„Analiza i Egzystencja" 58 (2022), 111–124
ISSN (print): 1734-9923
ISSN (online): 2300-7621
DOI: 10.18276/aie.2022.58-06

DIDACTICS OF PHILOSOPHY

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The Academia Electronica – Vision, Experiment, Future

Keywords: virtual world; virtual community; reality; avatar; open university

> …in order to promote and improve teaching and learning within higher education, higher education institutions have adopted learning management platforms hereinafter referred to as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs).
>
> P. Alves, L. Miranda, C. Morais, *The Influence of Virtual Learning Environments in Students' Performance*

Abstract

This paper describes the history of the Academia Electronica, which has operated since 2007 in the Second Life 3D graphic environment. I focused on the transformation it underwent and problems which have been being addressed for the last 15 years. There are three aspects to the analysis: the first concerning the philosophy of virtuality, the second teaching in the 3D graphic environment, and the third revealing the social importance of an open university. This text is autobiographic, meaning that it includes short accounts of a number of events related to the development of the Academia Electronica as a university alongside my own personal reflections based on my long stay in the Second Life world.

The Academia Electronica was founded in the virtual world of Second Life as a non-institutionalized virtual section of The Jagiellonian

University of Krakow and affiliated with the Department of Philosophy in 2007. At that time, the problems of virtuality were often analyzed in the contexts of simulation practices (Lister et al., 2008, pp. 105–127). Therefore, such concepts as e.g., immersion, telepresence, and/or telemacity were only familiar to those "initiated" adepts who had taken the decision to cross the boundary between the physical and virtual worlds to undergo the VR experience. The very origins of the Academia Electronica were influenced by the type of background which the users could find in the Second Life environment, and thus could perceive the phenomena mentioned above. Such an involvement may cause changes in the manner of a given person's reactions to the behaviors of other people present in the virtual world and/or the different reception of semantic content in comparison with its equivalent in the physical world (Heim, 1993, pp. 109–128; Lan, 2020, pp. 5–6). Direct contact with the virtual environment may be interpreted as the basis for and the source of the analysis of the difference between the physical reality and virtual reality, which, specifically, in recent times, has become a venue to which many human activities earlier occurring in the physical world have moved. This transfer is visible as a process developing over the three last decades at least (Bell, 2001, pp. 6–15).

When the virtual world of Second Life emerged (Wilkes, 2016, pp. 48–50), it was commonly referred to as the next 3D game, though it aroused slightly different interest in the wider public. There were no tasks to complete nor any kind of competition; therefore, what was its purpose? This question was seemingly answered by a woman from the Netherlands whom I met in this virtual world. She told me how she had split up with her partner in Second Life. She started by telling me how they had lived together in a beautiful house, then had had a child-bot who had obtained a birth certificate and she had then had a marvelous wedding. She shared photos from the ceremony with me and, just to compare events, she showed me photos from her wedding in the physical world. After more than two hours of conversation, we departed and have never met again. So, I became aware then that the experience the woman had told me about was not a simulation, because her feelings and emotional commitment were undoubtedly real, and she was deeply affected by them. It became clear for me that we were dealing with a situation affecting humans in a similar way to that in the physical world, but due to its eukaryotic nature, it is hardly noticeable (Ventrella, 1995, p. 301). The virtual world is considered as a source of human experience

which, with the development of technology, is gradually manifesting as an alternative to the physical world. In those times it was Second Life, which was an electronic world where you could do a range of activities differently and often independently of the processes occurring in the physical world; however, this does not mean that they were not real (Chalmers and Zányi, 2009, p. 4). It was evident for me that I would pursue further philosophical analyses of the phenomenon of the virtual world alongside education and the establishment of a VR university.

