

METRO AWAKENING: ELEMENTS OF MEANING UNDER THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL MAGNIFYING GLASS

Mihai BURLACU¹

Abstract: *In this article, I present an examination of the experiences loaded with juxtaposed meanings from Metro Awakening (2024a). This is a first-person adventure video game that was specifically built for virtual reality. From a conceptual standpoint, this article can be circumscribed within the field of philosophy of culture and is predicated on hermeneutical phenomenology. The notions emphasized herein are grounded on the theses of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1999) and Martin Heidegger (1927/2003). In conclusion, I assert that this game can be used to exemplify the concepts of 'lived body', 'life-world', 'Sorge' and 'Dasein'.*

Key words: *hermeneutical phenomenology, lived body, life-world, Being, Dasein, Sorge, heterotopia*

1. Introduction

In this article I present a phenomenological examination of the features from the virtual world depicted in *Metro Awakening* (2024a). This is a single-player first-person adventure video game. It was built specifically for virtual reality technologies, such as *Oculus Rift*, *Meta Quest 2*, *HTC VIVE*, *Index* etc. Interestingly, Dmitry Glukhovsky the author of the *Metro* series of novels (i.e. *Metro 2033* (2005/2024c), *Metro 2034* (2009/2024d) and *Metro 2035* (2015/2024e)) collaborated with the developers from *Vertigo Studios Amsterdam* as a lore consultant. Accordingly, the game is story-driven. Unlike the other games from the *Metro* franchise (i.e. *Metro 2033* (2009), *Metro: Last light* (2013), *Metro Exodus* (2019)), combat and stealth are secondary to the narration and dialogues. However, atmospheric exploration is enhanced.

The concepts used in this article are predicated on notions from the philosophy of culture. Furthermore, I use an analysis derived from the phenomenological method. I aim to expound the following thesis: the decisions taken by the team from *Vertigo Studios Amsterdam*, the developers of *Metro Awakening* (2024a), have a considerable impact on the reasons and the ways in which certain meanings become apparent in the player's² experience. Therefore, (1) the particularities of the missions and (2) the ways in

¹ *Transilvania University of Braşov*, mihai.burlacu@unitbv.ro, corresponding author.

² In this article, I use the terms 'player' and 'gamer' interchangeably as synonyms.

which the atmospheric exploration juxtaposes upon the story-driven gameplay, are aspects that help personalize each player's experience.

The immersion in a virtual reality first-person adventure video game implies the development of a specific perspective vis-à-vis the game world. This perspective is based on each player's habitus. From a phenomenological standpoint, an ascending movement can be described as starting from the meanings revealed in the broader social world that the player already occupies and continuing towards a set of more specialized meanings. These meanings exist only in the virtual world and are triggered by an in-game event. At a fundamental level, the aforementioned meanings have an impact both on the player's mental representation and on her/his perception, which is emotionally charged.

Generally, the worlds that are developed within video games include the parameters of meanings decipherable by players. These meanings are the ground for any type of experience that includes the autonomy, competence and ability to relate. Regardless of whether a person feels autonomous or oppressed, competent or overwhelmed, attracted or disinterested, the player's immersion is determined by the range of meanings identified in a 'linear world'³ such as the one in *Metro Awakening* (2024a).

My article is essentially a philosophical exercise, consisting of seven chapters. After the Introduction, in the second chapter I illustrate the ways in which several phenomenological concepts can be used to describe and explain the relations between the player/ gamer and the virtual world that she/he creates, while spending more time in-game. Afterwards, I elaborate upon several considerations regarding the fluidity of the player's perspective. These reflexions are predicated on the theses of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1999) about the notions of 'lived body' and 'life-world' (1945/1999, p. 88). In the third chapter, I express reflections regarding the symbiotic relationship between 'Being' and the 'virtual world', based on Martin Heidegger's concept of 'Dasein'. Subsequently, I emphasize a series of aspects pertaining to the phenomenology of relationality, which are predicated on the idea that the needs a player satisfies in a virtual 'linear world' contribute to her/his personal experience. These needs should not be considered exclusively features triggered by in-game events. This idea is derived from the insights I have previously illustrated vis-à-vis 'open-world' role playing games (Burlacu, 2022). In the next chapter, I present an interpretation of the ways in which the juxtaposition of the story-line and the atmospheric exploration have an impact on the player's experience. The *Metro Awakening's* 'linear world' is co-created by the game developers and the players. Finally, I outline a series of conclusions regarding the ways in which the in-game 'linear virtual world' contains the parameters for deciphering the meanings essential for a plethora of the players' experiences. These experiences include three dimensions: autonomy, competence and relationality.

