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## Augmented Headspace: Digital Parallax

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### Artist's Statement

This work responds to the theme of parallax futures by confronting our current relation to technology and posing alternative modes of conceiving the place of consciousness and culture in an increasingly digital world. Developed from a doctoral thesis on 'The Cyborg Subject' at the Centre for Art, Design, Research and Experimentation at the University of Wolverhampton, the project applies Slavoj Žižek's parallax, whereby "subject and object are inherently "mediated," so that an "epistemological" shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an "ontological" shift in the object itself" (Žižek 2009a: 17), to the split within consciousness between physical and digital modes of reality. This marks a shift in understanding contemporary digitised society, away from Žižek's technophobia under which the ultimate use for the digital realm is to destroy it in a "virtual catastrophe" that will "somehow redeem 'real life'" (Žižek 2008: 213), towards the need for new conceptions of the digital that embrace the parallel modes of thought and thus access to different realities. David Gunkel elaborates this within our conception of technology as the problem of "how the position of enunciation already influences and informs what comes to be enunciated" (Gunkel 2010: 139), under which the perspective on technology always (re)constructs our relation to the technology itself, the mediation of others through technology, and the

alternative worlds and ontologies the technology enables within consciousness. This leads us towards Žižek's assertion that "how cyberspace will affect us is not directly inscribed into its technological properties; rather it hinges on the network of socio-symbolic relations which always-already overdetermine the way cyberspace affects us" (Žižek in Wright and Wright 1999: 123). That is, the cultural construction of the contemporary subject is causal in the delineation of physical and digital as discrete modes of being and thinking.

Gunkel points out that the notion of a 'cyberspace' separate from our physical reality is "not the product of technological innovation" but "a constellation of ideas about technology and technoculture" (Gunkel 2000: 804). This he applies also the digital divide in access to technology (and therefore the digital world), in that "there is not one digital divide; there is a constellation of different and intersecting social, economic, and technological differences" (Gunkel 2003: 504). These 'constellations' of ideas are formed within consciousness, and it is the designation of physical and digital as such that forms the apparent separation of spaces, the shift in epistemological positions of enunciation and therefore the ontological difference in our subjective access to physical and digital realities. While Žižek's materialism is concerned with "the "disappearance of matter," the fact that there is only void" (Žižek 2012: 22), the causal role of consciousness in his construction of the subject necessitates a view of the ideal formation of the appearance of reality. Thought itself forms as a virtuality against the void of subjectivity, what Žižek defines in the cogito as "not a substantial entity but a pure structural function, an empty place" (Žižek 2009a: 8). This function of consciousness perpetuates the self-positing subjective position both creating and concealing the parallax between physical and digital worlds, to the extent that the virtualisation of society has shown that "reality always-already was virtual" (Žižek 2007: 193). If consciousness is responsible for its own fantasy of reality, then it is upon consciousness and its position of enunciation that a critique must focus. It is therefore the task of critical digital culture to insert ruptures in our view of the world through which the smooth functioning of the contemporary digital parallax can be brought into view.

*Augmented Headspace: Digital Parallax* attempts this gesture by highlighting the parallax function between physical and digital realities. Using the free *Augment* mobile app to view digital objects in augmented reality scanned from physical image trackers in and around the exhibition space, a literal parallax is created. The perspective we see through the screen of the digital mobile device, converted into a seemingly transparent window onto both physical and digital worlds in superposition, highlights the necessary mediation of digital ontology by technology. To engage with these cyberspace object requires an active choice by the subject to engage with the technology and open up a new space of spectatorship

within the familiar surroundings of everyday physical existence. At a conceptual level, this reveals the ontological parallax of the digital instigated by causal consciousness in choosing the epistemological framework of both technology and the art work. The viewer shifts from the venue accessible to all to an alternative space in which the digital objects are viewable.

