

This study applies actor-network theory in an effort to visualize the complex interplay among these technological actants, and to develop a description of the resulting assemblages in terms of that interplay.

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Conceptualization and definitions of virtual worlds

In the broadest terms, a virtual world can be conceptualized as “a place described by words or projected through pictures which create a space in the imagination, real enough that you can feel you are inside of it” (Damer, 2008). In this sense, a virtual world includes the painted caves of our ancestors as well as the literary worlds of Dante’s *Inferno* (Bittarello, 2008), Umberto Eco’s monasteries (1983), Shakespeare’s tragedies, Japanese samurai legends, Orson Well’s radio enactment of *The War of the Worlds*, and the Wachowski Brothers’ *Matrix* movies. The computer, by mediating the experience of communication and interaction with large quantities of information, makes it possible to expand the relationship between the imaginary and the real into a persistent three-dimensional space.

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In the novel Snow Crash, Stephenson (1992) provided one of the defining depictions of a non-game virtual world with Hiro Protagonist’s exploits in the *metaverse*, a term that the novel introduced into public discourse, Stephenson’s

metaverse is a three-dimensional virtual world where users interact with each other via avatars and through immersive technology; the users in this metaverse are able to experience and interact from a first-person perspective. The concept of the metaverse, as presented by Stephenson, has been instrumental in providing a vision for real-world computer programmers and technologists to emulate in their development of a variety of virtual worlds, from SnowMoo, Active Worlds, There, and Second Life to Croquet and Google Lively.

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