

ETHOS AND ENTERTAINMENT: THE MASS MIGRATION TO VIRTUAL
WORLDS

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract_____	
Acknowledgements_____	
Terms _____	1
Introduction_____	3
Chapter 1: The Addiction Diagnosis_____	11
• 1.1: Video games and psychological research_____	11
• 1.2: The power of norms and stigma _____	16
Chapter 2: Docility and Uniformity through Technology_____	26
• 2.1: Video games as a Tool for military recruitment_____	26
• 2.2: The dominant culture and new technology_____	34
• 2.3: A new commons?_____	41
Chapter 3: Escape to Simulations_____	45
• 3.1: The desire for another reality_____	45
• 3.2: New forms of interactions_____	48
• 3.3: The existence of a virtual self_____	67
Conclusion: A world of potentials_____	69
References_____	74

Abstract

This thesis aims to examine Western culture and its relationship to virtual worlds. The goal is to provide readers with a better understanding of the relationships between individuals and virtual reality, as well as how these relationships may influence our society. This understanding is explored in three chapters; the first examines several psychology articles on video games and virtual worlds and how they impact individuals; the second explores the social impacts of a rise in virtual reality as a primary actor in many individuals lives; the third chapter focuses on the individual and how the introduction of virtual worlds has changed the ways individuals interact.

Marx believed that technology can reveal our relations with one another and this thesis aims to address the notion that virtual worlds have altered our relations with one another. The methods of this thesis mix classical theories with existing literature on human-technology relations as well as discussions surrounding our relation to technology and if it is becoming the primary interaction in our lives. The virtual world has become a sea of potential; it can be used as an escape from corporeal reality, a tool of docility to keep mass amounts of people content, a military recruitment tool, and even as a staging ground for shared opinions and world change. What we could be seeing is a paradigm shift occurring where the primary actor in an individual's life is a virtual reality where they can interact with others in new communities.

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Terms

Avatars: Avatars are digital representations of the virtual self that the user controls in the virtual world. They are defined as objects that represent the users.

Cyber-Sociology: The study of a particular subculture that co-exists within cyberspace, earliest coining of the term was in 1997 by Robert Axelrod.

Lack: Our understanding of who we are. We define ourselves based not on what are, but on what we are not, we constantly compare ourselves to others and attempt to compensate for lacks ¹ (Lacan 1961).

Pseudo-Communities: A community of familiar avatars that socialize and interact within the virtual world.

RPG (Role Playing Game): a game where one is (or can create) a character interacting in the virtual world only in the role of that character.

MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game): in this type of game the individual is interacting with other avatars and in an open world environment while connected to the Internet.

Primary Actor: The term is drawn from Bruno Latour's approach that sees the person as the center, or "primary" individual, in a series of interactions with other human and non-human actors.

Substitute Sociality: A term that Agger calls, "A reaction to the turn inwards to individuality and away from the public sphere"

Techno-tainment: technology-centred or technology-based entertainment.

¹ Lacan calls a lack desire "What cannot be satisfied even when our demands are met. All our needs are at once converted into desires that cannot be satisfactorily fulfilled" (Lacan 1961)

Techno-Gateways: Devices (such as computers or entertainment systems) that allows a person to connect with their virtual self and the virtual world.

The Virtual Self: An individual who “spends a good deal of time online and acquires his/her identity from this activity, which is once removed from an everyday reality in which people interact with each other face-to-face” (Agger, 2004).

The Virtual World: This term refers to an alternate reality or simulated environment that exists from the material, corporeal world; but also within it.

The Wired World: This term refers to a culture obsessed with technology; the wired world fetishizes technology and views it as primarily a good thing.

Introduction

I would like to tell a brief story of my “eureka moment” that set me on the path towards my thesis topic. I always prided myself on being good at video games; I would rent the newest release and beat it within a few days; after a few years the games became more difficult and longer. One particular game called *Oblivion* required a lot of time and energy to beat. The game was a massive RPG (Role Playing Game) that took, on average, 300 hours to finish (without completing the side missions). In the game one is able to create a character, choose its gender, choose the dimensions of its face and body, choose its age, and choose the character race and class. Throughout the game a player can acquire things like armour, weapons, spells, and items of assistance on the journey. One can also join particular guilds and even attend a university for mages, of which I was the highest rank of professor.

I had been playing the game for about a week and was halfway into it; this particular session had lasted about 6 hours when suddenly I was hit by a powerful character and my avatar died; I flew back onto the couch as if it were I that had been hit, as if it were I that had been killed. I then realized how significant this game was to me; the fact that I could almost feel my avatar’s pain speaks to the level of attachment I had to, what I would come to know as, my virtual self. This was a self which I could enter into through the use of a techno-gateway like my PlayStation or computer. In this world I was no longer Ethan Angi, I was Locutus the Breton, Arch-Mage of the Arcane University, Duke of Mania, Lord of the Shivering Isles. This character had become a part of me in ways I could not have imagined, until now.

Over the past ten years there has been a growth unprecedented in human history, a mass migration into what Ben Agger (2004) calls the virtual self and the virtual world, and others like Jean Baudrillard (1985) call “the simulation”.

Fifty-eight percent of Americans play video games...Consumers spent \$20.77 billion on video games, hardware, and accessories in 2012...Fifty-one percent of U.S. households own a dedicated game console, and those that do own an average of two. (Entertainment Software Association, 2012)

The evolution of technology, coupled with a growing decrease in civic participation, has facilitated the growth of a simulation that mirrors reality and simultaneously replaces it. Agger, inspired by Baudrillard, produced a number of works based on what we have come to know as, “the virtual world” (Agger, 2004). His book, *The Virtual Self* (2004), recognized the hyperreal world as the world that exists when an individual is playing a video game that hosts a simulation of the real world. Agger postulated that a person’s freedom could be reduced in the sense that the game itself contains greater limitations than the corporeal world. However, Agger also believed that a person’s agency could be increased because the physical limitations of the corporeal world no longer exist. The purpose of this thesis is to expand on existing theory and literature on this migration and show the reader that this issue is much more complex than meets the eye.

This expansion of ideas will be done throughout three distinct chapters. The first examines and critiques assessments on the migration made by several psychologists. In this chapter we will see that many psychologists are diagnosing some who are engaged with virtual reality as addicted. The second chapter looks at broader social and cultural conditions that contribute to this migration. Technology is not just applied to culture; it is

welcomed. Social science cannot remain stagnant in this ever changing world; the traditional forms of social research must also change to examine new trends that are emerging in culture. The new field emerging called cybersociology, otherwise known as digital sociology (Daniels and Feagin, 2011), examines how technology is altering our social relations. It is the study of interactions and reactions, through this we are able to see how technology is fundamentally revealing our internal relations. Futurist Alvin Toffler (1970) believed that it was the study of change that held the key to examining the future:

Change is the process by which the future invades our lives, and it is important to look at it closely, not merely from the grand perspectives of history, but also from the vantage point of the living, breathing individuals who experience it (Toffler, 1970: 3).

There is a change occurring in Western culture that is altering the ways in which humans interact with one another. This change recognizes the existence of not just one reality, the corporeal reality that our conscious mind experiences, but a second reality, a virtual reality. There are now two worlds that co-exist; the world of materials, achievement, assignment, and communities; and the virtual world of entertainment, adventure, challenge, vocation, achievement, and pseudo-communities. This thesis will explore the virtual world as an alternate and expanding reality, its conception in historical context, and its effects on Western culture. Supported by the culture industry (Adorno, 1991), and existing through the individuals who choose to enter it, the virtual world, for many, has become a preferable existence to spending time in the corporeal, tangible, world. In analyzing the conditions in which this world was conceived, this thesis will explore how this world is generated, shared, and expanded. In advertising to the masses through culture and creating an environment that stimulates the mind, giving the user what they

cannot normally achieve, the virtual world has the potential to seep into the subconscious mind and become, what some believe, to be addicting. The priorities of the virtual replace those of the corporeal: lacks (Lacan, 1961) are somewhat compensated, and the virtual self begins to take precedent over the material self. Through this fulfillment of desires we will see that post-modern culture is undergoing a mass-migration from the corporeal to the virtual. The question that arises from this migration becomes one of autonomy: is this virtual world the new commons of the peoples, or is it the ultimate tool of hegemony?

In order to understand how this migration could impact the future of human interaction we can use an outlook that Karl Marx (1867) provides us in *Capital Volume 1*. In chapter 15 on titled *Machinery and Modern Industry*, Marx examines technology in a new way that sees technology as an indicator for relationships between individuals:

A critical history of technology would show how little any of the inventions of the 18th century are the work of a single individual. Hitherto there is no such book. Darwin has interested us in the history of Nature's Technology, i.e., in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which organs serve as instruments of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organisation, deserve equal attention?...Relics of bygone instruments of labour possess the same importance for the investigation of extinct economic forms of society, as do fossil bones for the determination of extinct species of animals. It is not the articles made, but how they are made, and by what instruments, that enables us to distinguish different economic epochs (Marx, 1867: 286).

This puts forth the idea that society, and its evolution, can be examined through technology. Technology becomes an indicator of social relations:

Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them (Marx 1867, chap. 15).

When we examine this statement we see that Marx carefully avoids determinist statements. He does not say that technology determines, he says "discloses"; and in some

other translations he says “revealed”, with this in mind we see a new way of examining the social relations of a particular culture by examining the technologies that surround them. Through this method we see the virtual world as a way of disclosing Western cultures micro-relations, the interactions between individuals that are now intertwined with disembodied forms of technology.

Using Marx’ notion of technology as an indicator for social change we see three major trends emerging when it comes to technology. The first is the idea that virtual reality is an addiction and that people become addicted through playing video games or other forms of entertainment online. Once again this thought is explored in chapter one as the possibilities and opinions on video games as an addiction are examined. The second idea is virtual reality as an escape from reality and its misery and is explored in chapter two. The third and final idea that will be examined in chapter three is the thought that technology is being used to control us and keep many docile and content with their corporeal existence. In order to examine these ideas this thesis uses what Ben Agger (2004) calls 21st century sociology to hear the voices of the people and see the emergence of new trends.

The third and final chapter examines the theory of virtual worlds as an escape from corporeal reality. Millions are opting to escape from corporeal life, choosing virtuality over reality, this mass migration of consciousness has become commonplace in North American culture. Many believe this leads to happiness, reducing the likelihood for significant social change in corporeal reality. This escape is encouraged by a culture industry that promotes escapism and simultaneously discourages excessive escapism by constructing an ideology of addiction. Through the emergence of this ideology we see

this movement met with resistance from the very culture that encourages it. The virtual world grows from a demand for entertainment and has grown into a substitute for reality itself. The purpose of this thesis is to show that this movement is much more complex than first thought; that we must look at both the individual and the social to fully understand why so many play video games and are engaged in virtual reality. Through asking the question “what are the conditions of the individual and society that facilitate a migration of consciousness from the corporeal world to the virtual world?” we can start to truly examine the issues and, eventually, understand it.

To substantiate some of the claims that were made, in some cases, it is important to have a method of showing that there is in fact a change occurring. In order to do this it is important to keep in mind the new methods of sociology as defined by Ben Agger in his book *The Virtual Self*: “virtual sociology studies virtuality, while conducting the analyses, writings, and community building online, as well as in traditional pulp formats” (Agger 2004:164). The change in human communication has altered the way researchers are able to conduct studies; virtual worlds are now vast databases in which people’s opinions and attitudes become broadcasts to the world, they become public information that can be gathered and examined as a new form of social research; “sociology must reach beyond its traditional disciplinary boundaries for intellectual tools with which to theorize the self, society, and culture” (Agger, 2004: 3). The method used in this thesis adopts this new way of research by analyzing the discourses found in various debates and blog sites online and treating them like an observed focus group. After examining the existing literature on this issue we see a distinct divide amongst the academic community on how to analyze this issue. Many think that this is an illness and must be treated as such

(Gentile, 2008). Others see this as a stage of technological development and embrace it as a new way of human interaction. Some see this as the emergence of a great commons of the peoples (Withaford, 2004); others see this as a greater mode of control over the peoples (Adorno, 1991).

The future is not what it used to be, many communicate through the virtual medium known as the web. Not only are we finding that people are attracted to this virtual world, but some have come to prefer it to the corporeal. This phenomenon provides sociology with tremendous opportunity to examine this mass migration between realities, and to do so requires us to step out of the “traditional” methods of research. The internet is not only an outlet of communication; it has become a massive pool of usable data, both quantitative and qualitative. The methods of this thesis use this pool of data to analyze online debates. Through rigorous searching we can find an online debate about almost any topic.

