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# Inhabiting Digital Worlds

## *Place, Nearness, Distance*

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*The significance of notions such as digital worlds and spaces remains vague despite their common use in digital humanities, and the extent to which these are bound up with our relation to place and the world is often disregarded. The aim of this article is to clarify the philosophical underpinnings of these concepts, identify the problematic aspects of our relation to digital technologies, and explore the possibility of developing a topological reflection on our being in digital environments. In drawing from the 20th-century German thinker Martin Heidegger's philosophy of place and technology, the article problematizes the modern conception of the world as a mere spatial network and outlines the phenomenological boundaries of digital spaces. By giving particular attention to explaining the ontological and hermeneutic meaning of the notion of distance, the article elucidates the interplay between nearness and remoteness and arrives at three correlated meanings of distance.*

## Questioning Digital Worlds: A Reorientation of Place

Digital technologies have been with us for more than half a century. The Digital Revolution, or the Third Industrial Revolution, which resulted in the commercialization of computers, the Internet, digital TVs, and smartphones among many other technologies transformed the very nature of commerce, science, education, media and communication. While recent technological, political, and economic developments suggest that online platforms and activities will increasingly become the norm in the 21st century, the integration of digital tools, applications, and systems into our daily practices by no means guarantees that we are fully experiencing the utter digitization of our world. How digital technologies transform our lives by shifting the boundaries of our dwelling places, redefining the space and place of our interactions with other persons and demarcating the horizon of our everyday practices, remains to be investigated. Addressing the wider implications of the digitization of the world, in a manner that goes beyond technological and entrepreneurial limits and commercial concerns and interests seems necessary and urgent.[1] To be able to answer inquiries such as "*Where* are we when we are situated in and attached to digital spaces?," or "Do we stand at an appropriate distance from the world when engaged digitally?," one must have an understanding of what it means to *be somewhere* and *be connected* to other phenomena (persons, things, places), and certainly, what it means to *be* as such. Accordingly, what I offer in what follows is to elucidate the place-nature of digital technologies.

Although there is a growing literature on the significance of digital and virtual worlds, most contemporary work pays attention to technical dimensions of the matter. Surprisingly, even in most philosophical discussions of cyberspaces, the space and place-character of these platforms are omitted.[2] More attention is given to epistemological and ethical questions, e.g., whether we can know or not we are living in virtual worlds, whether it is wrong to do immoral acts in virtual reality (VR), and cybersecurity. For instance, in his recent book, the Australian philosopher David Chalmers argues that VR is "genuine reality." According to him, we can never know whether we are living in a simulated world or not, which assumes that VR could autonomously exist alongside "reality."[3] The notions of reality and knowledge that are at work in this and similar accounts move within a dualistic Platonist-Cartesian framework that problematically divorces the mind from the body, reality from appearance.

The difficulty of understanding the core issues of digital worlds is due to two reasons. First, as we are so surrounded by digital technologies, we take certain aspects of these technologies for granted. As Iain Thomson puts it, that which seems to be the closest to us, being the most essential and basic, might also be that which escapes our understanding and experience the most easily.[4] Standing too close to phenomena or being completely absorbed in certain situations and activities can make it difficult to make sense of their implicit meanings and implications.

1 A contemporary architect like Patrik Schumacher suggests: "The metaverse is being built as we speak, rapidly. But who is designing it? Who should design it? My thesis is that the design of the metaverse falls within the remit of the discipline of architecture and the wider design disciplines …". https://www.archdaily.com/980196/the-metaverse-as-opportunity-for-architects-an-interview-with-patrik-schumacher

2 The collection of essays edited by Erik Champion addresses this gap in recent scholarship. See: *The Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places*, ed. Erik Champion (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

3 See chapter 6, "What is Reality," in David J. Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022).

4 Iain Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 18.

Second, the epistemology-oriented metaphysical tradition considers questions about digital and virtual spaces almost spontaneously to be tied to the meaning of reality. Yet, this implies omitting what determines the realness of the real, namely the more fundamental question of being. A coherent grasp of the topic requires us to reorient ourselves and adjust our focus to reconsider the overall meaning of digital spaces from a more suitable vantage point, which could also allow us to understand, first, our place in the world, and second, how our being placed is to be explored. A topological standpoint, one that can lay out the significance of digital spaces in relation to the human experience of being situated in space, place, and the world, can provide us with that necessary perspective.