³ I use here the term 'linear world' as an opposite for 'open world'. The latter is a type of virtual world in which the player can move freely, approaching the objectives freely, independent of the story-line and technical limitations, without any loading screens and without blocking structures, such as locked doors, walls or invisible limits. The main advantage of an 'open world' is the fact that it offers autonomy to the players. Conversely, a 'linear world' has clear limits, from a visual, narrative and gameplay point of view. It is structured according to clear missions with few secondary objectives. *Metro Awakening* (2024a) continues the traditions of the *Metro* franchise with linear maps, which in my experience are less flexible than the ones from *Metro: Exodus* (2019).

2. Epignosis: Elements of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology provides to social sciences and humanities a very useful conceptual framework for examining various types of video games. In *Metro Awakening* (2024a) the experience gained by the player entails a direct interaction with the locations developed within its story-line directed 'linear virtual world'. More specifically, in the subterranean world of the subway system beneath Moscow, the digital artefacts (e.g. weapons, gas masks, filters, generators, buttons, levers, AI animation and certain locations' design) and the non-playable characters (i.e. NPCs) are configured into a 'gestalt': the game itself is less important than the world that is created and recreated continuously through the player's interaction with the artefacts and the NPCs. In a specific sense, the game developers do not create the 'linear world' within the game, but rather outline the direction in which this world can be created through interactions with players.

The game story-line occurs in an alternate world, in 2028, 15 years after a nuclear war that destroyed most of humanity. Doctor Serdar Iskanderov (i.e. the playable character) and his wife, Yana, establish themselves in the Akademecheskaya metro station from Moscow. When she disappears into the dark and dangerous tunnels, following the trails of a traumatic past, Serdar is compelled to find her. This is the starting point of a journey that rewrites what he thought as being possible. It changes Serdar's beliefs and makes him attain a sort of 'epignosis': a thorough knowledge that acts as a catalyst for the awakening of the man he was destined to become (i.e. Khan). This is the origin story of the travelling mystic that has an important role throughout the *Metro* series of books and games. Below the dystopian irradiated ruins of Moscow, Serdar becomes Khan: he is forced to admit realities beyond his rational understanding. His 'epignosis' entails perceiving the Metro System as a living entity, endowed with a mind, a will and a soul of its own (Vertigo Studios Amsterdam, 2024b).

In a broader sense, the existence of the 'gestalt' is not necessarily a dimension specific to video game worlds. Additionally, it does not represent any new notion in relation to a domain of lived experience at the individual level. For example, in the discourses developed in the last two decades regarding the 'academic world', 'business world' and 'art world', the existence of the 'gestalt' is obvious. When a person refers to various types of 'worlds', she/he likely refers to an ensemble of phenomenological structures. The world created and represented in *Metro Awakening* (2024a) is a domain of meaning: it determines the parameters that guide the ways in which various types of representations are relevant for the player. In the game's world, similar artefacts can be endowed with different and sometimes even opposite meanings: the radio messages that Serdar receives have occasionally completely different narrative meanings.

Within the 'linear world' that is built under Moscow, the tunnels' representations remain relatively unchanged, from a design standpoint. The dimension that changes is the meaning of these digital artefacts for the character played by the player: there is the potential for the player to trigger pre-determined events that advances the narrative and contributes to the co-creation of the in-game world. Essentially, *Metro Awakening* (2024a) allows for the existence of three types of phenomenological structures within which different meanings have a specific relevance: (1) the foundation of the social

world based on controllers and VR headsets; (2) the operational world of artefacts, rules and game mechanics; (3) the world of characters, which includes quests, battles, heroes and villains.