At the beginning, only a few people from the academic and business milieus were involved in the initial work to establish the Academia Electronica. Our interest and enthusiasm for learning brought about the establishment of the first academic lecture hall in a building located in the virtual main market square of Second Krakow which was a part of the Second Poland project. In 2008 I delivered the first official open course, *The Electronic Environment as Human Reality*, which was attended by few students and listeners. The impression I received from those academic classes strengthened my view that it may be a long-term and fruitful path for education. Those lectures were only a part of the Academy's activity, but others were related to the emerging academic network community which was committed to the creation of educational projects and sharing time in a common venue which was intended for anyone interested in this type of activity. The Academy was considered to be a university although it included a virtual garden and a pool, alongside virtual animals and a virtual owl examining students, and changing lecture rooms with the passing of time. From the outset the Academy was supported by the Department of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University, which played a crucial role with regard to formal academic procedures. In turn, the registration and archiving of academic events were important due to the chance to maintain the continuation of the project and, therefore, the realization of the project of the Academy as a virtual venue for meetings. Most of the academic activities were published on the website www.academia-electronica.net and on a Facebook fanpage, as well as on YouTube. These actions were possible owing to a key moment in 2010, when a page was designed which allowed for recording and archiving the events. Then, Neutrinka Lisle (SL nick), who has an IT background, contributed to the implementation of these breakthrough developments. She suggested substantial improvements to the page design, which continues to be administered by her, and assumed administrative work in the Academia

in Second Life. Another person who has been engaged in the Academia Electronica's activities is Dex Euromat (SL nick), an engineer who has been responsible for the technological and logistic supply network for the academic projects.

While the Academia was in operation, it prompted me to ponder a number of research questions. Today, I am inclined to claim that the impact of the VR background and the theory of media alongside philosophical analysis became a solid foundation for later projects both in the Academia and in the research milieu. In my case, they involved a study on the phenomenon of the Network, which allowed me to discuss and re-evaluate a number of claims referring to the Web. I examined a range of views which, for example, were based on theory and on comparisons with other views showing only VR experiences (LaValle, 2017, pp. 8–22). Soon, it was clear that my commitment in Second Life referred to at least three areas of research: 1. Philosophical questions, which were for me essential for media study, 2. E-learning research, which has been and still is unique in Poland and has also resonated internationally, and 3. Social relations problems, which involve the co-existence of people coming to this venue from various social backgrounds and who have encountered the values and manners of performing activities by educational and research institutions on the Web.

The first area of research proved to be very extensive and profound, which resulted in the theory of ontoelectronics, that is, an ontological analysis based on judgment on the existence of electronic reality. This claim became the foundation for understanding other Web phenomena which became apparent in a number of analyses on communication and Web identity (Figueroa Sarriera, 2006, p. 100). Taking a look from a wider perspective, such a methodological approach to virtuality initiated by an ontological analysis which means *the interpretation of its existence as an alternative reality to the physical world* is essential for preserving the reference to reality, in this case the electronic (virtual) reality, because otherwise any actions taken in VR may be understood as non-real or simulated. As time passed, it was clear to me that academic discourse is inadequate for the spectrum of ideas which the Academia triggered. This made me think about extending the range of influence by sharing research outcomes and observations with the wider public. The philosophical assumptions, and specifically ontological views, were and still are of fundamental importance, but due to the multichannel communication from the academic to the more popular worlds

those views were formed and expressed in a variety of ways, although the philosophical message was the same. Then, my principal stance was that the evolving Web should be understood as reality, but that its different nature with regard to the reality of the physical world should be taken into account and that it should be defined as a non-physical dimension in the meaning of its electronic origin. After many years it was evident for me that not all the concepts which I had applied earlier were sufficiently developed. For instance, immateriality may be such a notion (Cubitt and Thomas, 2015, pp. 20, 29), which was used by many researchers for more or less three decades. Only the ideas developed in the context of New Materialism (Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012) allowed us to understand that the concept of immatter is ontologically weak and is irrelevant for the analysis of any being. The concept of immatter was intuitively clear at that time, but its later explanation led me to claim that we could not understand what the electronic being is, if it could not be comprehended as a form of materiality. Therefore, I stopped using this notion, and just at the beginning of the Academia applied the concept of electronic matter, although I did not reject the concept of immatter. I dismissed those concepts which "weaken" the existence of the electronic sphere of being alike, e.g., simulation and even the concept of virtuality, which seems to be excessively formed in opposition to the notion of the physical world. Recently, a rebirth of the concept of virtual reality has been observed, though it has evolved due to the development of VR technology (Mann et al., 2018), e.g., interfaces such as Oculus Quest and/or apps such as Mozilla Hubs, and the improvement in the quality of video games and/or the emergence of interactive VR 360 degree films which are shot with the use of 3D cameras (360 degrees). The experience with immersive interfaces such as the head-mounted display (HMD) may lead to a better understanding of the concept of virtual reality not in a strictly defined manner, but as a form of reality, though (Au, 2008, p. viii). Additionally, it was questionable whether the concept of the real world could be used as a notion depicting the exceptional existence of the physical world and often used in discourse on virtual reality, which caused doubts as to whether or not the actions taking place in VR may be interpreted as real. On the contrary, some concepts such as the concept of the electronic environment, which is widespread in philosophical literature, and the notion of virtual or electronic *realis* used by me, and the idea of electronic reality were helpful and meaningful due to the question of the ontology of virtuality.

