us. But the risks are only imaginary and have no long-term consequences. The temptation is to live in a world of stimulating images and simulated commitments and thus to lead a simulated life. As Kierkegaard says of the present age, "it transforms the task itself into an unreal feat of artifice, and reality into a theatre."45

The test as to whether one had acquired an unconditional commitment would come only if one had the passion and courage to transfer what one had learned on the Net to the real world. Then one would confront what Kierkegaard calls "the danger and life's stern judgment". But precisely the attraction of the Net, like that of the press in Kierkegaard's time, is that it inhibits that final plunge. Indeed, anyone using the Net who was led to risk his or her real identity in the real world would have to act against the grain of what attracted him or her to the Net in the first place.

So it looks like Kierkegaard may be right. The press and the Internet are the ultimate enemy of unconditional commitment, but only the unconditional commitment of what Kierkegaard calls the religious sphere of existence can save us from the nihilistic levelling launched by the Enlightenment, promoted by the press and the public sphere, and perfected in the World Wide Web.

The most philosophically fascinating phenomenon so far made possible by the Internet is a virtual world called Second Life — a three-dimensional virtual environment one can log on to from one's home computer. There are now over eleven million people signed up as "residents" of that world. Of these, in December 2007, 518,947 spent over one hour a day on-line, and, as of that date, users had spent a total of 25,646,287 hours in Second Life since its launch.1

Residents visit art galleries, shop for virtual goods, go to concerts, have cybersex, worship, attend classes, have conversations, buy and sell real estate, and so forth. The Vatican has taken on the task of saving souls there2 and Sweden has opened a virtual Embassy to sign up residents to become tourists in real Sweden.

Philip Rosedale, founder and CEO of Linden Lab, the creator of Second Life, writes in Chapter One of second life: the official guide:

You are the one who determines what Second Life means to you. Do you enjoy meeting people online, talking to them and doing things together in real time? Welcome to Second Life.
Do you enjoy creating stuff and making it come alive?
Welcome to Second Life. Do you enjoy running a business and making money — real money? Welcome to Second Life."
These remarks call for a brief overview of the uses of Second Life in order to situate and focus on the philosophically interesting one.

(1) Business ventures
One can make real money in Second Life by starting one's own virtual business. Entrepreneurs hope to earn Linden dollars (the currency of Second Life) so as to convert their Linden dollars into US dollars. (The exchange rate fluctuates around 260 Linden dollars to one US dollar.) Established enterprises such as Coca-Cola, Sears, Wells Fargo, IBM, BP, and Toyota are open for business in Second Life, and other businesses are rushing to follow. There is some question, however, as to whether this trend will continue. In a sober article in Wired, Frank Rose explains why he is not impressed:

[More than 85 percent of the avatars [figures representing residents in the virtual world] created have been abandoned. Linden's in-world traffic tally, which factors in both the number of visitors and time spent, shows that the big draws ... are free money and kinky sex. On a random day in June, the most popular location was Money Island (where Linden dollars ... are given away gratis), with a score of 136,000. Sexy Beach, one of several regions that offer virtual sex shops, dancing, and no-strings hookups, came in at 133,000. The Sears store on IBM's Innovation Island had a traffic score of 281; Coke's Virtual Thirst pavilion, a mere 27.5

In any case, the business use of Second Life turns it into an extension of everyday life where the issue is making a profit, not whether the commodities exchanged are virtual or real. The crossover from the virtual to the real may be surprising, but it isn't what is philosophically interesting about a virtual environment.

(2) Playing Second Life as a game
One could stay inside the world of Second Life and enjoy it as a role-playing game, but Second Life isn't itself a game. The mainstream games provide a structure and narrative that define the actions necessary for advancement. In Second Life as in the real world, however, there is no overall goal and so there is no way of ranking the success of those involved. The official guide tells us: "It's completely up to you to say whether your second life is a success, and how you came to that decision. And it's completely up to you as to when the experience begins and ends" (300). Thus the world of Second Life and games like World of Warcraft are worlds apart.

(3) Building a world
Building, maintaining, and expanding a virtual world is no doubt a daily challenge at Linden Labs. This fascinating type of work was presciently described from the point of view of a master programmer named Hiro Protagonist in Neal Stephenson's futuristic bestseller, Snow Crash. In his account of a future dystopia, Stephenson introduced the idea of a virtual world he called a metaverse, and the term is still used in Second Life's self-description. But, obviously, building a virtual world is a real-world occupation; not the job of those who dwell in the metaverse that Linden's programmers create and maintain.

Yet everything in Second Life is a program, and so Second Life provides the tools and tutorials that enable residents to contribute to the content of the virtual world. Indeed, the users
create almost all of the content in Second Life. Rosedale writes to the readers of the official guide: "If Second Life is a world at all, it's because you've created it. . . . You add millions of objects to Second Life – in the form of cars, clothes, castles, and every other kind of thing you can imagine" (iv).

But, according to the official guide, the vast majority of those enjoying Second Life do not regard the programming required to produce things in the virtual world as an end in itself; rather they take it as a necessary access to the virtual goods and services the programming provides. Consequently, a whole industry has grown up in which programmers produce and sell on eBay the programs that provide residents of Second Life with the virtual things they desire. Rosedale notes: "You spend close to $5 million . . . every month . . . on the things that other users have created and added to the world" (iv).

