Functionalization and the Real Virtual: What Happened to Us and How We Want to Overcome It Now

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ABSTRACT

In this article the authors are going to explore a tendency in virtual world design towards the creation of non-functionalized virtual worlds, i.e. worlds which only exist to exist without resembling any function in their design. They are going to show how this tendency is grounded in the ongoing process of formalization in the real world by introducing a 4-step model of de-functionalization and show which chances exist for these non-functional virtual worlds to affect the real world through the mental world conception of the user.

Keywords: Functionalization, Virtual Worlds, Virtualization, World Conception

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we want to re-trace the recent developments of real-world virtualization to their very core concept, namely to map the world. The idea underlying this concept is not new, although it experienced a formidable outburst over the last decade, and can be summarized best as a process of abstraction from real-world belongings, by making a model of them. This is step 1 of the virtualization process to be considered here. Step 2 consists of imposing that model onto the real world in the attempt to create a new one. The aim of this step is to re-mold the given world – the old reality – and to generate a new world with the help of the model, which does mean, in its final terms, a new reality; either super-imposed onto the old one, or even replacing it. In their entirety, i.e., when seen as a unified process, both steps make up what we have to deal with here. Because our thesis is that despite also other cultural spheres had developed step 1 in a more or less refined manner, and although step 2 appeared relatively late in occidental history, the approach sketched here is a typically occidental one. ‘Typical’ in both directions of

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the terms’ meaning: it was coining for a world (namely our one, the occidental); and it coined a world, through the latter’s functionalization according to maps. Not only the occidental, but the entire one since it became its prime molding concept. So far the general frame to be considered.

At the same time, quite many of the products of this concept are real works of art – for instance the beautiful Renaissance-maps of foreign lands with their painted associations of new paradises to be regained (to cite the poet Milton (Milton, 1930, p.451)), their fairy landscapes, animals, and men. And all of them are works of art in a literal sense, namely artifacts, products of an artefactum, of that what is made, artificially constructed and not naturally grown (Hoffmeister, 1955, p. 79), coming out as virtualities designed to mold the real. Since functionalization according to maps does not mean that such a molding of the real is confined to ‘pure’ abstraction (maps in their common understanding), by constructing worlds that are not physically present in real space, e.g. the ‘world’ of worldwide flight routes which is presented in a map of such a ‘world’. Of course, also in this case, the real becomes molded – there are real flights, real emissions with an impact upon climate and ecology, real masses of tourists with considerable impacts upon other cultures, and so forth. But in this case, real physical space is not directly shaped, as an intended and planned effort. In this case, the whole procedure follows step 1 but stays confined to it. It stays confined to be a “map only”. Although it expresses real functionalizations in a real world; that of a certain economics leading to worldwide flight routes, that of real technology enabling flight at all, and so on. In addition, and this is the most interesting case here, there are also maps which directly shape real physical space by their very intention. Expressing models of how a future world (to be located within the respective space) should actually look like, in its concrete physical terms. A map, expressing a model-world of the future, is destined to become that future; e.g., the model of a Haussmannian Paris becomes real Paris, turning into a new Paris as a physical entity. Combining steps 1 and 2, such processes of constructing real worlds, by either re-molding existing ones or entirely creating them anew, are typical for modernity (so our thesis), and are the mental as well as technical prerequisite (another thesis) for constructing worlds which are merely ‘virtual’ – such as background worlds of computer games or other worlds of comparable kind, all of them subsumed under the label of the fictitious, of virtual worlds in their common everyday understanding. It can be seen as step 3 of a virtualization: elements of an existing real are transformed – based on a model (step 1) – into virtual entities which are then assembled to form a ‘concrete’ virtual world. As types, all of these worlds treated so far have central features in common: they are based on the functionalization of an existing (‘original’) given real, and at the same time, they express, and serve functionalization. To provide examples, without the background of an economic functionalization, a world map of flight routes wouldn’t exist, nor the majority of recent ‘virtual’ worlds; without its political, economic and socio-mental background and the resulting will to format the Being (to functionalize it completely), a Paris of Haussmann would never have seen the light of day. Moreover, these worlds are prerequisite for virtual worlds of a “non-functional” character addressed in the abstract; a thesis to come to.

If we conceive maps and map making in a wider sense, by not confining them to the common understanding of what a map is, all four types of world – the ‘only’ abstracted ones, the realized functional, the fictitious and the non-functional virtual worlds – settle upon the conception of world(s) in terms of map making.

MAPS AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

With maps and map making, it is the same as with technique in Heidegger’s famous saying about it, namely that the nature of technique is nothing technical (Heidegger, 1990, p. 9). The essence
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