One of the fundamental research questions arising from the analysis of virtual reality refers to the stance on the paradigmatic change in the development of technology (Drucker, 2009, p. 5), i.e., the emergence of an increasingly engaging sphere of *being* differently, which allows the human to act effectively, though in certain aspects differently with regard to the physical world (Turkle, 1997, pp. 47, 73). In the Academia debates, there were increasingly frequent discussions of claims supporting the view that it is a fundamental and unavoidable direction of human development (Heim, 1999, pp. 44–45). Such judgments were not understood by many people, and in some cases, they triggered non-acceptance and even open hostility in the participants. The bone of contention was that those judgments were the outcomes of research on the Web, and they were uttered with a strong conviction about their veracity of future evolution alongside their materialization. In my view, research in the humanities needs to address such issues in this way, and not only concentrate on the depiction of the *hic* and *nunc,* neglecting observations valid in the future, and drawing on the consequences referring to the state of reality originating in the state of the presence. In addition, in the course of time and in relation to a growing interest in *inter alia* artificial intelligence and the development of cybernetic organisms, some researchers have shared similar views and have started to interpret the phenomenon of technology in this manner.

Philosophical views on the existence of an electronic (virtual) reality understood as an alternative sphere of being to the physical world are currently increasingly justified. Unfortunately, this process is taking place while humanity is suffering from the coronavirus pandemic, which is, however, a catalyst speeding up the process of transferring a variety of human activities to the Web. It is a tragedy that this is the cause of the transformation, but nevertheless we do need to stress the exceptional role of network technology, without which almost no human activities could survive, never mind academic ones. Technology plays a fundamental role in the widespread continuation of human activities which exceed the area of every-day communication by filling the Web with a large amount of human-related content. My view is that this Web integration could take effect, but that it will happen later and could last longer.

Social media apps such as Facebook (and most similar web applications) which display 2D content are the result of the development of programming languages and hardware technology at a given moment in time. In my view,

in the future, a form of a standardized VR Internet will arise which will use 3D graphic environment software. Humans living in the physical world may adapt easily to the three-dimensional world; therefore, Web technology will develop to the moment when the electronic environment becomes in common use. Nowadays, only the insufficient pace of the development of technology, including its present limitations, are obstacles to the process of technological evolution. However, the importance of the developmental process of VR may not be fully comprehended by the wider public, which may not be aware that the changes are leading to the creation of a human electronic world that could often overcome the limitations of the physical world.

In 2007, Second Life was one of the few 3D graphic environment apps in existence but, due to its promotion of social values and the use of advanced technological solutions, it is still the best. When I decided to choose Second Life, I was fully aware of my aims in finding a virtual place to spend time and do research on VR, and I was also keen on obtaining a homogenous and uninterrupted experience, and coping with the uncontrolled behaviors in the open Web, including incoming people who were mostly anonymous. All of this contributed to an infinite source of inspiration and it prompted me to formulate new philosophical judgments on Web phenomena. This experience allowed me to look for inspiration in futurology, which led me to gain a wider perspective related to the development of technology (Ihde, 1990, p. 31), but with a clear focus on views on the development of the Web, that is, the emergence of the standardized 3D VR Internet. In the Academia Electronica there was and still is a need to implement theory into practice, which was, to a certain extent, visible in e.g., the Art of New Media (Branden, 2004, quoted after Quaranta, 2013, p. 54; Zielinski, 2011, p. 128) and in cyberculture (Bell, 2001, pp. 48–49). In the case of the Academia Electronica, we intended to incorporate the university into the VR environment. Those procedures were joined with wider debates on the functions of the devices which need not be treated instrumentally, but as a medium allowing for a variety of users' activities on the Web, as a result of which they may obtain a range of sometimes unexpected and meaningful feedback. From this perspective, e.g., the reduction in functions of a modern smartphone to useful communication device is unjustified. The potential which may be released in this type of medium exceeds the communication process, and smartphones may become a medium triggering various forms of the user's experience. Therefore, users may need to have an uninterrupted connection to the Web and use the