In my paper I am using the term 'meaning' from a phenomenological standpoint: it cannot be considered to be a synonym for 'mental representation'. In hermeneutic phenomenology the existence of inseparable relationships is postulated between: (a) 'Being' and world; (b) body and mind; (c) embodiment and understanding; (d) person/player and context. This reality was masterfully captured by Heidegger through the concept of 'Dasein' (2003, pp. 56–85). This indicates the embodied nature of lived experience: meaning is always filtered through each individual's world. Accordingly, it can be argued that individuals have the ability to 'incorporate' entities within their own sense of existence.

In conclusion, in the phenomenological tradition, the term 'meaning' indicates an ontological quality of the individual: human beings intrinsically give meaning to things and ideas. Practices and different types of artefacts allow people to open clearly delimited contexts in which they have the opportunity to perceive, feel, think, and act. In a VR game, such as *Metro Awakening* (2024a), the succession of events shapes meaning, which is highlighted in affects: the felt significance of phenomena. This significance can take two forms: (1) the practical significance of phenomena for an individual's body is 'motor'; (2) the mental significance, such as, holding an idea in one's mind is 'cognitive' (Slaby, 2008, pp. 56–85).

3. Gnosis: The Fluidity of Perspective

The fluid perspective of a player that temporarily appears to be a part of a place, like the ones presented in *Metro Awakening* (2024a), is an important component of immersion in a virtual world. This perspective can incorporate a range of phenomena and embody the experience of the game. The 'gestalt' nature of this experience was approached in the 20th century by phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty. As a matter of fact, one of his claims is instrumental in understanding narrative driven virtual worlds: "The inside and the outside are inseparable. The world is inside and I am outside myself [...]" (1945/1999, p. 476). In a virtual world that is imagined by the game developers and recreated through experience and perception by players, the self is imagined as interconnected and multimodal. In a strict sense, meaning embodies artefacts, humans and other entities and contributes to the player's 'gnosis'.

The interconnected self is often highlighted by the use of the pronoun 'I' in the players' descriptions when playing even the most complicated missions from the game. The meaning of existence in such digital contexts is fundamentally fluid. 'I' has phenomenological valences, because the player does not experience a game, but a virtual world that includes multiple juxtaposed locations, complex characters, and missions meant to expand her/ his limits.

A phenomenological approach to the body and the meaning of a mission in the aforementioned game implies that one must admit the multiple levels of intentionality that exist in the 'lived body' and the 'life-world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. 88). Each level

has its own fields of significance. Fundamentally, gamers have cognitive intentionality. They can develop a strategy to accomplish a mission. However, that strategy is a particular way of acquiring knowledge that is usually activated by the perceived need in a clearly delimited digital context. For example, at the beginning of the game's story-line, players have to fight 'nosalises' (i.e. a type of mutated animal) that attack their metro station. They are formidable adversaries for an unexperienced gamer, especially if she/he is not used to playing with virtual headsets. These mutants attack an unsuspecting Metro station. The ensuing battle is a losing one, which foreshadows a part of the subsequent story-line. The survival of the player's character is difficult even on a normal level of difficulty. Accordingly, its survival can be understood in terms of 'motor intentionality'. This type of intentionality determines the process of shaping skills and habits in the 'corporal' knowledge of the main character's abilities. This knowledge is "neither thematic knowledge, nor involuntary action" (Bullington, 2013, pp. 30–31).

Interpreting the aforementioned example from Merleau-Ponty's standpoint entails using the concept of 'lived body' to examine the relationship between: (1) the player's character; (2) the NPCs; (3) the creatures that have the role of adversaries. Fundamentally, the concept that designates the lived unity between mind, body and the virtual world does not stop at the player's fingertips (Bullington, 2013, p. 25). It includes the in-game world where the various missions take place and the various types of NPCs and creatures that exist within it. When the playable character uses her/his weapons to engage an adversary, gamers do not feel their fingers interacting with the controllers. Rather, as a motor habit, the controllers and the headset allow gamers to incorporate the playable character as an extension of its own person. In the game experience, the 'lived body' is a combination between the gamer and its playable character. Ultimately, the gamer's cognitive, affective and motor intentionalities transcend through the playable character and generate a virtual world.