A collection of debates and online discussion forums were collected through online forums on the topic of video games and virtual reality. Forums were constructed that asked questions such as “why do people play video games?”, “Are video games addicting”, and “video games as an escape”; it explores the people’s answers to these questions as an indicator of trends that emerge and can be explored; from this we can derive explanations such as escape, control, and addiction. What we are beginning to see through these debates is the emergence of a new stigma about those who spend time in the virtual world. The next chapter explores the first trend that emerged through the online forums that sees technology and video games as an addiction. Through this examination we will see some critical mistakes that some psychologists make in over

generalizing and underestimating the complexity of this mass migration, in order to provide an adequate description of an issue or movement, one must first understand it. The following chapter is a review and critique of existing literature and theories made by several psychologists.

Chapter 1: Psychology and the Addiction Diagnosis

The goals of this chapter are to examine the methods in which certain researchers used to come to their conclusion of video games as addictive as well as the effects that this label brings on to those who fall under the label. Some psychologists (Melemis, 2009; Leung, 2004; Dy, 2008; Clark, Lanphear, Riddick, Chumbley & Griffiths, 2006; Bowman, Lewis, & Weber 2008; Gentile, 2008, Platt, 2012) have been quick to examine the trend of migration to the virtual world, and test theories that the virtual world itself is addictive. However, in doing this, psychology has started a trend of pathologizing an attraction to the virtual world.

1.1: Video Games and Psychological Research

Throughout the last dozen years the video game industry has surpassed the film industry as the dominant form of profit in the entertainment market, raking in over 74 billion in sales in 2011 and are projected to make over 115 billion in 2015 (Gartner Inc. 2012). The *American Medical Association* ultimately voted against a proposal to include excessive video gaming as an addiction in the upcoming Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV 2012) stating that, “further research into the addictive potential of video games [is needed] and that parents should “step up supervision” (Brown University, 2007). There has since been a call for papers for the release of the DSM-V (dsm5.org 2012) where they are debating the inclusion of video game addiction in an entirely separate section.

This move has prompted a number of experiments, theories, and proposals by several psychologists and institutions (Melemis. 2009; Leung, 2004; Dy, 2008, Clark, Lanphear, Riddick, Chumbley & Griffiths, 2006; Bowman, Lewis, & Weber 2008;

Gentile, 2008; Platt, 2012) in an effort to provide a clear-cut solution to this issue. The following is a review of existing research done by psychologists, its problems, and why the concept of video game addiction has been contextualized as a psychological problem. Through the existing literature we are essentially seeing the inception and conception of a new kind of stigma for the postmodern world. Many websites are telling us that video games are “addictive”, that those who play them in excess are “sick” and need help. The following studies attempt to pinpoint a single, significant, cause to what they call “excessive play”. The current DSM questions that represent pathological gambling are most commonly used for studies on pathological video game play. The following questions are the DSM criteria, tailored to suit the topic of gaming:

1. Over time, have you been spending much more time thinking about playing video games, learning about video-game playing, or planning the next opportunity to play?
2. Do you need to spend more and more time and/or money on video games in order to feel the same amount of excitement?
3. Have you tried to play video games less often or for shorter periods of time, but are unsuccessful?
4. Do you become restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop playing video games?
5. Have you played video games as a way of escaping from problems or bad feelings?
6. Have you ever lied to family or friends about how much you play video games?
7. Have you ever stolen a video game from a store or a friend, or have you ever stolen money in order to buy a video game?
8. Do you sometimes skip household chores in order to spend more time playing video games?
9. Do you sometimes skip doing homework in order to spend more time playing video games?
10. Have you ever done poorly on a school assignment or test because you spent too much time playing video games?
11. Have you ever needed friends or family to give you extra money because you spent too much money on video-game equipment, software, or game/Internet fees? (Gentile 2009)

Douglas Gentile conducted a research study in 2009 that utilized these criteria in an attempt to measure just how many gamers met definition of addiction. Gentile conducted a survey of 1,178 people, ages 8 to 18, using Harris poll. The study revealed that 8.5% of those surveyed exhibited pathological patterns of play (Gentile 2009). Additionally, “Pathological gamers spent twice as much time playing as non-pathological gamers and received poorer grades in school; pathological gaming also showed co-morbidity with attention problems“(Gentile 2009: 1). Based on these results, Gentile claims that psychologists can “[measure] pathological gaming reliably” (Gentile 2009: 1). Although the method used produced some interesting results, Gentile does not ask the participant why they play video games; consequently, the voices of the participants become lost. Altering gambling criteria is an interesting way to develop a survey but some the virtual world is fundamentally different than the gambling world. Some could argue that escape exists in both worlds but there is a much different community that exists in the virtual world compared to the corporeal world. The word “pathological” is, in itself, problematic because it assumes a mental or physical disorder is present within the individual. This thesis does not take issue with the results of the finding, but questions the premise of the argument itself.

A second study by The Institute of Cyber Psychology and Behaviour titled *Excessive Computer Game Playing: Evidence for Addiction and Aggression?*, it stated that, “nearly 12% of participants complied with three or more modified criteria for addiction and were therefore considered to be pathological gamers” (2007: 291). The study surveyed 7069 gamers, 94% male with a mean age of 21. The results showed that:

840 (12%) of subjects fulfilled at least three criteria of addiction concerning their gaming behaviour. Pathological gamers (mean = 4.70, SD = 4.03) differed

significantly from non-pathological computer gamers (mean = 2.49, SD = 2.22) regarding daily hours of playing (Cyber Psychology 2007: 291).

In stating that “positive outcome expectancies trigger pathological gaming tendencies” (Cyber Psychology, 2007) among certain people the institute must be careful not to exclude exterior influences that may have contributed to these “pathological” tendencies, such as parents, siblings, and teachers, and game designers. Although certain potential problems are pinpointed, such as excessive play, the Cyber Psychology Institute needs to provide a more comprehensive description of what makes some people pathological gamers and others non-pathological gamers. The study concludes by stating:

...gaming has an addictive potential that is also mirrored by addiction-related cognitive components like significantly stronger positive outcome expectancies. Given that such cognitions are dysfunctional in the long term and maintain addictive behaviours, our findings suggest that, these cognitive components may be considered in therapy of excessive behaviours that meet core symptoms of addiction. (2007: 291)

This statement creates a stronger position for the study because they present addiction as a potential and not certainty, but to suggest treatment or cognitive behavioural therapy is problematic in the sense that the foundation of why individuals play has not been fully explored, the voices of the individuals need to be heard, we need more than an analysis of behaviour before we start to diagnose an individual as addicted.

As per a survey conducted in 2009,

the institute of Cyber Psychology compared characteristics associated with excessive video game use with characteristics of other compulsive behaviours such as gambling, and found that excessive use of video games resembles a dependence syndrome (Angers et al; 2009).

This study is important because it outlines the important possibility of dependence as a variable that contributes to people playing video games. People play games for many

different reasons; one of these could be the attachment to the virtual self, an attachment that is examined in this next study.

A study by Weber and Lewis measured a characteristic of video game addiction classified as Character Addiction (CA). The study tested players of Role Playing Games (RPG) and the addiction to their avatar. In a report issued in 2009 by Weber and Lewis of the Cyber Psychology department of the University of California, it is said:

If the proposed CA is a valid measure of our construct, we should see relationships between CA and preference for the RPG game genre, RPG characteristic motivations for playing, enjoyment, time spent playing, game addiction, and self-esteem as predicted by theory. The prediction that CA scores would be higher in RPG gamers was supported: $t(270) = 2.941, p = 0.004$. For RPG players, the mean CA score was 3.96 ($SD = 0.68$). For players of other character-driven games (but non-RPG), the mean value was 3.70 ($SD = 0.60$). The literature suggests that RPG gamers who score higher in CA are motivated to seek fantasy, diversion, and social interaction (Weber, Lewis 2009).

This report states that there is a significant relationship between a user who seeks prestige for their avatar and the motivation to divert from society but towards online social, virtual, interaction. Based on the statistics provided, character attachment appears to be an important variable in why people choose virtual worlds over corporeal worlds. These studies have attempted to provide comprehensive, single variable, explanations of the question of video game addiction. To take one variable such as constructed criteria surveys (Gentile, 2009), character attachment studies become problematic in the sense that researcher become narrow minded and goal oriented and can lose sight of the other variables that are contributing to this phenomenon. Through this research there is no clear explanation as to what is really behind this trend. People are playing a lot of video games, but to attribute this entire movement to a single variable becomes problematic; very few have considered it to be a social problem or attempt to examine multiple complex

variables that attribute to this movement. More so, the voices of those being studied become lost in the methods used by the above researchers. The following section asks people if video games are in fact addicting and debates this question using the voices of those engaged in the virtual world.

1.2: The Power of Norms and Stigma

Through certain psychologists examination of this mass migration to the virtual world we see “the power of the norm appear through the disciplines” (Foucault 1977: 196). In the chapter titled *The Means of Correct Training in Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlines distinct components in the process of normalizing judgment. These processes can be seen throughout psychology literature on “the problem of gaming”.

1- “It [the process of normalizing judgment] differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule” (Foucault 1977: 195). This process can be seen throughout the work of Gentile (2009), where he separates individuals by using “A Harris poll [that] surveyed a randomly selected sample of 1,178 American youth ages 8 to 18. About 8% of video-game players in this sample exhibited pathological patterns of play...Pathological gamers spent twice as much time playing as non-pathological gamers and received poorer grades in school; pathological gaming also showed comorbidity with attention problems” (Gentile 2009). The method in testing for pathological gaming was “[assessing] video-game use with an 11-item scale based on the DSM–IV criteria for pathological gambling” (Gentile 2009), the study claimed that it met DSM-IV criteria for other disorders in “considering gaming to be pathological if the gamer exhibited at least half (6) of the symptoms” (Gentile 2009). We are able to see this through the website <http://www.video-game-addiction.org> where people are offered a list of symptoms of

video game addiction based off the Gentile 2009 study (video-game-addiction.org, 2013).

This idea is also prevalent in the work such as *Fun Ways to Limit Your Teen's Screen Time This Summer*, Vivo, M., (2009), *When (and How) to Pull the Plug: Six Tips for Protecting Your Child from Internet Addiction*, McBride, H., (2009). These studies compare and contrast the pastimes of the youth of today with the youth of the past, using the past as a template for normality. Since many of the psychologists that are examining video games as addicting experienced a childhood that was not as virtually integrated as today's, they may see a trend such as the mass migration to the virtual world as abnormal.

2- "It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, and the nature of individuals" (Foucault, 1977: 195). There are numerous studies such as Bowman, Lewis & Weber (2008), Chumbley & Griffiths (2006), and Funk (1999), which measure the effects of video games on the individual.

3- "[Normalizing judgment] introduces, through a "value giving measure", the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved" (Foucault, 1977: 195). This point can be seen when we read works that suggest that removing the techno-gateway, or forcing conformity to the norm, is the best solution for the individual who is "addicted" (Vivo, 2009). These studies are working under the premise that video games are a menace and that those who play in excess are sick and that conforming to norms is the best path to psychic health.

4- "It traces the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal" (Foucault, 1977: 195). This final factor is seen in works such as *Prevalence of Pathological Behaviour among Young Video Gamers*, McBride, H., (2009), *About Video Game Addiction*, Battaglia, E., (2009); in these texts,

the authors quantify the amount of time individuals spend on games and to diagnose them as “addicted”. They then proceed to offer ways in which to “help” these individuals. This process of labelling not only constructs a separate social category in which these individuals fit, but it also tells the world that these people are “sick” and need to be “cured”.

Are video games addicting? The following is a summary of the collected debates on the matter. Through this we see the emergence of this question and its effect on the peoples. An online debate collected on the question of video game addiction illustrates a debate on the existence of addictive potential of video games and virtual worlds. The “for argument”, made by the user *ManWithNoName*, used popular psychology, claiming that “videogames play a Pavlovian effect on gamers” (ManWithNoName, 2010), and that the addiction stems from Skinnerian techniques of reward and stimulus. The bloggers sources include an article written by David Wong in *Cracked* magazine that covers the 5 ways in which game developers attempt to attract players. Some of the tools that game developers use to attract players include the reward effects that the online debate mentioned. This can include what they call:

“virtual food”, a reward that is given to players after a task is completed or a skill level is reached, “If it takes time, effort and skill to obtain an item, that item has value, whether it's made of diamonds, binary code or beef jerky” (Wong, 2010).