### Topology and Place

In the history of 20th-century philosophy, phenomenological and hermeneutic thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Nishida Kitarō, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Kostas Axelos discussed in a myriad of ways that *being situated* in a place, body, or history is the constitutive condition of any experience. Place, or more precisely being placed (situatedness) is exactly that which precedes the "object" and "subject" division since all subjectivity and objectivity must first issue from a particular ground and belong to a certain horizon to be able to be appear as part of a meaningful correlation – a correlation of meaningfulness. As places show us, phenomena, phenomenologists of place, or what one might call topological phenomenologists, are interested in understanding how place determines the specific *appearing* of phenomena.[5]

Among these phenomenological philosophers, Heidegger's thought is probably the most pertinent one for explicitly tying his thinking of being, place, world, and dwelling.[6] His philosophy has been an important source inspiration for important architectural theorists and architects such as Christian Norberg-Schulz, Alvar Aalto, Hans Scharoun, among others.[7] Especially the final phase of Heidegger's philosophy between the mid-1940s and 70s, which he called a "topology of being" (*Topologie des Seins*) is key in that context, as it explicitly focuses on the place (*Topos*, *Ort, Ortschaft*) of the disclosure, or un-concealment (*a-lētheia*) of the meaning of being.[8] If the very appearing – becoming manifest – of the meaning of being can only be possible as an occurrence, the event (*Ereignis*) at issue is the happening of the belonging together of disclosure and hiddenness, which needs the space in *the between* (*das Zwischen*), namely the interval, or the leeway of that becoming apparent. The between is not only the neutral space that connects phenomena, or only a point of passage, but the very possibility of relationality and nearness.[9] Understanding digital technologies requires us to investigate the interplay between appearing and disappearing and explain the tension that exists between situatedness and displacement. Such an analysis can allow us to make sense of the specific kind of relationship between nearness and remoteness, as well as connectedness and distantiation.

5 Luís António Umbelino, "Spaces and Atmospheric Memories," *Joelho: Journal of Architectural Culture,* no. 13 (2022), 16. https://doi.org/10.14195/1647-8681_13_1

6 It must be noted that while my thinking draws a lot from Heidegger's philosophy of place and technology, what follows does not offer a critical analysis or exegetic interpretation of his thought. For such an approach, see Nader El-Bizri's account: Nader El-Bizri, "Phenomenology of Place and Space in our Epoch: Thinking along Heideggerian Pathways," in Champion, *The Phenomenology of Real*, 123–144.

7 Jeff Malpas, *Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger, Place, Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 2.

8 Martin Heidegger, *Seminare* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1986), 344.

9 When it comes to the thinking of the between, the works of Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) and William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) come to mind.

In that vein of thinking, thematizing the ontological nature, phenomenological significance, and hermeneutic horizon of the "interval" that originates from digital environments is essential. Philosophical topology allows us to interpret the middle ground at issue by appealing to the *logos/logoi* of the *topos/topoi*: if we go back to the origin of the word *logos*, we find that the root verb *legein* has a wide range of connotations such as laying, gathering, showing, and in that sense of letting-lie-before, "saying."[10] If Jeff Malpas explicitly considers topology to be the "saying of place," this is because thinking topologically implies reflecting on the gathering, saying, laying, and showing of *topos* and how phenomena appear meaningfully to us through the specific situatedness that arises from a specific place.[11] What is crucial regarding the Greek notion of *topos* is that it invokes a sense of boundedness, indeed, a boundedness which is possible only because place is also that which opens to neighbouring sites and locales.[12] As such, a place always has boundaries that make it the particular place that it is, giving access to and connecting with adjacent sites and locations. Here the two other qualities of place, connectedness and particularity, also come to the fore. Namely, not only place is always connected to the world, but it also gathers phenomena which are interrelated, while this specific way of relating to the world distinguishes one place from other places.

Within that context, reflecting on the place-nature of digital worlds concerns, first, hermeneutically, the interpretability of digital worlds from our situated standpoint, second, ontologically, a topology of digital world concerns the *be*-ing of that distance or space that emerges from digital worlds and third, phenomenologically, the significance of the world of manifestation which correlates the builders and the dwellers of digital worlds. Whether our different everyday activities (e.g., communication, socialization, commerce, entertainment) in virtual and digital environments enhance our relation to the world, or the digitization of the world undermines or significantly diminishes the space in which focal activities and practices take place and flourish survive is a central issue. Considering this issue as tied to the place of our inhabitation will help us see whether digital spaces fulfil the four qualities of place –openness, boundedness, connectedness, particularity, and how they challenge the limits or boundaries of place.

### The World: The Place of Digitization

As virtual worlds are essentially digital phenomena, it is necessary to turn our attention to the significance of the digital. The prevailing presupposition that needs to be unpacked is that we can understand the digital world(s) without grasping the meaning of the *world*, which is the notion of the world espoused in modern philosophy and science that prioritizes space over place.