smartphone as a hybrid of their corporeality. Today, we use devices whose extensive possibilities and functions result in the necessity to use them in everyday life.

With the passing of time and the accumulation of registered and archived lectures and other presentations which had taken place in the Academia Electronica, we felt increasing responsibility for our open university. It was of high importance with regard to contacts with people unidentified in the physical world who visited the Academia. Our fundamental idea was to join the functions of the university and the community of the VR world. Thus, our objective was to make ourselves better known and encourage users to reflect on the phenomenon of the Web and its everyday use, on the philosophical debates on the reality of the content, and also the questions of sincerity of their intentions and actions, which are easy to simulate. For our study, the value of the remote contacts was maintained by avatars which were seemingly not physical, but requiring determination and consistency in their continual creation, which was caused by the identification with the avatars by the users. Users' relationships initiated by the use of avatars may still arouse academic interest in the person functioning in the virtual world. At least in the beginning, users wish to preserve anonymity, so they get to know other people using avatars, which may be due to a need for compensation and/or their interest in such an unusual contact, or the possibility to play a different role. Then, new forms of expression become visible which sometimes may symbolically refer to the person behind their avatar.

The second area, as mentioned above, i.e., the VR university, was like putting a cat amongst the pigeons, due to the unusual practice of e-learning in the 3D graphic environment, organizing and participating in conferences alongside lectures by invited guests. Without the support of the Jagiellonian University, and, specifically the Department of Philosophy, it would have been impossible to run academic courses and teaching experiments in the Academia. The main issue was the authorization of activities which were independent from the university administration, but under the auspices of the Jagiellonian University. It was and still is a test for the realization of our ideas to carry out projects on the borderline between the structures and customs of the university and the everyday practices of the virtual world. This relation put to the test the university closed behind physical walls and the external world in the form of the open virtual environment. In fact, the ideals of the university had to be tried in order to show their necessity due

to the imponderables of an institute of higher education. Currently, nearly thirty courses have been reported (including those archived), which are run by several lecturers from various academic centers in Poland. Since 2013, it has been possible to enroll on a selected course on the Academia's website by any interested person, which mainly involves regular students who have received permission by their home institutions to formally obtain credits for completing a course. All lectures are open; therefore, anyone can be in the audience. Similarly, academic educators may register a course on the Academia's website (which is not necessary, because they may come to the Academia with a group of students and lead classes in a free lecture hall). The possibility to enroll on a course by a student and the submission of an open academic course by any university educator are exceptional opportunities in public HEIs in Poland. Such projects presumably anticipate future developments which may involve e.g., the exchange of courses between universities, and even the profiling of such individualized and organized courses of study.

Currently, apart from official open courses there are lectures in the series *From the Student to the Professor*, which have engaged several dozen academic educators from various university centers in Poland. Additional events include the lectures *Science Beyond Borders – The Global Academia Electronica* for our overseas guests, conference speeches and large conferences, and also popular science lectures alongside the activities of The Philosophy of Technology Student Scientific Club of The Jagiellonian University. In 2012 and 2015, the Academia was the first Polish university venue on the Internet where Bachelor's degree (2015), Master's degree and PhD degree examinations (2012) took place. We have also hosted three series of conferences, the *Philosophy of Technology* and two *Humanity in the World of Technology*, attracting speakers both from Poland and abroad. We have organized several exhibitions of art. In February 2020, for the first time, we used Oculus for giving speeches at our academic conference.