Yet the requirement of the technology, and the purely visual element of the work on the interface screen (you cannot touch these objects), places the work as a series of lost objects. Each of the eight augmented reality 3D objects linked to an independent tracker image, forms a pair of musings on the nature of contemporary digitised society, the place of the human in it and its cultural representations. In terms of the mediation of the work, these objects, as fragmentary *objets petit a*, the lost object cause of desire, are accessible only through active subjective and technological engagement, and the desire they cause is a desire for access to the digital itself. The work in the physical space is incomplete without the digital element, yet this element is lost as soon as the device is put away. The role of the subject as an active virtuality here demonstrates the “traces of the subject himself...in the object” (Žižek 2009b: 103) that define the relation of Žižek’s parallax ontology. The captivating potential for play and novelty suggested by the augmented reality is staged only in a specific and limited frame, requiring an initial causal gesture (turning on the device, downloading the app, etc.) and continued active attention (to maintain the temporal engagement) of the spectator. Thus the underlying function of parallax emerges through the inherent limitations of the work: engaging with the digital realm is as much a matter of the mediation of consciousness by itself as the mediation of consciousness by technology.

This self-mediation of the subject brings into view the work as the framing of two worlds. While engaged with the work, the physical environment itself becomes mediated, by both the technology of the screen and the subject in entering the liminal space. The position of the subject is thus drawn into the intersection of physical and digital modes of being, the void at the heart of the parallax position. Žižek describes this position as the “‘I of the storm’, the void in the centre of the incessant vortex/whirlpool of elusive mental events...the void that is nothing in itself...which nonetheless serves as the unrepresentable point of reference” (Žižek 2006: 102). In relation to contemporary digital technology, this subject caught between physical and digital worlds is not decentred but desubstantialised, a shell of consciousness constantly forming and reforming itself as a self-positing virtuality around the void of the perspectival position of digital parallax. The confrontation of this illusory functioning is what Gunkel defines as the Lacanian project of digital media in relation to subjectivity, which “continuously conceptualizes the place from which one claims to know anything and submits to investigation the particular position that is occupied by any

epistemological claim whatsoever” (Gunkel 2010: 138). The position from which the parallax is thought in consciousness must be made clear if the causal epistemological gesture is to be confronted and our relation to digital ontology rethought.

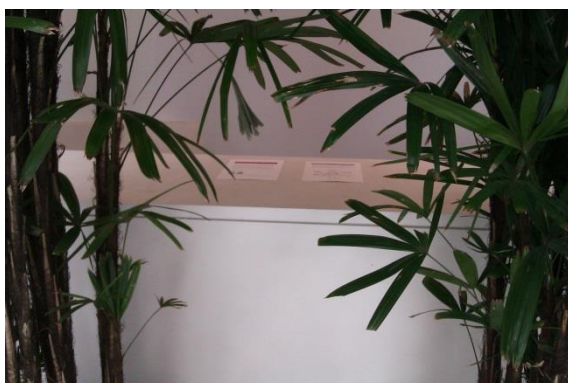
However, as the virtual functioning of consciousness that creates the parallax between physical and digital worlds is integral to our engagement with either space, it is only by breaking down the structures of the subject, reality and the medium that the position of the subject emerges. Žižek states that “the subject fails by definition” (Žižek 2000: 117), and it is in breaking down the virtuality of the subject that critical digital culture can bring the fantasy of both the digital and the subject into view. In *Augmented Headspace: Digital Parallax* this is seen not only in the disjunction between framings of the work, and the necessity of an active engagement that places the objects in relation to the structures of desire the work creates, but also in the temporal nature of the installation. While digital media in theory allow for an absolute fixity and reproducibility in code, the work was only installed in the physical space for the duration of the 2014 International Žižek Studies Conference, highlighting the tyranny of the physical mode of being in determining access to the cognitive realm of the digital. Not only this, but the augmented reality trackers themselves broke down over time, expiring within a week of the exhibition’s close. The need in our current socio-economic situation to pay for continued functioning of technology restricts its viewing possibilities, also exemplifies the work’s position as a series of *objets petit a*. The shift from purchasing data directly (via paying per kilobyte through a dial-up connection, or buying electronic content as a fixed download) towards purchasing access (seen in broadband, mobile data plans and subscriptions such as Netflix, Spotify or Amazon’s Kindle Unlimited) further cements this need in our contemporary culture for viewing the digital as a separate realm accessed through economic and technological mediation. As the art work breaks down over time, or malfunctions during its operation, the position of the subject as a mediating perspective of parallax is highlighted, suggesting the need for an alternative view of the relation between subject, technology and culture. Žižek states that “reality is never directly ‘itself’” (Žižek 2006: 241), to which we can add, amidst the virtual functions of mediation and remediation between consciousness and technology across physical and digital ontologies that the subject is never directly itself. *Augmented Headspace: Digital Parallax* therefore seeks to promote an alternative mode of viewing both the physical space of the exhibition and the cyberspace objects it reveals, bringing into focus through this antagonism of spectatorship a view of the problematic position from which the subject thinks and rethinks contemporary digitised society.

