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The Wonder and the Terror of Getting Lost in *The Room*

Abstract: This paper deals explicitly with two competing definitions of wonder. On the one hand, we have something like Mary-Jane Rubenstein's strange wonder where the very ground on which we stand is shaken and aporias determine our interaction with the world via wonder. We lose the very foundation on which we understand reality and thereby call into question our epistemological grasp of the world. On the other hand, we have Jan B.W. Pedersen's epistemological wonder where wonder is a kind of surprise or presentation of reality where we are struck by an epistemological lack. Wonder urges us forward in hopes of strengthening and broadening our understanding of the world. Both definitions seem to coalesce in the project of unveiling the reality of the world. Pedersen's project is explicitly epistemological in that wonder, be it an emotion or some kind of noetic faculty, reveals the world to us in a way that we didn't know before. Rubenstein, on the other hand, moves beyond epistemology by attempting a kind of strange ontology that opens new possibilities that were not previously accessible. In both versions, we end up peeling away a filmy layer of the world to find some other reality. In this paper, I will argue that there is a tension between wonder and terror that shows up in between Rubenstein's and Pedersen's definitions; a kind of wonder that attends to, at least partially, the filmy veil of reality. To do this, I will appeal to Weird fictions, including the virtual reality (VR) game, *The Room*, to pull at this tension and demonstrate its generativity for thinking through experiences of wonder and terror, including how they frame the meaning of our world(s).

Keywords: wonder, virtual reality games, terror, phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, embodiment

*You open your eyes. You are standing on a moon drenched balcony over what appears to be a London alleyway. You are prompted inside by the oncoming dark and the compulsion to keep working on a case involving multiple missing persons. Realizing that you are at an end to the evidence, you read a report left by your sergeant that guides you to the wall safe. Inside, you find a glowing obelisk curtained in growing tentacle-like vines. You hear a creak behind you, and before you reach for the obelisk, you quickly scan your surroundings to verify that you are alone. You are unsure if the noise came from your office (*reality*) or from beyond. Regardless, you are the only one there. You turn back to the safe and retrieve the obelisk. Immediately, everything changes. The lights flicker a red camera filter color and the projector that holds your evidence is rolling on an endless loop of static. You return to where you started only to find a newly placed note next to the projector. Either you missed a veiled companion, or things have changed more drastically than you thought. The note gives you new information about the case you are working on, but more than information, the note generates a sense of terror and wonder. Where did the note come from and who placed it there? How much has changed in the short time that you have possessed the obelisk? Is anything safe?*

This is the opening scene of the virtual reality version of a game called *The Room*. Like many virtual reality (VR) games, it combines textual cues with a virtual landscape to generate a meaningful world. In a good VR game, the virtual world can temporarily replace the material world as the primary carrier of meaning. This is in part due to the way that VR maintains the body as an anchor in the world and as the principal mechanism through which meaning emerges. Cognitive research has shown that some VR experiences induce bodily engagement that mirrors real life orientations. According to Hava Aldouby, "We orientate toward v i s u a l stimuli (art objects included) as if preparing to physically interact or make contact, whether this is actually possible or not."[1] What I find most interesting about *The Room* is the balance between a sense of atmospheric dread and a wonder that compels both a continual investigation of the world and a continual revealing of the world. Despite the lack of monstrous figures or nonplayer characters (NPC), I often find myself looking over my shoulder for some lurking menace, which prompts me to remove the VR headset to scan my material surroundings. *The Room* does a good job of playing on the tension between revelation and concealment so often discussed in phenomenological discourse. Every clue both reveals and conceals, and the world develops as an ongoing dialogue between the virtual body, the material body, and the virtual environment. The very access to the game via the VR headset also both reveals the VR world and conceals my material world. The game itself is mostly puzzle based, leading you through the story via clues, environments, and occasional hints. But it is the atmospheric element that makes the game particularly interesting because it is emotionally generative. As I will argue, along with the tension between revelation and concealment, the game produces a tension between terror and

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[1] H. Aldouby, "Art and Presence: Investigating Embodiment in a Virtual Art Gallery," [in:] *Shifting Interfaces: An Anthology of Presence, Empathy, and Agency in 21st-Century Media Arts*, H. Aldouby (ed.), Leuven 2020, p. 61, emphasis in the original.

wonder, motivating the exploration of the two ideas as both separate and simultaneous. I will use the game's atmospheric environment as a clue toward understanding the relation between terror and wonder and ultimately argue that some versions of wonder entail an experience of terror and vice versa.

We can begin with two competing definitions of wonder. On the one hand, we have something like Mary-Jane Rubenstein's strange wonder, where the very ground on which we stand is shaken and aporias determine our interaction with the world via wonder. According to Rubenstein, wonder "arises when the understanding cannot master that which lies closest to it—when, surrounded by utterly ordinary concepts and things, the philosopher suddenly finds himself surrounded on all sides by aporia."[2] We lose the very foundation on which we understand reality and thereby call into question our epistemological grasp of the world. We can begin to see the tension between wonder and terror in this definition because if we get lost in VR environments, the ground on which we know things begins to shift. This generates wonder but also a feeling of unsettled terror when we are suddenly caught between two worlds. Further, Rubenstein's version of wonder very quickly challenges the trend to limit wonder to an epistemological concept because knowledge ends up being a fundamental aporia that generates a kind of dizzying sense of wonder. That is, every time that we attempt to define what knowledge is we do so in terms of knowledge. It is like trying to cut a pair scissors with itself. Thus, the very thing on which we stand begins to slip away when we grasp that we are unable to attend to knowledge via the faculties of knowledge. We can, in this sense, never know what knowledge is, which leads to the opening of holes in our understanding of reality. Ultimately, we are left to wonder at the (sometimes dangerous) gap.