[4] Recovering a sense of enchantment

Edward Castronova, an influential exponent of the virtues of what he calls synthetic worlds, thinks that the fans of virtual worlds are seeking and finding re-enchanted worlds. Castronova's term "re-enchantment" harks back to Max Weber, who argued in 1917 that modern science had led to a disenchantment of the world. This disenchantment meant that no otherworldly forces are evoked in understanding our world and predicting what will happen in it. Fairies, witches, demons, angels, and the occult are nothing but superstitions and literary imaginings. Science can, in principle, master all things. Weber argued that this transformation of the world into a causal mechanism has left many inhabitants of the modern world with an unaccountable feeling of loss. Those disappointed by the disenchanted nature revealed by natural science but disinclined to return to traditional religion are forced to seek re-enchantment elsewhere.

Castronova maintains that the gods and goblins that are programmed by the residents in Second Life and by the game developers of alternative worlds such World of Warcraft give the user a new sense of wonder in the face of the supernatural. He notes:

In the long run we are not able to live without myths, . . . and when we see the ongoing migrations of people into lands where magic has finally been credibly (if crudely) rediscovered, we learn how hungry for myth we have become.

And he suggests:

Perhaps synthetic worlds have begun to offer a new mythology. Perhaps this mythology will eventually be successful, credible, even sublime, so that we will find ourselves in an Age of Wonder.6

Unfortunately, this claim misses completely what has been lost. To experience the enchantment of the world means to experience being in the grip of mysterious powers that have authority over you. That sort of power is expressed in traditional myths but it is necessarily lacking in the programmed gods and goblins we willfully invent and can completely command and understand. Only if powers we have not invented and do not control were to well up and dominate us could we recover a sense of wonder and the sacred.7

[5] Artistic creation

The official guide tells us:

Virtual hedonism is fun, but do not let it blind you to other possible SL activities. For many residents, Second Life
primarily represents a great opportunity to develop their talents as creators and artists (13).

Residents design clothing and buildings, write poems and books, compose music, and make paintings and movies.

Of all the activities in Second Life, these activities are the most impressive but also the least indebted to the unreality of the virtual world. The very same creative activities requiring the same artistic talents, skills, and hard work could have been engaged in the real world. Except for the clothing, sculptors, and buildings, the resulting artistic productions in either world are real, not virtual. The creative activity adds grace and beauty to the world of Second Life and sometimes evokes reactions that verge on wonder. They make Second Life worth visiting, but these achievements don't give rise to new philosophical questions or insights.

Finding new friends

There are many lonely isolated souls whose geographical location or physical condition makes it hard for them to find kindred souls to relate to. These people enjoy the way Second Life allows them to meet and converse with people all over the world. In this case Second Life functions as a three-dimensional chat room in which the setting and the avatars [the residents' virtual bodies] make the conversational experience more realistic and engaging. However, there is a tension between the goal of the lonely people who are geographically isolated and who would presumably prefer to know the appearance of the real people they are interacting with, and the goal of those whose physical condition is a barrier to conversation and who therefore enjoy the possibility of acting as if they were in a masquerade, presenting themselves through avatars that resemble not how they really look but how they would like to appear.

This tension adds a dimension of uncertainty that can be tantalizing or exasperating depending on one's goal, but it does not pose a philosophical problem. The originators of Second Life can leave it to the participants to work out how realistically they present themselves. If residents desire honest interactions they can use the voice mode of communication rather than profit from the anonymity of instant messaging, the usual mode of communication in Second Life. In any case, finding new friends can be an important positive function of a metaverse.

Living in an alternative world

Second Life also offers the possibility of spending one's time in a virtual world that may be more exciting than the real one. That raises the question of how much of one's life should be spent enjoying an admittedly unreal world. Such a question is so new that, so far as I know, only a few philosophers have pondered it; but Star Trek has. In Star Trek: Generations Picard tries to enlist the aid of Kirk, who has long ago retired to a holodeck-like virtual world. Picard finds Kirk jumping challenging chasms on a handsome horse. He reminds Kirk that, although the horse and scenery are magnificent and the chasms daunting, the whole set-up is virtual so there is no real risk. Thus, no courage is required and no thrill and satisfaction can be experienced. After thinking it over, Kirk sees Picard's point and returns with him to the risky real world.

However, the use of virtual worlds to express oneself in new ways and experiment with other possible lives could be of great interest to philosophers. Indeed, a few philosophers have sought to describe better possible lives than
those offered by our current world. Martin Heidegger has tried to capture what life at its best was, and might again be, by studying the enchanted world of the Homeric Greeks and their relation to their gods, while Friedrich Nietzsche imagined a world after the death of God in which higher human beings whom he calls “free spirits” would engage in constant creativity, enjoying transformation for its own sake. Now, for the first time, philosophers have access to a real virtual world so to speak in which they can take up residence and investigate other styles of life that once were possible or could become possible. One could then compare the satisfactions and disappointments of such different lives.