4. Symbiosis: The Relationship between 'Being' and the Virtual World

Heidegger's concept of 'Dasein' is similar with Merleau-Ponty's 'lived body'. Basically, Heidegger uses 'Dasein' with the meaning of 'Being-in-the world' to replace a plethora of terms, such as: 'subject', 'human' and 'conscience'. With this concept, Heidegger eludes any notion of relationship between: subject-object, mind-body and material-ideal. The symbiotic relationship that exists between 'Being' and 'world' is helpful in my argument. It can be used to overcome the ontological dualism. This dualism was often considered to be essential for explaining the relationship between the gamer as a 'Being' in the real world and the playable character as a depiction in the game world.

In a manner that is somewhat similar to what happens in role-playing games (Burlacu, 2022), the missions from *Metro Awakening* (2024a) imbue with meaning the existence of the playable character. This is influenced by the extent that the completion of these missions 'concerns' the gamer. The immersion in this game's world can be understood as the result of the relationship between 'Dasein' and 'Sorge'⁴. Just as the 'Being' and

⁴ 'Sorge' has the meaning of 'concern' or 'care': a feeling that borders anxiety (Heidegger, 1927/2003).

the world are mutually constitutive, in the linear virtual world of this game, the player's ability to find phenomena that are imbued with significance and meaning is determined by the virtual place in which the player is 'located' through the playable character. In the real world, the concern is expressed through a person's experience of being in a certain habitual mood. In fact, this is a person's initial way of understanding: to 'feel' a certain way about the world.

In their article regarding gameworld studies, Steven Conway and Bradley Elphinstone suggest that to 'feel' is a notion that has the connotations of 'disposition' and 'tactility' (2019, p. 294). However, both in the game's virtual world and the real world, sight and hearing are at least as important. In both worlds, the notion 'to feel' is relevant, because it conveys a form of 'embodied' understanding. This is fundamental to hermeneutic phenomenology. In this sense, 'to feel' oneself within a world is for a person equivalent to being in that world.

The habitual disposition that a gamer has in the real world entails at least an equivalent in each virtual world in which she/he 'incarnates' through a playable character. Being in a world does not mean that the gamer has an impartial birds-eye-view of a place. It is a realm of significance, which entails immersion, not contemplation (Ratcliffe, 2013, p. 158). The objects with which the player interacts, such as the controllers or the headset, have a practical meaning. This is not experienced like the meanings of mentally represented objects.

Habitual dispositions, taken in plural, do not represent properties of isolated objects, nor are they imposed on people by a culture or group. From a phenomenological perspective, it can be stated that the respective dispositions arise from the mutual relationship existing between 'Being' and the world. According to Matthew Ratcliffe, the habitual dispositions are more than subjective or psychical phenomena. They also constitute an immutable pre-theoretical background, against which the world and every person is revealed (2002, p. 287). The meaning attributed to the entities from the games can change. For example, Conway and Elphinstone claim that the change in habitual dispositions is mediated by the dynamics of 'Being' and the world (2019, p. 294). In a dystopian virtual world, such as the one from *Metro Awakening* (2024a), the player's sense of temporality fades, as she/he comes to feel stuck in a continuous present that is disconnected from the surrounding world. If the player is in a state of deep depression, then the practical and emotional significance of things is experienced as an absence. The world in the game is 'created' through discovery, but the player faces an alienating disconnection that permeates every corner of the discovered/created world. Conversely, if the gamer is in a euphoric mood, the artefacts from the 'created' world acquire a wealth of meaning. This 'allows' the diversification of the gamer's options.

The prerequisite for examining the relationships from *Metro Awakening* (2024a) from a phenomenological perspective is asserting that 'concern' should not be understood as a characteristic that translates into experience. The 'concern' is rather intrinsic to the phenomenon of experience itself (Heidegger, 1927/2003; Bullington, 2013). Accordingly, the professional gamer or the casual player that chooses to immerse herself/himself into this game's virtual world does not start to play at a zero level of 'concern'. On the contrary, as a 'Being' transposed into the virtual world, the gamer is already embodied

through the playable character.

In the *Metro Awakening* (2024a), the relationship between the gamer's 'Being' and the game's virtual world is experienced in terms of affective intentionality. Furthermore, this relationship is felt as a fascination to accomplish missions, collect postcards and solve audio puzzles. For example, collecting postcards contributes to the game's attractiveness and replayability. This underlines an instrumental relationship.