On the other hand, we have Pedersen's epistemological wonder where wonder is a kind of surprise or presentation of reality where we are struck by an epistemological lack. For Pedersen, "Wonder is a sudden experience that intensifies the cognitive focus and awareness of ignorance about a given object. It is typically an unsettling yet delightful experience that makes one aware that there might be more to the perceived object than meets the eye."[3] Here, wonder urges us forward in hopes of strengthening and broadening our understanding of the world. Both definitions seem to coalesce in the project of unveiling the reality of the world. Pedersen's project is explicitly epistemological in that wonder, be it an emotion or some kind of noetic faculty, reveals the world to us in a way that we didn't know before. Rubenstein, on the other hand, moves beyond epistemology by attempting a kind of strange ontology that opens new possibilities that were not previously accessible. In both versions, we end up peeling away a filmy layer of the world to find some other reality. In this paper, I will argue that there is a tension between wonder and terror that shows up in between Rubenstein's and Pedersen's definitions; a kind of wonder that attends to, at least partially, the filmy veil of reality.

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[2] M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*, New York, NY 2008, p. 3.

[3] J.B. Pedersen, "Weird Fiction: A Catalyst for Wonder," [in:] *Wonder, Education, and Human Flourishing: Theoretical, Empirical, and Pracital Perspectives*, A. Schinkel (ed.), Amsterdam 2020, p. 1.

Much of Rubenstein's analysis of wonder focuses on the relation to the familiar. She attempts to move away from the epistemological framing of wonder because wonder ends up a mere step toward the goal of knowledge. Rather than fizzle in the face of knowledge, she contends that wonder has a kind of staying power, a power that is located in wonder's ability to wonder "at the strangeness of the most familiar: at that which, within the possibilities of determinate thinking, still remains indeterminate, unthinkable, and impossible."[4] Pedersen spends less time explicitly locating wonder within the familiar but is not very far from Rubenstein's concern. Pedersen sees wonder as both something to be sustained and as something related to horror. But rather than a dizzying ungrounding of the foundations of knowledge or existence, the sustainability of wonder is found in a kind of cultivation. Pedersen's main goal is to generate a "balanced wonder" that is "free from negative constraints" and "may prompt the discovery of new sources of flourishing and in effect prove the antidote to complacency."[5] So, while wonder is epistemologically oriented it must be sustained beyond the accrual of knowledge.

The relation between wonder and horror highlights the implicit relation between wonder and familiarity. According to Pedersen, because "horror encompasses the assumption that the person experiencing it is comfortably situated within a universe of meaning ... horror comes as a direct result of losing the center around which a given life revolves and which makes it a coherent whole."[6] For Pedersen, this sense of horror is like wonder because both account for threats to that which is familiar. This is not to say that they, or the threats they respond to, are the same. In fact, Pedersen makes a critical distinction between the two such that wonder is a confrontation "with the limitation of our knowledge but at the same time we are filled with the urge to further our knowledge."[7] Horror, on the other hand, "is a representation of the structure of our individual universe of meaning under threat ... We know what it looks like and so what horrifies us cannot be truly unknown."[8] While I disagree with the claim that what horrifies us cannot be unknown, both horror and wonder are motivated by their relation to the familiar. That is, what is familiar is under threat in some way.

Both Rubenstein and Pedersen extend the relationship between wonder and horror through the connection between wonder and wound. According to Rubenstein, "Insofar as wonder can function as a kind of wound in the everyday, it must again be emphasized: just as a wound ceases to be itself when it heals, wonder is only wonder when it remains open."[9] For Pedersen, "Wonder can be seen as a wound but also something that produces smiles, joy, and delight. It may be that it is synonymous with marvel and admiration and that it is a sensation connected to the senses."[10] Even through the claim that wonder "produces smiles, joy, and delight," the idea

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[4] M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 8. Emphasis in the original.
[5] J.B. Pedersen, *Weird Fiction*, p. 4.
[6] Ibidem, p. 41.
[7] Ibidem, p. 42.
[8] Ibidem.
[9] M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 10.
[10] J.B. Pedersen, *Weird Fiction*, p. 22.

that a wonder is also a wound lines up with the relation to familiarity. Wonder acts as a kind of trauma to what was understood or to the reality that was accepted. Even if it leads to delight, wonder-as-wound-as-trauma leaves open the connection between what produces wonder and what produces terror.

The identification of wonder as wound also highlights the bodily component of wonder. That is, the tension between wonder and terror is experienced via the body and thus allows for a phenomenological analysis of each term. Both wonder and terror stun us in our activity, and through this experience we become paralyzed and sometimes immobile. Here we can briefly think of objects of wonder. What are objects of wonder but those things that call to us to experience this kind of immobilization. Standing in front of the Grand Canyon, exploring the Taj Mahal, or being confronted by the scale of the Colosseum are experiences of objects of wonder. These objects, however, are not somehow filled with magical powers but work to organize wonder around them. They enact a kind of wondrous gravity that calls for those inclined to experience wonder. But the relation between the object and the experience of wonder is never a necessary relation. That is, not everybody who encounters these objects are immediately full of wonder. There must be something else besides the object of wonder itself, and maybe even beyond the wonderer themselves. There is no doubt that objects of wonder have some great capacity to call on people to experience wonder, otherwise their reputation would disappear very quickly. These objects have a kind of gravitational pull that bends their observers toward a greater likelihood for wonder. Or, they are like portals to other dimensions that call to those so inclined to travel, but they do not necessarily show up for everyone. In these experiences of wonder generated by specifically sought after objects, then, there has to be something wonderful about the object and the one experiencing wonder. It is not that the object forces us to wonder by meeting necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, there is something in between the two poles of wonder that acts as a kind of gravitational force.