THE EXISTENTIALIST CRITIQUE OF SECOND LIFE
The ever-increasing number of people who spend an average of four hours a day in Second Life don’t seem to be tempted to return more than is necessary to their everyday lives. Clearly, the Picard story misses something attractive to most people about virtual worlds.

The drawbacks of our world are obvious. The boundedness and fallibility of individual and group perspective, physical and mental suffering, and the vulnerability of one’s world to collapse – all of which we might call our essential finitude – are ineliminable. Blaise Pascal, the first existential thinker, writing in the middle of the 17th century, spells out what he calls our wretchedness:

Nothing is so insufferable to man as to be completely at rest . . . He then feels his nothingness, his forlornness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness. There will immediately arise from the depth of his heart weariness, gloom, sadness, fretfulness, vexation, despair.11

One could try to confront the world we are thrown into, to face up to our situation, and to struggle to live in a way that accepts and incorporates our vulnerability without despair, but Pascal goes on to point out that “[a]s men are not able to fight against death, misery, ignorance, they have taken it into their heads, in order to be happy, not to think of them at all”.12 Pascal calls this escapist approach diversion and gives as examples indulging in billiards, tennis, gambling, and hunting.13

Now, however, the Internet and the virtual worlds it makes possible offer us diversions on a much grander scale. Indeed, thanks to virtual worlds like Second Life, we can forget our finitude and immerse ourselves in a rich, safe metaverse. Thus we now face a clear choice between a captivating life of diversion, which existential philosophers like Pascal consider empty and inauthentic, and the authentic life they favour in which one is called to face up to the vulnerability of all one cares about and yet, at the same time, find something meaningful to which to dedicate one’s life.

At the limit the question becomes: how much misery should one confront? When would it be preferable and ethically permissible to be under the illusion that one was free of finitude? Star Trek has raised this question too. In contrast with Picard’s rescue of Kirk in Generations, consider the 1964 Star Trek episode “The Cage”. There Spock has to decide whether or not to “rescue” Captain Pike, whose body has been terribly deformed in an accident, and who is living in a dream world thanks to the Talosians who are masters of illusion. Spock decides to let Pike remain in his virtual world, young and handsome, dallying with the beautiful image of a fellow deformed crash victim.

In this extreme case, illusion may well be a wise choice.
Diversion only looks obviously wrong if one holds that facing the truth is our highest duty, or, more specifically, believes like Pascal that we are all called by God (or, as Martin Heidegger would say, our ontological conscience) to take on the hard work, risk, and sacrifice required in answering our calling. After all, we do admire those, like Franklin Roosevelt, Itzak Perlman, or Stephen Hawking, who, instead of identifying with an invulnerable avatar and diverting themselves by enjoying virtual successes, have struggled with their disabilities in order to respond to the call of something that matters crucially to them and gives their life meaning.

AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF LIFE ENCOURAGED IN SECOND LIFE: EXPLORING NEW WORLDS THROUGH SAFE EXPERIMENTATION

But there may well be more admirable uses of Second Life than diversion. One can see Second Life as offering a quest rather than a distraction. As a new medium for exploring other ways of life, virtual worlds may enable people to learn through safe experimentation which sort of life works best for them.

Thus, many of the residents of Second Life are attracted by the way an alternative world promises to enable them to discover and satisfy their deepest desires. One can, for example, devote one’s life to the endless production and consumption of commodities—anything that one can buy and enjoy without any risk or any special skill. The official guide says: “Shopping, of course, is one of the most popular activities in Second Life” (300). Indeed, in Second Life people can use the Linden dollars they are given to acquire all the commodities they desire. There is on offer virtual designer clothes, real estate, cars, houses, furniture, hi-tech gadgets, sex toys, art objects, islands, and so forth—anything that has a price.

But the creators of Second Life seem to suspect that collecting commodities as a way of life is not enough to make life worth living. The official guide goes out of its way to assure us that “Second Life has become more than just a machine to support sellers and buyers” (207), and in an interview Rosedale explains:

[T]here’s initially a desire to just have everything that you’ve ever wanted: to be very beautiful, to be very sociable, and to be very engaged in a kind of fast-forward version of consumption as we know it in the real world.

But that’s the first couple of months. And then after that you’ve almost reached a Zen-like state where you can say, “Well, I’ve done everything, but what more is there?” Then you start to ask questions like, “Well, maybe I just want to build a temple on a hill and meditate.” [This would presumably have to be real meditation, not virtual meditation.] Or, “I want to contribute to a community...”

So why do people give up on fast-forward consumerism? Perhaps because they have learned that a lot of what is most rewarding in life can’t be commodified. Residents of Second Life seem to have discovered something like this for themselves. Artemis Cain, one of the residents of Second Life quoted in the official guide, asks: “Do you want to spend money on all sorts of gadgets, or do you want to create, explore, and try all sorts of different things?” (19).

The official guide takes it to be an advantage of the virtual world that in it breakdowns are generally a lot less serious than in ours. When your second life is not going well, you can simply abandon the troublesome situation—your fickle friend, your lost love, even your avatar body and your identity. What you do has fewer consequences than it would have
in the real world, thus you are free to make commitments with fewer risks.