The home essentially becomes a “Skinner box”, and the players are repeatedly pulling the lever for rewards. The final point that the blogger had was the wave of frustrated complaints that occurred during 2011 when the entire PlayStation Network crashed for over a week, leaving online players without access to their virtual communities. He characterizes this backlash as withdrawal from their addiction.

In the online debate forum the argument that challenges the existence of video game addiction was constructed by the blogger known as *Caters*. This person outlines the addiction argument by stating that there is a chemical addiction and behavioural addiction; dopamine release is a process by which the brain releases the chemical dopamine as a reward for a task. The problem that this outlines is:

Research has yet to prove that video games can cause the release of abnormal amounts of dopamine into the brain compared with activities, or even drug use. In fact, in 2007 the American Medical Association could not definitively say that playing video games can cause a psychiatric addiction. They stated that there is insufficient evidence to label the effects of gaming as an official disorder... Based on history and personality type, some people are more susceptible to becoming addicted to an activity than others... this does not mean that video games are responsible for addiction. People can become behaviourally addicted to anything based on their personality, background, or if they simply choose to (*Caters*, 2010).

Here *Caters* is telling us that she believes that video games are not addictive but just a pleasurable activity, more so than many others. The debate was posted on the website massdebate.org, a subsection under destructiod.com, and opened for voting and commenting. Based on the comments and votes received by others that looked at both arguments and decided on who presented the better argument, *Caters* won by 64% of the votes. Among the comments debates erupted from commentators based on endorphin research on gamers and the idea that we are labelling the game itself as addictive when it is a habit performed by the individual.

One reoccurring trend among the comments in this forum was the idea of labelling video games as:

...addictive or a highly pleasurable pastime for something to be considered addictive (or better, dangerously addictive) there has to be a threshold danger of contracting that addiction. Otherwise, even one instance automatically makes something addictive, and the word addictive loses a great deal of meaning (*Gnarlythotep*, 2010).

The inherent problem with constructing an argument that centers on a causality relationship is that of video game play cannot be defined by a single variable. To attribute someone's choice to play games to one reason is an overgeneralization.

The next set of online debates involves a question and answer forum where an individual asked the question *how do you cure video game addiction?*, opening it up to comments from any who so choose. This discussion board was operating within the context of video game addiction being an established problem. The original post had heard about “a Chinese facility that literally beat you to death so that you could get over your video game or Internet addiction” (Peruvian, 2009). Comments on this were less of a debate format and more about a discussion on how to “cure” video game addiction. Participant responses ranged from recommending an in-patient facility called *Restart* that operates out of Washington State, to life coaching, to “game breaks” where we introduce mandatory stops from playing games. The conduct of operating under the assumption that video game addiction is a recognized psychological illness and that the rehabilitation centers mentioned in several comments can “cure” people may be a questionable proposition if the grounds of this diagnosis are not only unproven, but (so far) unsuccessfully tested.

Well, if your child spends too much time on games, then you might as well just join them and have some bonding time with him or her. This will help create more time for you and your child to be together and would allow you to monitor his activities more. Also, you could gain a good understanding of what drives him to play” (Gertie, 2012).

This discussion shows an important trend in the thinking patterns of people who have children who are interested in the virtual world: they do not understand why they are

doing this and assume that it is the game itself that is causing this, rather than a possible reaction to something much greater.

The next online forum includes a discussion of an article by John Platt titled *Why are video games so addictive?*. In this article, Platt paints video games as a simple source of entertainment with the potential to go too far and become, what he calls, “a dangerous obsession” (Platt, 2012). Platt backs up his argument by testimonies by “Dr. Nicholas David Bowman, assistant professor of communication studies at West Virginia University, who has studied the role of video games in society” (Platt, 2012), and “Dr. Soroya Bacchus, a psychiatrist in Los Angeles who specializes in addiction” (Platt, 2012). Bowman argues that video games have been integrated into society, stating that “There is big fight in the psychology industry right now as to whether or not we consider technology an addiction” (Platt, 2012), while Bacchus believes that “Video game addiction is a modern day psychological disorder which is becoming more and more frequently seen and diagnosed” (Platt, 2012). Platt takes a middle ground to this debate in the sense that he preaches moderation, outlining that “displacement hypothesis” can lead to isolation.

Comments to this article included a discussion surrounding what one person believes is hypocrisy amongst the opposition to gamers. A blogger named Molly writes ““Why are people wasting so much time playing video games?” they wonder as they flip on American Idol.” (Molly, 2012). This discussing asks why those who watch extended amounts of television are passing judgement on those playing extended amounts of video games; it also argues that, “video games have some measureable benefits whereas

television does not” (Molly, 2012). Micah Shapiro supports this idea by explaining that there is more than one type of gamer.

I play games for the same reason I read novels or watch long drawn-out television series. Games now offer the visuals of film, the long drawn out characters and story of novels and TV series, and the interactivity and multiple story paths that make games a game and offer a new level of immersion” (Shapiro, 2012).

The final discussion is a blog made by a gamer who is professing why he plays video games and engages with the virtual world. Gerald Belman writes:

The reason I play games though is to entertain and challenge my mind... One is aware when one is playing the game that one is actually not a hero or a super soldier... Yet you still enjoy it because it immerses you in what it might be like to actually be one” (Belman, 2011).

Belman does not play for a self esteem boost; he plays for immersion and brain stimulation. Belman went into this asking why people play video games and he believes that “there are many reasons; many of them unrelated to self-esteem” (Belman, 2011).

Belman concludes his blog with his beliefs on the overall reasons that people are so attracted to the virtual world;

It gives people the opportunity to have adventures, face their fears and live out their fantasies without any physical or financial risk to themselves. And that is a powerful and beautiful thing. Especially in a world that seems more and more bent on concentrating wealth, knowledge and opportunity in a relatively small portion of the world population (Belman, 2011).

He also adds that virtual worlds have the potential to influence mass amounts of people and could be made to better humanity but, unfortunately “I don't always feel that that is the direction we are heading with games” (Belman, 2012). The next section looks at the effects that these studies have on the population through the creation of norms and stigma. Although many views criticized the possibility of addiction this does not stop

media and other organizations from exaggerating these claims and begin to create a stigma against the subculture known as gamers.

Other psychologists have used personal narratives to convey their beliefs about video games and society. Ryan Van Cleave is one psychologist who believes that he has had a video game addiction, and in his text titled *Unplugged, My Journey into the Dark World of Video Game addiction* (2010), he talks about his own personal battles with what he called “an addiction to World of Warcraft” (Van Cleave, 2010). Van Cleave takes us through his life from being interested in video games at a young age, to neglecting his own family later in life because of this very thing. Although this book was excellent in the way that it explored the results of an individual's commitment, or what he believes to be addiction to virtual worlds, it is one person's narrative and should not be used as a guide that explains why people are migrating to virtual reality.

In response to the data that has been presented in this thesis, there is a fundamental problem with the research being conducted on this issue by some psychologists. Much of what we do as “social scientists”, things such as observational research and theory building, have a close relationship with positivism. Many believe that if any problems arise from an individual playing video games excessively, it is from a problem of priorities. If the person wants to improve their life in the corporeal world then a simple re-arranging of priorities may be in order. If video games are listed as an addiction by the DSM then many will want a clearly defined solution to this problem and will seek expert advice, even rehabilitation. The reality of this issue is very complex and, so far, very mysterious; this could be a natural stage of human interaction that has resulted from the introduction of new forms of technology like when the printing press or television

appeared. However, some social psychologists like Valerie Walkerdine are examining alternative reasons to this migration to virtual worlds. In her book *Children, Gender, Video Games: Towards a Relational Approach to Multimedia*, she examines the issue of video game play from a number of different perspectives. She first argues that “the traditional split between passive consumption and active makes is a false dichotomy” (Walkerdine, 2007: 209). This approach does not subscribe to the idea that there is a fundamental split between the agency that an individual has, and the effect of advertising and culture also has on that same individual. She believes that individuals evolve with their environments in a fluidity of social interaction, that the advertising industry impacts an individual’s life regardless of their will. Walkerdine believes that people, particularly gamers, are active contributors to the making/meaning relationship between the game and the person (Walkerdine, 2007: 2). From this she goes on to argue that video games are much different from other forms of media such as television because those who play them are not spectators but contributors and experience games in “an embodied way” (Walkerdine, 2007: 209). She refers to the appeal of virtual worlds rising from the ability to control a brand new environment while simultaneously existing in a traditional corporeal one. Walkerdine concludes her book by arguing that elements from corporeal life such as the domination of “women by men, of colonial subjects by the coloniser, of labour by capital” (Walkerdine, 2007: 214) transcend body and transfer into virtual space. Walkerdine believes that meaning is created through praxis, and that the core of why people play games is rooted not in the devices but in the social spheres in which we interact.

To call this phenomenon “addictive” does not seem to encompass the root of how people came to play video games in the first place. We must examine the game itself, and the user, in order to understand how both interact together with a multitude of influences from human and non-human factors.

Chapter 2: Docility and Uniformity through Technology

When we examine what is actually going on when someone engages with the virtual world we see that they are in fact socializing with other actors, that they are engaged with one another on a different plain. Although their corporeal participation has decreased, the user is actively participating in another environment. In her conclusion, Valerie Walkerdine (2007) argues that virtual worlds should be examined in a relational approach in which “the assembling of players and the assembling of profit might be understood as part of a complex set of interrelationalities” (Walkerdine, 2007: 214). Part of this chapter looks at this assembling of profit and the motives behind it. With this principle in mind, this chapter argues that virtual realities are not just modes of escape or release for people but they can be used as a method of control or a tool of the state. In order to show how modern technology produces docile bodies, this thesis will implement an experiment that looks at online discussion forums that center around the question of “why do people play video games?” In looking through forums we will see trends emerging that support claims of popular culture as a tool of docility (Adorno, 1991), technology as a tool of power by the state in efforts to create one dimensional society (Marcuse, 1991), and the potential of these technologies to bring human interaction into a new realm (Foucault, 1988). Among other things, we will see that this technology can be used as a method of control over the peoples, and a recruitment tool by the military.

2.1: Video Games as a Tool for Military Recruitment

We are discovering that children are becoming recruits of a rapidly expanding pastime known as gaming. It is unknown how much we truly know about these games. Who makes them? What are the motives behind the design and content of the game

itself? The results indicate that some designers of modern war games, such as *Call of Duty* and *Americas Army*, have a hidden agenda to coerce children into joining the military and fight in real wars. Instruments of pleasure become instruments of recruitment as children are trained in the art of war, improving accuracy, reaction time, and become desensitized to violence, detaching the human from the soldier.

According to a study done by *The Media Analysis Lab* at Simon Frasier University, “the video game industry has already won 30% of the U.S. toy market, earning \$8.8 billion in the U.S. alone -- a share which is larger than the Hollywood box office gross (\$5.2 billion) and 10 times the amount spent on the production of children's television” (Media Analysis Lab, 2007). This leads many people to believe that it would have more rules and regulations because of its size.

On average, parents recognized 16% of games presented to them. This data suggests that parents may not have the information needed to help children make appropriate choices. This may be a moot point, as children and parents participating in related studies have stated that supervision of electronic game playing is rare. (Funk, 1999: 300)

It is because of this assumption that children playing video games is, by in large, an unsupervised activity.

A study on video games and aggression by Elly Konijn and Marije Nije Bijvank from Vrije University in Amsterdam and Brad Bushman from the University of Michigan in 2006 titled *I Wish I Were a Warrior: The Role of Wishful Identification in the Effectsof Violent Video Games on Aggression in Adolescent Boys*, found not only an increase in aggression in subjects who played violent video games, but that the user wished they

would be that character in the game. The study tested 102 boys with a mean age of 15 and divided them into 4 groups:

...from the pool of 52 games, we selected 3 violent–realistic games (*America’s Army* [U.S. Army], *Killzone* [Sony Computer Entertainment Europe], and *Max Payne* [Rock Star Games]), 3 violent fantasy games (*Doom 3* [id Software], *Quake* [id Software], and *Metroid Prime* [Nintendo]), 3 nonviolent–realistic games (*Pro Evolution Soccer* [Konami], *The Sims 2* [EA Games], and *Tony Hawk’s Underground* [Activision]), and 3 nonviolent–fantasy games (*Mario Kart* [Nintendo], *Mario Sunshine* [Nintendo], and *Final Fantasy* [Square Enix]). We selected three games of each type to increase the generalizability of findings (Wells & Windschitl, 1999). Violence ratings were higher for the violent than for the nonviolent games, and realism ratings were higher for the realistic than for the fantasy games. The 12 games were matched in terms of how much participants liked to play them. (Konijn, Bijvank, Bushman, 2006: 310)

Therefore, boys tended to react strongly to the realistic games because of wishful thinking, because the boys felt immersed “although realism and immersion did not influence aggressive behaviour, they did influence wishful identification. If the game was realistic, and if players felt immersed in the game, they identified more with game characters” (Konijn & Bijvank, Bushman, 2006: 1041).