Beyond the smiles of joy and delight, Pedersen acknowledges that there is another side to wonder, which he calls "dark wonder." In "dark wonder" horror and wonder comprise two poles of a single circle. In Pedersen's words: "At one end is horror, you go around the circle to wonder and on the other end of the circle, close to horror yet not horror, is dark wonder."[11] Following Pedersen's definition, it is possible to conceive of climate change as an object of dark wonder. It poses an existential threat to humanity, which should advance feelings of fear and terror. Yet anxiety seems to be a more appropriate description of our emotional and cognitive response to climate change because there is no clear and impending doom. Even Cthulhu, rising from the depths of the ocean, is a discrete object with definable boundaries and a bodily anchor. Climate change has none of those qualities. Regardless, terror and horror seem to arise, for Pedersen, in the face of an explicit threat to our life or our world.

In the tension between wonder and terror, I argue that moments of terror can also be moments of wonder, and moments of wonder can be moments of terror. This is the initial tension seen in Rubenstein's definition and is contrary to some

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[11] Ibidem, p. 328.

scholars of wonder who have argued that wonder is specifically associated with delight. Even in "Dark Wonder" Pedersen claims that "wonder is typically an unsettling yet delightful experience—and something perhaps we ought to seek out."[12] In *Wonder, The Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Philip Fisher calls wonder a kind of "aestheticization of delight."[13] Rubenstein's definition of wonder, however, makes very little of wonder as delight. Instead, she focuses on wonder as an "unsettling pathos."[14] The idea that in wonder we can encounter the reality that we thought we knew in a new and uneasy manner, that we can experience the most familiar setting as unfamiliar entails some sense of terror at a basic level. If wonder is about the opening of reality to new possibilities and new organizations, what Jeremy Bendik-Keymer calls a kind of "positive anxiety,"[15] then wonder entails some overlap with terror.

The Room and the Limits of Games

You read the note left by the invisible intruder. It is signed by someone calling themselves "The Craftsman." The note indicates that your missing persons investigation is stranger than originally conceived and that they have information that could help you solve the case. Whoever wrote the note also left you a box with a pair of eyeglasses locked inside. You spin a compass-like dial until you find the right combination. Inside the box are what look like steampunk goggles. When wearing the goggles, the room turns to an ominous shade of green. You turn again to check behind you. Was that the knocking again? No, this time it sounds like creaking footsteps. You verify that no one else is in the room (which room?), but footprints have appeared that lead you to another locked box and another puzzle. Once solved, a platform emerges that seems just the right size for the obelisk you retrieved from the safe. Placing the obelisk on the platform reveals a hidden reality beneath the everyday material existence of your office called the "Null." You find yourself in an empty room with no distinction but a table in front of you and another letter from "The Craftsman." Yet, you still hear that creak. Which veil is being lifted? Which veil needs to be lifted to obtain the source? It isn't clear what the Null is, but the note indicates that it is both invisible and powerful. You follow the instructions and reality shifts once more.

What is interesting about this scene from *The Room* is the revelation of a new version of reality and the mechanism by which access is given. Not only are we granted entry to something called "the Null," we are also shown that reality in the game is much deeper and much stranger than initially assumed. It may be the case that the reality in which we began was a kind of veil that hid something truer or

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[12] Ibidem, p. 322.

[13] P. Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1998, p. 2.

[14] M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 4.

[15] See J. Bendik-Keymer, "Beneficial Relations Between Species & The Moral Responsibility of Wonder," *Environmental Politics* (2021), p. 1–18.

more real. Access to the Null is initiated by a pair of goggles, a tool that deliberately enhances vision. It is likely no mistake that vision is used as the primary means to navigate dimensions of reality given that the tool used to access the game itself is also a kind of eyewear. When I put on the VR headset, a new reality is presented to me. But unlike the Null, I do not question which reality is more real. I can always remove the goggles to firmly ground myself back in my bodily subjectivity (find that knock...), back in my projects and tasks (or was it footsteps?), and back in my habitual space (safety). The question presented is not whether the virtual game is more real than my material existence, but whether my material existence contains any mechanisms that mask access to reality.

The scene also reveals a fundamentally limiting condition of games and virtual worlds: the rules. While the rules of physics may not necessarily act the same as the material world, the virtual world is necessarily structured. I can only move certain objects, which in turn provide clues for how to proceed. Unlike the material world, the infinite reserve of revelation and concealment is limited. Not only does this help to move the game along, but it may also be what Nicholas J. Mizer has called "rationalized constraints."[16] According to Mizer, rationalization of gameplay typically happens throughout the history of the game. Speaking specifically of *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*), Mizer tracks how role-playing games navigate the tension between the expansive imagination of the players and the limiting structures of the game. Because games become "increasingly rationalized over time" they also often become "dull and unbearable to the players."[17] Finding a tension between wonder and terror in *The Room* must necessarily consider the impact such rationalization has on the emotional, cognitive, and even ontological aspect of the game.