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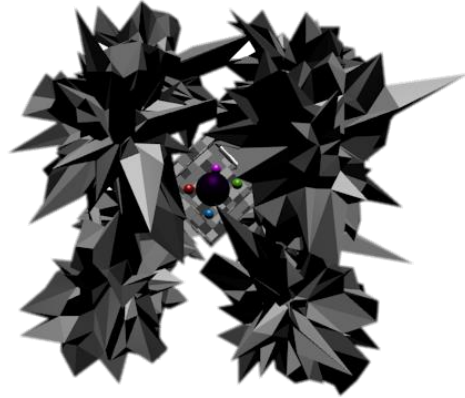
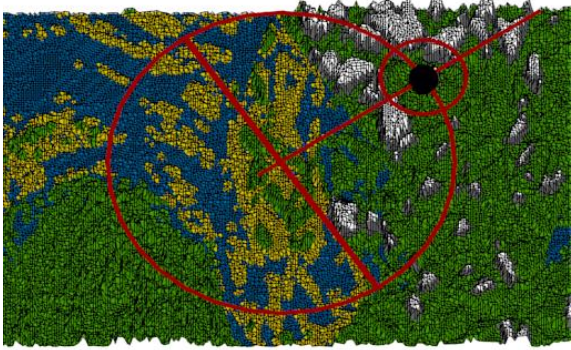
## Documentation

There follows a documented form of the work. Firstly, a number of photos show the context of the physical element of the work 'in situ'. Eight segments were installed throughout the exhibition space as posters: placeholders, signifiers and even advertisements for the digital expansion of the work, points at which the physical space could give way to a cybernetic engagement. However, these were often partially hidden or in hard to reach places (such as ceilings or balconies), representing the active role of engagement necessary for any interaction with digital reality. The information from the posters is then presented here sequentially. A common abstract and set of instructions for the work accompanied each poster. Each segment contained a short section of text to offer a brief framing and contextualisation of a specific thought on the relation between consciousness and digital technology explored through the imagery of that specific object. These are shown in here order, each followed by its tracker image (left) and linked augmented reality object (right). Links to online media and documentation are then included.



1

The functions of consciousness constantly realign themselves around the parallax of physical and digital worlds: the abstract space of computer code represents an excess of meaning and a lack of existence, brought into reality only through the subjective engagement of ontological parallax; physical and digital mediations augment our parallax position in each space, coding one mode of existence upon the other.