Setting aside the increased aggression and immersion there are some benefits to video games. One of them is increased reaction time. According to Clark, Lanphear, and Riddick, “video game playing has been shown to enhance reaction time (RT) performance” (1987: 82). Children and adolescents are reaching new plateaus in hand eye coordination and reaction time by playing the latest video games for hours on end; many over 30 hours a week (CyberPsychology, 2006).

With the increase in gaming comes an increase in foreign interest. One industry has taken it upon themselves to nurture and fuel these effects for their own agendas, for instance the United States Military Industrial Complex. Not only is the military producing video games that target young children, but the National Guard is using portable video

game devices for its recruits, because they do not have enough space to accommodate them all (Peck, 2008). The US Military has discovered that it can capitalize on the addictive and immersion properties of video games so it has produced and promote the first person shooter game known as *Americas Army*:

...on May 12, 2004, Black Hawk helicopters converged on downtown Los Angeles, surrounding the city's convention center. Troops rappelled down nearby buildings, and armed with machine guns, soldiers ran through the street. Most people remained motionless, fixated on the surreal events. Others, possibly out of fear of a terrorist attack, ran for cover. It was not until an Army spokesman made an announcement that individuals breathed easier. There were no terrorist activities occurring. In fact, there were no immediate threats in the area. So what did the Army want? They were there to encourage everyone to download the latest version of *Americas Army* off the internet. Simply put, the operation was a promotional event. (Lugo, 2006: 11)

For those who have not played the game itself, *Americas Army* is a realistic violent action game produced by the U.S. Army in 2002 and is free to download off the site www.americasarmy.com. The game boasts a high quality graphics engine and has over 5 million registered players (U.S. Army, 2005). The game begins with individuals going through the ropes of the basic training:

...there they practice marksmanship, go through ropes courses, and learn the basic tenets of Army doctrine. Upon completion of basic training, gamers then engage in more complex counter terrorist missions, such as *Special Forces Pipeline*, where they, along with other teammates, defend an Alaskan oil pumping station from a terrorist attack. (Lugo, 2006: 11)

One question comes to mind: why is it free? Why would the military spend large amounts of resources on a high calibre video game and then give it away? According to the military, the game is used as a recruitment tool (Downing, 2004). Since *Americas Army* the *U.S Army* has had great influence and support in several other popular video games such as the *SOCOM* series where users play as a *U.S. Navy SEAL* and participate

in several covert operations, familiarizing the player with military terminology and tactics. This case, it is preparing them for the career that they are unknowingly working towards. One of the most popular games of 2008, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* contains

...the biggest aviation mission—and one of the game's finest surprises—is where the player becomes the weapons controller on a Lockheed G-130 Hercules gunship. The gunship effectively escorts a group of allied troops through a pair of towns by destroying everything in their path. (Dy, 2008: 83)



Comparing this virtual mission to a declassified U.S. Army mission involving a similar scenario and setting, we see that the two videos are almost identical. After viewing the videos it is clear that the user in both reality and virtual reality felt no remorse or even hesitation in incinerating people, demolishing vehicles, and buildings; the user had become desensitized to these violent acts. Some of the appealing aspects of the game are that it boasts an amazing graphics engine with 1080p resolution, and load times that last for only a few seconds.

In the game *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, the player has the task of fighting in modern day Russia and Middle East. When the user fails to complete an objective, the mission starts over from the previous checkpoint. This is where *Americas Army* deviates from the norm. While load times of newer video games last a few moments, *Americas Army* (whose motivation is not profit) lasts over 30 seconds where these words are repeated:

I am an American Soldier.
I am a Warrior and a member of a team.
I serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values.
I will always place the mission first.
I will never accept defeat.
I will never quit.
I will never leave a fallen comrade.
I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills. I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself.
I am an expert and I am a professional.
I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.
I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.
I am an American Soldier. (Americas Army 2005)

Furthermore, when people begin to compare what happens when the player fails the objective, there is a significant difference in what happens between a game like, *Call of Duty* and *Americas Army*. In *Call of Duty*, if a person were to fail the objective they

must start over; however, in *Americas Army* the clock restarts and the player will have unlimited amount of time to restart the mission in basic training.

Why might the Army design levels in such a way? If the primary goal is recruitment, it is likely the game design fulfills such a goal, and by making basic training a relatively easy, pain free experience, one's opinion of the Army, and more specifically basic training, might be similarly impacted. (Lugo, 2006: 13)

One aspect of video games that few people take into account is the subordination of the game over the user. The game creates a scenario where the user cannot question or refuse the orders given to them. Users are therefore subordinates of a plurality where:

...subordination to an impersonal objective principle precludes a real, immediate interaction to the effect that the individual is deprived of some degree of freedom - i.e. we are subordinated in a relationship to an idea or ideal construction that we did not initiate and which we have little/no ability to alter (Simmel, 1950: 352).

When it comes to gaming consoles, users are considered an extension of that console. Users are required to submit themselves to hundreds of hours of game play in order to view action sequences and the reward of progression. This may translate into reality if the user is accustomed to following orders without question they are likely to do the same in a real scenario.

The developers of these violent realistic action games defend these phenomena by stating that children should not be playing these games in the first place because the Entertainment Software Rating Board has labelled most of these games as mature (M 17+), which means that children under the age of 17 are not permitted to buy the game or play it (ESRB, 2008). However, the site lists some helpful tips on how to become involved with children by playing the game with them and speaking to them about it; and it does not list any laws prohibiting the sales of these games to underage children.

After searching the popular websites *ebay.com* and *ebgames.com*, there were several games with a mature rating available to anyone with a valid credit card or debit card. (EB games.com, 2008) The fact is that even if these games were strictly regulated and controlled, children could still download the latest version of *Americas Army*, which is free with no questions asked (U.S. Army, 2005). Although, a person would need to give the website their address and postal code so they can contact them for recruitment (U.S. Army, 2005). If the gamer achieves a high enough score in *Americas Army*, they are contacted by the Army and asked to attend a recruiting session where they are encourage to enlist, if they are 18 years or older (U.S. Army 2005). The Army defends this statement by stating on the game's website that they refer to it only as a "communications strategy" and that it "provides virtual insights about the Army" (U.S. Army, 2005). The problem about this is that, "teenagers have no idea that they are being recruited and neither do their parents" (Lugo, 2006: 14). At least if they are bombarded with advertisements they know they are being recruited. In his conclusion, Lugo writes that "using video games to recruit youth is unethical, it is also brilliant" (2006: 14). Children are offered an enticing video game for free, similar to advertising; they are then conditioned to perform tasks without question and are desensitized to violent and virtual acts. Furthermore,

...if all goes as planned, reality and fiction will become so blurred, gamers will not know the difference, nor will they even understand how they ended up in the middle of the desert, fighting an enemy they know nothing about." (Lugo, 2006:14)

The largest problem is that this recruitment process, created by the military, has gone undetected for years. The game was released in 2002 and when many parents are asked about this game and its content many claim to have no knowledge about it because

they do not have the time, nor the desire to participate in playing the game, or familiarizing themselves with the ESRB rating system to find out if the game is appropriate for their child (Funk, 1999). According to Funk, the greatest challenge that we are facing is “the message that violence is necessary, fun, acceptable and without negative consequences has become the norm in violent media, and particularly in violent video games” (Funk, 1999). If this method of control continues unchecked these organizations will continue to train and develop the next generation of full spectrum warriors, ones that kill virtually, and eventually physically.

2.2: The Dominant Culture Industry and New Technopoly

One of the foundations upon which the opposition to this mass migration is the argument that the individuals engaging in this activity do not socialize and that it is detrimental to society because it is a major cause in the decrease of social and civic participation. This could not be further from the truth. When we examine what is actually going on when someone engages with the virtual world, we see that they are in fact socializing with other actors, that they are engaged with one another on a different plain. Although their corporeal participation has decreased, the user is actively participating in another environment. This change in engagement was seen by some as more of a movement, one towards what Herbert Marcuse calls “the one dimensional society”, a society that uses technology to repress its peoples and stop resistance through the growth of docility. In this book *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse builds upon his concept of the advanced industrial society that is mentioned in *Eros and Civilization*. Marcuse talks about a society dominated by a culture industry and robbed of thought. He uses Sigmund Freud’s notions of repression and domination notions illustrated in *Civilization and its*

Discontents (1930) to depict a one dimensional society where people are controlled by their own superegos. A subsequent result of this control is a loss of agency and a decrease in the substance of politics. In order to maintain control, and preserve the economic and political status of the elite, the conquest of the state becomes one of unhappiness and of repression (Marcuse 1964). It is from this one dimensional society that one dimensional thought emerges. Workers are given access through retail to tools that make them feel equal, when in fact it is more beneficial to the worker to feel unequal. When given the feeling of equality, the worker will care less about the inequalities in life. Marcuse believes that technological advancements have the capacity to help all, but only “If the individual were no longer compelled to prove himself on the market, as a free economic subject, the disappearance of this kind of freedom would be one of the greatest achievements of civilization” (Marcuse 1964). In the eyes of Marcuse the greatest hurdle that people have is the capitalist economic system and the government that is operated by it. Under the current economic and political frameworks technologies are used to control the population:

The apparatus imposes its economic and political requirements for defence and expansion on labour time and free time, on the material and intellectual culture. By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian (Marcuse 1964).

In this logic, Theodore Adorno’s work titled *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* argues that our civilization is in a state of cultural regression (1944); that, in fact, culture has been co-opted and altered to serve the state in turning people into docile bodies. Culture is no longer created; it is administered through agencies such as advertising and entertainment. Adorno paints this Orwellian picture of a society that is spoon-fed culture and is no longer capable of creating “true culture” (1944). Adorno

explains this thought by describing true culture as a plethora of ideas and actions conceived by individuals, for individuals with no state agenda. True culture is born from artists, philosophers, poets, and critical thinking beings. Adorno concludes that the best thing one can do is to think critically. With thought comes possibility, thinking is praxis, “thinking has the momentum of the general” (Adorno 1991: 203). It is through thought that we can become free of docility “the universal tendency toward suppression goes against thought as such...even where unhappiness prevails; thought achieves happiness in the expression of unhappiness. Whoever refuses to permit this thought to be taken from him has not resigned” (Adorno 1991: 203). It seems that thought can be the most effective resistance against the biases of technology and the control of culture. When we begin to think critically about technology and its biases we begin to see that each technology brings with it both positive and negative artefact ideas.

The introduction of new technologies, such as video games, brings with it a wave of changes to the social reality of individuals; these changes have the potential of producing both positive and negative effects. Philosophers like Langdon Winner believe that each technology brings with it artefact ideas, positive and negative traits that impact societies in unimaginable ways. The next aspect of this literature review will examine some philosophers who are looking at the positive and negative effects of this technology on our culture. The questions then becomes, is the existence of a virtual world a problem? Technological philosophers like Neil Postman and Langdon Winner critique technology as having both good and bad traits, one of which is the enslavement and domination of humanity.

Langdon Winner asks:

How will technology be used? What are its functions and practical benefits? How will the technology change the economy? What will it contribute to the production, distribution, and consumption of material wealth? How will the technology affect the environment? (Winner 1980: 85)

With open arms we welcome the advent of new technology and the exponential growth of its abilities:

Many people in freedom loving countries like the United States seem eager to embrace repressive models of social integration expressed in automation, electronic surveillance, and pseudo democratic “quality circles” (Winner 1980: 88)

This is the promise and peril that new technology brings. It is our responsibility to ensure that new technologies that are proposed are properly examined for their potential positive and negative impacts. For Winner, in order to determine the positive and negative properties of these artefact ideas we must understand more about the artefact itself. In looking at an artefact such as an Xbox or Playstation, we are able to trace its history to entertainment made by a corporation or government. What were the motivations behind its design? What were the good and bad things that came with it? These questions, inspired by Winner, have the potential to reveal important variables to the reasons behind the mass migration.

