded over a billion times.⁵³¹ The game relies on two main smartphone features: the camera and GPS tracking. With these two features the player explores both the physical world as well as the digital-virtual world of Pokémon. First, by following a digital-virtual map on the phone and then, second, when having found a Pokémon, the player points one's smartphone camera at a physical space, after which a digital-virtual Pokémon is superimposed on it via the smartphone screen. The main goal of the game, maximalism, can be seen in its catchphrase "Gotta catch 'em all": to catch as many different Pokémon as possible. In the case of *Pokémon GO*, one can catch a Pokémon by throwing a Pokéball via a swipe on the smartphone screen. If the Pokémon stays in the Pokéball (they can break out of them), it will be added to the player's digital-virtual storage. In addition to this maximalist notion of catching Pokémon, there is a second important playstyle: battling other players – "Pokémon trainers" – in areas that count as a "gym". In these gyms players can use the Pokémon they have caught against each other. The player that wins these battles will occupy the gym from that moment on, for which one receives a digital-virtual currency that can be used for buying items like different kinds of Pokéballs or berries that make it easier to catch Pokémon.⁵³² Hence, *Pokémon GO* is both a collectathon and a fighting game.

Before analysing the specifics of playing *Pokémon GO* and the supportive role of digital-virtual technologies in it, it is first important to situate it within the wider Pokémon franchise, for it explains the importance of interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism. The franchise has been around since the early 1990s, with Joseph Tobin noting that “Pokémon is the most successful video game ever made, the top globally selling trading-card game of all time”, moreover has had multiple television shows and film adaptations, and since its inception has evolved into a sprawling media empire.⁵³³ Allison explains this huge popularity through the concept of “virtuality” and argues that compared to other “fantasy factories” the Pokémon franchise doesn’t try to create and maintain an illusion of being “real”:

This is virtuality: a world of vistas and creatures that is entirely made up (and therefore limitless). Here, a fictional construct with a labyrinth of habitats, landmarks, and beasts has expanded exponentially over the years from the original Game Boy game to a veritable empire of (ever more) editions, iterations, and forms. [...] The world envisioned is not “real”, but overtly constructed, inviting claims to classify and accumulate what are now manufactured commodities. Forefronting not only the fact that *Pokémon* is a made-up game but the specific way it was put together is a tactic that differs strikingly from the conventions of the public discourse of other fantasy factories. In Disneyland, for example, the illusion of magic is maintained by concealing references to both the outside world and the machinery of production. *Pokémon*’s artifice, by contrast is fully exposed.⁵³⁴

Allison’s idea of virtuality is essential to this thesis: the Pokémon franchise is a “fantasy factory” with no intention of creating an “illusion of magic” that conceals it from everyday reality. This is immediately different from the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, where sensual and conceptual immersion are driven by the illusion of being somewhere else and making sure one is completely sealed off from everyday life. With Pokémon’s virtuality, as Allison says, the opposite happens: the world of Pokémon isn’t cut off from everyday life, it is explicitly made part of it via a variety of media and commodities. Ito Mizuko agrees with Allison, noting how the “media ecology” of the Pokémon franchise enables “a more activist mobilization of the imagination in everyday life”, instead of trying to take people out of it.⁵³⁵

Ōtsuka Eiji would call the Pokémon franchise a “media mix”, which is a “synergetic combination of multiple media types to promote consumption across commodity

forms”.⁵³⁶ Reminiscent of the concept of the hidden world, Ōtsuka observes how in such a media mix a collection of smaller narratives hints at a “grand narrative (or worldview) found in the background” that has “an essentially invisible existence and is not an attribute seen by the eyes” of the person “consuming” a narrative.⁵³⁷ Ian Condry says Ōtsuka’s media mix and the idea of smaller narratives hinting at an invisible overarching “worldview” are often to be found in Japanese animation, where “it is seldom narrative coherence” that is the binding tread “across media”, but rather “characters and worlds provide that link”.⁵³⁸ Hence, in such a media mix, Pokémon are interstitial beings, suggesting a hidden world just behind the edges of visibility in everyday reality. What is furthermore of importance in Ōtsuka’s media mix, say Tosca and Klastруп, is that these grand narratives, or invisible worlds, “are not a permanent and unchanging thing”.⁵³⁹ Like everything else, grand narratives are considered an intimate part of everyday reality and are therefore also defined by impermanence.

Techno-animism has an important place within the Pokémon franchise as well. Allison, reflecting on writings of Nagao Takeshi, notes that Pokémon are akin to “spirits or companions”, rooted in a Shinto worldview that “gives value and respect to the non-human”.⁵⁴⁰ Hence, Allison says, the most distinctive part of the “Japanese brand of fantasy morphability” is techno-animism, with a “high degree of techno-interactivity in the play equipment” and “profusion of polymorphous attachments” with “nomadic humans finding new kind of transhuman attachment”.⁵⁴¹ The Pokémon creatures reflect the older animistic cultural traditions of Japan, but they are also *technological* beings, for they exist mostly as digital-virtual objects in video games. They provide a modern technological approach to connecting humans to each other and, more important, the nonhuman. As Allison says, the techno-animistic Pokémon creatures are “at once a container of the past and a medium for millennial relation-building” in the way they “broker the border between the practical, everyday, capitalistic and the fantastic, extraordinary, communitarian”.⁵⁴² Pokémon are both interstitial *and* technological beings, suggesting they are here too, in everyday life, living on the outskirts of the peripheral, waiting to temporarily show up via a media mix.

One more thing needs to be noted about the Pokémon franchise before further analysing the game of *Pokémon GO* and how it combines interstitial imagining, techno-animism, and the idea of *supportive* digital-virtual technologies. That is, in one respect the franchise differs from the other Japanese examples this thesis has used so far. *Persona 5*, *Your Name*, and *My Neighbour Totoro* are all clearly set in Japanese

modernity and convey certain Japanese ways and aspects of life, both modern and more traditional. Japanese modernity, however, is of less importance in the makeup of the fictional world of Pokémon. Quite the opposite even: Iwabuchi argues that elements of “Japaneseness” have been removed from the many instalments of the Pokémon franchise to “make them more acceptable to global audiences”.⁵⁴³ The global success of the Pokémon franchise, says Iwabuchi, is part of a type of brand of Japanese animation that is “culturally odourless”. He explains this concept through its difference from “Americanisation”. American products, whether Hollywood films or burgers from McDonald’s, seek to express a certain American lifestyle, says Iwabuchi. The Pokémon franchise, on the other hand, has “specific cultural characteristics” that can be traced back to so-called “Japanese culture”, but it doesn’t seek to impose and export an obvious idea or discourse of “Japan”.⁵⁴⁴ A Japanese term for this is “*mukokuseki*”, which means an “erasure of visible ethnic and cultural characteristics” and additionally loosely mixing “elements of multiple cultural origins”. Iwabuchi says this combination of blending and erasing means that such cultural products are recognised as Japanese only a little bit and their global success is based on being odourless.⁵⁴⁵

Andrea De Antoni, on that part, argues that the interstitial beings of Pokémon function as both a modern representation of *yōkai*, being specifically Japanese, as that they provide a cross-cultural bridging.⁵⁴⁶ Even though its Japanese roots are not in your face, they are still there. Yet, they are presented in such a way that a global audience can easily catch on and be charmed by the hidden world of Pokémon: they can be *everywhere*. Think of the magical world of Harry Potter as a counterexample: it is very difficult to imagine the hidden world of wizards existing anywhere else than in Britain. It has a very distinct British feel, from the architecture to the cultural behaviour. With the hidden world of Pokémon, however, being culturally odourless, it is much more plausible that its inhabitants are hidden in plain sight everywhere, whether in Tokyo, London, or on the outskirts of a scientific village in Antarctica. Looking once more at Ōtsuka’s media mix, what makes the Pokémon franchise so potent is that its hidden world is effective far beyond the borders of Japan: people all over the globe feel that by consuming smaller narratives, via different forms of media, they will be able to briefly bring this hidden world into their everyday lives.