For years, researchers used to come to the Academia, and despite our openness to the variety of themes for debates, it became clear that such subjects as Web themes, New Media Art, cyberculture, transhumanism, artificial intelligence and cyborgization, alongside similar topics which were related to the general claims on the importance of the technology development were in our profile. There were also criticisms of those commitments, but, admittedly, they had no major influence, because they coincided with the

content underscoring the values of technology rather than its drawbacks. We encountered a number of issues relating to access to the courses in Poland. They involved different days off in various universities, summer and winter holidays, alongside the application of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). We agreed that the suggested number of credits should not be obligatory, and that each university was free to grant the number of credits listed in the curriculum information on the website. Regarding the academic calendar, we adopted the Jagiellonian University's for a given academic year.

Delivering a speech in the presence of a variety of avatars is an unforgettable experience, particularly due to the nicks used by the audience; therefore, it becomes intriguing because, sometimes, they tend to show the character of the person (Varela et al., 1993, p. 62). However, it was always essential to adhere to the most important obligation in such situations and be faithful to academic values. The form of such education works well, perhaps due to its naturalness and the sense of freedom and adherence to the community. These may be revealed in other types of activities and ways of transferring content to the Web, but in the case of 3D virtual worlds, they are more comprehensive because of the 3D space, which is similar to the physical world.

The classes in the Academia have some interesting features which are also characteristic nowadays for other educational systems used in remote education (Westbrook, 2006, p. 471). For example, there is the joint chat, when students may send messages without interrupting the lecture (Michailidou and Economides, 2003, p. 133). The lecturer may address them, although it is not compulsory, but if such messages appear, they always contribute to the creation of another dimension to the lecture. Many a time it has happened that those messages contained comments which were later expanded in term papers and/or conference speeches. This mechanism is impossible in traditional classrooms. Some people have participated in classes for years, and later in the lecture framework *From Student to Professor*, and one student prepared their PhD thesis inspired by their experience in the Academia. Similarly, some tutorials presented in open classes also stimulate engaging debates. So far, there have been 40 meetings of the Philosophy of Technology Group, during which students have presented papers, reviewed current philosophical literature and/or shared information on the latest technological developments. The Academia Electronica is not only a system of remote learning, but a Web university with real academic

life which may combine scientific debates and casual conversations in the Academia's garden.

The third area under discussion is social relations, the establishment of which in the virtual university proved to be possible and necessary from the very outset. This social dimension means building friendly contacts based on shared academic values and the enthusiastic involvement of even anonymous people, which have all contributed to the Academia's development. The Academia has steadily become a joint venue for the Polish community in Second Life. At the beginning unusual situations occurred, such as the interruptions of lectures, but in 15 years there have only been 2 or 3 such cases. The classes were open, and they were announced in Second Life and on Facebook; therefore, we had to take into account that besides students, the classes could be anonymously attended by specialists in the domain or laypeople, which in turn could lead to slight problems. Those exceptional cases were interpreted as a part of the cyber-culture experience, and we tried to deal with them by talking to such people and persuade them that we were on university territory. Over time, lectures and other events became common procedure and they took place without interruptions. It turned out that relationships and private contacts arising in the Academia with its ideas, and specifically involving some people, became permanent and with the passing of time, once they had become rooted in the Academia, the responsibility for them increased.

Regarding philosophical questions, the most important thesis that emerged in the Academia was the recognition of the electronic environment as an area of being. From the present point of view it is clear that due to the pandemic, sadly, we have been "moved" to the electronic reality to a broad extent, but also it became evident that our activities performed there are real. The existence of the Academia Electronica is a timely experience which provides support for claims on the importance of technology and suggestions concerning the structure of the VR university, whose future existence, surely, cannot be denied.

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environment in Second Life and from 2021 in Altspacevr, where official, academic courses and conference presentations are carried out.

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Citation

Myoo, S. (Ostrowicki, M.) (2022). The Academia Electronica – Vision, Experiment, Future. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, *58* (2), 111–124. DOI: 10.18276/aie.2022.58-06.