How do we become aware of techno-domination? Neil Postman believes that the solution lies in education, that we must understand that technology is not, as is popularly thought, a benign, neutral tool. The problem, for Postman, is that “The uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of our humanity. It creates a culture without a moral foundation. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living” (Postman 1993: X). Over time, we have evolved from a society that utilized technology as simple tools to aid us in our daily lives to a

technopoly, the surrender of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology.

According to Postman, there are four distinct factors that allowed technopoly's rise in our culture. First are the ubiquitous inventions that led to the association of newness and improvement. Second is the idea of technological advancement improving quality of life as measured with indicators such as standard of living, lifespan, capital gain, men exploited technology, opportunity, and humanity for wealth (Bell, Edison, Rockefeller, Aster, Ford, and Carnegie) (Postman, 1993). Technology provided endless conveniences and comforts; medicine could cure what people formerly relied on religion to do. A person did not need to live close to loved ones since they could drive and telephone and, theoretically, still maintain relationships. Books were replaced by radio, which was replaced by television. According to Postman, science and machinery were easier to trust than God because they were tangible and you could observe them work successfully. "As the spectacular triumphs of technology mounted, something else was happening: old sources of belief came under siege" (Postman 1993:54). This technopoly is not only a state of culture, but a state of mind. In order to fight this Postman explains that Americans should become "loving resistance fighters" (Postman 1993:182). Education should seek to inform us about the potential benefits, and pitfalls, of modern technology such as video games.

Before the existence of the virtual world we were, according to Baudrillard (1985), living in a simulation, once removed from reality with traces left behind. In the virtual world, the user lives in an environment twice removed from the real, with elements of the simulated reality periodically emerging throughout their experiences. Not

only has the virtual world become commodified in the industrialization of culture, but it has become fetishized by those who dwell within it. The gaming industry benefits greatly from increased user interest, not only does increased play increase profits but with the new online multiplayer features that most games have it greatly improves the quality of the game itself. Interest for games is created in a number of different ways; some titles and companies have historically produced quality games and they manage to generate interest through branding while others rely on marketing. However, expert knowledge that has come do conduct studies on particular games has given rise to a new form of marketing that was unexpected by developers.

In order to further examine the way in which this virtual world emerged it is important to examine the political, economic, and cultural conditions of this time. In North America, advanced industrialism paved the way for the construction of a world wide web in which the United States military could share tactical data without relying on unsecured telecommunications lines. From this came a versatile environment that could be sculpted for an infinite number of uses, the rise of the World Wide Web, coupled with these conditions is responsible for the rise of techno-rationality and the wired world; a world in which sociologist Ben Agger believes that postmodernism is a significant factor in its rise. Aggers new work titled *Cyberself and Cybersociety* examines the ideas of virtual self, and pseudo communities in which our virtual selves live. The abandonment of the corporeal sphere has turned people inward;

Everydayness overtakes larger issues of social concern and obscures the connection between everyday life and social structure. This turn inward has resulted in the sublimation of political and social impulses in favour of what I call *substitute sociality* and *cybersubjectivity* (Agger 2010).

Some argue that people engaging with the virtual world are not transported into some escape, they remain in the tangible world, that the virtual world does not exist in any sense. Agger becomes useful in this situation because he clearly outlines the existence of what he calls a “pseudo-community” that is constructed out of technology and demand. This new community becomes a place where the users’ mental state is transported and engaged with an alternative environment.

In an advanced industrial society, Adorno believes that techno-rationality as a form of agency or freedom becomes a contradiction “a technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself” (Adorno 1944: 121). The wired-world, along with the profit motive, facilitates capitalist domination over society through its culture. The proclaimed goal within the advanced industrial civilization is the “end” of domination. In actual fact, however, the contrary trend operates: when we examine the way that technology is used as a tool of docility and as a tool of domination (the conveyer belt, assembly lines, robots replacing workers). The virtual world may very well have emerged as one of the most powerful tools of hegemony ever constructed.

If we are to examine this problem, we must look at the stage in which it is occurring, the internet. Although the virtual world is considered to be somewhat separate from the corporeal it is still a product of the corporeal, dependant on it, following its discourses. The question then becomes, what is the underlying purpose of this product? The virtual world came out of technological developments of the advanced industrial nation:

The first recorded description of the social interactions that could be enabled through networking was a series of memos written by J.C.R. Licklider of MIT in

August 1962 discussing his "Galactic Network" concept" (Leiner, Cerf, et al., 2013).

After that, it quickly became a military affair:

TCP/IP was adopted as a defence standard three years earlier in 1980. This enabled defence to begin sharing in the DARPA Internet technology base and led directly to the eventual partitioning of the military and non- military communities" (Leiner, Cerf, et al., 2013).

Has this product remained in the hands of those in a position of power? Or through the commodification, quantification, and mass distribution of techno-gateways and methods of access, has the product become that of the masses.

2.3: A New Commons?

As we saw, the virtual world provides entertainment for many, providing them with an alternate environment and a new community, so much so that we have become a society obsessed with techno-entertainment, a wired world. As technology improves, we become more engaged, more immersed with the virtual world, believing that we are freeing ourselves from the shackles of the corporeal we embrace the newest techno-gateways with thundering applause. As new technologies emerge, the virtual world becomes more engaging, more enticing, and more realistic. What many fail to understand is that although this virtual world may seem free of normalizing judgment but it is still a product of the material world, thus, things such as patriarchy, class conflict, and struggles for power, get reproduced within a similar framework. The virtual world is dependent on, but also draws from, the corporeal world. Even in the new commons there are struggles for power, each video game released is based on the notion of competition and obtaining prestige. A true commons would recognize that power and relations of power necessarily reproduce repression. Marcuse concludes that not only is repression a part of capitalism,

but that capitalism is preventing us from achieving a non-repressive society, a society where actions are “based on a fundamentally different experience of being, a fundamentally different relation between man and nature, and fundamentally different existential relations” (Marcuse 1956). As long as our existence of being, our relations between one another, and existential relations remain the same then the virtual world will reproduce systems and relations of repression.

In the defence of agency, we can argue that the virtual world has provided a safe haven for subcultures; individuals who are punished for having dissimilar interests can communicate and interact with those who share their interests. Individuals who have desires they wish to fulfill can semi-satisfy them using the virtual world or their virtual selves. Although these desires are not completely satisfied one could argue that some satisfaction is better than no satisfaction. The reality may be that the virtual world increases agency by creating an escape where individuals are freer than the material world, that our culture is happier with access to the virtual world. The virtual world has become the haven of the subcultures.

The problem with this rationale is that we are assuming that the virtual world is purely a product of the masses for the masses, a tool of agency that exists to resist repression and domination. Few have considered the possibility that the virtual world may be a tool of hegemony, a method of controlling the masses by keeping them distracted from their oppressors. Why would people want to mobilize and resist their oppressors in the material world if they are almost removed from it? The virtual world itself may in fact be the new opiate of the masses. The pursuit of prestige may in fact be the new drug of choice, providing stimulation without fulfillment. Fooling us into

thinking that our lack has been filled the virtual world masquerades as an environment that exists outside the world, providing the mind with everything it needs through the presentation of possibility, in actuality it operates off of the fundamental systems, reproducing repression while simultaneously creating docility. With a higher level of engagement with the virtual over the corporeal we see less of a desire to purchase commodities for the purpose of happiness; if someone is content with escaping to the virtual then why attempt to purchase products in an attempt to improve the corporeal? Thus, the consumer is no longer purchasing material goods at the same rate.

Simultaneously, many people who are engaged with the virtual world will purchase or simply exchange virtual commodities without being taxed or exploited. This reduction of consumption, although it does not affect a large portion of the population, is a growing threat to those who profit heavily from high rates of consumption. The problem is that the video game industry has become large enough to generate its own elite class, its own set of interests, and its own policy lobbyists. We are beginning to see a mutual relationship emerge between the profit motive of those who sell these games and those in the medical industry who stand to profit from labelling and treating extended play as “addiction”.

When a large amount of people are engaged in virtual worlds but still consume products at the rate that the culture industry dictates, it is favourable to the economy that depends on a particular rate of consumption; however, it is when large amounts of people begin to migrate from the corporeal and focus solely on the virtual that a problem arises. The corporations now have two options: they can either attempt to stem the amount of time that individuals play games by constructing an ideology of excessive play (a method

that we already see emerging); or, they can integrate themselves into virtual worlds and attempt to profit from the users engaged with them.

The envisioning of a virtual commons, full of agency, is a false hope, one that will not come to fruition with the current political system. One must understand the extent at which reification exists, in doing this you will see that the autonomist Marxist arguments laid out that see the virtual commons emerge from a struggle are becoming more and more bleak. As Simon Penny succinctly puts it:

We have no reason to delude ourselves that any new technology, as such, promises any sort of sociocultural liberation. History is against us here. We must assume that the forces of large-scale commodity capitalism will attempt to capitalize fully on the phenomenon in terms of financial profit, and that the potential for surveillance and control will be utilized by corporate and state entities (Penny 1994: 247).

This is the endgame of capitalism and virtuality, the transcending of exploitation from the corporeal into the virtual, the infiltration of panopticism into the virtual world, and the insidious culture industry invading the so called commons,

The internet either saturates people with pre-formed meaning or it liberates our better literary natures as we critically engage other texts and ideas and, in response, compose our own versions (Agger 2004:162).

Although some may view virtual worlds as a possible vehicle of change, we cannot disregard the fact that they are biased technologies that can ultimately be turned off by the state as a tool of political domination.

Chapter 3: The Escape to Simulations

In the previous chapter, we saw that video gaming can be seen as a form of power and control. In this sense, we explained that it cannot be seen as a source of agency for the players. However, it is impossible to understand the ongoing migration toward virtual reality without seeing the game from the perspective of the players, and to see why they want to play these games rather than doing something else.

3.1: The desire for another reality

There exists a place where you can go on quests in a mystical land, play for your favourite sports team, and engage others in combat, a new world, and a virtual world. With the potential to do almost anything many have come to prefer this world to their own tangible, corporeal, world. Those who label this preference as an addiction must understand the process in which individuals choose the virtual over the real. The way to understanding what is truly going on with this mass migration is to ask the right questions. The problem with the vast majority of literature on virtual reality is that it does not do this. Most literature on the subject (Melemis (2009), Leung (2004), Dy (2008), Clark, Lanphear, Riddick, Chumbley & Griffiths (2006), Bowman, Lewis, & Weber (2008), Gentile (2008), and Platt (2012)) examines this phenomenon as a sickness, treating individuals that prefer virtuality as mentally ill. They still follow the notion that assimilation into corporeal reality is the best way to psychic health. When we look beyond the individuals desire to play and look at the social context in which this desire emerged we can begin to ask broader questions; instead of asking why are these people “addicted” to video games (Gentile, 2008, Melemis, 2009), we should ask under what

conditions has this trend of escaping to a virtual world not only emerged, but has become commonplace for many individuals?

This section begins with thinkers that look at the matter of virtuality or substitute reality. Jean Baudrillard forms the foundation of a critical analysis of an issue of alternate realities that is before his time; he believed, towards the end of his life, that there is a “murder of the self” that is going on in the advanced industrial society known as the west. Virtual communities have become escapes from corporeal life.

His work titled *Simulations* is one of the most significant books on the emergence of substitute realities. Baudrillard influenced many to recognize the rise of what was once imaginary, the rise of a world only thought to exist but never existed: “abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1985). What happens when the realities become blurred? The current practice of politics, economics, culture itself, is to ignore the existence of the virtual world. In doing so the virtual world has become the Wild West of culture, existence without norms or consequences:

Perhaps only the allegory of the Empire remains. For it is with the same Imperialism that present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models. But it is no longer a question of either maps or territory. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between them that was the abstractions charm (Baudrillard 1985).

People now have the ability to take on new identities as avatars, as virtual selves that “seek meaning, community and love not face-to-face” (Agger 2004: 47). Many people will go on to the Internet in order to express feelings of anger, love, or even power over others without seeing them face-to-face. The monotony of every day life overtakes

larger issues of social concern and obscures the connection between everyday life and social structure. Stressing the emergence of a virtual world may seem strange but it is actually quite remarkable and worthy of study for the reason that, “this turn inward has resulted in the sublimation of political and social impulses in favour of what I call *substitute sociality* and *cybersubjectivity*” (Agger 2004). The transformation of an individual from a critical thinking being, into a reified existence represents what Baudrillard sees as the murder of the real.