The remainder of this chapter will analyse how the combination of interstitial imagining and techno-animism can be observed when playing the game of *Pokémon GO* and show the supportive role of digital-virtual technologies in this experience. To

first establish this supportive role of digital-virtual technology in *Pokémon GO*, with its use of the smartphone and augmented reality. Brendan Keogh argues that “to read the success of *Pokémon GO* as a success of augmented reality is to miss that the augmented-reality and locative aspects of *Pokémon GO* are merely the intermediary hinge between the Pokémon franchise sheer brand power” in combination with the ubiquity of the smartphone.⁵⁴⁷ What has made *Pokémon GO* into a success is first and foremost, as Keogh argues, the potency of its hidden, techno-animistic world that can be accessed via digital-virtual technology. Condry uses in that regard the concept of “platform” to show how this reflects a wider attitude of Japanese animation. Based on Ōtsuka’s concept of a media mix, Condry states that “rather than viewing the media technology [...] as the platforms”, platforms should be “viewed in terms of characters and worlds – that is, both as free-floating ideas and as objects of emotional attachment”.⁵⁴⁸ Therefore, although the digital-virtual technologies of the smartphone and augmented reality are definitely important factors, the true platform of *Pokémon GO* is its hidden world and the interstitial beings of Pokémon suggesting they are just lurking behind the borders of visibility in one’s everyday life.

The smartphone and augmented reality in *Pokémon GO* are tools that support an ontological playfulness: they form interstitial zones in everyday life, in which the hidden world of Pokémon is made barely and briefly visible. When then looking at the *act* of playing *Pokémon GO*, it combines two earlier themes of this thesis: it i) stimulates (mind-)wandering and ii) functions as an open game of make-believe. These are central to the type of player experience this thesis is interested in. But before moving on, the concept of player experience needs to be defined first. This thesis follows the model of Salen and Zimmerman, who argue that the player experience consists of “inputs, outputs, and internal player mechanisms”.⁵⁴⁹ They explain that although the player’s reaction to a game, and his actions within it, are “specific to a particular design”, nevertheless “these details are contained within a larger system of experience that always includes some kind of sensory input, player output, and internal player cognition”.⁵⁵⁰ The first and latter characteristic of the player experience matter to this thesis in particular – sensory input and internal player cognition – for they underpin the phenomenological virtual experience.

The discussion of (mind-)wandering in *Pokémon GO* can help explain this phenomenological virtual player experience in more detail. To begin with the importance of physical wandering. *Pokémon GO* relies on movement: only by wandering around

the player will encounter interstitial manifestations of the hidden world of Pokémon. Without this the smartphone can't function as a tool for interstitial imagining and discovering interstitial beings. The game encourages movement therefore and does so successfully. For instance, Paul Manning, using Benjamin's concept of the flaneur, talks of the "Poké-Flaneur" that goes on "botanizing the asphalt",⁵⁵¹ whereas Tim Althoff, Ryen White and Eric Horvitz show in a study that playing *Pokémon GO* led to "significant increases in physical activity" in American players, with on average a 25% increase of steps per day over a period of a month.⁵⁵² A similar study in Hong Kong showed an increase of 18% of physical activity, again by counting steps.⁵⁵³ Allana LeBlanc and Jean-Philippe Chaput argue that with that *Pokémon GO*, as a "free-to-play location-based augmented reality mobile game", has been able to succeed "where most population health strategies have failed before", by stimulating a change in "behaviour among inactive individuals".⁵⁵⁴ In short, wandering around is key if one wants to make use of digital-virtual technology: if one doesn't move, the hidden world of Pokémon remains hidden. The smartphone and augmented reality don't transport the player, creating an illusion of being somewhere else, they are merely supporting the player to interact with one's immediate surroundings.

The idea of the Poké-Flaneur shows how *Pokémon GO* is in one way close to the literary examples of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf: a way to experience and observe the modern city. Whereas the latter three use a pencil to narrate this experience, the Poké-Flaneur uses his smartphone when wandering around. That said, the flaneur also highlights a very important question in the case of *Pokémon GO*: who is this player-flaneur perceived to be? In the case of the flaneur, Deborah Parsons argues that its historical explanations highlight that "the urban observer, as both a social metaphor and a metaphor for the modern artist, has been regarded as an exclusively male figure".⁵⁵⁵ Parsons describes how there is a gender difference, both when considering the experience "*in the city*", as well as "*formulations of the city*", but that historically it have been "masculinist ideologies that have dominated the discourses of urban geography and literary modernism".⁵⁵⁶ Hence, when thinking of the player experience of *Pokémon GO*, although this thesis explores specifically the aspects of sensory input and internal player cognition, it should also be recognised that a concept like the Poké-Flaneur is not neutral. Not everyone has the same kind of opportunities to, in Manning's words, botanise the asphalt. More will be said on this further on in the analysis.

Going back to describing the player experience of *Pokémon GO*, in addition to physically wandering it also stimulates mind-wandering. Useful in understanding this is Calleja's idea of player involvement, which is not focused on immersion but "incorporation". Incorporation functions on two levels: a) the micro-involvement phase, in which the player is playing a video game; and b) the macro-involvement phase, in which the player is not playing the game, but is thinking about the game, "such as when one is riding the train or in other situations which does not require one's full attention".⁵⁵⁷ Calleja to this adds: "Thus, incorporation allows us to move beyond the notion of virtual environments as experientially separate otherworlds and to treat them instead as domains continuous with the media-saturated reality of everyday life."⁵⁵⁸ Using the terminology of this thesis: the micro-involvement phase describes the act of play; the macro-involvement phase describes the playful attitude.

The example of *Pokémon GO* is a soft blend of the two functions of incorporation: it involves the micro-involvement of playing the game on your smartphone, as it involves the macro-involvement phase and stimulates the state of an aspersive playfulness, in which an everyday imagining blends with the rest of intrinsic conscious experience. With *Pokémon GO* one can constantly slip in and out Calleja's two states: one, playing the actual game, trying to track down Pokémon and catch them, or battle other Pokémon trainers in a gym; or two, to just stroll around, maybe sitting in a train, letting the mind wander, retaining a playful attitude in which the Pokémon are blending with intrinsic conscious experience. This interstitial and playful zone formed by the smartphone is not a conceptually or sensually immersive elsewhere in which the player is completely cut off from everyday life. Instead, *Pokémon GO* supports a modest everyday imagining, in which aspersively the hidden world of Pokémon comes to the surface and blends with the rest of the phenomenological virtual experience.

(Mind-)wandering is key to the experience of *Pokémon GO* in the alternative rhetoric. Like the watercolour prose of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, it supports the player in its phenomenological virtual experience of everyday reality, with an aspersive playfulness leaving its faint and fleeting colours. In addition, wandering is essential when wanting to experience the Pokémon's hidden world. It is within this context that the interstitial imagining of *Pokémon GO* takes place. The game doesn't want players to be static or immersed in an anthropocentric digital-virtual reality: Pokémon, living on the borders of a hidden world, are actively scattered throughout everyday reality and the game stimulates the players to go places. This thesis argues such a player

experience, when zooming in on sensory input and internal player cognition, can help one become more aware of one's immediate surroundings, while also seeing them playfully in a different light. It combines Calleja's ideas of micro-involvement and macro-involvement. The player must wander and then wonder where digital-virtual technology will form the next interstitial zones of ontological playfulness in everyday life. In these interstitial zones an everyday-interstitial imagining purposely ambiguates one's immediate surroundings, in which the digital-virtual Pokémon are like watercolour prose: faint colours that slightly colour everyday life.