A conventional though problematic way of considering digital environments and platforms is to take them as autonomous or independent

10 Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. D.F. Krell and F.A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 60–62.

11 Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 73–75.

12 In the fourth book of *Physics*, Aristotle defines *topos* as "the first immovable limit of what encompasses the thing". Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. C.D.C Reeve (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 212b, 18–19.

spaces that exist alongside the world, as if they could be seen as parallels or alternatives to it.[13] Part of the problem here is that the concept of world is confusingly employed in the sense of a mere unified totality, as an abstraction of the planet Earth or the globe, and thereby as an indistinct realm that within which things are only contained and bunched together. It would be useful to recall that the concept of the "digital" can be traced back to the Latin word *digitus* (finger) which symbolizes the act of counting by fingers.[14] In that regard, the idea of "digitality" is intrinsically related to the mathematical-geometrical determination of space as calculable and mappable extension, or homogeneous, indistinct territory.[15] Only to the degree that space is organized in a logistic manner, as I will discuss in the next section, can the storage and transfer of physical data, which are the basic principles of computer-based technologies, be possible. Yet, before we organize space by means of computers and establish the numeric arrangement of space, the very idea of "organizing" space itself can be deemed a "digital" endeavour. Willing to transform space into a measurable and exploitable realm for human concerns and projects is at the heart of the Anthropocene, which divorces us our way of being from those of other living beings. Even though as a generation that has gotten used to various debates and discourses on space travel, space tourism and space colonization, observing the notions of "space" and "world" to be attached to the "digital" might not strike us, it must be underlined that conceiving the world and place(s) in such "spatial" terms is rather a modern phenomenon.[16] Even if human practices such as agriculture, architecture, art, among others can certainly be taken to suggest human intervention with and exploitation of "space" – in varying degrees and context – this by no way guarantees that the modern conception of objective space can be readily compared to Plato's *chôra* or Aristotle's *topos*.[17]

In contemporary scholarship, it is already demonstrated that starting from Descartes and Newton, it has become characteristic of modern philosophy and science to view place as a specific point in space as extension.[18] Though here I cannot get into the details of the history of the notions of space and place, I would like to emphasize that what is peculiar regarding the conception of the digital world is that it is often treated as a setting that claims to provide access to the "real" world as if the digital world is situated in another realm or is only indirectly related to the world. What needs to be done first is to designate the specific place of the digital world *within* the world and second indicate the sense in which how the world appears in and through the digital world(s) can also show forth the essence of the digital world. Putting the matter in this way makes it clear that the "virtual" distance between the world and the digital world must become an issue for us.

In what sense does the digital world belong to the world? It can be worthwhile to remember that the most important idea of Heidegger's early thinking is that we cannot think of being – or the question concerning the

13 Malpas, "On the Non-Autonomy of the Virtual," *Convergence* 15, no. 2 (May 2009): 135–139.

14 Ernest Klein, *Klein's Comprehensive Etymology Dictionary of the English Language* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1966), 448.

15 Stuart Elden, *Speaking Against Number: Heidegger, Language and the Politics of Calculation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 3; Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time Division 1* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 139.

16 For a discussion of these issues in relation to the spatial idea of the world and place, see: Axel Onur Karamercan, "Could Humans Dwell beyond the Earth? Thinking with Heidegger on Space Colonization and the Topology of Technology", *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Vol. 92, no. 3 (Fall 2022): 877–902. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa164

17 Helen Lang's often neglected work on the Aristotelian idea of place includes important insights into the differences between ancient and modern understanding of space and place. Helen S. Lang, *The Order of Nature in Aristotle's Physics: Place and Elements* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

18 Perhaps the common point of prominent contemporary figures such as Edward Relph, Joseph Fell, Hubert Dreyfus, Edward Casey, Stuart Elden, Robert Mugerauer, David Seamon, Jeff Malpas, Bruce Janz, as diverse as their thoughts are, is that they all point out the significance of the particularity of place and dwelling in distinction from a spatial view of the world. The collected essays edited by Bruce Janz, ed., *Place, Space and Hermeneutics* (New York: Springer, 2018) are one of the richest sources in recent literature that gathers together most of these philosophers and includes discussions of their main ideas.

