

THEME 03

# A meaningful Second Life

VIRTUAL WORLDS

GEN Z

VIDEOGAMES

The virtual worlds of teenagers allow them to earn money, watch TV, meet each other and learn valuable skills. As such, virtual worlds have begun to generate profound meaning that we often still think we can only find in the physical world. As more and more parts of daily life are virtualized, the physical and virtual worlds slowly become indistinguishable.

## Our observations

- The newest virtual worlds blur the boundaries between TV, social networks, gaming, learning and functioning economies (as we have [noted](#) before). Roblox, for instance, has allowed teenagers to earn money by letting them sell their self-created game experiences to others. Popular platforms such as Fortnite are increasingly used as social networks (i.e. to meet friends and strangers) and sources of passive entertainment (i.e. watching livestreams). As more and more activities of daily life become part of virtual worlds, the meaning people attach to these worlds increases.
- Videogame addiction reflects the profound meaning people attach to virtual worlds. About [2 billion people](#) worldwide play video games. With the rise of [e-sports](#), it's even grown into a career path. For some, videogames have become the only meaningful social interaction during their entire day. Earlier this year, the World Health Organization started to recognize "[gaming disorders](#)" as patterns of gaming behavior characterized by increasing priority given to gaming over other interests and daily activities. Put simply, videogame addiction occurs when people attach as much meaning (e.g. through social interaction, creativity, learning, earning money) to virtual worlds as to the physical world.
- Gordon Calleja argues that immersion (i.e. the sensation of inhabiting the virtual space represented onscreen) does not represent the full experience of virtual worlds. Instead of immersion, virtual worlds offer "[incorporation](#)": through six dimensions of player involvement (kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective, ludic) the virtual environment is fully absorbed into the user's consciousness.
- The 2018 movie *Ready Player One* is a product of the zeitgeist that, through finding meaning in virtual worlds, does not recognize clear boundaries between the physical and virtual worlds. The movie presents a world in which people spend most of their time in virtual reality, as all parts of daily life have been successfully virtualized.
- Technological innovation (e.g. cloud computing, 5G, higher processing power) is an essential underlying driver of more meaningful virtual worlds. After all, such innovation boosts the capacity of virtual worlds to build more immersive environments, offer more types of activities, create more engaging content, and connect more people.



## Connecting the dots

Up until recently it was hard to imagine people making a living, learning valuable skills and watching TV-like content within virtual worlds. Yet these activities of daily life have been virtualized. Through this process, virtual worlds have become much more than 'videogames'. Instead, they increasingly offer profound meaning to their users. Indeed, the dimensions of meaning within virtual worlds continues to rise: from playing games, meeting people and watching idols to learning skills, creating content and earning money.

The growing meaning people attach to virtual worlds questions the general distinction between the physical and the virtual. As a result of profoundly meaningful experiences in virtual worlds throughout their lifetimes, especially Gen Z will not clearly recognize boundaries between the physical and the virtual. Indeed, as sociocultural mindsets shift, perhaps any part of physical daily life will be translated into virtual worlds (e.g. [eating](#), [sex](#)). Anyhow, we will increasingly be confronted with virtual worlds not as escapist playgrounds for teenagers, but as meaningful spaces on equal footing with the physical world.

Skepticism towards the idea of full virtualization of daily life is related to the Skin Bag Bias (as we have [noted](#) before). It is often believed that our bodily presence is unique to the physical world and is clearly separated from the virtual world. However, technologies such as [haptic gloves](#), full [haptic suits](#) with biometric feedback, [brain stimulation](#), [treadmills](#) for VR, and interfaces for [smell](#) and [taste](#) have already been developed. These technologies all transport parts of the physical body into virtual environments. Furthermore, technologies like Augmented Reality and Mixed

Reality concepts also blur the line between the physical and virtual. To imagine what these developments could lead to, *Ready Player One* presents a world in which our physical body has been completely incorporated into virtual worlds through VR, haptic suits and biometric feedback. In such a scenario, perhaps the only difference between the physical and the virtual is the possibility of death, but even if that is true ([Black Mirror](#) season 4 episode 1), the profound equivalence between the physical and the virtual has already been revealed.

The growing meaning people attach to virtual worlds is, naturally, a double-edged sword. Virtual worlds could become sources of [altered states](#) that elevate videogames to essential tools for education, meaningful entertainment and mind-expanding experiences. However, meanwhile, growing meaning is accompanied by potentially destructive behavior, as videogame addiction shows. Teenagers increasingly struggle with [loneliness](#), [mental health](#) issues, and [non-virtual communication](#), which are all associated with time spent in virtual worlds. Indeed, virtual worlds could also weaken social cohesion, as virtual companionship already competes with flesh-and-blood companionship: [LovePlus](#) is a Japanese game in which players interact with a virtual girlfriend by kissing the screen and taking her out on dates (it has hundreds of thousands of users). Furthermore, virtual worlds could increasingly become breeding places for subcultures that aim to alter social norms (as we have [noted](#) before). Although such potentially destructive behavior reflects social dynamics that also occur in the physical world, the opaque nature of virtual worlds could increasingly trigger anxiety about their proliferation.

## Implications

- Platforms will emerge that incorporate multiple dimensions of meaning (i.e. even beyond just social, learning, making a living, and watching content). There is a significant rise of [“social VR” projects](#): all of these companies are trying to build fully immersive open-ended virtual worlds for hundreds of users in a single space. Building on the newest technology that allows more expansive virtual worlds, they're playing into the trend of virtual worlds becoming more meaningful to people.
- Mobile interfaces, while offering less immersion than other interfaces, are perfectly suited to meaningful virtual worlds. After all, contrarily to immersion, meaning is not simply created through impressive sound and realistic graphics. Instead, it is also created through meeting people, learning valuable skills, and finding purpose beyond playing a game – which is possible on mobile platforms as well. Indeed, games like [Fortnite](#) are massively popular on mobile platforms.