Neriko Musha Doerr and Debra Occhi argue that *Pokémon GO* has created "new ways of sensing the environment, reading things around us, walking the street, and dwelling in certain areas, i.e., inhabiting the world".⁵⁵⁹ Jason Chew Kit Tham and Deondre Smiles agree, stating that *Pokémon GO* stimulates "public play and a sense of place", in which augmented reality can "co-produce the concept of place through visualization of digital materials, lived experience, and imagination".⁵⁶⁰ *Pokémon GO* persuades players, say Tham and Smiles, to "explore and investigate the public spaces around them in a way that may not have happened before".⁵⁶¹ The use of digital-virtual technology in *Pokémon GO* sits therefore comfortably within the narrative of Sicart's playfulness: the goal is to (re)ambiguate the world, giving the player the opportunity to wander through ordinary surroundings with a new sense of wonder. To be playful while playing, the *Pokémon GO* player experience is defined by a symbiosis of everyday imagining and interstitial imagining, supported by the smartphone and augmented reality.

However, as with the concept of the Poké-Flaneur before, it needs to be acknowledged that these public spaces, which the above authors talk about, are in fact not neutral. Susan Riddick argues there is often the "assumption that public spaces are universally accessible to a civic public", however, "gendered and racialized identities", as well as class identity, "function to constrain participation in the public sphere".⁵⁶² One exists within a web of everyday power structures, which are much more strongly felt by some than others. This also needs to be considered when talking about *Pokémon GO* and the experience of public spaces: the aspersive playfulness of *Pokémon GO* doesn't erase socio-economic realities. Nevertheless, this thesis does argue that the *Pokémon GO* player experience, when focusing on sensory input and internal cognition, can playfully help create new connections in everyday life. It allows

players to reimagine the (public) places they inhabit in everyday life, *if* they have open access to them.

This can be further explored through the second point of interest when discussing the player experience of *Pokémon GO*. In the words of this thesis, the latter can be considered an open game of make-believe on both a personal and intersubjective level. On a personal level, as discussed, this involves an interstitial and everyday imagining helping one to become closer to one's immediate surroundings. Yet often the *Pokémon GO* player doesn't wander and wonder alone but does so in the context of a play community. For instance, Chia-chen Yang and Dong Liu asked *Pokémon GO* players why they play the game. They found that "being able to have fun and enjoy the game was consistently associated with positive outcomes, including higher bonding and bridging social capitals" and "lower loneliness".⁵⁶³ Kellie Vella and others studied the social aspect of *Pokémon GO* as well, finding it to contribute to "a sense of belonging".⁵⁶⁴ They argue that by i) bringing together strangers in public spaces and ii) strengthening the "ties between family and friends", augmented reality games like *Pokémon GO* show "how to motivate social connectedness through play in the real world and what form it may take".⁵⁶⁵ This thesis would avoid using this idea of "the real world", believing it to be a problematic description. That said, the above authors show that the social element of the game matters. *Pokémon GO*, in the words of De Koven, is a *well-played* open game of make-believe, for the goal of play is not to win, but to keep going with friends, family, and strangers.

What is also of interest to this thesis, is that the above two studies emphasise how the game encourages a sense of *connectedness* and creating new connections. In *Pokémon GO* the smartphone's main goal is not to create immersive and anthropocentric digital-virtual structures, but to let players together make and remake connections in everyday reality through the digital-virtual interstitial beings of Pokémon. This connectedness and creating of connections can be understood again through Tsujimara's interpretation of *Machenschaft*, in which it doesn't reflect the drive to perpetually create, but instead is about keeping intact a sprawling framework of inexhaustible connections and making sure modern structures fit into this interconnected framework. Playing *Pokémon GO* accomplishes this on two levels: one, the individual playfully forms connections with new and old surroundings, and two, this intimate connection-making also applies on an intersubjective level, for players will together playfully explore the interstitial zones that the smartphone forms in everyday reality.

In the conceptual language of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, *Pokémon GO* is about playfully and aspersively exploring an ambiguous *here*. It helps one becoming more intimate with one's immediate surroundings: making place out of space. Its playful model differs from the quixotic immersive play explored in chapter two and three: instead of expecting reality to completely change through a combination of the overzealous imagination and digital-virtual technology, *Pokémon GO* follows Sutton-Smith's broad definition of play, where the borders of play are ambiguous. With *Pokémon GO* the smartphone resembles the umbrella of *My Neighbour Totoro* or the sake of *Your Name*: an object that becomes an interlinking part of interconnected everyday reality and interstitial zones. The moment the *Pokémon GO* app starts, interstitial zones are formed in everyday reality, which are experienced by the player(s) in an aspersive fashion. Therefore, *Pokémon GO* shows how digital-virtual technologies such as the smartphone and augmented reality have a supporting role in the alternative rhetoric: they are not the absolute centre but are there to support an aspersive playfulness.

Another element important to discuss, in the context of this thesis, is the position of the real when playing *Pokémon GO*. In the alternative rhetoric, and the analyses of *Persona 5*, *Your Name*, and *My Neighbour Totoro*, realness is hardly a point of interest. However, in the current academic literature on *Pokémon GO* one can often find discussions about the real, reflecting the current rhetoric. One example is Nicola Liberati's essay on the relationship between the "everyday world" and *Pokémon GO*:

Thus the intertwinement between digital and everyday world aimed by Augmented Reality is not achieved yet because these objects are still fictitious and they are not part of the everyday world. However they do affect the paramount reality where the players and non-players live their everyday lives. [...] Our world is digitally embedded even if digital objects are not here among us.⁵⁶⁶

In Liberati's remarks one sees a similar kind of reasoning also encountered in the third chapter of this thesis with for instance Juul's description of video games as half-real. He looks to make distinctions between the fictional and the real. To this thesis such ontological discussions are distractions, for they take away a certain focus on what the discussions should mostly be about: the intrinsic conscious experience of playing games such as *Pokémon GO*.

Another aspect of *Pokémon GO* that is discussed in terms of realness in the academic literature, is the topic of the avatar. Thomas Apperley and Justin Clemens, for instance, note that in *Pokémon GO* the function of the avatar has evolved since its popularisation in *Snow Crash*. They say that “the avatar is no longer simply an index for locating us in virtual space, but has become the technology that organizes our relationship between spaces, which are simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘virtual’”.⁵⁶⁷ Apperley and Clemens put real and virtual between quotation marks, implying there might not be that much of a difference, but this thesis would argue there is no need to come up with constructions like this. Instead, it would opt for the idea put forward by Condry, that “it makes more sense to think of media’s reality (or actualization) in terms of emotional response than in term of a physical object”.⁵⁶⁸ Condry’s remark shows an intimate relationship between media and the individual, which this thesis would also argue for. If the focus lies on media supporting an emotional response, the ontological realness of the avatar becomes less of an interest.

Doerr and her analysis of *Pokémon GO* also show parts of the current rhetoric in action. She contemplates that “the virtual and real are neither separate nor opposite from each other, but they rather [...] relate to each other”.⁵⁶⁹ With this Doerr on the one hand argues that the (digital-)virtual and the actual overlap, while simultaneously fixating on the real and talking about integrous entities that *relate* to each other. Next to that, also reflecting the current rhetoric, Doerr combines these discussions of realness with discussions of an immersive fantasizing. When playing *Pokémon GO*, Doerr argues, “your avatar is the only human being on the map” and only meets “other humans – Pokémon trainers – in gyms when you battle their Pokémon [...] that is, the screen name and face of a trainer’s avatar are visible, but what you really see moving is the Pokémon that your Pokémon is battling”. Doerr continues: “It is a fantasy world for you alone – unless some player decides to cross the boundary between fantasy and reality.”⁵⁷⁰ Again, like with Apperley and Clemens, with Doerr there is a fixation on the avatar and its place in everyday reality, as that she combines it with ideas about immersive play and the dialecticism of “fantasy and reality”.