19 Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, 73–75.
20 Chalmers, *Reality+*, 113–114.

horizon of the meaning of being – without thinking (as) "being-in-the-world" (*In-der-Welt-Sein*).[19] *What* constitutes the "relationality" of a given setting is not only a spatial sense of connectivity or a multitude of routes that link various points to one another. On the contrary, it is precisely the particular connectedness of the world that constitutes the context or contextualization at issue. The meanings of phenomena are disclosed on the basis of the understanding of being that embodies the meaningfulness of that world. Only because *there is* (*Es gibt*, *il y a*) the world, which is not a mere totality of different "worlds" or phenomena, but rather a place of dwelling and coming-to-presence, the world itself can also appear in (and through) an abundance of ways, e.g., digital, physical, religious, and so forth. However, that does not qualify these manifestations of the world as independent realms or regions. Much rather, each one of these "worlds" *is* a manifestation of the world. This is why it is crucial to recognize that a solely spatial view of the world leads to a mistaken idea of dwelling or inhabitation as mere presence as well as being as a mere biological notion of "life," just as it leads to a misleading view of connectivity and distance for disregarding the nature of connectedness at stake.

But even when we grant that the digital belongs to the world, the nature of this belonging might remain opaque. Consider seeing a world event on the television, listening to a song on the smartphone, participating in a virtual conference, reading a letter in digital format: these are all experiences of distance, that is, either experiences of remote phenomena or distant versions and appearances of these phenomena and events. Here it is crucial to eliminate the quasi-Platonist distinction between the non-digital and the digital in terms of "real" and "unreal," as well as getting rid of the association of the physical with the real and the digital with the false or the replicate. As Chalmers rightfully argues, digital experiences are genuine just like our in-person experiences of phenomena; the song that I am listening to on my smartphone is the "true" song, the virtual conference that I am participating in is the "true" conference, the world event that is on my TV is a "real" event, and so on.[20] However, what should not be mistaken is that if our "real" or "virtual" experience of phenomena in the world are equally genuine, this refers not to the *phenomenal* status of the objects of experience – for what is remote is certainly different from what is near – but rather to their *phenomenological* status as tied to their manifestation to "being-in-the-world." Since distant phenomena or events *appear to be* near while remaining remote, at issue with this "distant nearness" is considered to be some sort of an ontological "as if" effect. However, considering digital spaces as a mere replacement of physical phenomena assumes that on the one hand there are "real" entities and on the other there are their digital equivalents. Such a way of conceptualizing the link between digital and non-digital phenomena not only fails in making sense of digital entities and platforms as *true* manifestations of the world on their own, but it also blurs our understanding of non-digital phenomena as non-mediated, immediately accessible stuff.

Phenomenology teaches us that the meaning of things in the world are always *understood* through certain meaning-structures, conditions, and moods. This does not concern the presence of phenomena, but their meaningful presencing. Hence, phenomenology is a unified study of correlations:[21] it studies the threefold correlation between the meaning of phenomena, the sources of the meaning of phenomena, and the nature or the structure of that correlation. To be sure, perceiving phenomena in "real time," in their "physical" presence, is also a particular experience – a product of a certain source of meaning on its own. That is to say, the digital and the "really real" are not readily comparable in terms of their proximity to reality. Whether giving a "in-person" or "online" seminar, we are not provided with a set of epistemological norms to judge if our practical involvement is real or not. We are simply immersed in the world, captivated in the act of speaking to the audience.

If we are always already encompassed within the world of experience, the epistemological status of digital experiences as true or not does not play a role in our sense-making processes regarding the authenticity of those experiences for they continue to shape our being in the world. While digital and non-digital activities do differ in terms of our relation to environment, and they certainly can be compared in terms of how our experience of space and place vary; there can be no experiential hierarchy between the digital and the non-digital since there is not an immediate, primary access into the fixed reality of phenomena that provide a set of norms that by which the so-called secondary ones could be distinguished. As the conditions and correlations of experience are unrepeatable and irreversible, particularity, singularity, and one-timeness determines the very nature of experience itself. Put more concisely, the bodily experience of phenomena can be as "artificial" or "remote" as their digital equivalents, if the person at issue is not fully immersed in her or his involvement with(in) the world. Having clarified how not to think the place-nature of digital spaces and how not to divorce them from the world, let us turn to the central problem, which is to specify the kinds of distance that occur from the digital world.

### The Logistics of Distance

First, let us consider Heidegger's suggestion regarding the nature of distance in his later thought:

> Two isolated farmsteads – if any such are left – separated by an hour's walk across the fields can be the best of neighbours, while two townhouses, facing each other across the street or even sharing a common wall, know no neighbourhood.[22]

This thought, which clearly distinguishes the qualitative aspect of distance from the quantitative, shows to what extent the link between place, dwelling,

21 Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 73, 106, 121.