The practices associated with the design of the game's virtual world are relevant for the construction and cultivation of meaning. The design of characters, missions, game mechanics, sound, animations, narratives, artefacts contribute to the relationship and implicitly to the gamer's immersion and satisfaction. Ultimately, the causes for the differences in the intensity and type of players' experiences are predicated on their specific relationships between 'Dasein' and 'Sorge', regardless of whether they determine more or less engaging experiences.

5. Synthesis: Elements of the Phenomenology of Relationships in a Virtual World

The appeal of the experiences from *Metro Awakening* (2024a) is determined by the synthesis of gamer's potential relationships, through the playable character, with artefacts, creatures and NPCs. Obviously, interacting with such types of entities in a virtual world is not a suitable substitute for the multi-meaningful relationships a player can have with other people in the real world (Conway & Elphinstone, 2019, p. 295). However, from a phenomenological perspective, there is a distinct possibility that the experience of relating to an NPC can provide the player with the necessary elements for an engaging experience. It can also provide educational value that contributes to the player's satisfaction, autonomy and skills. The experience of relating to an NPC offers the player the opportunity to enrich the meaning attributed to the accomplishment of a mission in which both herself/himself and the NPC is involved.

Each mission ends up having three intertwining dimensions: (I) a clearly delimited place; (II) a time instantiated in the game, with a different flow from physical time in the real world; (III) a narrative line whose degree of authenticity is increased by the insights gained by the player as a consequence of the relationship with different types of entities (i.e. NPCs, artefacts, virtual places etc.). Also, the three dimensions are fundamental for immersion in the game. Each mission is a sequence of events that every player ends up completing autonomously. This 'autonomy' is based on personal understanding and the attribution of a level of relevance to the completion of the mission.

Metro Awakening (2024a) entails only one narrative line, with no secondary missions. The game mechanics and the virtual world's dynamics are changed by the gamer's completion of linear missions. The gamer's choices determine the continuous recreation of the virtual world. The developers did not integrate in the game mechanics of *Metro Awakening* (2024a) any systems designed to give the player a sense of skill development. In the other games from the *Metro* series, this was achieved by establishing a direct correlation between the narrative line and an experience progression system. Furthermore, from the beginning of the storyline there are significant increases of the difficulty level. Adversaries who have a skill and/or ability

level above the player's current avatar level are not marked in any way, which increases the game immersion.

All the needs that a player is attempting to satisfy in *Metro Awakening* (2024a) should not be understood exclusively as features of specific predefined events. If assessed through phenomenological glasses, then Conway and Elphinstone's assertions regarding other game worlds are applicable to this game as well: the aforementioned needs are elements of the gamer's personal experience (Conway & Elphinstone, 2019, p. 295). Although a gamer may feel less connected to an NPC than to a friend in real life, the relationship itself is multidimensional. As a gamer, a person may feel affectionate or apathetic towards a playable character or may view it as an object necessary for completing a mission. However, the person cannot ignore the fact that satisfying her/his needs has significance, even if that significance reflects on autonomy, competence, or relationships in various ways. A person's basic needs cannot be reduced to a single quantifiable dimension. In the end, a plethora of decisions made by the developers of the two games increase the likelihood of a positive impact on gamers' basic needs.

6. Diegesis: The Juxtaposition of Narrative, Combat, Stealth and Exploration

The immersion in this game is improved considerably by the atmospheric exploration using virtual reality headsets and controllers. The players have to explore a detailed virtual world set in 2028, in which stealth is more important than combat. This game was envisioned by its developers as a prequel to the rest of the *Metro* franchise. Doctor Serdar Iskanderov, the playable character, is set on a path to become one of the most powerful entities from the *Metro* series: Khan. Basically, the game's story-line includes the theme of transcendence and awakening at a spiritual level. Serdar's story approaches topics that transcend the boundary between life and death. It encroaches the dialogical relation between the material and the spirit world. The somewhat linear missions raise questions about consciousness and the perception of supernatural that echo phenomenological texts from the last century (1927/2003).