Veils of Reality

Part of my argument is just that there are moments in which we claim to have a veil removed from our eyes, some new vision given to us, some quality of the visual world offered in relief of the dampened sensual experience that categorizes our everyday experience. We can see these kinds of things when we talk about momentary breaks in depression or anxiety. In many instances, people dealing with depression describe relief from their depression as if some kind of light is turned on and some new access to the world is granted. On an episode of the podcast *Radiolab*, for instance, the use of transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) is discussed in terms of its possible use to increase the speed of learning and rate of calculation. At one point the host, Jad Abumrad, tries tDCS and is shown various three dimensional (3D) images. Under normal circumstances, Abumrad claims that he is unable to see these images clearly. However, while under tDCS, the images are easily identifiable and seen clearly. This leads him to say that he feels "very very

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[16] N.J. Mizer, *Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds*, Cham 2019, p. 29.
[17] Ibidem.

awake."[18] Another producer of the show, Sally Adee, also experienced tDCS but did so while playing a video game. Not only was Adee able to perform better and make strategic calculations more quickly, she discussed how the process seemed to put her anxiety in relief. According to Adee, "It was like somebody had wiped a really steamy window, and I was just able to look at the world for what it was."[19] In both instances, there is a sense in which tDCS reveals reality and lifts an opaque obstacle from those who undergo the procedure,[20] as if our standard experience of sensation hides some aspect of reality from us. This is especially interesting in discussions concerning anxiety and depression, complex veils that seem to negatively filter reality for those afflicted.

Louise Danielsson and Susanne Rosberg describe the process of battling depression as an "ambiguous striving against fading."[21] Collecting phenomenological data through interviews with clinically depressed patients, Danielsson and Rosberg demonstrate the embodied nature of depression. In an interview, one of the patients describes depression as "an artificial world" that left them with a strange feeling of rejecting reality.[22] The authors describe this strangeness in terms of Freudian uncanniness and argue that depression "can be understood as an unhomelike being-in-the-world, where the body, and life itself, turns alien."[23] If depression leads to an uncanny alienation of the body, then the desire to overcome depression is a kind of "homecoming."[24]

The homecoming that occurs when one lifts the veil of depression can be taken as a highly qualified experience of delight. One of the interviewees from the Danielsson and Rosberg article describes the momentary relief of depression as their body "singing out." Another describes the "pleasure" of walking that confirms that their body "really works."[25] I do not deny that Fisher and Pedersen seem to be onto something important by calling attention to the relation between wonder and delight. However, there are times when peeling back the film of reality to see things in a new way, to see things strangely, or as they "really are," are moments of terror, moments of abject weirdness. What happens, for instance, when we start from a perspective of the naïve complacency depicted in the 1988 John Carpenter film

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[18] J. Abumrad, R. Krulwich, *Radiolab*, June 26, 2014, retrieved July 4, 2023, from https://radiolab.org/podcast/9-volt-nirvana/transcript.

[19] Ibidem.

[20] While this is clearly anecdotal, there is growing research on the use of tDCS for depression. For more information about tDCS and its effect on depression, see: A.K. Kurzeck, B. Kirsch, E. Weidinger, F. Padberg, U. Palm, "Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation (tDCS) for Depression During Pregnancy: Scientific Evidence and What Is Being Said in the Media—A Systematic Review," *Brain Sciences* 8 (2018), doi: 10.3390/brainsci8080155.

[21] L. Danielsson, S. Rosberg, "Depression Embodied: An Ambiguous Striving Against Fading," *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 29 (2015), p. 503, doi-org.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/10.1111/scs.12182.

[22] Ibidem, p. 504.

[23] Ibidem, p. 507.

[24] Ibidem, p. 506.

[25] Ibidem, p. 504.

They Live. Pederson's "dark wonder" works when we wonder at things that do not delight but cause us to be afraid or call to us in a sense of terror. I claim that we can map this sense in which the world becomes newly available as partly generative of wonder and partly generative of terror. In this sense, wonder is not just a light, not just terror, but something in between the two.

Embodied Games/Embodied Reality

Given the necessary structure and rationalization of games, there is something strange about the claim that games, especially virtual reality games, can contribute to an experience of wonder. In many ways the virtual gaming experience requires that I take up the world through my own body. More than handling controllers, when I move my body in the primary world, I also move in the virtual world. I reach for objects with my material/virtual body and swivel my head to look at 360 degrees of playing field. Yet, in another sense, I make my body invisible in the game so that I can take up the virtual world as meaningful. Virtual reality, especially in successful games, does the work of both putting a veil between myself and reality and revealing a world that is saturated with reality. I separate myself, deliberately from reality, but I also remove the limitations of reality. While I do not want to claim that VR gaming is like depression, the ability of the body to recede or emerge sets up a strange tension between the fading from reality described by Danielsson and Rosberg and the revelation of reality in VR gaming.

In *The Possible Phenomenal Autonomy of Virtual Realities*, Matthias Kofoed-Ottesen attends to some of the concern about whether games can generate a sense of wonder by arguing that virtual reality worlds are autonomous from non-virtual worlds. He does this by appealing to the discussion of place articulated by Martin Heidegger in his article *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. His claim is that despite the reliance upon the non-virtual world to provide a sense of meaning, virtual worlds meet the conditions that establish *place* as set out by Heidegger. But more important to my argument is the way that Kofoed-Ottesen uses Merleau-Ponty's view of the phenomenal body schema as a frame for thinking about virtual worlds as autonomous places. Specifically, through the habituation of our bodies to the virtual worlds we inhabit, the worlds take on a depth that renders them distinct from the non-virtual world. Both time and space become newly meaningful through a habituation of practice and as acted out via the phenomenal body, which here is rooted in the virtual body.

One of the most compelling parts of Kofoed-Ottesen's argument is the claim that virtual realities are autonomous from non-virtual worlds. A significant component of this claim is that virtual realities immerse us into a new world and make present a set of rules and practices that are distinct from the material world. Kofoed-Ottesen goes on to claim that this is often disturbed by what he calls "immersion breaks," where immersion breaks "are defined as the moment when the individual experiencing the virtual reality environment is made aware of the non-virtual environment

in a way that disturbs the consistent totality of the virtuality."[26] What I find compelling in Kofoed-Ottesen's argument is that in *The Room*, there are times when immersion breaks add to the atmosphere of the game. That is, in attempting to peer beyond the scope of the playing field, a ghostly sheen of the material (non-virtual) world emerges. This is often shocking like being struck by an "outer" world beyond the veil of appearance and introduces a feeling of terror that is motivated by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the material world. Further, if we accept Kofoed-Ottesen's conclusion that virtual places are autonomous, then the experience of an immersion break is an experience of an outside world interrupting the habituated world. This enacts a "Weird" intrusion of some outside force and aligns with Mark Fisher's version of the Weird, which is characterized by "irruption into t h i s world of something from outside."[27] Given the autonomy of the two worlds, immersion breaks position the material world as an outside intruder, thus making the material world Weird.

