Chapter 12
The Players’ Dimension: From Virtual to Physical

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ABSTRACT
This chapter outlines three positions in the development of game spaces from the ideal of the perfect mindspace to the commercial reality of virtual worlds to the expansion of the game world into the physical environment into a hybrid space. The third position will be investigated further as the argument looks into peculiarities of the evolving hybrid space that result from the combination of changes to the physical through the fictional space. This continues the ongoing dissolution of the magic circle’s boundaries and illustrates how fictional worlds expand into even non-game locations. Building on Popper’s system of the 3 worlds, it is suggested that today’s fictional game worlds have already changed our physical environments. In that, it partially closes the argument back to the earliest dreams of cyberspace but arrives not at a new mindspace to “log in” but instead at a new physical space in need of re-evaluation.

INTRODUCTION
Early on, spatiality has been noted as a defining element of digital media. However, the kind of space involved changed over time. Starting from a perspective mainly informed by Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Game Studies, this paper looks at the development of space in video games as it reaches out of the digital virtuality into the physical domain. This is a necessarily limited view at the complexities of the debate about space and our engagement with it. It focuses at the increasing role of the physical domain in digital game worlds and will sketch out three steps in the development of video game spaces: from an idealistic mindspace to the contested virtual game worlds of commercial video games to the more current interconnections between physical
and virtual game spaces. Although this paper will suggest three – rather roughly defined – positions in this development, it should be noted that these positions do not necessarily contradict each other in practice. As our involvement with game worlds grows from an ongoing media history and widening literacy, these three categories should be seen as interwoven and parts of an ongoing evolution. To clarify their differences, though, they will be treated as separate entities.

The three entities outlined here represent three different yet interconnected answers to the question posed by the spatial representation and practices in digital media. Thus, instead of an excluding view that would replace one stage with a new one, it is suggested to understand the argument for stages as a cumulative one. Game worlds can be understood as mindspaces as well as virtual worlds as well as hybrid spaces. The differentiation, as will be argued in the closing section, happens in our actual engagement with them, which can shift rapidly.

**CYBERSPACE**

Ever since the early days of digital media, visionaries saw them as a new accessible space and a world to explore. Howard Rheingold hoped that cyberspace may be “a new laboratory of the spirit” (Rheingold, 1991). Supporting the idea of the “spirit world” Barlow claimed “[o]urs is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth” (Barlow, 1996). Reflected in these positions we see the visions of Gibson and other visionaries as they popularized that mix of Science Fiction and technological origins that came together to seed “cyberspace.” But it had to be a mainly futuristic forward-looking perspective.

Gibson’s work, and the Cyberpunk genre in general, have principally served to excite interest in newly developing interactive computer systems. In a social order whose economic and technological rationale still seems centered on a Marinettian notion of progress - where ‘progress is right, even when it’s wrong’ - the lack of address to the cautionary aspects of the genre is perhaps understandable. It is not surprising that a society preoccupied with technology and consumerism can more readily grasp the potential pleasures of new media rather than predictions of the social decay they might cause. Whatever Gibson’s (best) intentions, his work has created a desire for cyberspace technologies in advance of their production. Their current unavailability thereby renders them objects of desire par excellence for a high-tech consumer culture untroubled by vague speculations as to their dystopian potential. (Hayward, 1993)

Inspired by the promise of the new digital technology and its usage, the prophets of cyberspace called for a new kind of space, defined by a new society, somehow stepping beyond the problems of the flesh, at times stepping beyond the biological altogether (Moravec, 1988). These were places to “log in” to a higher level of cyber-enhanced consciousness and “drop out” of reality with its social, economic, and political flaws.

Visionaries such as Douglas Engelbart, whose perspective originated not from the cyberspace fiction of Gibson but from a more practical and technological basis, promised “augmenting man’s intellect” (Engelbart, 1988) with the help of this new technology. In Engelbart’s case, this famously included the mouse as control device that offered new interaction options to the user. Others expanded this perspective to a conquest of new knowledge spaces through digital technology. Cyberspace as such a deterritorialized knowledge space was seen as the “civilization’s new horizon” (Levy, 1997). As a techno-social construct offering “a form of universally distributed intelligence”