The story-line is not directly connected with those of the other games from the *Metro* series. However, it portrays the transcendence of Serdar into the mystical Khan. He is depicted as a well-spoken doctor, that was fortunate to find himself in the Moscow Metro System when the nuclear apocalypse commenced. The planetary catastrophe determines the settings in which Serdar's story takes places.

Initially, Serdar is shown as a regular person that enjoys drinks, in the company of two friends. The context changes dramatically, because the station in which he resides is attacked by waves of mutants, which are called nosalises. This first violent mission sets the tone of the game: a battle that apparently is won, but turns out to be already lost. In spite of Serdar's attempts, the metro station is overrun and he escapes as the only survivor. The narrative jumps ten years into the future. Serdar is showed as a man that tries to ignore the events of his past. While returning to his home in Akademicheskaya Station, he discovers that Max, his friend and leader of the station, is furious with Serdar's wife, Yana. The reason of Max's anger is the fact that his wife destroyed the pipes that ensured the functioning of the station's mushroom farm. Yana's actions were

determined by her apparent distorted perception of their dead son, Petya. Allegedly, she heard her dead son's voice inside the farm's pipes. Her hallucinations underline a mental illness, which is held in check by a rare medicine.

Serdar is presented as a kind and rational man that tries to comfort his wife, and find medicine for her illness. Max sends him on a dangerous mission to find a stalker⁵ from whom he usually buys remedies. Serdar begins a dangerous trek through metro tunnels and ruined buildings on the surface to find the stalkers that may have drugs for his wife. Here the gamer's perception of reality is blurred, as the playable character discovers that those he was supposed to find were ritualistically killed. Forced to return home without any medicine, he must fight a gang of bandits that were in the process of looting the bodies of the stalkers. Interestingly, the gloomy atmosphere is compounded by the violence that appears to be one step away from Serdar's path.

Yana finds out that her husband is seeking medicine for her. Still hearing her son's voice, she runs from the station to find Petya. Under the guidance of Max, Serdar leaves the station once more to find his wife. The missions are linear, and have clear markers that delineate Serdar's transformation into Khan. One such marker is a pressure seal named 'Eugenia'. This is a door-like device, which is depicted as being notoriously difficult to open. Serdar apparently opens the door only to find himself again in front of it. The emplacement of the aforementioned door is a heterotopia. Both time and space appear to fold onto themselves in a manner that mirrors Michel Foucault's fifth principle from his 'heterotopology': it includes a system of opening and closing that both includes and paradoxically excludes Serdar (1967/2008, p. 21). Serdar passes twice through the pressure seal and only the second time he truly goes through it. Symbolically, this also epitomises his ascension to a new level of perception.

Serdar braves waves of mutants, bandits and slavers to reach the place where he hoped to find Yana: an Orthodox shrine dedicated to the accident in which her son died. Unfortunately, he is unable to find his wife and ends up being knocked out and kidnapped by slavers. While unconscious, Serdar is haunted by a vision of a priest that chants and sacrifices someone on the altar. The priest finishes the sermon by uttering "For you mighty Khan!" (Vertigo Studios Amsterdam, 2024a). This becomes a recurring vision throughout the rest of the gameplay.

Serdar wakes up and finds himself locked in a cage. Next to him, in another cage is his wife. The two of them argue: the argument underlines the differences in perception. Serdar argues that she should have taken the medicine, while she tells him that he should not have come after her. From this point onward, the events unfold in an accelerated manner. Yana is taken by the slavers, and soon after, Serdar escapes from his cage. Subsequently, he gets his equipment back but loses his radio connection with Max. The latter is replaced by Oksana, who is apparently searching for her husband. This is another marker in Serdar's transformation: Oksana becomes his guide through the slaver camp and later turns out to be the spirit of a dead woman.

The slavers are attacked themselves by cultists that seem to be ghosts. The juxtaposition between the narrative, gameplay and atmosphere blurs the line between

⁵ In the *Metro* game series, a stalker is an explorer that reconnoitres Moscow's irradiated surface to scavenge for various supplies and valuable artefacts.

the material and the spiritual. Even though he is confused, Serdar finds Yana again, in a train controlled by cultists. She stresses that he must not follow her. For some unknown reason, Yana wants to join the cultists, and blocks Serdar's attempt to save her.