Ethics and VR Worlds

The level of immersion in VR creates philosophical and ethical questions for players, programmers, and even researchers. In *Real Moral Problems in the Use of Virtual Reality*, Ramirez and LaBarge identify the danger of using VR as a mechanism for psychological research. Ultimately, they argue that "if it would be wrong to subject a person to an experience then it would be wrong to subject a person to a virtually real analogue of that experience."[28] More important for my purposes here, they argue that VR experiences have a higher "perspectival fidelity," which makes it more likely to generate experiences that can be taken as real and thus carry ethical weight.[29] Coupled with Kofoed-Ottesen's claim that virtual realities are phenomenologically autonomous worlds, we can begin to connect the impacts of virtual reality experiences on the material world. That is, following Ramirez and LaBarge, who claim that "we need to consider possible indirect impacts the simulation might have on other agents whom the subjects of the simulation might i n t e r a c t w i t h later, outside of the simulation itself,"[30] it may be possible to ask how the "immersive fidelity" and autonomous reality generated by VR impacts the world outside of gameplay. Explicitly relating this back to the tension between wonder and terror, we can analyze the way that immersion in VR worlds manipulate the emotions of the player, which in turn manipulates the affective response to material conditions.

The "immersive fidelity" of VR experiences translates into a kind of emotional immersion so that the boundary between the character and the player becomes

[26] M. Kofoed-Ottesen, "On the Possible Phenomenological Autonomy of Virtual Realities," *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 20 (2020), p. 5, doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2020.1857945.

[27] M. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, London 2016, p. 20, emphasis in the original.

[28] E.J. Ramirez, S. LaBarge, "Real Moral Problems in the Use of Virtual Reality," *Ethics and Information Technology* 20 (2018), p. 260, doi.org/10.1007/s10676-018-9473-5.

[29] Ibidem, p. 249.

[30] Ibidem, p. 251. Emphasis in the original.

blurred and even dispersed. We can be given background information about the character (e.g. they are a police detective) but because the player performs the character's actions via their virtual/phenomenal body, the player takes on the character in a radically immersive way. In VR experiences, we move *as* the body of the character rather than moving an on-screen avatar as in non-VR games. When placed in atmospherically intense contexts, such as in *The Room*, the emotions felt by the character are identical to the emotions felt by the player. This raises the level of something like horror, which, as Noël Carrol has remarked, already institutes the audience into the emotional experiences of the characters.[31] But this is a feeling that also draws one in and invites further exploration.

For Andrea Pinotti, the avatar experience acts as a "powerful identity operator which allows for a virtually infinite number of negotiations of selfhood."[32] The avatar puts the player at a distance from themselves in the same way that a mirror might, changing the body from a lived body to a body object. But the body under scrutiny is largely missing. More than a compelling and generative relation to the body, Pinotti claims that the self is revealed in a two-way mediation "which permit interventions from the virtual onto the real world as well."[33] Here she appeals to neurocognitive research and argues that "avatars seem to be able to impact actual reality, modifying for instance gender and racial biases via the elicitation of a full-body ownership illusion."[34] Along with a kind of empathy and an experience of the self from a distance, there is also a sense of a kind of possession. I possess the other as myself and control the other from my own perspective. I possess the body as a self, but the self is revealed through the body, including the height and perspective of the avatar. If, as Pinotti shows, the possession of an avatar can have an impact on my self as manifest in the material world and via my material body, the next question to be asked is how far does this go? Do I now have a heightened sense of induction because I have possessed a detective? Why does it seem as though I can feel the Null even when I am not playing? Unlike some of the experiments discussed by Pinotti and Aldouby, the stakes involved in gameplay are only related to my own concern, safety, and enjoyment, which may lead to a shorter temporal impact. The effects of possessing the character of *The Room* fade quickly as I return to my (safe) material world. A lingering concern with Pinotti's argument is her description of self-revelation in VR as "auto-empathy." This seems to indicate that I empathize with myself as seen from a distance, through the act of embodying another. Does this reveal me, in "auto-empathy" as a possessor?

While I cannot expand on the role as possessor here, there is something uncanny about the experience. And as I return to my material environment, I am left with a persistent feeling of disease. In the twin activities of playing the game and possessing another, we have a mixing of the terror and fear of horrific experiences that repel (I flee the implicit danger of the atmosphere and the haunting moon)

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[31] N. Carrol, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York 1990, p. 17.
[32] A. Pinotti, "Avatars: Shifting Identities in a Genealogical Perspective," [in:] *Shifting Interfaces*, p. 33.
[33] Ibidem.
[34] Ibidem.

and the allure of the context and environment. This allure that drives me to investigate seems very much like the wonder described by Pedersen. Further, sitting in between terror that repels and wonder that compels, is the Weird, which Fisher articulates as "a fascination usually mixed with a certain trepidation" that "cannot only repel" but "must also compel our attention."[35] We, as the player, are immersed into a character that is both repelled and compelled at the same time. The atmospheric tension of *The Room* drives me to solve the puzzles while it also forces me to constantly look over my (virtual/phenomenal) shoulder.