The need to establish (un)realness; the discourse of how the virtual and the real relate; the focus on the human avatar; immersive fantasizing; all are examples of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality. Using the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality instead, the focus shifts to the temporary interstitial zones *Pokémon GO* forms, relying on an intimate orientation and an aspersive playfulness

that is open to an interstitial imagining in everyday life. In this furthermore techno-animistic model, the nonhuman/fictional/digital-virtual creatures of Pokémon are equally as important, with them inviting players to be playful in dealing with their immediate surroundings. Therefore, in this intimately overlapping space the player becomes more aware of one's immediate surroundings not because of the importance of the human avatar, but because of the importance of the *nonhuman, digital-virtual* Pokémon.

The alternative rhetoric, furthermore, looks mostly at the phenomenological virtual state of Pokémon as digital-virtual and interstitial beings. This statement can be better understood by considering the Pokémon as a) virtual beings; and b) potential beings. To start with the latter, *Pokémon GO* suggests Pokémon are potentially there, even when the player is not using a smartphone to look for them. They might be hidden in plain sight. However, this is different from the virtual state that has been discussed at length throughout this thesis: the Pokémon in their phenomenological virtual state *exist* in the fleeting thoughts of the player. Using the example of the best-known Pokémon, Pikachu, the following statement can be made by the player: there might be a Pikachu behind the supermarket. In this statement Pikachu exists both potentially, for there is the possibility he will be found behind the supermarket, as well as existing virtually in the active imagining of the player. Realness and immersion are not of interest here, as the alternative rhetoric argues for an aspersive playfulness: Pikachu is not meant to take up all the space in someone's head, he is meant to slumber there, pop up occasionally when the mind wanders. Furthermore, from a techno-animistic perspective, where the smartphone resembles the umbrella of *My Neighbour Totoro* as a tool that supports an ontological playfulness, the Pokémon in their digital-virtual state resemble the umbrella as an important actor in a wider interaction between the human and nonhuman. In the alternative rhetoric, although Pokémon have been created by human imagination and craft (like the character of Totoro or the object of an umbrella), they are digital-virtual, nonhuman entities which intrinsically have become unknowable to us.

The experience of this techno-animistic world and its playful ontology rely on the combination of interstitial imagining and *han shin-hangi*: it doesn't concern itself with realness and doesn't mind ambiguity. Thinking once more of *My Neighbour Totoro*, its pivotal "it was a dream, but it wasn't a dream!" can be changed to "the Pokémon are here, but they aren't here!" This ambiguity relies on a sense of impermanence as well: like the Metaverse of *Persona 5* or the shifting borders of *Your Name's tasogare* and

kakuriyo, the implied hidden world of *Pokémon GO* is in constant flux. The Pokémon don't remain in one place and whenever the player boots up the app, it is completely open where one will find new Pokémon.⁵⁷¹ In *Pokémon GO* the interstitial Pokémon, like Totoro, appear on the edge of a visible darkness, in mundane everyday life, hinting that the player only sees the tip of the iceberg. It is this mere suggestion of a vibrant hidden world that is so potent in everyday-interstitial imagining. The player is not immersed in an overwhelming illusion of being somewhere else. Instead, the player is very aware of being *here*, but the mind can't help wandering off from time to time, wondering what else is lurking just beneath the surface, behind the borders of the visible, digital-virtual darkness.⁵⁷²

In conclusion, in the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality digital-virtual technologies support an aspersive playfulness on both a personal and intersubjective level. They help provide interstitial zones in which a hidden world and everyday reality briefly overlap. The examples of *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Pokémon GO* have helped put more emphasis on the role of the nonhuman in the alternative rhetoric, as well as showing the importance of interstitial imagining, interstitial beings, and techno-animism. Furthermore, their sense of virtuality has been close to the watercolour prose of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, and the visual-spatial explorations of *Persona 5*'s Metaverse and *Your Name*'s *tasogare* and *kakuriyo*. All examples are cultural explorations of the ambiguous interconnection of consciousness and everyday reality in Long Modernity. They are close to philosophical virtual investigations yet use different toolsets. Instead of the anthropocentric outlook of the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, the alternative rhetoric, as shown by the above examples, is worldly and multi-layered. By transculturally discussing how different forms of media – literature, films, video games – have engaged with these phenomenological virtual themes, the thesis has been able to make connections that didn't seem obvious at first.

Ultimately, the player experience of *Pokémon GO* brings all the themes of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality together. It shows how digital-virtual technology can support the phenomenological virtual experience, especially when it comes to the act of imagining. Playing such a game, in the alternative rhetoric, is about playfully finding novel ways to form temporary connections with humans and nonhumans. It helps the player to imaginatively explore the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings. That is, as long as the player has open access to these surroundings. Summarised, it is the basis of

Story B, the alternative to Story A, with which this thesis began, and this chapter will end:

Story B

I've downloaded Pokémon GO this morning with a colleague. During our lunchbreak we walk with our smartphones out and find a Pokémon in front of a dodgy sandwich place where it's always greasy, smelly, and my colleague is pretty sure he got food poisoning there. We aim our smartphone cameras at the shop and laughter ensues: the ugliest, slimiest Pokémon pops up on our screens. While deciding to rename the sandwich place after the Pokémon (Grimer) we notice little flowers are growing underneath the digital creature and there is a colony of ants coming from under the pavement. We make up a story on the spot, where Grimer is a city overcome by dark magic and the ants are saving the last flowers to break the spell.

After work I'm standing in a fully packed train. As the city goes by, I try to imagine which Pokémon are invisibly roaming the busy roads, patches of city green, and maybe even inhabiting the many rooftops. The mind-wandering gets interrupted every now and then by people bumping into me as they're getting off the train. I used to play the Pokémon games on my Gameboy during family holidays. Where was it again? Spain? Portugal? I can't quite remember. For a while I'm not really looking at anything in particular, my memories, the Pokémon and the story of Grimer vaguely blend together. I notice I'm at my stop and get off.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis has been to answer the question of what it means to imagine in the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, and how digital-virtual technologies can support such an imagining. Through a conceptual and transcultural analysis, relying on a diverse selection of examples, it has aimed to present a fresh conceptual language for discussing virtual reality. Furthermore, the thesis has been historical in its analysis, on the one hand showing persistent beliefs of modernity underpinning the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, on the other hand showing modern alternatives to these modes of thinking as well. Having traversed the spaces of different modernities to discuss the alternative rhetoric's qualities, arguing why they are preferable to those of the current rhetoric, the conclusion would first, anachronistically, like to start with the setting of classical Japanese travel writing. This to stress that the virtuality of the alternative rhetoric has been around for centuries, even millennia, and that while this thesis has been historical in its approach, it has purposely been situated within modernity to make it effective for modern everyday life.

As said, virtuality has been around for millennia. Taking the example of Japanese travel writing from the eighth to the seventeenth century, Meredith McKinny says that over the centuries many educated Japanese travellers – Buddhist monks, women diarists, military men, courtiers – would carry an essential object with them: the writing brush. These literary travellers built poetical structures along the routes they wandered: the long and winding roads would be filled with historical-poetic markers – trees, rocks, waterfalls, viewpoints – places and objects that the traveller would recognise from poems often centuries old.⁵⁷³ McKinny explains the “literary traveller was always shadowed to some degree by a composite figure of those who had gone before”, and a collective and “suprapersonal” effort of poetic meanderings overlay the hardships of travel.⁵⁷⁴ As a result, “both the land itself and the experience of those who travelled through it were overlaid with a complex palimpsest of the literary that integrated the two in much the same way that landscape and feeling might merge in poetry”. This didn't make travel less hard in those times, but it allowed the traveller “imagining himself as a figure in a scene”.⁵⁷⁵ Japanese traveller-poets merged their ink with landscapes, over the centuries building coexisting literary trails, providing small moments of comfort during their journeys.