This ease of getting out of sticky situations enables experimentation. In The official guide we are told:

*Second Life* is often held up as the perfect place to get your fantasy on – and yes, there’s no other place like it for becoming something you aren’t, or even for working out just what it is you want to be. In a sense, it’s the epitome of the “walled garden”, a place where reality dare not intrude (301).

The attraction of such noncommittal involvements becomes more understandable if one thinks of *Second Life* as a masquerade. In a masquerade, people are disguised and are allowed to do normally forbidden things without adverse consequences for their everyday lives. *Second Life* is much richer and more engaging than a masquerade, but the attraction and essential superficiality of the risk-free carnavalesque relation to reality is the same. In *Second Life* if one breaks up with a lover, one does not have to see the suffering of an actual person or worry about the shock of running into him or her again. After the failure of a virtual marriage one does not have to go through a real divorce. When one’s virtual business fails in the virtual world one doesn’t have to face bankruptcy. In general, one doesn’t have to clean up the mess one leaves. You can always just walk away.

But the official guide hastens to point out that in *Second Life* just walking away from a situation you don’t like is not the only possible response:

The right thing to do, of course, is not to leave the world, but simply find something that you do like. There’s no shortage of choices – shopping, visiting art galleries, skydiving [but with no risk and so no thrill], bowling [but virtual bowling would presumably require only hand/eye coordination, and so give no full-bodied sense of accomplishment], and attending live shows and concerts are just some of the options available [14, my reservations in brackets].

In general, we are told that

one of the biggest differences between real and virtual life... is the amount of control you have over your existence. Virtual life offers you total control of everything – you even choose when to enter the world and when to leave, an ability that’s sadly lacking in real life. You are truly the master of your destiny (196).

Although it seems exaggerated to claim that in the virtual world one’s essential vulnerability can be eliminated altogether, at least you can enter the virtual world without prior attachments or responsibilities and, when you exit, leave behind whatever attachments and responsibilities you formed there. If, however, you become involved in what you are doing, even in the virtual world you are no longer in total control. Failure in your virtual emotional, professional, or practical life is still always possible. Yet, in a virtual world as in the life the ancient Stoics advocated, the kind of life you lead, including how much vulnerability you accept, is up to you.

But, as usual there is a trade-off. Although risk-free experimentation with ways of life and forms of involvement is more exciting and revealing than consumerism, one could argue that it does not give one serious satisfaction. What, then, might be missing?
TWO RISKY WAYS OF LIFE DISCOURAGED IN SECOND LIFE: BOLD EXPERIMENTATION AND UNCONDITIONAL COMMITMENT

Nietzsche might sound like he is praising the virtues of Second Life in claiming that one can and should constantly be reinventing one's self. He boasts:

We ourselves keep growing, keep changing, we shed our old bark, we shed our skins every spring, we keep becoming younger, fuller of future, taller, stronger.\textsuperscript{15}

But Nietzsche famously also says:

[BJeUeve me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas!!\textsuperscript{16}

Nietzsche is saying that a way of living that is exciting and rewarding must be more risky than cautiously trying out new ways of life in a protected garden. In the real world experimentation has serious consequences. It takes courage to try new things since one must be ready and willing to learn from surprising and upsetting consequences. Thus, what makes role-playing easy and risk-free, limits the sort of openness to surprising and dangerous new situations that could lead to real discovery.

A Nietzschean life of daring undertakings and willingness to risk failure is possible in Second Life, but Second Life does not encourage such risks. Indeed, Nietzsche's call for bold experimentation flies in the face of the supposed advantages of a virtual world. Nietzsche would claim that, while the safe experimentation of Second Life is easy and can give you superficial satisfactions as in a synthetic Mardi Gras, only a bold experiment with the real possibility of having to deal with the consequences of failure could help you discover what is really possible and worthwhile for you.

In the end, however, Nietzsche advocates a life of the sort that Second Life offers. It is a life free of the dark side of finitude — a life that is

self-sufficient, rich, liberal with happiness and good will; \ldots [that] does not permit the petty weeds of grief and chagrin to come up at all.\textsuperscript{17}

But Søren Kierkegaard would argue that a life free of the possibility of grief and humiliation is also a life free of bliss and glory. According to Kierkegaard, the true opposite of a Nietzschean life of bold but existentially safe constant transformation is a life of immutable commitment. In such a life, you hear a calling just for you and live in terms of it the rest of your life, giving up what you want to do for what you are called to do. In Chapter 4, I call this making an unconditional commitment. Kierkegaard presents a Christian argument that only a life of unconditional commitment with the work and risk that it requires can save one from despair. A hard-earned skill for which one has made a life of sacrifices, or a love that defines what matters in one's world, or an enterprise to which one has dedicated oneself, give life maximal meaning. But at the same time such commitments make one vulnerable to accidents, humiliation, and grief. Thus, in answering a calling one must be ready to risk everything for what defines who one is. One is, however, then aligned with and blessed by an authority greater than any merely human authority, be it a god, history, a tradition, a lover, or something else that our practices show us is worth our total devotion.