22 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. Hertz (New York: Harper Row, 1971), 103.

connectedness, and distance has important implications for understanding our dwelling in digital worlds. The following passage from his 1950 lecture "The Thing" is an extremely relevant example as to how clearly Heidegger identified the issues relating to digital culture in advance:[23]

> *All distances in time and space are shrinking.* Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. The germination and growth of plants, which remained hidden throughout the seasons, is now exhibited publicly in a minute, on film. Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic. Moreover, the film attests to what it shows by presenting also the camera and its operators at work. The peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness is reached by television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication.[24]

While it may appear as if Heidegger is criticizing our use of the technological devices mentioned in the passage, this would be a simplistic interpretation. Crafting and using technical objects is clearly an essential part of our being.[25] The aim of Heidegger's critique of technology is not to replace digital *technē* with preindustrial tools and instruments, but rather to urge us to try to understand its particular *logos*, i.e., what it shows about our interaction with the world which no longer signifies a simple means-ends relationship.[26]

In a nutshell, the danger that occurs from our interaction with digital technologies is the pursuit of complete overcoming of space and time, which implies a distanceless relation to phenomena. Such distancelessness, which for Heidegger brings no nearness but only its annihilation, disregards the ontological happening and disclosure of place and focuses primarily on establishing immediately connectable points on a spatial plane with no boundaries. If the manifestation of phenomena requires the space in and through which they can appear, the abolition of distance implicates the end of any appearing and relationality. In rendering phenomena as readily displayable and exchangeable data between online users and consumers, digitization conceives of space and time as *obstacles*. This yields a completely unique experience of the world, for instance, compared to Kant's modern subject who considers space and time as the *conditions* of the possibility of experience. If Kant's space and time, as the forms of intuition are restrictive conditions of experience, thus, culturally what could be considered products of a "conservative" modernity, the so-called post-modern, "liberal" response to it is a transgressive one. The digital experience of space and time challenges the boundaries and the nature of the "between" at issue in a way that it tolerates no more boundaries. Yet, a more appropriate relation to place and distance stands right in the between and beyond. In order to

23 Idem., *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 165–188.

24 Idem., *Poetry Language Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 163.

25 Idem., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 4–5.

26 The essence of modern technology, *Gestell*, which is translated by commentators with different terms such as "framework", "enframing", "positionality", "inventory" – implies that our thinking runs the risk of turning into a merely calculative mode of arranging, organizing, and stocking that no longer allows phenomena to emerge and grow as things with which we can engage meaningfully. While the exploitation and optimization of phenomena become our sole way of experiencing *technē*, we ourselves turn into instrumental objects of technology.

preserve a safe space in which we can interact with digital technologies rather than being completely overwhelmed by them, we must distinguish the dynamic space – the interval – that occurs from, belongs to, and constitutes the relationality between phenomena and the absolute space as an area within which phenomena are placed as commodities.

What is so easy to miss regarding the digital world is that insofar as the tools, objects, designs, software and interfaces of digitization hinge on a global network that connects physically distant "subjects" and/or "objects," they are also reliant on physical distance and a sense of situatedness. Without distant dwellers who are placed in separate locations and contexts – therefore without the physical distance between them – a digital or any kind of "connection" would not be needed either. Nonetheless, internet technologies turn distance into a matter of speed, and more precisely, speed of connection. How long it takes for an image, video, text, or a document to be sent and to *appear* on another screen, while preserving their "real appearance," seems to define the ambitions of current day information technologies. The danger at issue here is that the delivery of persons, news, things from point A to point B in the shortest time possible defines our primary and the sole idea of connectivity and distance, this would gradually lead to the marginalization and even complete disappearance of the experience of the crossing of the between, the "interval," which would also imply the complete absence of experience – complete disappearance of a sense of space, time and place.

It is not surprising that the more consumers of digital technologies are driven further away from one another as isolated subjects, which is one of the characteristic features of a sense individualism that feeds from the modern, Cartesian idea of self, the more they will demand these technologies in order to be "connected." For instance, it remains questionable whether metaverses, which is a term originally coined by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 book *Snow Crash*, today described as "a future Internet of persistent, shared, 3D virtual spaces," can provide the social connection, immersivity, and work efficiency that they promise.[27] Is it rather that the connectedness, immersivity and efficiency that metaverses seek to provide can only exist in and be based upon a world of social disconnection, practical detachment, and procrastination, owing to the very technological way of being from which they originate? Let us underline: if the digital world leads to the disappearance of nearness, this is not because we live away from other persons and wish to remain in connection with them despite that distance, but because the only meaning of connection becomes "remote connection." This is precisely why Heidegger writes, as cited above, "*all distances in space and time are shrinking*." Instead of letting distance remain *as* distance, digital technologies are capable of transforming it into a "distant nearness," namely, distance itself experienced *as* nearness, or nearness that is only found in distance. However, the happening of nearness, in the sense of "becoming and remaining near," depends on the preservation of distance

27 Patrice Flichy, "The Social Imaginary of Virtual Worlds," in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality,* ed. Mark Grimshaw, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 702.

and the two cannot be treated separately. Therefore, it is key to question whether digital technologies can identify an *ethos* that does not treat the boundaries and the ways of the world as mere routes of information transportation. In other words, is it possible to construe a non-metaphysical relation to digital worlds and spaces that can bring nearness?