Alternate realities have traditionally been grouped into categories such as hallucinations or dream states. The concept of a simulation, however, was articulated by Jean Baudrillard in the early 1980’s. Baudrillard postulated that the real is no longer real, that:

Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal... Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible. It is the whole political problem of the parody, of hyper simulation or offensive simulation, which is posed here (Baudrillard 1985).

What then happens to reality itself? The very definition of the real becomes “that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction” (Baudrillard 1985). This is when the “perfect crime” (2004) is committed; the real has been replaced with a simulation and there is not a soul who knows it; the focal point of the panopticon may be blind (Baudrillard 1985). In this sense, the virtual world is similar to the wild west of the 19th century; actions or comments that are taboo in corporeal life are ignored or accepted in many virtual communities.

2.2: New Forms of Interactions

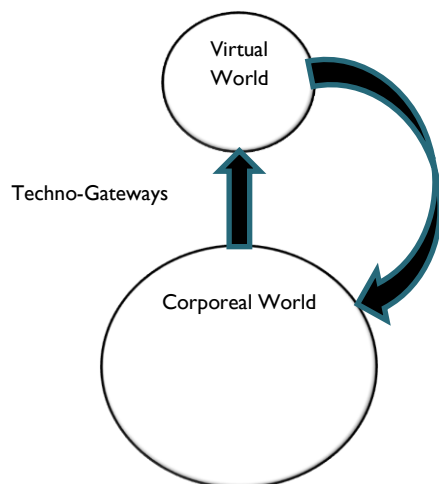
The concept of virtual reality came from the entertainment industry; the ability to engage with the virtual world came from technological progress; what follows is a product of what we have come to understand as progress merging with capitalism and the entertainment industry. Although there had been a rich history of individuals attempting to escape reality (books, drugs, meditation...), we have never seen the attempt at marketing an escape that appeals to multiple senses and gives the user the ability to interact with the fabricated world, the ability to do this has made virtual worlds very appealing, so much so that there appears to be a mass migration of social interaction from the corporeal world to the virtual world; the preference of interaction in virtuality over physical reality is something that has never been seen before. This new form of interaction promises to reshape the human condition.

What we are seeing with the majority of the current literature is an emphasis on the micro interactions between the user and the game (Angers, N., Fagley, W.H., Hart, G.M., Johnson, B., Lally, T., Robinson, A. & Stamm, B. 2009; Bowman, N.D., Lewis, M.L. & Weber, R. 2008; Bushman, Brad J 2007; Chumbley, J. & Griffiths, M. 2006; Clark, J., Lanphear, A., Riddick, C 2009; Gentile, Douglas 2009; Leung, L. 2004). The problem with this literature is that it fails to examine the other social elements that impact the user. In missing interactions like those between the user and other users in the game, and that of the user and their interactions with both the virtual and corporeal world, these articles do not provide us with a solid foundation for their quantitative and qualitative results and recommendations. We need to fully appreciate the amount and depth of interactions that are occurring, only then will we see what is fuelling this mass migration

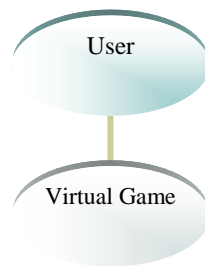
to virtuality. In order to gain a better understanding of these interactions we must look to those who understand the culture industry and the individual's interactions within it. The next section focuses on the development of a solid foundation of understanding in which we can build a better theory for the issue.

In this sense, this thesis moves slightly from Baudrillard's belief that the simulation replaces the reality in that it contends that virtual reality is in itself a separate reality that coexists with corporeal reality.

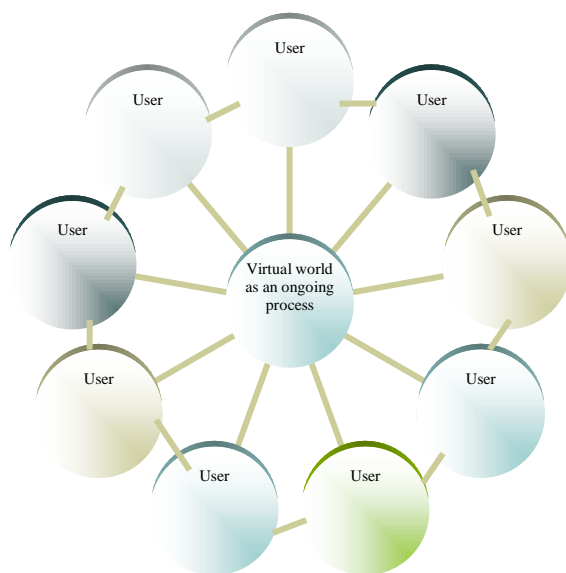
Figure 1.1



When an individual engages with a virtual community he or she is entering into an alternate reality that emerges from the interaction between the individual and the game as seen in this figure.

Figure 1.2

This configuration can also exist between an individual and other forms of entertainment such as books, television, and movies; however, virtual worlds differ in that there are other individuals interacting with the environment at the same time as the user. When reading a book there is not a group of people reading the same book letter for letter and working with you to read or write to the end. Therefore the dynamic becomes enriched when other users are added to the mix. This enrichment results in the dramatic transformation of the game from a form of individual entertainment into a pseudo-community.

Figure 1.3

This configuration works within spheres of interaction that encompass an individual's daily routine of interactions. Based on the amount of time that an individual is awake we are able to map their interactions with human and non-human actors to see who or what is the most powerful relationship. Each sphere of interaction contains a reality in and of itself and, as we will see in the following case study, each reality has the potential to expand and contract based on the amount of interaction received. In doing so, that so called virtual reality becomes increasingly important to the individual. The following is a case study on a year of an individual's life where we see that the virtual world emerges from non-existence to the individual, to becoming the most powerful reality in that individual's life. When that reality was taken away, the results were tragic.

This is the story of Brandon Crisp, a story that is now familiar with many people in central Ontario. Crisp, a young fifteen year-old boy from Barrie, Ontario, ran away from home on October 13, 2008 after an argument with his parents regarding his excessive use of the popular video game Call of Duty (COD), for the Xbox 360. As the weeks passed Crisp's disappearance became a mystery and eventually, winter began to arrive. The late days of October marked the beginning of freezing temperatures and light flurries, the air was getting colder as the search parties combed the Oro Medonte countryside. He was not seen or heard of until his lifeless body was discovered by a group of deer hunters on November 5, 2008, over three weeks later. Autopsy reports later revealed that he had died due to injuries sustained similar to falling from a tree. His funeral was held a week later with a turn out of over 1,700 people to pay their respects to the young boy. It was reported that Brandon was playing an excessive amount of COD, which led to multiple arguments with his parents. On the day Crisp decided to run away

from home his parents announced that they were taking away his Xbox permanently. This situation received a large amount of media attention, providing multiple explanations for the reason that Crisp had decided to run away. Some media sources such as CBC chose to blame the video game and the addiction to the video game as the reason for Crisp running away. Other sources such as the *Toronto Star*, and the *National Post* chalked it up to a classic case of permissive parenting. Although many people attempted to point fingers and create blame regarding the disappearance and subsequent death of Brandon Crisp, this will not provide an accurate understanding of what led to his disappearance.

When compiling the information surrounding the disappearance of Crisp, various news sources were used such as *CBC*, a *Fifth Estate* documentary, *City TV*, *Simcoe.com*, *National Post* and *Toronto Star*. The popular social networking website Facebook was also used to establish Crisp's interactions with his peer groups. Based on the traces of interactions found within the media sources the entire configuration begins in the fall of 2007, when Crisp's father and hockey coach decided to remove him from the team because of his size, and ends in November of 2008 when Crisp's body was discovered in a field in Oro-Medonte.

Based on statements made by the Crisp family, his friends, and his school principal, to different media outlets during the time of Crisp's disappearance, one can obtain a perspective of who he was and what he was like. Brandon was a typical teenage boy. He was a grade 10 student at St. Joseph's High School in Barrie Ontario. He lived with his mother and father, Steve and Angelika, his older sister Natasha and twin sister Samantha. He was rather small for his size, being only five foot three inches and around one-hundred pounds. Brandon was described by his older sister as annoying, intelligent

and extremely funny (Ramsay, Oct. 22, 2009). His principal described him as a fairly quiet, good student (Toronto Star News Service, Oct. 20, 2008), and his best friend Nick said that he was fairly shy outside of his group of friends (Caloz, 2009). His interests included history and hockey. In 2007, Crisp's hockey coach and Brandon's father decided it would be in his best interest if they removed him from the hockey team he played for, for one season to let him grow (City TV Staff, Nov. 5, 2008). Brandon's father said that his height was his disadvantage as he rose through the levels of the minor hockey league. Hockey was something that offered him the competition and teamwork that he enjoyed, and abruptly it was removed from his life without his input on the situation (Ramsay, Nov. 13, 2008).

Christmas that year Brandon's parents gave him an Xbox. The quick transition out of hockey allowed him time to excel in the video game (City TV Staff, Nov. 5, 2008). It offered the same competitive and team atmosphere that hockey would, where everyone depends on one another for one common goal. Instead of the goal being saving the puck and winning games, it was now about killing people and indulging in a world far different than he was able to physically live in. Quickly, Crisp began playing video games more often than his parents anticipated; it was no longer a recreational hobby like hockey once was (Toronto Star News Service, Oct. 20, 2008). This was something readily available for his enjoyment whenever he needed a sense of social interaction.

Brandon Crisp, the gamer, was not the same as Brandon Crisp, the teenager. He became heavily interested in and attached to COD. All of a sudden the 15 year-old was playing with giants, ex military men, other children, adults, all walks of life. This virtual world was able to give him a sense of empowerment to do what he wanted and be who he

wanted. His small size did not matter in this game (Watt, Oct. 22, 2008). His best friend Nick said he introduced Brandon to online gaming, so they could play with one another, when not physically with each other (Caloz, 2009). His father said that he quickly became heavily involved with the game, but had no exact idea of how involved he really was. Brandon the gamer, played constantly and was soon on a Gamebattles website, sponsored by Major League Gaming (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009). One of Brandon's online friends called him obsessed, while another ranked him 8 out of 10, and said Brandon was attempting to go pro (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009). Brandon's position in his online gaming was a tactical shooter, something seen as a crucial role among gaming clans. His playing seemingly paid off as well, he was ranked Level 55, 10th Prestige on the Gamebattles website, and had every intention of eventually making money from playing this video game (Caloz, 2009). The game had no longer become a mere hobby, but a vocation, a future. His father said that he was a very competitive person and he put 120 percent into everything he did, but he hated physical labour, possibly why the incentive of money for playing interested him (Watt, Oct. 20, 2008). The video game began to consume the life of Brandon Crisp, removing him from the average teenage world and into one of gaming and fantasy. Nick said quickly Brandon became the leader of their clan (an internal collective of individuals that compete at a high level against other clans), and he possessed a "natural instinct" (Caloz, 2009). As Brandon began to indulge deeper into the virtual world his parents watched him begin to withdraw from his family. At dinner he would run down from his room, eat as quickly as possible, and then would be right back up stairs (Watt, Oct, 20, 2008).

Spring 2008, Brandon and his friends joined a website called Gamebattles; it is sponsored by Major League Gaming, and allows him to compete with and against other people to move up the virtual ladder into the Major League Gaming world (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009). What followed with this were much more excessive playing and much more detachment from the physical world. In the beginning he joined with his friends, their clan was called “A Fundamental System” and together they played other clans online. However, his friend Nick said that he and his friends slowly began to argue and get frustrated with one another because of the online gaming, and decided it was best if they did not play together in such a highly competitive mode (Caloz, 2009). Although he was no longer playing with his friends, Crisp’s excessive play persisted. His parents also recalled waking up at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning hearing Brandon talking on his microphone, playing his video game. It sometimes reached the point that his father would physically have to rip the cords out of the wall to get him to pay attention and quit playing (Watt, Oct. 22, 2008).

Into the summer months, Brandon began to lose contact with his friends from school. They all began looking for summer jobs, and spending their summers outside of the virtual world. Brandon did not attempt to find a job that summer, and as a result interacted less with his friends, and much more with his Xbox (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009b). Brandon’s mother said that Brandon was hardly able to enjoy the summer. He spent all of his time inside playing his Xbox (Watt, Oct. 20, 2008). By this point into his gaming, his family had hardly any interaction with Brandon. He preferred sitting up in his bedroom playing Xbox in his virtual world. One of Brandon’s online friends, an eleven year-old from New Jersey, was in a clan with him called “Eye of the Storm” (CBC News,

Mar. 6, 2009a). He recalled two specific matches they played, one on July 11, 2008 at 10:45pm and the other on July 17, 2008 at 11:30pm. Both in which they lost. He said that Brandon was obsessed, and when they lost he became very aggressive and verbally disrespectful to him and other teammates (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009a). His playing became so excessive that his parents worried it was consuming far too much of Brandon's life. His parents attempted to cancel their subscription to Xbox Live, but because it was pre-paid they were unable to (Doolittle, Nov. 6, 2008). Brandon's involvement with the video game continued to consume all of his relations with the physical world, and his parents felt helpless.