Nat Goldhaber, an early exponent of the virtues of
disembodied existence, points out that we don’t have to believe the official guide as to what is possible in Second Life. He then describes a case in which, thanks to the lack of seriousness in Second Life that makes noncommital experimentation attractive, a person is drawn into a serious unconditional commitment:

Initially, people may experiment furiously to settle on a “way of being” in Second Life that satisfies and stimulates them; a way of life which they feel better represents who they are than the body and position they occupy in the physical and social world. Once they have found this place, this new way of being, they can become deeply invested in it. So deeply that their investment in their body and circumstance in the physical world pales by comparison. With such a commitment, even absent the physical body, there is great risk. There is room for rejection by their peers. There is the possibility of embarrassment. There is the possibility of financial collapse.

Goldhaber clearly sees that finitude, in this case vulnerability, is a necessary aspect of our most meaningful experiences and relationships. And he rightly points out that such vulnerability is possible in Second Life. But granted that finding one’s vocation is the most valuable gift one could hope for from real life or from Second Life, it is also important to realize that being drawn into an unconditional commitment is not the normal result of entering the world of easy experimentation. Choosing to live in Second Life is not neutral. According to the official guide, “What is best about Second Life . . . is [that] practically all the restraints and limitations of real life are absent” (194). Second Life does, indeed, enable one to try out a whole spectrum of lives, but it makes activities ranging from consumerism to risk-free experimentation so attractive that it lures one to pursue a life that minimizes vulnerability and maximizes enjoyment, thereby diverting one from being drawn into a life that faces vulnerability and is rewarded by seriousness and meaning.

Someone seeking serious commitments and the lasting meaning they promise could enter the virtual world, but such a seeker would have to resist what is most seductive about the virtual world, viz., the promise of freedom from finitude. One would have freely to give up one’s unrestrained freedom and make oneself vulnerable. Only then could one experience the excitement of bold transformation, or the grief and bliss of unconditional commitment. But then there would be no reason to spend a minute of one’s life in an artificial world whose special attraction was its risk-free enjoyment. There are plenty of opportunities for dedication with its concomitant dangers and rewards in the real world.

ARE ANY SOURCES OF MEANING NECESSARILY ABSENT FROM SECOND LIFE?

A serious philosophical question remains. Are there any rewarding ways of life not just discouraged but impossible in virtual worlds? That is, does an at least memorably meaningful life involve any crucial elements that may well be unprogrammable? As philosophers we will not be asking merely about the limitations of current technology where a meaningful life is concerned, nor what people so far have used Second Life for or may use it for in the future. We are mainly interested not in actualities but possibilities; in this case (1) the necessary limitations of a certain model of human interaction dictated by a computer interface akin to the one in Second Life, and (2) the limitations, if any, on all human interactions in a
virtual world. In keeping with the overall argument of this book, we might expect that, if there are such limitations, they will have to do with the importance of our real-world embodiment.

To answer these questions, where the meaning of life is concerned, we have to begin by noting that the most meaningful and rewarding kind of life we have discussed so far is an openness to a calling that, if answered, results in a life of enduring commitment. But Nietzsche first, and many postmodern thinkers since, have claimed that such an unconditionally committed life is rigid and restrictive and therefore less and less appealing, while a life open to experiment and change has come to be seen as more and more attractive. The success of Second Life confirms this observation. But, as Kierkegaard points out, an experimental life lacks seriousness and focus. So the question arises whether our culture, or any culture, has practices that support a rewarding way of life that avoids both the narrow focus and immutability of traditional unconditional commitment as well as the hyperflexibility and dispersion characteristic of life in our postmodern world.

In answer, Martin Heidegger has pointed to a familiar but now endangered species of practice that is more flexible than unconditional commitment but which, nonetheless, can provide focus, enchantment, and a memorable sort of meaning. Such practices can bring us in touch with a power that we cannot control and that calls forth and rewards our efforts—a power that we, therefore, recognize as sacred.

Heidegger has in mind practices that encourage local gatherings around things or events that set up local worlds. According to Heidegger, such local worlds bring out at their best those involved. Heidegger gives as an example drinking the local wine with friends, where a celebratory occasion, friendship, and a sense of being blessed can come together radiantly and forcefully. Albert Borgmann has usefully called the practices that support such local gatherings, focal practices. The family meal when it acts as a focal practice requires the culinary and social skills of family members and draws fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and children to come forth at their best. Such practices make family gatherings matter.

For people who experience such focal practices, many elements of the practice such as how and when to share a meal together can vary, but the basic focal practice itself is felt as an imperative, not a matter of choice. One does not simply choose the roles of family members. Nor does one simply choose the conventions of sharing a meal. These are the background on which all manifest options appear. Indeed, to do their work such practices must remain in the background. One reason we cannot program them is that we are so immersed in them that we cannot stand back from them and make them totally explicit.

For an example of a background practice that is taken for granted and can't be made explicit and programmed take distance standing. We are not aware that, when interacting with friends, colleagues, loved ones, and so forth we stand at what we feel to be the appropriate distance from them. If we thought about what distance to stand at, we wouldn't know how to do it. The sense of appropriate distance was passed on to us by our parents and peers who didn't know that they had the practice. They just felt uneasy and backed away when we stood too close and moved closer when they felt we were too far away, and now we do the same. Like many social skills, we mastered distance standing by our body conforming to other people's bodies.
Anthropologists try to measure and codify the distance-standing practices in various cultures. There is even a field called Proximics dedicated to doing just this. But our distance-standing skill, like any skill, is endlessly flexible. We feel comfortable standing further away if the person we are interacting with has a cold, closer if there is a lot of noise in the background. In a library reading room or a church we speak more softly and stand closer, all these subtle discriminations and responses are further inflected by our relationship with the person involved.