As also recently examined by Anna Kouppanou, it is possible to consider the experiential kinesis of digital phenomena as part of the problem of "metaphoricity."[28] The Greek word "metaphor," which is composed of the prefix *meta,* meaning "beyond, away" and the verb *pherein*, meaning "bringing, carrying," precisely implies the relocation of phenomena from one place to another.[29] While it is no secret that Heidegger thought that a symptomatic feature of meta-physics is to think of being in terms of metaphors, insisting that his famous idea of language as the "house of being" must be conceived of neither as a metaphor nor a sole transfer of poetic imagery, the notion can also be considered in the sense of the event or the interplay of nearness and distance.[30] Although, as Kouppanou underscores, Aristotle originally considers metaphors the "improper transposition of names," Heidegger takes the metaphorical thinking of being and dwelling to be an improper interpretation of our situatedness in the world.[31] This gives rise to a misleading idea of nature (*physis*) as a biosphere "objectively" distantiated from the world of human "subjects," since *physis* rather indicates the emergence, growth of being(s). As such, the ideal would be to render digital technologies attuned to *physis* rather than transforming nature into a space of human wills and procedures, the Nietzschean "will to power," or even to that of "will to will." In that sense, the task is to find out how we could say yes to digital technologies without letting our dwelling to turn into a mere mechanism of remote programming and representation.

Kouppanou's suggestion is to read the transposition that stems from the digitization of the world not only negatively, not as a displacement that automatically defines phenomena as distant, technical, artificial, non-sensible entities, but as a new mode of disclosure, giving way to *poietic* (more on this shortly) revelations of being and dwelling. The most important aspect of Kouppanou's argument, therefore, is to distinguish utter digitization of all phenomena from the possibilities of revelation that the digital dimension of *technē* offers. Put more explicitly, the goal is separate the overpowering essence of digital technologies that transform all relations into distant relations from the human being's capacity of illuminating the world through emerging digital crafts.

Even if "overcoming" distances is nothing new for us considering our anthropological history, how this "overcoming" is achieved is what matters the most. To take distance from Heidegger, it is possible to argue that most of our linguistic and cognitive skills such as communication, imagination, and storytelling are abilities that allow us to "displace" ourselves from our physical environments. Ideas of telepathy, time travel, or teleportation, as also widely issued in works of science-fiction literature,

28 Anna Kouppanou, *Technologies of Being in Martin Heidegger: Nearness, Metaphor and the Question of Education in Digital Times,* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 113.

29 It is interesting to consider that the modern Greek word *metaphora* literally means "transportation" as tied to the logistics of goods.

30 Heidegger, *Pathmarks,* ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 272.

31 Kouppanou, *Technologies of Being in Martin Heidegger*, 41.

have long been part of our popular cultures. We could say that the entire history of human existence is also a history of the disappearance of physical distances owing to the constant invention of new technologies. In fact, is not language the very first medium that by which we learned to "overcome" mental and physical remoteness? For instance, words are not the things themselves but their "signs": they refer us to the things, which indicates the necessary *interval* between them. Reading a novel or listening to a story is already an immersive experience, allowing us to imagine ourselves in other places, historical epochs, settings and contexts. It could be said that technological devices such as radios, televisions, cameras, satellites, telescopes do the same: they are instruments that are designed to receive, transmit, and show that which is remote in space or invisible from our immediate perspectives. Withdrawing ourselves from our immediate environment by some media, whether that is technological devices or tools of our intelligence, and at the same time physically remaining within our environment, constitutes our very being. However, we must highlight the fundamental difference at stake: if our mental capacities grant us the possibility of "seeing" things, bringing events, persons, phenomena near in our imagination, technological devices claim to achieve the same "manifestation" on an "objective" level. It is this claim of objectivity that transforms the world into a "world picture" that can be captured in its "real" being.[32]