Rabbits and Alternate Reality Games

Revisiting the question of whether games can reveal reality to us, I turn to the novel *Rabbits* by Terry Miles. In the novel, "Rabbits" is a game played by people who are obsessed with games, and it is rumored that people lose their lives while playing. But the risk of death is equally buoyed by the promise of rewards, including a cash prize or an invitation to work in the CIA. Knowledge about the game is incredibly decentralized with no clear source of information or direction to the degree that it isn't even clear what kind of game is being played. Described as an "Alternate Reality Game" or ARG, the contestants interact with real entities and real histories to decode the game's puzzles and unlock new futures (via prizes, losses, or changes to the material world). "Rabbits" is especially tuned to a weird reality that is available only to those who investigate with a specific set of skills and are attuned to a specific kind of interaction with the world. Because the game evolves in the material world and is not limited to any specific playing field, it unfolds in the background of everyday activity and is largely unnoticed by most people. Two questions arise from the novel's main premise that a game like this can be run on a global scale with little centralized information. First, thinking about how rules define games, how is it that a game can reveal reality through a deliberate set of restrictions? Second, what does it mean to play a game that one can "play" without knowing that they are playing? Again, *The Room* may offer insight for the seeming contradiction between rules, limitations, and revelations.

While *Rabbits* seems to be another iteration of the VR fantasy novel like Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One* or a myriad of LitRPG[36] entries, the relation to reality and treatment of time is what sets it apart. *Ready Player One* is powered by nostalgia and a longing for past experiences. This is the case even for those in the story who have not experienced that past. Parzival, for instance, grew up loving pop-culture artifacts that are relevant to the maker of OASIS, the massive virtual world in which much of the novel takes place, and thus spends most of his time

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[35] M. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 17.

[36] LitRPGs are typically novels where characters take on characteristics similar to RPG characters. This often includes a complex games or other realities. Characters often gain new attributes through experience or interactions and "level up" as the narrative progresses. There narrative is set and no dynamic interaction occurs between the reader and the text.

playing games and watching movies made in the 1980s.[37] The past is brought forth and made relevant through a meta-game played in the OASIS. Instead of bringing forth the pop-culture past for its players, LitRPGs establish another kind of reality, often rooted in fantasy. That is, they work on the basis of bringing forth a world that could have been but is not, and has not, ever been.[38]

Rabbits is not about the future that could have been nor is it about the world as it could have been otherwise. Instead, it is about the world we currently have, though modified and made strange by parallel tracks. K, the novel's main character, has memories of events and movies that no one else seems to remember. But more than a possible hallucination about possible events that never occurred, K is also missing information that everyone else seems to have. The world of *Rabbits* is our own world. If Carrol is right that horror, as opposed to fantasy and science fiction, is about strange entities inhabiting the world we know, then we have to put *Rabbits* closer to the horror genre than either of the other two because it is about our world. But *Rabbits* doesn't read like a horror novel. There are no monsters or evils lurking in the dark, no looming unknown things hiding in the clouds, no shadows threatening the safety of our most familiar spaces. But there are times when *Rabbits* is horrifying. More than broadly speculative, *Rabbits* is weird. It offers a break in reality, and the treatment of the world whose claim to reality is weak at best. K is forced to wonder about whether she is in the reality she always knew, or if something has dramatically changed. Put the other way around, the weird world of *Rabbits* wonders K by reorganizing time, the meaning of her activities, and the horizon of possibilities.

Putting on a headset to start the game requires a kind of submersion into a new reality. If I don't sink into the story, then the experience highlights the limitation of reality rather than the expansion of reality. Instead of revealing the world to me, it prohibits my engagement with the world, obstructing my vision, and obfuscating the real. If we take up a phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* demonstrates how the world is available to us in a kind of infinite ongoing process. The very act of a phenomenological bracketing means that I put out of play the assumption that the world exists in any other way than through my experience of it. That is, phenomena are what show reality to be reality. When I engage in the virtual reality world, I take up the space that's available to me. It expands beyond the limits of my material surroundings. This is the basis of Kofoed-Ottesen's argument about phenomenologically autonomous virtual realities. The virtual world is limited to a defined playing field, which prohibits the expression that comes via Merleau-Ponty's description of the body subject as "freedom."[39] But the body is also limited in the material world and in that material expression,

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[37] In *Ready Player One*, the recently deceased creator of the OASIS leaves clues and puzzles based on his favorite movies, games, television shows in the virtual world. Whoever solves the puzzles first is granted ownership of the company that runs the OASIS.

[38] M. Cisco, *Weird Fiction: A Genre Study*, Cham 2021, p. 27.

[39] M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C. Smith, New York, NY 1962, p. 231.

which leads Merleau-Ponty to admit that the body is never an "unconditioned freedom."[40] In the material world and through my material body, I can stand up, take a walk around the room, pick up a book. When I pick up the book, I initially see the front of the book. But I can explore the book by turning it over. As phenomena are presented to me, I attend to a horizon of experience so that the back of the book is first presented as a potentiality not as an assumed reality. *The Room* seems to limit my ability to do this because there are only a few defined objects that I can interact with. I can pick up a book, but not every book. I can turn this piece of paper around or look through this letter that was left on a table to reveal a similar horizon of meaning. But at other times, I try to pick up a pen or turn a chest around and I'm unable to interact with the objects I am exploring. My hands seem to go through the objects, demonstrating their flimsy sense of reality. In fact, the reality of this virtual world generally seems flimsy. This sense of flimsiness can work to take me out of the world by revealing its limitations. It shows me that virtual reality is not a revealing, but a concealing.