So just how could such practices be introduced into the virtual world? The answer is surprising and important. The bodies of the users controlling the avatars bring them in. Experiments have shown that, without thinking about it, users tend to position their avatars in relation to each other at what would count as the appropriate distance in the real world. We shall need to come back to this phenomenon in a moment.

In addition to basic background practices like standing appropriate distances from others, focal occasions require a shared mood and the sense that all who are present are sharing that mood. This sense of sharing creates a self-contained world. The best way to see this is to consider some famous representations of focal occasions from film and literature. Consider the dinner in the film Babette’s Feast. At the beginning of the dinner, bickering among the guests over issues brought in from the past almost spoils the occasion by preventing it from becoming self-contained. But then, with the wine and good food, a mood of openness and care for others specific to the occasion descends, and when everyone senses that this mood is shared, the feast works as a self-contained world. Likewise, in Virginia Woolf’s novel, To the Lighthouse, Mrs Ramsey’s dinner cannot come off as a successful occasion as long as a mood of political argument brought in from outside by the men persists. Only when a shared appropriate mood – in this case a mood of warmth and generosity – arises, and the guests sense that they are all sharing that mood, the event becomes a self-enclosed focal occasion.

A similar phenomenon occurs when there is a brilliant play at a baseball game and many in the crowd rise as one. What is so moving is not just that they are swept up in the same excitement; what is especially moving is that each one senses that they are all swept away by it. Indeed, the sense that the shared mood is shared is constitutive of the excitement. Again, it is what binds the participants together in a focal event and makes the occasion into a self-contained world.

When a focal event is working to the point where it has its particular integrity, one feels extraordinarily in tune with all that is happening, a special graceful ease takes over, and events seem to unfold on their own. This makes the moment an all-the-more enchanting and unforgettable gift. One feels grateful for receiving all that is brought out by this particular occasion, thus a reverential sentiment can arise. Such sentiments are frequently manifested in practices such as toasting or in wishing others could be joining in. An ancient practice for expressing such a sentiment was pouring a libation to the gods.

We have little current vocabulary for talking about our moods coming together to make an event come alive, but we know it is not in our power to make it happen. How the power of moods is understood depends on the culture, but the understanding of moods as gifts from powers outside of our control is found in every culture, with the possible exception of ours.
A sense that we did not and could not make the occasion a
centre of focal meaning by our own efforts, but rather that we
were granted the special attunement required for such an
occasion is what Heidegger wants to capture in his claim that
for a focal event to work the divinities must be present.
Describing a similar phenomenon — a baseball game where
people are attuned to each other and sense that they are so
attuned — Borgmann says:

Given such attunement, banter and laughter flow naturally
across strangers and unite them into a community. When
reality and community conspire this way, divinity descends on
the game.26

Much that gives life meaning is organized around such
focal occasions. There are not only dinners and sporting
events, but also celebrations such as weddings, graduations,
and reunions, solemn commemorations such as memorials
and funerals, as well as religious rituals such as Seder or the
Eucharist. All these focal events depend for their success on
the gift of a shared mood and the appreciation that it is
shared. To determine whether this practice that helps make
life worth living in the real world is reproducible in virtual
worlds we must begin by considering to what extent moods
can be experienced, communicated, and shared in Second Life.

In so far as philosophers have thought about moods at all,
the usual approach until recently has been to think of them as
inner mental states. On this Cartesian view, people are not
really in a mood but moods are in people. A person’s private
moods are expressed (made outer) by his or her bodily
movements, which can then be observed, interpreted, and
responded to by another person’s movements.

Given the mediation of the computer, the communication

of moods in Second Life is currently implemented the way
Cartesians envisage the transmission of moods in the real
world. If a resident in Second Life sitting at her computer
experiencing a mood wants to communicate it to another
resident, she must command her avatar to signal this pri-

vate mood publicly by means of a preprogrammed gesture.
The viewer then must interpret the gesture. If, thanks to his
inner mental process, he succeeds in figuring out the mood
of the sender from the gesture of the sender’s avatar, he can
then command his avatar to respond with an appropriate
gesture. This way of understanding the communication of
moods in Second Life makes manifest the clumsy character
of the Cartesian account of our everyday communication of
moods. But this Cartesian procedure does not at all
capture the way moods are normally shared in the everyday
world.