The next marker in Serdar's transformation is represented by his gradual turn from reason. Initially, he was entirely rational. However, his radio interaction with Oksana makes him question reality. Slowly, Serdar's perception becomes distorted to the point that he cannot discern reality from hallucinations, including Oksana's voice.

Evocative for Serdar's transformation of his 'Dasein' is the section in the Metro System that appears to repeat itself in a labyrinth. Serdar convinces himself that he is slowly going insane. In order to pass through the labyrinth, Serdar must follow the voices that he hears in the tunnels' pipes. Following these voices, he returns in time and space to the station where he fought the nosalises, ten years before the current events. He finds the spirits of his two friends and defends once more the station. From this point forward, the borders between the living and the dead are irrevocably breached. Serdar accepts his ability to perceive and help the dead, including Oksana, and fully embraces his spirituality, becoming Khan. Afterward, he tries to find his dead son.

When he returns to his home station (i.e. Akademecheskaya), Serdar/Khan learns that it was wiped out by the cultists. He discovers that Max' spirit has been consumed by the 'worm deity', a globule of howling spirits that is worshiped by the cultists. Interestingly, this entity's in-game representation echoes Heidegger's theses about the authentic choice. Serdar is turning away from the collective entity represented by the 'worm deity' to face his own individuality and 'Being': his own 'Dasein' (1927/2003).

Serdar/Khan returns to the Orthodox shrine and witnesses the reunion between the spirit of Oksana and the spirit of his husband. This event foreshadows his own reunion with his wife and is representative for his 'Sorge'.

Serdar/Khan reaches the labyrinth again, under the guidance of his son's voice, emanating from the pipes. Following Petya's voice, Serdar/Khan discovers his son's spirit. Together, they reach another heterotopic emplacement: *Hell Mouth*. This place is similar to the *Room*, from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). It is the source of the 'worm deity' and its cultists. After fighting through a crypt full of ghosts, Serdar/Khan and Petya arrive at a frozen platform. While his son awaits on the platform, Serdar/Khan faces the cultists. Ultimately, he is defeated and imprisoned. The priest from Serdar/Khan's dreams emerges and sacrifices Yana in an elaborate sermon. Again, in an action that echoes his past choices, Serdar/Khan manages to escape and destroys the entrance to the worm cultists' altar. Thus, the cultists and their deity are sealed.

Finally, Serdar/Khan returns to the frozen platform, and takes his farewells from Yana and Petya. His family boards a ghostly train to the afterlife. Thus, Serdar/Khan fully embraces his 'Dasein', satisfied that he gave his wife the peace she had always wanted.

For the player, the game's story-line represents an exploration of the 'Other' seen both as an interlocutor, and a potential enemy. The dystopic environment, artefacts, weapons, monsters, voice acting, surround sound and soundtrack provides a depth of detail and an atmosphere that augments the gamer's experience of 'Dasein' (i.e. 'Being-in-the-world').

In conclusion, the virtual reality design predicates the player's 'Sorge' and grounds

her/his individual experience in the linear world. Game mechanics, such as the interactive gas mask, the interactivity of combat and stealth engenders an enhanced sense of embodiment. Thus, the distinction between the player's perceived reality and the virtual world is obscured.

7. Conclusion

The virtual world from *Metro Awakening* (2024a) contains in its story-line the meanings that predicate the gamer's experience of gaining autonomy and establishing relationships. Regardless of whether or not a player feels that she/he has developed her/his autonomy, skills, and relationships, her/his habitual dispositions are based on the multitude of meanings that this virtual world engenders. My observations regarding the in-game world determine me to claim that its level of complexity causes a multitude of ways in which gamers are attracted, through the apparent gratification of their needs.

After examining the environments from this game, I disagree with the assertion of Conway and Elphinstone. They stated that the ways in which virtual worlds connect with the player's needs are "always relational and intrinsically constructivist" (2019, p. 304). The universal nature of this assertion ignores the fact that immersion in a virtual world can often give the illusion of satisfying needs that can only truly be fulfilled in the real world. Also, the illusion of relationships with various NPCs can generate a form of gameplay addiction that ends up replacing relationships with real people. Likewise, by admitting the constructivist nature of the ways in which connections are established between virtual worlds and the player's needs, a form of explanation that essentializes the in-game experience is highlighted. Thus, the educational potential of a virtual world, such as the one from *Metro Awakening* (2024a), could be distorted and simplified.