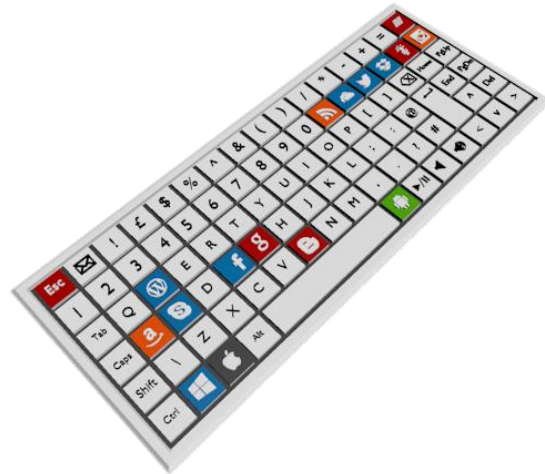
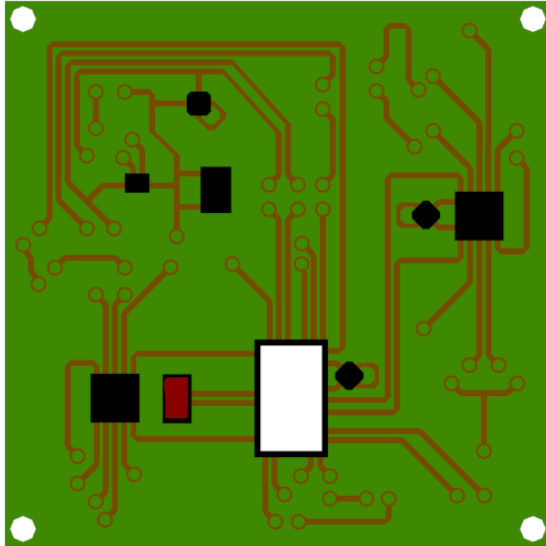
2

Reality always-already was virtual: the Real of code is presupposed beneath the Virtuality of digital signifiers as the void of digital reality.



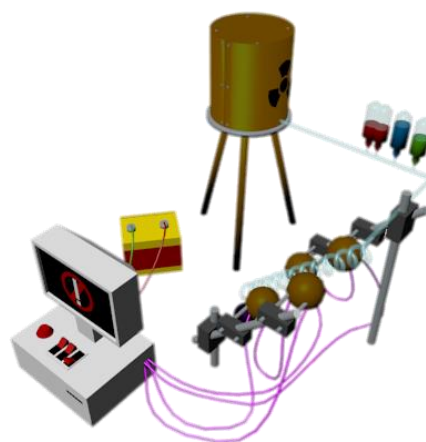
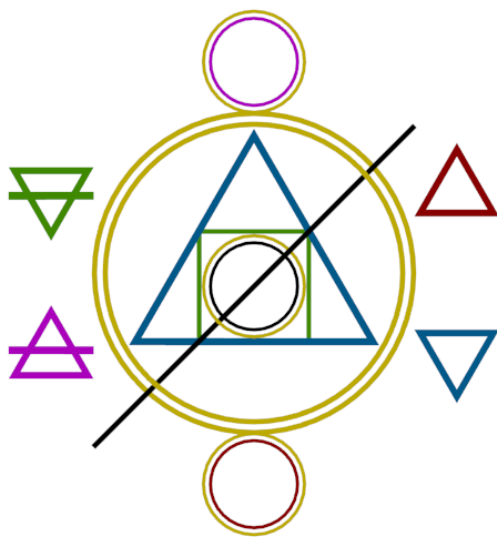
3

Consciousness is the flow of Virtuality across the surfaces of physical and digital worlds as an assemblage of the Body-without-Organs-without-Bodies: instant engagement with many parallel semantic worlds in digital headspace.