Stephenson, prophetic as usual, is onto this problem. He
notes how important body language is in international nego-
tiations and has Hiro observe:

Businessmen . . . more or less ignore what is being said . . .
They pay attention to the facial expressions and body
language of the people they are talking to.27

But Stephenson doubts that programming body language
would be sufficient to capture genuine emotional communi-
cation. He doesn’t tell us the basis for his doubts; he simply
has Hiro report that Juanita, the metaverse’s master pro-
gramer who has done more than anyone else to program
facial expressions and body language, does not believe her
programs capture how people communicate their feelings.
She thinks that there is something misguided in the whole
programming approach. Hiro says:
Juanita... has... decided that the whole thing is bogus. That
no matter how good it is, the metaverse is distorting the way
people talk to each other.28

It’s hard to say what Juanita has in mind, but since Juanita
is a master programmer and knows that programs can be
improved without limit, whatever is lacking would have to be,
not better programs, but something necessarily missing
from how people currently communicate in virtual worlds —
something that could not be fixed by programming more and
more sophisticated gestures and facial expressions.

A comment from the official guide gives a hint of what is
bogus about communication in the metaverse. Iris Ophelia,
one of the residents of Second Life, while praising Second Life’s
attractions, admits:

One of the biggest problems with the Internet since day one
has been a lack of expression. Emoticons [smiley faces, etc.]
help, but there’s always an uncrossable line where
expressions, tones, and body language lie...

This whole world [of Second Life] has been created, with so
much to see and do and experience, and yet there’s so little
genuine emotion. The crying gesture is used as a joke 90% of
the time. If you were really crying, how could you convey it in
Second Life? [207]

The question is, just what is missing? It seems that, given
the Cartesian understanding of the communication of feel-
ings, one would have to program a repertoire — a dictionary so
to speak — of emotive gestures, and residents would have to
choose which ones to use on each occasion. A certain con-
ventional gesture of a person’s avatar would be used to indi-
cate being in a typical mood. The crying gesture is an extreme
case. One might, to take a more everyday example, decide to
use a gesture such as yawning to indicate one was bored.

But in the everyday world, moods are not normally experi-
enced as essentially private and then communicated indirectly
by using gestures. There are in fact two problems concerning
communication of moods in Second Life. As already noted, to
be programmed, the gestures used have to be generic while in
the real world our communication is normally specific to
each specific situation. Moreover, and more importantly, in
our world the communication of our moods is direct, while in
Second Life it is indirect. That is, in the real world our bodies
spontaneously express our moods and others directly pick them
up, while in Second Life one has to select an appropriate gesture
and then command one’s avatar to make that movement while
the other person has to figure out what the gesture means. Thus
the Cartesian model inserts an object/body — human or avatar —
into the experience of everyday communication and thus
distorts both the situation-specific moods we normally
express and our spontaneous, direct, embodied, way of
expressing them.

If stepping back and choosing a gesture were required to
communicate our moods, communication would take us out
of the flow of our immediate moods and transform them into
self-conscious experiences, as if like an actor we needed
to decide which bodily expressions to use. This is presumably
why Juanita says that all emotional communication in the
metaverse is bogus. Happily, in the real world people directly
pick up and directly respond to each other’s situation-specific
moods. Indeed, genuine communication of moods seems to
require the direct body-to-body interaction that in discussing
the acquiring of distance-standing practices I called intercor-
poriality. As Merleau-Ponty puts the problem:
The sense of our gestures is not given, but grasped, that is, recaptured by an act on the spectator's part. The whole difficulty is to conceive this act clearly without confusing it with a cognitive operation. The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his.29

Until recently, our direct communication of our feelings has been, indeed, mysterious, but recent work in neuroscience has cast a new light on the subject. Researchers have found brain cells, which they appropriately call mirror-neurons, that fire both when one makes a meaningful movement and when one sees another person make that movement.

As reported by Sandra Blakeslee in the New York Times:

The human brain has multiple mirror neuron systems that specialize in... understanding not just the actions of others but... the social meaning of their behavior and their emotions. [Giacomo] Rizzolatti says... "Mirror neurons allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but by feeling, not by thinking."30

Vittorio Gallese, the discoverer of mirror-neurons, provides more details:

When we observe actions performed by other individuals our motor system "resonates" along with that of the observed agent. Action observation both in humans and monkeys seems to imply a concurrent action simulation. This notion is corroborated by evidence coming from neurological patients.

Demented patients with "echopraxia..." show an impulsive tendency to imitate other people's movements. Imitation is performed immediately with the speed of a reflex action. Imitation concerns gestures that are commonly executed as well as those that are rare and even bizarre for the observing patient. It can be hypothesized that echopractic behavior represents a "release" of a covert action simulation present also in normal subjects, but normally inhibited in its expression...31

Gallese notes that yawning is a normal case where the inhibition seems to be missing.

[Examples of] "contagious behavior" commonly experienced in our daily life, in which the observation of particular actions displayed by others leads to our repetition of them, [are] yawning and laughter.32

Moods are likewise contagious. No interpretation of someone's movements and no selected response movements are required. Of course, the direct communication caused by mirror-neurons only works if one is in the presence of a body enough like one's own. Cats' yawning doesn't make us yawn.

It's an empirical question whether an avatar's gestures can be made similar enough to ours to cause a direct response in the person controlling the avatar. But even if avatars could be programmed to make such realistic gestures that a person seeing the avatar on her computer would directly respond to it, she would still have to consciously command her avatar to make an appropriate canned response. So her response would still be doubly bogus, that is, not situation-specific and not direct. Indeed, indirectness is built into any model of communication that inserts two public object-bodies between
two inner minds, whether the two interposed bodies are each person's own body as in the phenomenologically inadequate Cartesian model of everyday communication, or two avatar bodies as in the current Cartesian implementation of emotional communication in Second Life.