The player's needs are multidimensional. The way a person perceives her/his own autonomy, competence, and relational capacity in relation to virtual world differs substantially from the way she/he feels the three dimensions in the real world. The virtual reality technologies that are used in this game change the gamer's perception. The confined subways, claustrophobic emplacements and dim lighting contribute to an immersive experience that shapes juxtaposed maps of meaning. The player's connection with the game's themes and its story-line is mediated by virtual reality technologies in a manner that opens rich areas of phenomenological investigation. Ultimately, this game can be used to exemplify the concepts of 'lived body', 'life-world', 'Sorge' and 'Dasein'.

References

- 4A Games. (2010). *Metro 2033* [PC Video Game]. THQ; Deep Silver. <https://www.4a-games.com/mt/our-games>
- 4A Games. (2013). *Metro: Last light*. [PC Video Game]. Deep Silver. <https://www.4a-games.com/mt/our-games>
- 4A Games. (2019). *Metro Exodus* [PC Video Game]. Deep Silver. <https://www.deepsilver.com/games/metro-exodus>

- Banks, J. (2017). Multimodal, multiplex, multispatial: A network model of the self. *New Media & Society*, 19(3), 419–438. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815606616>
- Bullington, J. (2013). *The expression of the psychosomatic body from a phenomenological perspective*. London: Springer.
- Burlacu, M. (2022). *Fallout 4 și Cyberpunk 2077: Elemente de semnificație și context în oglinzi fenomenologice* [Fallout 4 and Cyberpunk 2077: Elements of meaning and context in phenomenological mirrors]. In M. Constantin (Ed.), *Anthropologia perennis: In honorem magistri Gheorghiță Geană* [Anthropologia perennis: In honor of the magister Gheorghiță Geană] (pp. 39–54). București: Etnologică.
- Conway, S., & Elphinstone, B. (2019). Towards gameworld studies. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 11(3), 289–307. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.11.3.289_1
- Foucault, M. (2008). Of other spaces. In M. Dehaene, & L. De Cauter (Eds.), *Heterotopia and the city: Public space in a postcivil society* (pp. 13–22). Routledge. (Original essay published in 1967)
- Glukhovsky, D. (2024c). *Metro 2033* (A. Olteanu, Trans. in Romanian). București: Paladin. (Original book published in 2005)
- Glukhovsky, D. (2024d). *Metro 2034* (L. Ciobanu, Trans. in Romanian). București: Paladin. (Original book published in 2009)
- Glukhovsky, D. (2024e). *Metro 2035* (S. Genescu, Trans. in Romanian). București: Paladin. (Original book published in 2015)
- Heidegger, M. (2003). *Ființă și timp* [Sein und Zeit/ Being and time] (G. Liiceanu & C. Cioabă, Trans. in Romanian). București: Humanitas (Original book published in 1927)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1999). *Fenomenologia percepției* [Phénoménologie de la perception/ Phenomenology of perception] (I. Câmpeanu & G. Vătăjelu, Trans. in Romanian). Oradea: Aion (Original book published in 1945)
- Ratcliffe, M. (2002). Heidegger's attunement and the neuropsychology of emotion. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1(3), 287–312. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021312100964>
- Ratcliffe, M. (2013). Why mood matters. In M. A. Wrathall (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time* (pp. 157–176). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slaby, J. (2008). Affective intentionality and the feeling body. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7(4), 429–444. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-007-9083-x>
- Tarkovsky, A. (Director). (1979). *Сталкер* [Stalker] [Film]. Mosfilm.
- Vertigo Studios Amsterdam. (2024a). *Metro Awakening* [PC Video Game]. Vertigo Games; Deep Silver. <https://metroawakening.com/>
- Vertigo Studios Amsterdam. (2024b). Story trailer & pre-orders. *Metro Awakening News*. Retrieved September 28th, 2025, from <https://metroawakening.com/news/STORY%2520TRAILER%2520%2526%2520PRE-ORDERS24.09.2024>

Other information may be obtained from the address: mihai.burlacu@unitbv.ro