4

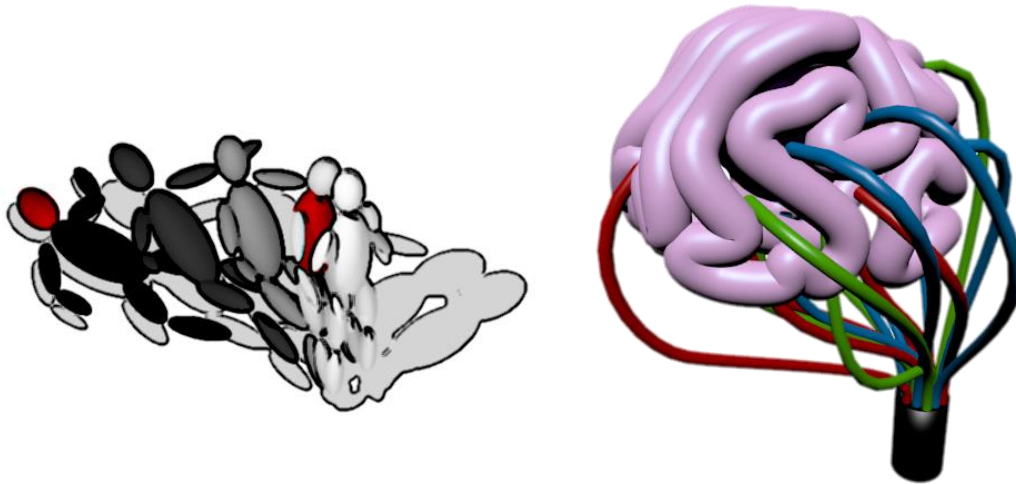
Physical and digital worlds are constructed through the assemblage of the functions of consciousness, positing the void of subjectivity as presupposed in the necessary unrepresentable point of reference amidst the engagement of consciousness with fragments of substance in any given world. The void of the subject is impenetrable by Science, Philosophy and Art except by a NonScience, NonPhilosophy and NonArt through which the unrepresentable might be confronted in its absence.





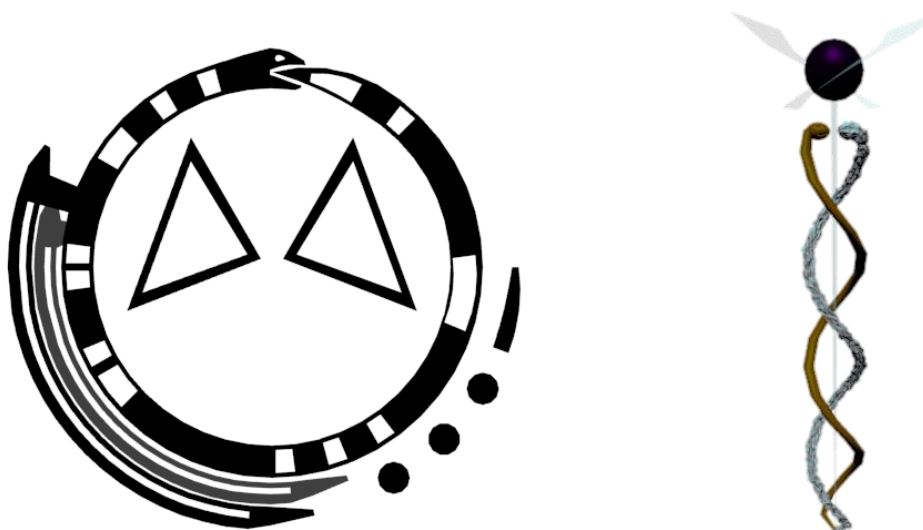
5

Technological mediation ever seeks to penetrate the void of consciousness, bridging the gaps between the horrors of digital potentiality and the comfort of physical 'reality'; between spaces we stage our many possible lives and deaths; we are all digital zombies.



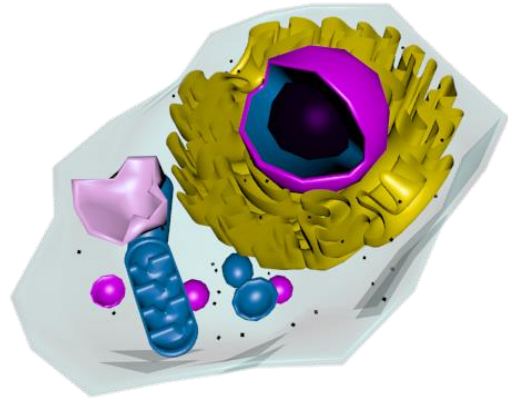
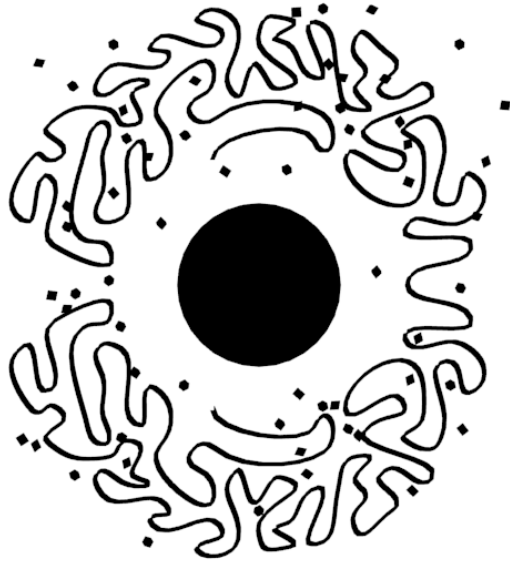
6