Bashō Matsuo (1644-1694), one of Japan's most lauded poets, was embedded in this tradition of literary travel and in many ways the epitome of the traveling poet, blending everyday events with poetic takes on nature, history, and legend, all captured in the immediacy of experience.⁵⁷⁶ In the most famous example of Bashō's travel writings, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, posthumously published in 1702, the reader encounters a flow of momentary impressions: never trying to go for an overarching narrative, Bashō instead names the places and people he visited in his two-and-a-half-year journey, loosely threading together immediate feelings and observations with old tales, poems, or descriptions from long dead travellers. Bashō understood how all these poetic meanderings over the centuries had become part of the landscape. For example, while waiting "for the fair weather at Ōishida", Bashō wrote "he was told that the old seed of linked verse once strewn here by the scattering wind had taken root, still bearing its own flowers each year and thus softening the minds of the rough villagers".⁵⁷⁷ And then, over five hundred kilometres to the southwest, Bashō went to see a famous pine tree encountered by Saigyō, a poet from the twelfth century:

Hiring a boat at the port of Yoshizaki on the border of the province of Echizen, I went to see the famous pine of Shiogoshi. The entire beauty of this place, I thought, was best expressed in the following poem by Saigyō:

Inviting the wind to carry
Salt waves of the sea,
The pine tree of Shiogoshi
Trickles all night long.
Shiny drops of moonlight.

Should anyone dare to write another poem on this pine tree, it would be like trying to add a sixth finger to his hand.⁵⁷⁸

One can argue that Bashō and the traveller-poets before him created virtual landscapes, cultivated over many centuries. In the above two fragments of Bashō's journey one encounters the aspersive playfulness of the alternative rhetoric: imaginings sprinkled over landscapes, blending together with memory and sensory impressions; animistic; being both an individual and intersubjective effort. Bashō, his contemporaries, and those travellers who went before him, mediated the immediacy of imagining, memory, and sensory impressions via the writing brush: the ambiguity of

experience was expressed through the ink of calligraphy. This thesis, on the other hand, has looked at the tools of today guiding our experiences: digital-virtual technologies. Keeping the lens of travel in mind, to that effect this thesis's Introduction started off with two journeys. Story B, based on the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality, resembled the ambiguous, aspersive, and playful virtuality of Bashō, with digital-virtual technology being the writing brush of today. In Story A however, based on the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality, digital-virtual technology was positioned as a tool that offered an immersive escape from disenchanting modern life. The traveller of Story A was enthralled by digital-virtual travel destinations: one's immediate surroundings were blocked out in favour of the immersive illusion of being *over there*, in an anthropocentric digital-virtual reality, overwhelming oneself with all kinds of adventures and being able to perpetually create.

Story B was the road taken for this thesis: mapping out the alternative rhetoric and contrast it with the current rhetoric. To do so, it split its argument up in five chapters, but also in two different parts. The first three chapters were about establishing the alternative rhetoric through conceptual analysis, showing where it strayed from the current rhetoric. The second part of the thesis, chapter four and five, took a transcultural approach and showed how Japanese perspectives could conceptually deepen the alternative rhetoric, as well as providing an adequate integration of digital-virtual technology. Next to this argumentative structure, the thesis relied on an interdisciplinary approach in choosing its examples to discuss these different conceptualisations of virtual reality. It used different types of literature, video games, and films, as the thesis looked for the best ways to complement the analytical with the descriptive and hoped to show the strength of the humanities in stimulating creative thinking.

The first chapter dealt with the question of what constituted the conceptual basis of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. To answer this, the thesis decided to, as said, combine the strengths of the analytical and the descriptive by understanding the philosophical readings of the virtual through literary explorations of its experience. The literature of Walser and Sebald reflected intrinsic conscious experience and showed the ambiguous interconnection with its immediate surroundings. The thesis's conceptual language strongly benefited from their narrations, introducing the concept of watercolour prose to help describe the phenomenological virtual experience of their narrators: imaginings, memories, feelings, sensory experiences, and

knowledge would dissolve like little spots of colour, merging with the world around them. In the virtual reality of the alternative rhetoric the following idea was its basis: the intrinsic conscious experience of one's immediate surroundings and how these immediate surroundings vice versa engaged with intrinsic conscious experience. In order to establish an alternative *rhetoric* of virtual reality, furthermore, this thesis combined its analyses with a normative approach. It highlighted everyday imagining from the phenomenological virtual experience, making it the foundation of the remaining investigations, however always stressing it was part of the inherent ambiguity of intrinsic conscious experience and not an independently operating faculty.

The first chapter also showed the original approach of the thesis's historical framework and how it was able to provide unique discussions on virtual reality. It did not make digital-virtual reality the starting point of the investigations, taking away the dominant image of computational technology for virtual discussions, nor did it look to overly investigate the history of virtual reality. Instead, the historical context of Long Modernity helped put a spotlight on alternative, often older, authors and theorists, and show how they could still be relevant for contemporary virtual thinking. It allowed for vastly different discussions on virtual reality in the first chapter, like investigating Bergsonian temporality through the waiting-room experiences of Sebald's characters or showing where Walser's everyday imagining differed from Bachelard's phenomenology and his more antimodern approach to the imagination. This latter comparison also showed the overall approach of this thesis: to be historical without becoming too historical. It looked for *modern* approaches, not quaint or archaic ones, that could help engage with the complexities of contemporary everyday life.

The second chapter's aim was to further explore the main concept of everyday imagining, asking what its defining qualities were in the context of the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality. This thesis proposed two concepts: aspersion and playfulness. These were contrasted with conceptual immersion and an overzealous imagination. Using the framework of an open game of make-believe, it looked at a form of play (acting imaginatively) of which the basis was *padia*: improvised, open-ended, not about winning or losing but keeping the flow of play and imagining going. Following Sutton-Smith's concept of broad play, this thesis used Sicart's definition of playfulness: an attitude that looked to ambiguate everyday life by imaginatively engaging with it. This thesis's aim to provide a new conceptual language was especially shown through the novel concept of aspersion, being one of its main contributions to

academic debates on virtual reality. Here, too, a literary example was used to the benefit of the conceptual analysis: Woolf's *The Waves*. Woolf's watercolour prose, tied to the phenomenological virtual writings of Walser and Sebald, helped explore the cognitive framework of panpsychism and her narrations showed the aspersive experience: imaginings were *sprinkled* over the immediate surroundings of the protagonists. This sprinkling was shown, again, to be ambiguous. In *The Waves* the open game of make-believe and its imagery fleetingly returned throughout the novel in the form of memories that sprinkled themselves over the protagonists' conscious experiences, even years later. Therefore, the open game of make-believe from an aspersive perspective went on long after the actual game had finished, adding once more to the inherent ambiguity of the phenomenological virtual experience.

Don Quixote was used as an example of conceptually immersive play, contrasting it with aspersive playfulness. It was discussed how in *Don Quixote* an overzealous imagination didn't look to blend with Don Quixote's and Sancho Panza's immediate surroundings, but instead the idea was to subvert reality to the benefit of a conceptual immersion. It highlighted a negative dialecticism with everyday life, as it was plagued by questions of how real the actions of Don Quixote and others were within the parameters of his overzealous imagination. This quixotic immersion and its negative dialecticism were then translated to the act of mind-wandering, using Thurber's short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. This example, too, showed an overzealous imagination, with the character of Walter Mitty trying to escape his unsatisfying everyday life through an excessive mind-wandering. This did not enrich his everyday life but instead created a diametrically opposed fantasizing. Both *Don Quixote* and *Walter Mitty* represented therefore conceptual immersion, with characters relying on an overzealous imagination to subvert or escape everyday reality, getting lost in considerations of how real these immersive acts were.