Early October, just weeks prior to his disappearance, the only interactions Brandon had with his parents were arguments revolving around the game. He was playing Xbox from the moment he got home from school until 12 or 1 in the morning (City TV Staff, Nov. 5, 2008). His parents felt like every waking hour was spent improving his position in Call of Duty and the Gamebattles website. They feared his academics were going to suffer as a result (Watt, Oct. 22, 2008). The Gamebattles website revealed that the weekend of October 9 to 13, 2008 was a very important weekend for Brandon in the gaming world. It was a weekend full of scheduled matches (City TV Staff, Nov. 5, 2008). It was a global tournament designed to spot the up-and-coming gamers, with money incentives to the most talented, and an opportunity into the Major League (Watt, Oct 20, 2008). On October 9th, the first day of the tournament Brandon skipped his afternoon classes to compete in this competition. Subsequently, he missed the entire day on October 10th to play as well (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009a). This

was certainly something out of the ordinary for Brandon; his principal said that he was a good student, with great attendance (Toronto Star News Service, Oct. 20, 2008).

Crisp's parents discovered he skipped his classes on the 9th and the 10th and while discussing his absences, his parents decided that they had had enough and removed the Xbox from Brandon's bedroom and attempt to hide it in a place he would not be able to find it (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009b). The following day, while his parents were at work, he retrieved his hidden Xbox and resumed his involvement in his important tournament (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009b). On October 12th, his parents realized he was once again playing his Xbox. At the time his parents confronted him, he was online playing with Michael Russell. He heard Brandon and his parents' argument regarding the Xbox, and was also the last person from the gaming world to hear from Brandon, as well as the last person besides from his family within the physical world (CBC News, Mar. 6, 2009b).

The following day, Crisp's parents told him that they were removing the Xbox from his life for good. They told him he would not be seeing it again. Brandon told his father that if he was not getting it back, he was running away from home (Roberts, Oct. 21, 2008). He went outside told his mother he was running away from home, she called his bluff, telling him to pack a jacket even though that particular day was warm. He went inside grabbed his jacket along with his backpack with a few belongings, and then rode off on his bike, that he had not been on even prior to his interest in gaming (Roberts, Oct. 21, 2008). His parents never believed this was the last time they would see of Brandon. They believed he would head into Oro-Medonte, just north of Barrie, not far from their home, to one of his friend's homes, who had an Xbox (Watt, Oct. 20, 2008).

On the evening of October 13th his parents became worried, wondering if Brandon was truly bluffing of his running away. They had not heard from him since his declaration at lunchtime. At 11:30pm that night when Brandon had still not returned home his parents contacted the Barrie Police Service to report their son as missing (Doolittle, Nov. 6, 2008).

October 22, the police contacted Microsoft regarding the case. They quickly offered any assistance possible to help find this young boy, but made it very clear that his disappearance was not their fault (CBC News, Oct. 25, 2008). All online information was handed over to police, but police were not able to find any information regarding a lure attempt (CBC News, Oct. 25, 2008). They offered any assistance they could to the police, and matched the current reward, upping it to \$50,000 for information regarding Brandon (CBC News, Oct. 25, 2008).

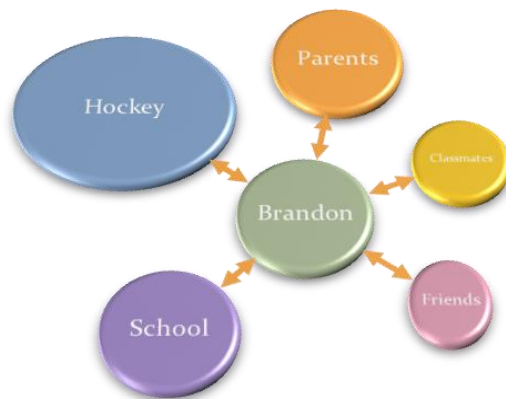
Late October, the weather was now beginning to play a crucial role in the case of Brandon Crisp. When he disappeared on the Thanksgiving weekend, it was unusually warm for October – to the point where long sleeves were not even necessary. By October 24, temperatures were dropping as low as minus 8, with snow (City TV Staff, Nov. 5, 2008). With the quick transformation in the weather, people began suspecting the worst, but hoping for the best in the locating of Brandon.

November 5th, 10:18am, a group of deer hunters in Oro-Medonte discovered a dead body in a field between Lines Four and Five, and immediately contacted the police (Doolittle, Nov. 5, 2008). Although autopsy reports had not confirmed it, this was the ending that no one had hoped for (CBC News, Nov. 5, 2008). The body of Crisp was removed from the fielded area at 5pm that evening (Doolittle, Nov. 5, 2008). Although

everyone had suspected that he had died from hypothermia due to the drop in temperature, the autopsy reported that he died due to injuries similar to those sustained from falling from a tree (CBC News, Nov. 14, 2008). The time of death was not reported.

Upon examination of Crisp's interactions with human and non-human actors we see a pattern of interactions emerge. The change in the size of the spheres represents stronger and weaker interactions based on the hours that Crisp was awake during an average day. Though these diagrams we see that in October of 2008 his Xbox and the virtual world within had become the thing that he interacted with the most and, therefore, had the greatest attachment. In October 2007, one of the most significant interactions in Crisp's life was between him and his hockey team. When that dynamic was removed Crisp had lost a significant relationship where he was able to interact with others and make a difference. *Figure 1* shows the dynamic that existed in October, 2007, between Crisp and significant actors. The approximate size of each sphere represents the approximate time that Brandon spent interacting with on a monthly basis gathered from articles from *CBC news* (2008), *Toronto Star* (2008), and *Watt*, (2008).

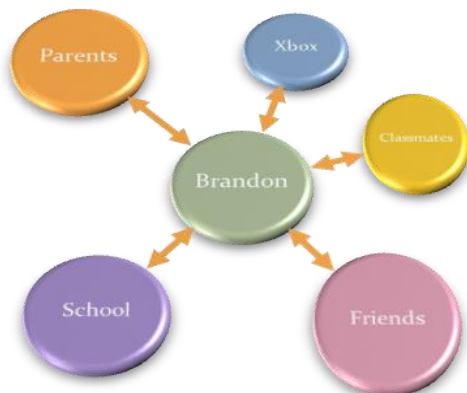
Figure 1: October 2007



Green: Brandon
 Blue: Hockey
 Orange: Parents
 Yellow: Classmates
 Pink: Friends
 Purple: School

When Crisp's parents bought him the Xbox and his friend Nick introduced him to the Xbox live online community, COD, for Crisp, this became a virtual substitute for his Hockey. Therefore, in January 2008, Crisp's interactions with the Xbox had begun. Crisp was able to be a part of a team, interact, and influence the outcome of matches, just like he could on his hockey team. *Figure 2* shows the new dynamic that had emerged with the change in the social.

Figure 2: January 2008

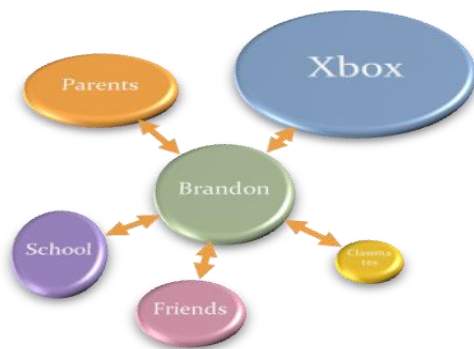


Green: Brandon
 Blue: Xbox
 Orange: Parents
 Yellow: Classmates
 Pink: Friends
 Purple: School

As Crisp's COD skill and rank increased his interactions with the game and virtual world became stronger. Putnam would classify this as decreased civic interaction; Crisp was part of a team in the corporal community, now his leisure time is consumed by media entertainment and civic interaction has diminished. The truth is that Crisp's civic interaction did not decrease, it merely shifted. Crisp is still interacting with others, he is part of a team who met at scheduled times and played games together. The problem was that the COD world had become preferable to the corporeal world.

As his game play increased Crisp learned of the possibility of a future profession in playing this game. In the summer of 2008, while many of his friends were going to work, Crisp began to play for a future, practicing longer, and climbing the ranks towards a new objective, a career in gaming. When Crisp began to have confrontations with his parents in October 2008, the virtual world had become a powerful influence in his life. At this point the corporeal world may have even seemed like an obstacle; his decision to skip school to play COD indicates that the importance of this actor was more powerful than any other. *Figure 3* shows that the power dynamic had changed yet again, the Xbox and its virtual community had become the most important actor in Crisp's life.

Figure 3: October 2008



Green: Brandon

Blue: Xbox

Orange: Parents

Yellow: Classmates

Pink: Friends

Purple: School

When Crisp's father decided to remove his Xbox, Crisp lost more than a toy, he lost his gateway into his virtual world; a world that had become more important to him than the corporeal world itself. He lost most of his friends, his team, his avatar, and the possibility of getting his dream job. Removing these elements caused a strong negative reaction from Crisp, which led to him to run away from his home and towards his friend who had another Xbox.

In examining the changes in interaction in an individual like Brandon Crisp, we see that the virtual world has the potential to become the most powerful reality in an individual's life. The simulation has been slowly advancing upon society itself. With establishing the presence of a simulation, more specifically a virtual world, this thesis now turns to some of the factors that facilitated its growth in post-modern culture. One of these factors is a decrease in what Robert Putnam calls civic participation.

Some people may believe that Western culture is adopting a new way of life, one that holds individuality over collective action. Putnam examined this trend by exploring "America's concerns about weakening community bonds" (Putnam 2000: 25). In doing this Putnam does not assume that ties have weakened but that "the younger generation today is no less engaged than their predecessors but engaged in new ways" (Putnam 2000: 26). The challenge was to take into account the vast number of variables that can account for this trend. Putnam looked rigorously for different explanations that accounted for a reduction in human engagement. In this circumstance, Putnam is referring to factors such as political participation, civic participation, religious participation, connections in the workplace, informal social connections, altruism, volunteering, and philanthropy.

Addressing his section on civic engagement, Putnam examines four different factors that may have aided in decreased civic participation. Some of the factors that he examines include pressures of time and money:

The central exculpatory fact is that civic engagement and social connectedness have diminished almost equally for both women and men, working or not, married or single, financially stressed or financially comfortable (Putnam 2000: 203).

This idea has us looking for a secondary explanation for a decrease in civic engagement; mobility and sprawl. “[Could] disengagement perhaps be linked not with urbanization, but to suburbanization?” (Putnam 2000: 208).

Further into his analysis, Putnam examines the way in which technology affects communication and leisure, suggesting that “the gradual merger of the massive telecommunications and entertainment industries had become the very foundation for a new economic era,” the net generation (Putnam 2000: 216). Technology is being integrated into households at an unprecedented rate, bringing convenience to many while simultaneously broadening individual tastes. Through his examination of technologies impact on civic engagement Putnam reveals that technology had become one of the most significant factors that contribute to the overall trend.

Entertainment in this age is not linear. Individuals are no longer viewers, they are users, and they are actively transforming the world in which they are being entertained. They are now able to exercise their will upon a virtual environment. The user is active in a making meaning praxis with the message. This is one of the major attractions to the virtual world. One of the most important theoretical questions that we must ask ourselves is “what purpose does the virtual world serve?”:

In the context of prurient diversions and electronic simulation, the Internet can either facilitate business growth along with cultural sedation, or it can become a “counter” net, a subversive force for self-exploration and self-expression, which together become politically significant (Agger 2004:162).

In examining the reasons, or factors, why people like Brandon Crisp choose the virtual over the corporeal it is important to look at some significant properties such as mortality, power, excitement, and consensus of existence in each world, how they differ, and the roles they play. Each of these has a particular role in the overall lure of the virtual world. The lure of immortality and the possibility of a second chance may be a significant reason as to why individuals choose the virtual over the corporeal. When playing an online game, if the player’s avatar dies he has the ability to “respawn” and are given an opportunity for a second chance. In the material world, we are given only one chance, one life, there are no “respawns”, at least that is the common belief among the Abrahamic religions, and the Buddhists would likely disagree.