Based on what I have discussed so far, it becomes possible to define three kinds of distance which are strictly interrelated: (1) *physical distance* is the one that exists between places, persons, events, and phenomena. Physics translates this space in the between into a quantifiable sort of distance and calculates it by using mathematics. Conceiving of distance as only something to be measured by numbers leads to the metaphysical conception of the world, space, nearness, and connectivity; (2) *metaphysical distance* is that which emerges from the attempt to overcome the physical distance in its totality by means of digital technologies. In other words, metaphysical distance appears as a result of the denial of distance and the finite nature of place. It is based on a logistic idea of space, and the metaphoricity in which it is involved implies an infinite transfer of phenomena that remains in constant displacement. Now what is being measured is not only the distance itself, but also the overcoming of that distance; (3) *meta-metaphysical,* or *poietical distance* is that which emerges from the need to appropriate the metaphysical relation to space and distance. Hermeneutically appearing as a possibility and ontologically appearing as a necessity, poietical distance is the source of any distance as such, which occurs from our phenomenological situation of being bounded by place and being connected/open to other persons and places. Poietical distance is "meta-metaphysical" not because it is "beyond" the metaphysical, but rather because digital spaces reveal the possibility of problematizing the nature of place in a new way, as they show forth the

32 Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. J. Young and K. Haynes (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67.

ever-present interval; the space of relationality that always exists between the self and the world, which remains implicit and oblivious to metaphysics. In other words, poietical distance is capable of displacing the logistic displacement of metaphysics. At issue, thus, is not a teleological hierarchy between the three definitions of distance; it is simply that the poietical distance allows the physical and metaphysical to appear as such.

Consider the following: visiting a museum from distance obliges us to see that in visiting the museum remotely, we find ourselves not only remote from the historic world in and through which the works of art at issue are withdrawn and uprooted, but we also stand in distance from the city, the street, the museum building, the gallery, in short, the entire artistic and urban context that embodies the primary displacement of the works of art. The secondary displacement of the work of art can awaken us to inquire into the nature of the primary displacement and problematize the topological meaning of museum. In that sense, experiencing poietical distance requires a specific attitude vis-à-vis place and the world, where instead of attempting to eradicate physical distance, the builders and the dwellers of the digital world(s) make sense of digital experiences not as replicates that replace the physical experience. By turning the metaphysical distance on its head, the digital experience of the world can be taken to constitute its own and unique manifestation of the world. This provides the leeway for taking a step back from "overcoming." In that regard, the trifold idea of distance naturally relates to the question of the link between digitality and dwelling, which also has important implications for architecture.[33]

### Builders and Dwellers of Digital Worlds

In our era of global warming and environmental catastrophes, we see more and more clearly how the design and planning of our houses, streets, cities, urban areas, and natural environment fundamentally determine the ways in which we experience the world. Today we are desperately in need of cities and urban areas that can breathe, lacking the necessary space and openness. The same can be thought with regards to the building of digital environments and existing digital platforms. One of the crucial dimensions of the subject is the relationship between the builders and the dwellers of digital spaces. In his famous 1951 essay "Building Thinking Dwelling" (*Wohnen Denken Bauen*), Heidegger points out the link between building and dwelling by saying:

> The nature of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature in the raising of locations by the joining of their spaces. *Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.*[34]

Dwelling, or inhabiting the world, is our *way of being*. Accordingly, different ways of building (*bauen*) would allow different kinds of dwelling (*wohnen*) to emerge. Insofar as building and dwelling belong together, the underlying

33 As regards with the link between architecture and digitality, Malpas draws on the topic of "parametric design" which, put in a nutshell, concerns the tension between computer-based and place-based design. Malpas, *Rethinking Dwelling*, 135–144.

34 Heidegger, *Poetry Language Thought*, 157.

principles of the construction of digital spaces and places matter to us as their dwellers, which also relates to the core matter of architecture.

Firstly, it would be useful to consider that in ancient Greek, the word architecture originally stems from the word *architekton*, literally meaning master, chief builder (*archon* + *tekton*).[35] Here it is equally important to remember that *tekton* is related to *technē,* commonly interpreted as "art" or "craft," but thought more essentially, it implies a sense of "bringing forth." It could be said that architecture brings out the essence of our existing relationship with space, place, and the world. Thus, before being a *technē*, the essence of architectural "bringing forth" is poietic.[36] One question that arises here is the link between the architectural and the poietic. To understand that connection, a more complete understanding of the poietic is necessary.