The second chapter showed once more this thesis's historical approach, with the discussed novels ranging from the early seventeenth century (*Don Quixote*) to the first half of the twentieth century (*The Waves* and *Walter Mitty*). In two ways it showed the benefit of using such a historical lens. First, although the alternative rhetoric looked to present a new conceptual language when discussing virtual reality, the thesis continued to stress that this didn't necessarily need to come through futuristic thinking. It tried to point out there was already a rich and *modern* body of work that could be consulted when making the aspersive and playful turn of (a phenomenological) virtual

reality. As noted also with the first chapter, the thesis looked to question dominant patterns of modern thinking, not by being antimodern, but by shifting to different modes of modern thinking. Second, concerning the current rhetoric, it, on the contrary, looked to *interrupt* the historical continuity of the modern quest for immersion and its dialectical kind of virtuality. *Don Quixote*, especially, showed the Long Modern history of overlapping discussions of the imagination and subjectivism, as well as its analysis helped to emphasise how discussions of immersion shouldn't restrict themselves to the technological.

Chapter three answered the question of how the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality differed from the alternative rhetoric. It showed how the conceptual immersion of chapter two was married to a modern technological mindset and the sensual immersion of a digital-virtual reality headset. While the virtual reality of the alternative rhetoric referred to the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and one's immediate surroundings, which should be engaged in an aspersive and playful manner, the current rhetoric was adamant on positioning virtual reality *outside* of everyday reality to the benefit of the illusion of being somewhere else. This illusion rested on two basic principles. First, a modern technological mindset that wanted to control and remake reality to one's liking, in which digital-virtual technologies were positioned as tools that could build separative anthropocentric structures in which people were allowed to perpetually create. Second, the desire for conceptual immersion was based on the overzealous imagination of chapter two. It used the example of fictional worlds to show that the current rhetoric, while strongly technological, also relied on a conceptual leap that was made possible by the imagination.

Although the third chapter was analytical in nature, with less of a goal to present novel conceptual language supported by literary examples, it did amplify just how different the current rhetoric and alternative rhetoric were in approaching virtual reality. The first two chapters discussed the intrinsic conscious experience of everyday modern surroundings, trying to capture the ambiguity of these experiences through language. The third chapter, however, was instead dominated by computational/technological language; questions of realness; trying to establish demarcations between everyday reality and digital-virtual reality; and discussions of how human cognition could be programmed and manipulated. *Snow Crash* and *Ready Player One* were used as literary examples in showing how the current rhetoric manifested itself. More implicitly, they also highlighted why this thesis couldn't use them as examples to describe the

ambiguous intrinsic conscious experience of everyday reality: that was simply not what these novels did. Although the novels described the immersive experiences of the Metaverse and the OASIS, they didn't go much further than protagonists conveying they felt as if they were *really* there. It showed how limited the current rhetoric could be in defining the virtual experience, as it mainly came down to describing how convincing an illusion was.

Here as well the historical context of modernity played a prominent role, this time highlighting the dialectics of disenchanted everyday reality versus enchanted digital-virtual reality. It highlighted a paradox. On the one hand, digital-virtual reality was strongly embedded in a modern technological mindset, in which computational power helped analyse and rationalise everyday reality. On the other hand, this same computational power harboured the promise of providing an enchanting escape out of this disenchanted everyday reality. Another dynamic of modernity that was discussed, also in the second chapter, was how it stimulated discussions about the realness of digital-virtual reality and the fictional worlds behind them. The literary examples *and* academic writings would often get stuck on defining the realness of existing and playing within the boundaries of digital-virtual reality. The thesis tried to show how these discussions of realness were nothing new, with digital-virtual reality being one of the more recent episodes in an ongoing modern engagement with this elusive concept. In that regard, *Don Quixote*, *Walter Mitty*, *Snow Crash*, and *Ready Player One* were strong examples of the Long Modern history of Story A and its dialectic virtuality. They were tales of immersive separation, describing modern quests of building imaginative and technological structures that could overrule immediate surroundings. This was distinctively different from this thesis's Story B – defined by the watercolour prose of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf – which expressed the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and everyday reality.

The fourth chapter returned to the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality and asked how Japanese perspectives could help deepen its conceptual language. The aim of this chapter, and the next, was to show how such modern Japanese perspectives, embedded in their own intellectual history, could help further rethink virtual reality and aspersive playfulness. Additionally, Japanese animation provided striking imagery that this thesis could use as a supplement to its conceptual analyses, with furthermore its visual-spatial explorations complementing the previous literary analyses. The first important contribution of Japanese perspectives to this thesis, was

helping to develop an intimate interpretation of virtual reality. The Metaverse of *Persona 5* was used as a contrast to *Snow Crash*'s Metaverse. Where the latter positioned the Metaverse as a digital-virtual reality outside of everyday reality, *Persona 5* interpreted it as a phenomenological virtual reality, existing somewhere in-between the ambiguous overlap of everyday Tokyo and cognitive Tokyo. Instead of having rigid boundaries, this intimate Metaverse symbolised the unclear borders between cognition and the outer world.

The transcultural investigations, combining the conceptual with imagery from animation, helped deepen the key concepts of aspersion and playfulness. Aspersion, for instance, benefited from the discussions of *kokoro* and *musubi*. *Kokoro*, the heart, covered the whole domain of inner subjectivity, bringing together the abstract and somatic. *Persona 5*'s Metaverse was an aspersion structure, as opposed to *Snow Crash*'s immersive structure, and consisted of this *kokoro* fabric: an ambiguous amalgam of the images, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the inhabitants of everyday Tokyo. The other concept important to aspersion was impermanence. In that regard *Your Name*'s *musubi* helped provide effective imagery. Imagining everyday reality full of invisible connections that were constantly made and remade, everything and everyone would as threads come together, entangle, disentangle, and drift apart. *Kokoro* and *musubi* represented the benefit of transculturally investigating aspersion, as their meanings and imagery managed to provide a unique blend of the ambiguous and impermanent.

Playfulness also benefited from a transcultural approach. Of interest was an ontological playfulness within the parameters of everyday reality. This was explored through the concepts of the hidden world and interstitial zones. Here *Your Name* provided two distinctively Japanese spaces that helped explain this spectrum from the invisible to the barely visible. First, there was *tasogare*, the twilight, an interstitial zone in which ontological borders were unclear, somewhere in-between light and darkness, and only silhouettes were to be observed. Second, there was *kakuriyo*, a hidden world situated around an old Shinto shrine in a mountain crater, with its borders constantly in flux, being first only a creek, the second time a substantial pond. These animated spaces visualised the two main parts of ontological playfulness: how a hidden world was implied to exist just behind the edges of visibility; and the ambiguous ontological makeup of these temporary interstitial zones.

Furthermore, Japanese perspectives brought forward a symbiosis of the phenomenological virtual and digital-virtual. First, by providing an intimate framework that positioned technology as an intricate part of the vast interconnectedness of everyday reality; and second, by helping to show how digital-virtual technologies were tools that could support an active ambiguation of everyday reality. *Persona 5* and *Your Name* were once more essential in presenting these conceptual investigations. Despite being different forms of media – the first being a video game and the second an animation film – the thesis showed how both narratives exhibited clear characteristics of Japanese animation in general. It helped show how Japanese animation, with its different approaches to aesthetics and storytelling, provided striking imagery which greatly benefited the conceptual discussions of the thesis. Furthermore, the visual-spatial explorations of *Persona 5* and *Your Name* complemented the watercolour prose of Walser, Sebald, and Woolf, highlighting different aspects from the ambiguous interconnection of intrinsic conscious experience and everyday reality. It showed the great benefit of transcultural investigations when establishing the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality.