Getting Lost

But as I move along, knowing that this world is not a world filled with infinite possibilities, I am also struck by the atmosphere of the world. Narratively, *The Room* participates in the tradition and genre of cosmic horror. It is a game where I explore a world that is revealed to me through puzzles and enchanted objects. The world of meaning in *The Room* is built upon the idea of revealing that which is hidden beneath the mundane. Ultimately, the game pulls at the tension, often found at the heart of phenomenology, between revealing and concealing.[41] Through this revelatory sense, I encounter the world of *The Room* differently as it opens and reveals something strange and distinct from what I expected or anticipated. The very ground of my understanding, going back to Rubenstein's definition of wonder, is uncovered as false, which thereby leaves me without a firm footing on which to establish a clear relationship with the rest of the world. The world of *The Room*, like the objects of wonder, organizes experiences of wonder around it. The world of *The Room* wonders me. It investigates me and reveals me as a phenomenal object within a broad phenomenal schema.

As I progress through the game, I confront various levels that are deliberately full of surprise. I knowingly enter the world in a modified state of naiveite. I don't k n o w what this world is like. It doesn't act like the world I know and the surprise that I feel compels me to discover other parts of the world and to know how it works and how I habituate my body with the world in a more intimate way. This again seems to match up with Pedersen's definition of wonder, where wonder is "a state of mind, which potentially can give rise to a desire for inquiry."[42] The world of *The Room* is full of wonder in that it pushes me forward to investigate. But it is also

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[40] Ibidem, p. 198.
[41] See ibidem, pp. xxiv and 7.
[42] J.B. Pedersen, *Weird Fiction*, p. 6.

more than that. The objects themselves are limited by the rules. The objects themselves are limited by the creators of the game. But the atmosphere seems to exceed the rules of the game. That is to say, in the rules of the game I do not encounter any other person or mechanism of attack. There is no monster waiting behind the door or around the corner. There is nobody sneaking behind my back. I know this, and yet there are moments when I must look around to confirm that this is true. I turn around in circles just to make sure that nobody is there. The knowledge of the game's dynamic is itself a surprise because of the atmosphere it generates. My expectations and my experience continually clash, leaving me unsettled.

But this too is part of the wonder of the world. I am both always safe and never safe. I do not know what the world offers. I do not know what the puzzles will reveal. I do not know what the game will ultimately lead to. But I am spurred on by the generativity of the world. There are times when the atmosphere becomes so real and so present that I have to lift off the VR set to see if there is something in the room with me. In one sense, this breaks the experience of the game. I can always take off the VR set and return back to the world. This is a true immersion break, but it is not always clear which reality is being broken. If we accept the "two-way" directionality of Pinotti's avatars, then something slips in between the two worlds. If I carry the atmosphere with me in my bodily habits, then I release the atmospheric dread of the room into my material environment. More than an immersion break, the intrusion completes the circuit of the game and extends its reach. There is a kind of veil or thin membrane that I cross, back and forth. And the distinction is not between reality and not reality, but a kind of portal through reality in which I engage a new and expansive world. The world of *The Room* bleeds into the world of my material body. I take up the room that's around me through both my material body and my virtual body. My virtual body, therefore, extends into, and in some way drives my understanding of the world itself.

We can situate this tension between solving puzzles as acquisition of knowledge and the excessive nature of the atmosphere in *The Room* in the distinction between wonder and curiosity. For Rubenstein,

curiosity at its most irresponsible skips from one marvelous phenomenon to the next, "resolving" each puzzle as quickly as possible in order to possess it—materially or epistemologically—and move on to something newer and more bizarre. Accelerating toward a state of perpetual distraction and departure, curiosity eventually becomes "t h e i n a b i l i t y t o s t a y a t a l l."[43]

Following the rules of *The Room*, I am perpetually pushed forward to the next puzzle and to the next level. But the question at the heart of Rubenstein's distinction is about how the difference between curiosity and wonder applies to our ability to stay. It is here that *The Room* provides insight regarding how to map the tension between Rubenstein's and Pederson's versions of wonder. That is, for Rubenstein the goal is to figure out how to stay in wonder. Or, at the very least, to find a wonder that does not dissolve in the solution of knowledge. But "staying" in *The Room* is less about remaining open to the answers of the puzzles and more about staying in the open mystery of the atmosphere. The wonder of *The Room* is less

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[43] M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 27. Emphasis in the original.

about curiosity generated by the puzzles, and more about the atmosphere and open-
ness of the world. But following Ramirez, LaBarge, and Pinotti if VR experiences
have real impacts on psychology of the player and the kinds of experiments that are
ethically allowable, is it possible that the staying power of the atmosphere bleeds
into the experience of the material world? Is there a sense in which the atmosphere
transfers from the phenomenal body to the material body, generating a sense in
which the way *The Room* wonders me ultimately leads to an intrusion of wonder
into the material world? This leads to a kind of phenomenology of the body that we
can do in *The Room*, where *The Room*'s atmosphere envelopes my body schema,
fusing the virtual body with the material body. What happens if, like in *Rabbits*,
the game cannot be distinguished from the material conditions of everyday living?