The origin of poetry and the poetic is *poiesis*, which in Greek essentially is related to "making" (*poieō*) and has great importance for Heidegger's thought of place and dwelling. Heidegger's main point is that the "making" of *poiesis* must not be confused with the mere production or creation of things. Production of a new phenomenon first necessitates openness and space; it demands the clearing within which it can be imagined and built. Thus, at first, making appears as a heedfulness of space, letting the place of a phenomenon disclose itself as such. Heidegger conceives of the making of poietic as the "measure-taking" of the between, which is also where building and dwelling occurs between the earth and the sky. Only by appropriately measuring the space of the between, the interval, one can reveal the hiddenness of what is hidden and disclose the being of a thing in harmony with its particular way of being present.[37] The measuring at issue thus is not quantitative calculation, but the meditative experience of the dimension of disclosure. Master builders and dwellers are *poets* – those who build and dwell po(i)etically.

Considering the metaphysical distance that emerges from digital spaces, can we say that these environments bring forth the necessary room for us to be able to inhabit the world in a poietic way? At first, it seems that the very word "inhabiting" itself would contradict the possibility of inhabiting the world from distance since inhabiting a place precisely implies being situated *in* a habitat or a dwelling-place. But as I have attempted to show, we must be careful not to take inhabitation as mere physical being-in or being-near since doing so leads to another problematic position, only to treat place as a "restrictive" phenomenon. Indeed, being *somewhere* always implies not being elsewhere. However, one also needs to grant that precisely because it is possible for us to experience distance *as* distance that we have been able to invent technologies that permit us to engage with different, previously unintelligible appearances of the world and phenomena. This is the reason that the so-called "restrictive" essence of place is in fact also its "freeing" dimension, which requires us to assess distance as an inherent element of our experience of place and being in the world, an interval which

35 Klein, *Klein's Comprehensive Etymology Dictionary*, 101.
36 Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 10.
37 Idem., *Poetry Language Thought*, 219.

opens us up to the world. In turn, the effort to "free" us from place is exactly the source of the problematic metaphysical relation to place, as well as identity and culture.

Even if there can be no nearness without the interval – the betweenness – of distance, such an experienceless world, one that immediately appears before our eyes in its absolute reality, seems to be the goal of most tech companies, states, and state-funded agencies. In the same vein, the existing paradigm of the virtualization and simulations of space, place(s), historic and existing sites remains a representational one, where the aim is to represent places by remaining faithful to what *is* or *was* in those places, that is, by appealing to verisimilitude.[38] Yet, still, could it be possible to simulate the experience of dwelling in its entirety by digital techniques? Perhaps, a more complete answer to this question exceeds the limits of a purely philosophical inquiry and needs to be investigated in an interdisciplinary manner that involves philosophers, architects, web designers and informaticians.

An initial way of testing this idea, especially in a way that is of interest to all of us as researchers, lecturers, and students in our academic world would be by producing a prototype of an architectural virtualization of a campus site or some of its buildings. Such a virtual production could help us compare a university-dweller's experience of being in the campus site with those of a distant student's and a tourist's respective virtual, online visits. The hypothesis of such a creation would be to see how the distant student experiences the *physical distance*, how the tourist experiences the *metaphysical distance*, and how the university dweller experiences the *poietical distance*. This could help us see what could be captured about the finite nature of dwelling in a comparative manner and tell us more about the links between embodiment and culture, as well as the methodological possibilities of bringing philosophy, architecture, and information technologies together in a way that they could work towards overcoming the metaphysical – representational – applications of virtualization.[39] Today, learning to take a step back from metaphysical objectification of place and the world seems to be the only therapeutic approach to digital spaces in order to benefit more from them as a new disclosure of the world.

Thinking on place with Heidegger shows that, just as web designing is fundamentally an architectural enterprise, so the practice of architecture is fundamentally poietic. Whether we will be able to keep these disciplines connected, and not only in an academic way, but in the actual taking place of building, designing, and thinking, will define the nature of our dwelling in the 21st century. What is needed to that end is to identify the ways in which physical, metaphysical, and poietic manifestations of distance relate to another without letting the metaphysical to get in the way of the poietical. In turn, this implies neither overestimating the nearness of the physical nor trivializing the remoteness of the digital, but letting the poietical be the measure of building and dwelling.

38 Janz, "Virtual Place and Virtualized *Place*" in *The Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places*, 61.

39 For carrying out such a work, the University of Coimbra's UNESCO world heritage site Alta and Sofia campus, which offers an important historical, architectural, and urban setting, would be an ideal candidate. In that regard, Erik Champion's approach, which highlights how the architectural not only has to do with nature and the ontological, but also with culture and the bodily dimension of dwelling, is key. Champion, "Norberg-Schulz: Culture, Presence, and a Sense of Virtual Place," in *The Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places*, 151.