A second factor of influence in the transition from the corporeal to the virtual is that of power, the ability to have power over others, the power to change an outcome, the power to become something you are not. In our current political, and economic, frameworks power as something centralized, to be held and not to be shared; individuals compete for power and the vast majorities believe that they are powerless in many situations. Power, in terms of physical, mental, or commanding power, becomes easier to obtain in the virtual world when the individual is given an ability to directly execute his power without material sanctions. Power, or lack thereof, can manifest itself in multiple ways (patriarchy, political domination, power...). In the virtual world, we have the power to fulfill certain desires through the actions and quests of our virtual selves.

A third factor that could attract individuals to the virtual world is that a world full of possibility and absent of material sanctions is more appealing than one riddled with sanctions, discipline, and oppression. The mass migration to the virtual world may in fact be a backlash to the extensive degree of discipline and punishment exercised in the material world. This factor plays into Nick Dyer Withaford's notion of class struggles manifesting themselves in new ways, in new technologies. In response to excessive discipline and what Foucault calls "normalization", the people have found sanctuary in the cyber-commons of the virtual world. In the book *Cybermarx* (1999), Nick Dyer-Withaford constructs an idea of the virtual world as having the potential to become the commons of the people, a place where individuals can be free and the people can unite and assemble for social change (1999, chap.4). Others like Simon Penny (1994) believe that this commons is temporary; the rate at which the state co-opts and assimilates virtuality has never been greater. Many see the virtual world as a space of reification, a new opiate where masses converge as an escape from the corporeal world and enter into distracting tasks to take their mind off of the misery and repression of reality. As we can see, the debate on whether the virtual world is the new commons of the peoples or the ultimate tool of hegemony becomes central in this thesis.

One thing is sure, that it is an escape from reality. In an article on the website <http://ninety-ninepercentgaming.wordpress.com> titled *Escaping Reality Through Video Games* Micheal writes:

The escape they provided and the relief they brought means that Video games will always be my favourite medium. Last April I fell ill, and couldn't do much. I fell out of touch with most people I knew. I couldn't enjoy my life. So I enjoyed a multitude of others instead (Micheal, 2012).

Comments to this notion of enjoying alternative lives through virtual reality ranged from support “When we got out of that apartment and moved in with his folks temporarily before moving here to N Texas, we also played Wow – we were in an in-between place and it helped us get through it” (saymber, 2012), to

“games offer me a sense of adventure, creativity, and competition (maybe even camaraderie) that no other form of media does. I always tell people, I play video games for the same reason you watch TV or movies for hours: it’s fun, entertaining, and an escape” (Brenan, 2012)

This article was less a debate and more of a proclamation of the idea that video games are an escape for this particular individual, the fact that many others responded to this article with words of support and agreement speaks to its value on the trend of escapism.

The next group of comments was gathered from an article written by an individual calling themselves Ocarina of Time Nerd and is titled *Video Games: My Escape from Reality*. In this article the writer talks about how he or she plays video games to cope with different elements of life:

Everyone deals with their situations differently, but for myself video games offer me a way to cope while also giving me a forum to gain understanding (Ocarina of Time Nerd, 2013).

Reactions to the article ranged from individuals identifying with the blog “I understand you... I play cod all day. I’m 15 and a girl but I just want a chance to escape from all my problems going on in my life right now” (Livelifetothefullest, 2013), to guilt “I play them because I don’t feel I’m as important, special, or interesting in real life as I can be in a game” (Marc, 2013), all comments were acknowledging video games as a form of escape from reality.

3.3: The Existence of the Virtual Self

When we look at how people present themselves online we see that there is now a third stage in Erving Goffman's dramaturgy, a front stage self, a back stage self, and a virtual self. Goffman believed that people present themselves in different ways in everyday life. He illustrated the properties of the front stage and back stage selves. The front stage self is the self that we project to others in formal, social situations. Goffman's dramaturgical approach sees people interacting as if they were on stage, with a front stage self-appealing to the public, and a back stage self that we show in private, personal or intimate relationships (Goffman 1959). What we are witnessing with the emergence of a virtual world is the emergence of a third self in Goffman's equation, the virtual self. The virtual self, according to sociologist Ben Agger (2004: 179) applies to a person who "spends a good deal of time online and acquires his/her identity from this activity, which is once removed from an everyday reality in which people interact with each other face-to-face. The virtual self-experiences the world through the screen". The virtual self can interact in pseudo-communities in which users interact using avatars that are constructed by the user. Depending on the game, the users can model an avatar after any image (fantasy, reality, the physique they are, the physique they wish they could be). Through this construction, some see the avatar as a "better" or ideal self that can be controlled and used in a "better" society.

Before this culture passes this judgment on these individuals we must first ask ourselves both: What are the conditions that make the virtual world appealing, and what the conditions in which the virtual world emerged? The virtual world grows because there are individuals choosing to interact with it more. It would follow that the answer lies not

in removing the techno-gateways that make the virtual world accessible, but in making the corporeal world, and the priorities within it, more preferable than the virtual. If the material world were a better place to be, then we would have no use for the virtual world.

Some argue that it is not a preferable change, that this path may lead us down a road that we ought not to follow; a scenario which Baudrillard describes as a state where “We shall never experience the primal scene, but at every moment we experience its prolongation and its expiation. There is no end to this and the consequences are incalculable” (Baudrillard 2002). Removing one’s self from reality can often result in decreased interaction in the corporeal world, social interactions become less prevalent, the body becomes isolated, and the mind begins to lose its grasp on what is real and what is simulated. The goals of life in the corporeal world become blurred as we establish new connections, new interactions, and new life goals in the virtual world.

Goffman’s work has become an integral part of this thesis in that he believes that there is not just one self or personality that an individual projects but a sort of dramaturgical effect where the individual projects a front stage self, the self that is presented to the public in social situations involving the unfamiliar; and the back-stage self, the self-presented in private or intimate setting. If we take this into account then there remains a possibility for the development of multiple selves, that this effect is not simply a dichotomy but has the potential to increase if a new social environment were introduced. It is from this that we see the emergence of a third identity, the virtual self. The virtual self is an identity that is presented in a total virtual environment, I believe that the user projects an entirely new self when he is engaged in virtual social interactions with unfamiliar people.

Conclusion: A world of potentials

Eric Schmidt once said “the Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, it is the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had” (Taylor, 2010) One of the most important theoretical questions that we must ask ourselves, what purpose does the virtual world serve? Is the virtual world in fact a tool of increased agency, existing to fulfill lacks, semi-satisfy desires, and provide people with an escape from reality? Or is the virtual world a tool of hegemony, a product of techno-domination, a double opiate that blinds the masses to the tyranny and oppression of the advanced industrial nation, the new method for debilitating freedom?

Free time is no longer leisure time but still labour intensive. In examining this issue, when applied to the virtual world, we see a new way to attempt to reclaim leisure time through the virtual world. It can be argued that the individuals within the virtual world are not only attempting to reclaim leisure time, but also attempting to create their own culture within the virtual world. The irony of this is that, although they are attempting to create culture in a new social atmosphere, the influence of the corporeal culture is so strong that it transcends into the virtual world. Ideologies such as patriarchy, racism, superiority, even class conflict can be seen throughout the interactions in these virtual worlds. This shows us that a world, even a virtual world, conceived out of the current culture industry, designed to be free, cannot be free because of the current cultural constraints on humanity.

Innes (1951) postulated that the mixture of communications biases would eventually combine to make for a successful imperial project, a project that Theodore Adorno calls the administration of culture and reification of the individual. This, in turn,

could give way for the construction of a violent, militarized, and docile culture as we saw in chapter two.

In defence of agency we can argue that the virtual world has provided a safe haven for subcultures, individuals who are punished for having dissimilar interests can communicate and interact with those who share their interests. Individuals who have desires they wish to fulfill can semi-satisfy them using the virtual world or their virtual selves. Although these desires are not completely satisfied one could argue that some satisfaction is better than no satisfaction. The reality may be that the virtual world increases agency by creating an escape where individuals are freer than they are in the material world, that our culture is happier with access to the virtual world; this could be because their choices in the corporeal are deemed to be restricted. The virtual world has become the haven of the subcultures, where new interactions can be experienced.

What we have seen here is that technology affects society in many ways; even though we are able to observe general trends that are happening the future, much like societies, is unpredictable. In spite of the fact that we are able to deduce trends and examine ideas, we see that things are always changing; virtual reality has become integrated into our lives and has become a part of 21st century social interaction. What we have learned is that people play games for many different reasons and continue to play for many reasons. They play to escape reality, they play for fun, they play to compete with others, they play to make a living, and they play because they enjoy the feeling of being rewarded for completing a task. What must be remembered is that there are many reasons for these trends, some involve escape, control, and addiction; we cannot over-generalize the reason that these trends are occurring. To state that the reason that people

play games is because they are addicted is just as incorrect as stating that they are all simply escaping reality.

Once again, examining the virtual world leaves us with a paradox that must be considered: does this new environment provide people with liberation and freedom from the constraints of modernity. Or is it a double opiate, further constraining the individual with a sort of virtual barrier that can provide comfort to people who are not satisfied with their material conditions? What this thesis shows is that it is actually both, in a sense. Many believe that the virtual world makes them free or gives them the ability to be free; however, they are further constrained through norms and values that transfer over from the tangible world. The virtual world is a double opiate because the illusions of reality transfer into another illusion, many people become content in a fabricated reality and are docile to oppression and exploitation.

Through the perspectives that this thesis has explored we see that the virtual world is a place of great potential. This thesis attempted to examine and show some of the different perspectives on the virtual world, and the possibilities that arise from them. Through the perspective of the virtual world as a form of domination and control we are looking at the power of entertainment and its potential to attract human beings at such a level that they are considered mentally ill. We looked at if this were in fact possible, and the methods being used to determine this. Through the perspective of escape we looked at these players as if they were actors on a grand stage, that they would portray different selves on a day to day basis and that the virtual world had become a new stage where a new self could be portrayed. This new stage would be the escape for any individual and give them the opportunity to be a third self, a virtual self. The final perspective of control

looked at the potential of the virtual world as a collection of masses that houses the greatest assembly of individuals ever seen throughout history. These masses could be controlled by the state to create a one dimensional society, a society where culture is administered like medicine in order to turn a critical thinking being into a docile body. However, these masses can also become the greatest possibility for change we have ever seen. The individual online has the potential to focus their mental energy, their conscious mind, into a task or problem that could be solved with the help of others online; the virtual world becomes a plain in which masses could be free and are able to solve problems that plague the corporeal world. The virtual world goes beyond a refuge for the peoples; it becomes the most powerful tool of the masses ever seen.

These are mere possibilities, however they have great potential. The potential of virtual worlds rests with the peoples and if they choose to subscribe to the culture industry that is delivering culture through mainstream media to the masses, or if they choose to be critical thinking beings in an online world. The power of the actors is greater than the power of the game, we can choose to use the virtual world as a stage for our entertainment and become docile, or we can choose to contribute toward online goals, social movements, and critical discussions. Both events are occurring at this time, people are being controlled by culture in ways similar to those outlined by Adorno and Marcuse. However, they are also thinking critical and organizing movements through social media. Only time will tell us which trend grows and which one fades.

As for future research on the topic, throughout the construction of this thesis, the relationship between virtual worlds and the state has become increasingly fascinating. The state requires virtual reality to reify masses and produce docile bodies, but it also can

cause individuals to consume less, leading to an increasing drop in consumption that could spell disaster for a capitalist state. Future research will involve a comparative analysis on how two particular countries (China and the United States of America) deal with a mass migration to virtual reality. These two countries will be chosen because, at first glance, they seem to deal with the issue in dramatically different ways. The Chinese government caps the amount of time that one can spend playing video games and the Chinese military is constantly conducting raids on gaming cafes that have begun to surface throughout the country. The United States, on the other hand, incorporates companies and advertising into virtual worlds and attempts to capitalise within this alternative reality. Instead of physically capping the amount of time one spends playing video games the United States constructs a stigma where the citizens themselves judge, chastise, and self govern each other to prevent excessive play. The dynamic between the two is an indicator of what is to come as more and more people migrate their conscious minds to the virtual world and its pseudo-communities. The other realm that should be further examined is the way in which we examined the interactions of Brandon Crisp; we have here a way to not only examine the strength of virtual reality in an individual's life, but the possibility of altering the social spheres that have been mapped through growing or introducing new human and non-human actors in that individuals life. Further research should expand on this approach and test its potentials.

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