The final chapter continued the transcultural approach of analysing Japanese conceptual language and using imagery from Japanese animation. It looked to answer the question how digital-virtual technology could support an aspersive playfulness in everyday life. For that it investigated the *experiences* of interstitial zones in everyday reality, in which it stressed the importance of becoming closer to the nonhuman as opposed to the anthropocentrism of the current rhetoric. Truly at the centre of chapter five were the interstitial beings of Totoro and Pokémon. What made them so potent for this thesis, was that such *yōkai* were manifestations of the conceptual, being interstitial embodiments of the hidden world, as that these interstitial beings could help one experience interstitial zones. Furthermore, from the perspective of techno-animism, although these interstitial beings were human creations, after said creation their nonhuman existence was their own. Both *My Neighbour Totoro* and the Pokémon franchise showed how Japanese animation, again including animation films and video games, liked to use interstitial beings to stress the interlinking of the human and nonhuman and how these creatures could help ambiguate everyday surroundings to become closer to the nonhuman.

My Neighbour Totoro provided a variety of interstitial zones in which the sisters Satsuki and Mei interacted with their fantastical neighbour Totoro. In these interactions

interstitial imagining was crucial. The ambiguous attitude of interstitial imagining was understood through the concept of *hanshin-hangi*, in which doubt and belief coexisted in harmony. Essential for portraying this concept was the scene of Satsuki and Mei shouting: “It was a dream, but it wasn’t a dream!” Not being interested in the (un)reality of their nightly endeavour, the sisters settled on the ambiguous conclusion that it both did and didn’t happen. Next to interstitial imagining, *My Neighbour Totoro* helped clarify the concept of techno-animism, which was close to panpsychist ideas of complex and simple forms of consciousness, however retaining a spiritual component, making it slightly different from the latter. The relationship of Totoro and the sisters reflected traditional animism, as that the film showed how man-made objects, imaginary or technological, could also potentially possess a form of *kami*. The film gave the visually stimulating example of the Catbus, reflecting this blend of traditional and technological animism, and the more subtle example of the umbrella.

What *My Neighbour Totoro* helped show was how *historical* ways of thinking were reinterpreted to benefit *modern* life. One didn’t need to replace the old with the new. Instead, it was a reconsideration of the old(er) so it would better suit and reflect the present. The other prominent example that helped emphasise this point, was the Pokémon franchise. It was a form of traditional *yōkai* culture, as that it was a modern media mix, in which smaller narratives scattered over different forms of media implied a hidden world. The specific example of *Pokémon GO* explained then how Pokémon were both interstitial beings and digital-virtual beings, making them perfect examples of the traditional and the modern. What Totoro, the Catbus, and Pokémon all embodied in a way, was an underlying question of this thesis: when thinking about the future of modern technological culture, does one need futuristic thinking? The same could be said of the watercolour prose of Walser and Woolf: although being writers from the first half of the twentieth century, couldn’t they still inform experiences of contemporary digital-virtual technologies?

Finally, the player experience of *Pokémon GO* was analysed, with an emphasis on sensory input and internal player cognition. It showed the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality in action. From chapter one it used discussions of (mind-)wandering, highlighting the phenomenological virtual experience of one’s immediate surroundings, as well as showing the interplay of the individual and intersubjective. Chapter two’s open game of make-believe and aspersive playfulness were discussed and contrasted with chapter three’s immersive fantasizing and discussions of

the real. Lastly, combining chapter four and five, *Pokémon GO* showed how the smartphone and augmented reality were tools that could support an aspersive playfulness in everyday life. On the one hand, they briefly formed interstitial zones in everyday reality, stimulating an everyday-interstitial imagining. On the other hand, from a techno-animistic perspective, they helped one becoming closer to the nonhuman and one's immediate surroundings. Having come full circle, the final chapter ended with which the thesis had started: Story B.

And so, the wanderings of this thesis are about to come to an end, having tried to show the opportunities of the digital-virtual writing brush in a phenomenological virtual reality. Reminiscent of the lively ink of Bashō and the other traveller-poets, digital-virtual technologies in their own – modern – way can continue the tradition of intimately weaving virtual threads through the actual landscapes of everyday reality. This thesis hopes to have contributed a thought-provoking reimagining of what virtual reality is and can do for us. Following its ideas of watercolour prose and aspersive playfulness, it has outlined a modest form of imagining, providing a little bit of colour every now and then. Like the travel writings of earlier Japan didn't negate the hardships of travel, the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality doesn't necessarily offer an enchanting escape from the hardships and boredoms of modern life. Instead, it argues digital-virtual technologies and imagining should benefit our intrinsic conscious experience, letting us engage with our immediate surroundings, which are both human and nonhuman. If anything, such a perspective could help us become more resilient, toning down the restless drive for immersive escapism and bickering about what is real and what not.

This thesis hopes to have carved out new pathways, giving future research new points of departure. One is curious to see if one of the underlying speculations of this thesis will be true: that a conceptual rethinking of virtual experiences and virtual reality within the humanities can help lead to an actual shift in technological research and design as well. Implementing the qualitative findings of this thesis, what kind of technological innovations could support the phenomenological virtual experience? Additionally, although this thesis has greatly benefited from its transcultural approach, showing how Japanese perspectives could deepen its conceptual framework, it should simultaneously be acknowledged that this thesis has missed out on many insights from other cultures. One angle this thesis would be interested in, for instance, is the

perspective of Chinese authors, given the fast-paced digitalisation of their country and their leading research on digital-virtual technologies like artificial intelligence. How do they conceptualise virtual reality or the virtual world – and what does it mean to them to virtually exist? Or what about, for instance, Nigerian and Kenyan oral storytelling traditions; how are they being used in the development of digital-virtual reality and/or augmented reality?

Another discussion that will be of interest, is how the conclusions of this thesis fit into wider debates of posthumanism and transhumanism. It was a deliberate choice to not incorporate these intellectual traditions in this thesis, for two main reasons. First, as the aim was to be truly transcultural, these humanisms would have presented problems of Eurocentrism. This thesis wanted to study Japanese perspectives in their own intellectual context, not through Western lenses. Second, the goal was to come up with original vocabulary to discuss virtuality, trying to capture the inner narration of conscious experience as much as possible, for which other modern intellectual traditions were deemed more effective. In that regard, this thesis would advise future lines of humanistic research on virtual living to consider Kasulis's suggestion of a Zen humanism. Kasulis says that "while the humanities have increasingly focused on the final product of human activity, Zen is both refreshing and provoking in its emphasis on the source, not the end result, of the human act".⁵⁷⁹ This thesis agrees: trying to understand intrinsic conscious experience is still something the humanities excel at, and it is a quality that should be utilised more often, in which transcultural perspectives can be greatly illuminating.

In that regard, this thesis also feels strongly about the following: future virtual discussions should not exaggerate the novelty of contemporary, everyday human experiences. There is too often a tendency, also in the humanities, to describe every development as a fundamental break with the past. This may be partially true, but if one takes a closer look at actual everyday human experiences, how much has *really* changed? This has been the reason for this thesis to use the framework of Long Modernity, because it is a very *modern* tendency to treat the past as dull, slow, ancient, and how it couldn't possibly help understand our ever-accelerating present. Revolutionary talk has at times become a default setting, conveniently ignoring the evolutionary. Therefore, although this thesis's historical framework may have seemed ambitious from afar, what drove it was to instil a sense of modesty when it comes to our contemporary situation. Not to be reactionary or claim things are static; far from it, given the

prominent place of impermanence in this thesis's investigations. But to highlight how continuously many insightful people have had important things to say about (modern) everyday experiences, from which there is still a lot we can learn. Yes, every moment has its specifics, and they should be thoroughly investigated, but there should also be an acknowledgment of continuity. It makes the stories we tell about ourselves, also through research in the humanities, more grounded.

Finally, to suggest one more angle for future research: although the current rhetoric of (digital-)virtual reality and the alternative rhetoric of (a phenomenological) virtual reality have been juxtaposed throughout this thesis, in the end there should be possibilities of them coexisting in some form. For instance, with ambiguity having been at the centre of this thesis, can aspersive and immersive experiences flow in and out of each other? Is there an in-between zone to be found? Is an aspersive playfulness possible in digital-virtual reality? Can digital-virtual reality be made less anthropocentric? What would a techno-animistic digital-virtual reality look like? These questions will hopefully be picked up by others in the future. For now, this thesis will reach its final stop, but its thoughts will aspersively and playfully linger on in the phenomenological virtual existence of its author.