VR Experiences as/and Hallucinations

After exploring a museum full of Egyptian relics and an old church suffused
with mythology and cosmic energy, you find yourself following a winding staircase
and through a cloud of spiderwebs. Reaching the bottom, you are again transport-
ed, but this time to a house of an ancient witch, who like you, is trying to solve
the mystery left by The Craftsman. The witch's house is full of standard witchy
things like a boiling cauldron, vials of liquid and a chandelier that is made of what
looks like the carcass of a deer. More than the standard witch accoutrement, it is
the way the moon shines through the window and the floorboards creek that gen-
erate the sense of atmosphere and dread. You continuously feel someone near, but
do not see them. Your body tenses to meet a stranger, but you never do. At one
point you unlock a passageway through a large tree trunk that occupies the cen-
tral room. There you find a table with three outlined spaces that call for some as
of yet unknown set of objects. Through a series of puzzles, you find small relics
that fit into each one of the spaces. Unsettling and disembodied voices guide you
to more tasks, providing tarot cards as entry to pockets of reality through an al-
cove door. As was the case in previous settings, the walls are covered with ancient
runes and symbols that guide you on to the next clue and the next puzzle. It isn't
always clear who left the runes. Was it The Craftsman? The Witch? Does it mat-
ter? You walk outside your glass slider to the back patio and find runes similar
in shape and pattern to the ones from the witch's house. Your children are gone
for the weekend, so no one has played with chalk since it last rained. You flicker
back and forth, the "immersion break" breaking the divide. The moonlight floods
the witch's hovel, as you stand waiting for the key to materialize so that you can
move on to the next puzzle. The light is a kind of diffraction pattern that bends
reality and blends your material and virtual bodies in a continuous phenomenal
body. You can hear the rain and smell the must of your basement at the same time
that you see the full moon clearly through the open window. No clouds in sight.

Two things are incredibly disturbing. First is that every time you turn your
back on the door you hear it slam loudly. Second are the voices. It is unclear who
is calling to you, but it acts like the dialogic world that calls for and motivates

investigation. It demands something of you even if the language/signs are unclear without unlocking them first. Going against Koffoed-Ottesen's claim that virtual worlds are autonomous, it may be helpful to think about the world of VR as a kind of hallucination. Merleau-Ponty draws some conclusions about hallucinations in *The Phenomenology of Perception.* There he claims:

> What protects the sane man against delirium or hallucination, is not his critical powers, but the structure of his space: objects remain before him, keeping their distance and... touching him only with respect. What brings about both hallucinations and myths is a shrinkage in the space directly experienced, a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world, which is, not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception or by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers.[44]

Sanity and hallucination, it seems, are a product of a spatial relationship. Truth is important, but it is more about the bodily comportment toward objects in a given schematic context. Instability is a central part of the generation of hallucinatory experiences because the spaces in which we navigate meaning are constituted and verified by others. That is, it is the "stable and intersubjective world" that offers a mark of veracity. Thus, what hallucinations lack is the "the fullness, the inner articulation which makes the real thing reside 'in itself,' and act and exist by itself."[45] As such, "the hallucinatory thing is not, as is the real thing, packed with small perceptions which sustain it in existence."[46] This claim has consequences for individual objects, like objects that are in VR worlds but are not manipulable in the game by the player. But it also has implications for the entire space generated by the VR environment, especially in relation to the experience of immersion.

Immersed into a VR world like *The Room*, the singularity of perspective (there is no option to play with others or in a multiplayer mode) and lack of intersubjectivity means that all meaning within the game is on shaky footing. There are clearly differences between hallucinations as we typically understand them and VR experiences. I choose when and where to enter into the VR world. I can leave it at any time and return to the material environment and ground myself in the safety of the intersubjective world. There are also rules and repeatable opportunities (I can replay a level or repeat a puzzle). But the shaky ground of knowledge in a world without intersubjectivity lines up with the challenged ground of knowledge articulated in Rubenstein's version of wonder. The distinction between hallucination and VR experiences allows me to accept the claims made by Koffoed-Ottesen and Merleau-Ponty at the same time. The unreality of the objects in *The Room* has to do with their inability to be continually investigated. And yet, if I spend enough time in *The Room*, the objects and the environment offer a "concrete hold on time in a living present" that "glides over time as it does over the surface of the world."[47] I habituate to the world so that the "two-way" mediation starts to impact the material world.

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[44] M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 339.
[45] Ibidem, p. 395.
[46] Ibidem.
[47] Ibidem, pp. 395–396.

You begin to see that the world is full of puzzles. The challenge on the back of the cereal box will reveal a new step in the day. Your daughter walks into the room and asks if you are ok. She tells you that you have been staring at the box for 10 minutes. You calmly let her know that you are almost done with the puzzle and will move on to the next step. The runes on the back are almost aligned.

The temporality of *The Room* is oddly different from the temporality of the material world. Things seem to move a little slower. The movement of the sun and the phases of the moon are not markers of the passing of time. Taking off the visor requires a kind of adjustment back to the material world. H o w   m u c h   t i m e   h a s   p a s s e d   h e r e? There is even a sense in which the two temporalities can begin to jumble. The adjustment of the body schema is a kind of flickering back and forth. W h i c h   b o d y   a m   I   p o s s e s s i n g? If the immersion is realistic enough, which forms the background of the ethical problems of research identified by Ramirez and LaBarge, it becomes possible to question which world is more "real." But if we return to Merleau-Ponty, we may be able to put this kind of question out of bounds. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he claims that "to ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is asking, since the world is not a sum of things which might always be called into question, but the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn."[48] The tension between wonder and terror has come full circle. The ground on which to know the world as real is shaken by the pull to continue to investigate. Seized by the world in the dizzying possibilities of flickering realities, the firm grasp of the real begins to fade and we are left with the question: What happens if we cannot return from our wonder?

You open your eyes, stretch your back, and return to the keyboard. You are a philosopher attempting to spell the meaning of the world with twenty-six letters. There are voices beyond your range of vision. It isn't clear if they are trying to tell you something, to help you out, or if they are content with their own puzzles. Time seems to flow uniformly here, but the rules seem somewhat flimsy, which means that there is some threat, and thereby some danger, of unpredictability. The sunlight pushes through the semi-closed curtains, dust floating in the stranded rays. There is great wonder here, and terror. But you are comforted by the fact that you can return to the safety of The Room *whenever you want.*

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