The intertwined realities of the physical and digital remain always at a minimal distance around the parallax centre of the void, around which the surfaces of subjective and social reality are made manifest in consciousness.



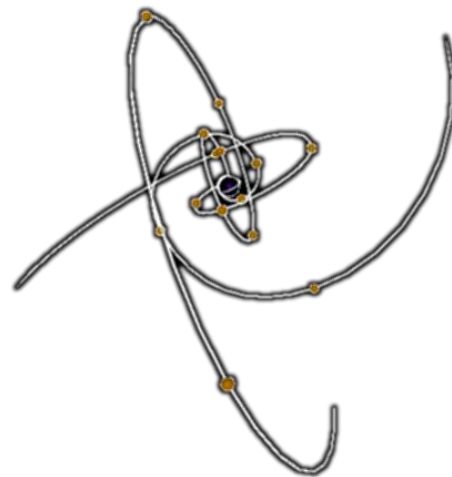
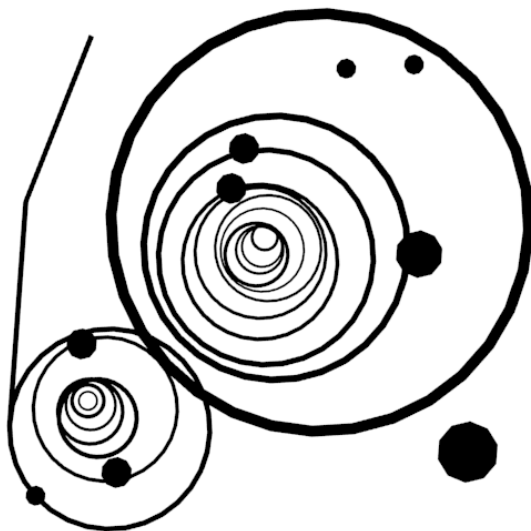
7

We attempt to read in our coded DNA the same causal truth of computer code, yet the essential construction of our physical self is always a lost object of embodiment in the atrophy of life.

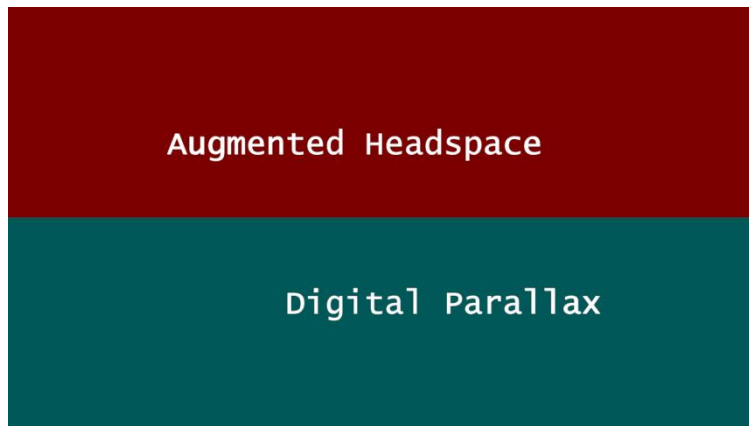


8

All realities, from quantum to symbolic, from social to cosmological, are built upon an initial gesture of decision, the fundamental engagement of the subject in parallax: the decision of the possible conditions for reality.



Further documentation, including a short video displaying the 3D objects, along with the original posters installed at the exhibition, can be found at the following link:



<https://garfieldbenjamin.wordpress.com/2014/11/26/augmented-headspace-digital-parallax/>