Endnotes

¹ The thesis will only use the abbreviation of VR for the sake of clarity when discussing virtual reality. Augmented reality will not be abbreviated. VR will furthermore be called *digital-virtual reality* throughout this thesis, as will be discussed shortly, yet sometimes it will quote authors that use the term VR, therefore also introducing it here to the reader.

² Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 35.

³ *Idem*.

⁴ Mixed reality allows virtual objects to *interact* with physical reality. This is different from augmented reality, in which virtual objects are placed in physical reality but don't interact with it.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁶ Grigore C. Burdea and Philippe Coiffet, *Virtual Reality Technology: Second Edition* (Hoboken: Wiley-Interscience, 2003), p. 3.

⁷ William R. Sherman and Alan B. Craig, *Understanding Virtual Reality: Interface, Application, and Design* (Cambridge MA: Morgan Kaufmann, 2019), p. 5.

⁸ Mihaela Irimia, "Why the Long Modernity," in *Literature and the Long Modernity*, ed. Mihaela Irimia and Andreea Paris (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 8.

⁹ *Ibidem* pp. 8-10.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2013), p. 134.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 21-23.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 130.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 130-131.

¹⁷ Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), p. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso Books, 2010), p. 288.

²⁰ Jaron Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything: A Journey Through Virtual Reality* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), pp. 50-54.

²¹ Mel Slater, "Immersion and the Illusion of Presence in Virtual Reality," *British Journal of Psychology* 109, no. 3 (August 2018), p. 432.

²² Jeremy Bailenson, *Experience on Demand: What Virtual Reality Is, How it Works, and What it Can Do* (New York: Norton Paperback, 2019), p. 3.

²³ Mario Guttierrez, F. Vexo, and Daniel Thalmann, *Stepping into Virtual Reality* (London: Springer Verlag, 2008), p. 2.

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²⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2008), p. 26.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

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- ³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 19.
- ³¹ Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 27-28.
- ³² *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.
- ³³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.
- ³⁴ Alan Richardson, "Reimagining the Romantic Imagination," *European Romantic Review* 24, no. 4 (June 2013), p. 398.
- ³⁵ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁶ Alexander M. Schlutz, *Mind's World: Imagination and Subjectivity from Descartes to Romanticism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), p. 6.
- ³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7.
- ³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 7-8.
- ³⁹ Chris Goto-Jones, *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 40-41.
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- ⁴¹ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 13.
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- ⁴³ Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything*, p. 293.
- ⁴⁴ Samuel Greengard, *Virtual Reality* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2019), pp. xvii-xviii.
- ⁴⁵ Sherman and Craig, *Understanding Virtual Reality*, p. 8.
- ⁴⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul & W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 57.
- ⁴⁷ *Idem*.
- ⁴⁸ Jimena Canales, *The Physicist & Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate That Changed Our Understanding of Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 85.
- ⁴⁹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 33.
- ⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 2018), p. 14.
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- ⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 13.
- ⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 97.
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- ⁵⁵ Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2*, p. 18.
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- ⁵⁷ Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 29.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 30
- ⁵⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2014), p. 18.
- ⁶⁰ *Idem*.
- ⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

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- ⁶³ Ibidem, p. 27.
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- ⁶⁹ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 47.
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- ⁷⁴ Philip Goff, *Galileo's Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2019), p. 31.
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- ⁷⁷ Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Brain* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), pp. 253-254.
- ⁷⁸ Goff, *Galileo's Error*, pp. 22-23.
- ⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 32.
- ⁸⁰ Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," in *The Extended Mind*, ed. Richard Menary (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 29.
- ⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 30.
- ⁸² Daniel C. Dennett, "Facing Backwards on the Problem of Consciousness," in *Explaining Consciousness: The Hard Problem*, ed. Jonathan Shear (London: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 33.
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- ⁸⁶ Philip Goff, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 256-257.
- ⁸⁷ Goff, *Galileo's Error*, pp. 113-114.
- ⁸⁸ Ibidem, pp. 146-147.
- ⁸⁹ Edward S. Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study: Second Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 3.
- ⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. ix.
- ⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 6.
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- ⁹³ Ibidem, p. xix.
- ⁹⁴ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace: Updated Edition* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2017), p. 124.
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- ⁹⁷ Idem.
- ⁹⁸ Guttierrez, Vexo, and Thalmann, *Stepping into Virtual Reality*, pp. 2-3.
- ⁹⁹ Sherman and Craig, *Understanding Virtual Reality*, p. 10.
- ¹⁰⁰ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, pp. 48-49.
- ¹⁰¹ Idem.
- ¹⁰² C.T. Onions and G.W.S. Friedrichsen, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 55.
- ¹⁰³ Anthony R. Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), p. 281.
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- ¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 215.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 58.
- ¹⁰⁷ Idem.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, pp. 58-60.
- ¹⁰⁹ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2014), p. 22.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 21-22.
- ¹¹¹ Ibidem, p. 28.
- ¹¹² It should be noted here that this thesis does rely on translations and interpretations of Japanese works by Western academics. As this thesis is transcultural in its approach, looks at the interactions between Western and Japanese (intellectual) culture, and tries to see where they can inform each other, this doesn't have to be a shortcoming, but it still should be noted.
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- ¹¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 158.
- ¹¹⁷ Bryan Van Norden and Taylor Carman, "Being-in-the-way. A review of *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, Graham Parks ed.," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 70 (February 1996), p. 25.
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- ¹²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 53-54.
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- ¹²³ Ibidem, pp. 17-20.
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- ¹²⁵ Ibidem, pp. 53-55.
- ¹²⁶ Ibidem, p. 102.
- ¹²⁷ Ibidem, p. 24.
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- ¹²⁹ Ibidem, p. 111.

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- ¹³⁰ Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Place and Dream: Japan and the Virtual* (New York: Brill Rodopi, 2004), p. 10
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⁵⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 597-600.

⁵⁶⁶ Nicola Liberati, "Phenomenology, 'Pokémon GO', and Other Augmented Reality Games: A Study of Life Among Digital Objects," *Human Studies* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2018), p. 229.

⁵⁶⁷ Thomas H. Apperley and Justin Clemens, "Flipping Out: Avatars and Identity," in *Boundaries of Self and Reality Online: Implications of Digitally Constructed Realities*, ed. Jayne Gackenbach and Jonathan Bown (London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2017), p. 42.

⁵⁶⁸ Condry, *The Soul of Anime*, p. 71.

⁵⁶⁹ Neriko Musha Doerr, "The Politics of Intersecting Landscapes," in *The Augmented Reality of Pokémon GO: Chronotopes, Moral Panic, and Other Complexities*, ed. Neriko Musha Doerr and Debra J. Occhi (London: Lexington Books, 2019), p. 60.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁵⁷¹ This changeability is not necessarily a unique feature, with many video games randomly reorganising the world whenever the player starts, however, it is the combination of a) ephemerality and b) being a mostly hidden world that makes *Pokémon GO* of interest to this thesis.

⁵⁷² This is conceptually different from for instance the Harry Potter franchise. With the latter there is always the tension to keep the world of wizards hidden. It needs to be a Secondary World to remain an enchanted realm for the imagination. As Allison says,

Pokémon's virtuality, on the other hand, is not interested in this tension/separation. There is no strict divide between a Primary World and Secondary World.

⁵⁷³ Meredith McKinny, *Travels with a Writing Brush: Classical Japanese Travel Writing from the Manyōshū to Bashō* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), pp. xiv-xvii.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. xxi.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. xx-xxi.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. xxiii.

⁵⁷⁷ Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 123.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

⁵⁷⁹ Kasulis, *Zen Action*, p. 151.

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