Instead of trying to explain how one's private inner states can be conveyed to others by means of one's public external body, Heidegger starts with the observation that moods are attunements and notes that attunements, unlike feelings and emotions, are normally public and directly shared. He describes the phenomenon:

A human being who ... is in good humor brings a lively atmosphere with them. ... Or another ... makes everything depressing and puts a damper on everything ... What does this tell us? Attunements ... in advance determine our being with one another. It seems as though an attunement is in each case already there, so to speak like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves ... and which then attunes us through and through.33

Heidegger implies that the traditional account of moods as private inner states misses the phenomenon of the contagion of moods. He asks:

Do [moods] bring about an emotional experience which is then transmitted to others, in the manner of infectious germs? We do say that attunement or mood is infectious.34

And he further notes that most of the time and most basically people are directly attuned to each other by being always already attuned to a shared situation.35 He writes:

[Moods] are precisely a fundamental manner ... of ... being

with one another ... [a]nd precisely those attunements to which we pay no heed at all, the attunements we least observe, those attunements which attune us in such a way that we feel as though there is no attunement there at all, ... - these attunements are the most powerful.36

Moods are powerful in that they are not under our control, and yet they determine what matters in our interactions with others and so govern our social behaviour.37

We therefore need to understand how people alone at their computers could be drawn into an already shared public mood in the virtual world.38 It would seem that the current object-body-mediated model poses an insurmountable barrier to the genuine communication of moods in Second Life.39

Phillip Rosedale, however, tells me that the programmers at Linden Lab are now working on just the sort of direct communication of one's feelings I would have thought impossible in Second Life. Linden Lab is developing software he says, that, if one has a webcam trained on one as one sits at one's computer, will enable the computer to pick up directly one's head and upper body movements and use them to control the movements of one's avatar. He says that "the technology exists today in every web camera that's out there to have it be the case that ... if you're nodding or if you're making head movements, ... - your avatar - [will make the same movements]."40 So, your avatar could in principle directly manifest your feelings. This would be an important first step towards virtual intercorporeality!

There are problems, however. Although a camera can surely capture your posture, style, speed, and facial expressions, it is an open question how much of that information can be manifested by your avatar. The avatar's body, and especially
its face, would have to be sufficiently human looking to reproduce the subtle movements that would be directly picked up by the camera. Whether the body language that the camera directly picked up could be reproduced in sufficient detail by one’s avatar to communicate one’s feelings directly to the viewer is an empirical question.\textsuperscript{41}

If reproducing such subtle body movements were possible, people at their computers, already in a mood, might transfer their moods into their avatar’s reactions without realizing they were doing so, just as they smuggle in background-standing practices. Capturing each person’s movements and communicating them directly to his or her avatar might result in all the avatars getting in sync and so producing a contagious situational mood. Like an atmosphere, such a mood would be beyond the control of any one person and would draw in each new participant like a raindrop into a hurricane.\textsuperscript{42} This is in principle possible but far beyond current technology.

Given the current Cartesian model, the best one can do is to direct one’s avatar to go through the motions of being in a mood at a wedding, a funeral, a sporting event, or a family dinner but there would be no possibility of a contagious global atmosphere. Moods could only be experienced as private inner feelings communicated between isolated individuals by controlled body movements just as Cartesian philosophers have held. The spontaneity and specificity of shared attunements, and the sense that the shared attunements were shared, all of which go to make up a focal event, would necessarily be lacking. There could be no contagion, no excitement of being swept up into a shared atmosphere, no self-contained shared world, and no shared sense that something important and gratifying was happening. No divinity would descend and produce a memorable focal event.

To sum up: A focal event — perhaps the most meaningful experience available to us in our otherwise secular world — requires four capacities recognized by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty that cannot be captured in the currently accepted Cartesian model:

1. Intercorporiality, i.e. the direct bodily expression and pick up of moods,
2. that the moods picked up be shared,
3. that those involved in a focal event sense that the shared attunement is shared, and
4. that those involved sense that they have contributed to their being taken over by a power outside their control.

As long as one is confined to the current Cartesian model of the communication of feelings, programming the contagion of moods is impossible, and so focal events are not possible in current virtual worlds.\textsuperscript{43} However, we can begin to see that perhaps programmers at Linden Lab might generalize their webcam-using program and so discover how to smuggle people at their computers into the bodies of their avatars. After all, if programmers managed to program avatar bodies to make expressive movements sufficiently similar to ours, and if they could couple control of one’s avatar directly to one’s brain or body, they could perhaps draw on the mirror-neurons of the users to capture intercorporeality. Residents of Second Life could then be drawn into a shared mood and come to share that that shared mood was shared, and so bring focal practices into Second Life. Whether in fact focal events can be programmed, and if so how and when, are empirical questions.
CONCLUSION
We have seen that Second Life as currently conceived is subject to four philosophical objections. Existentialists would claim that indulging in a virtual life is the ultimate form of diversion to avoid facing the vulnerability of a real-world life. It would thus blind users to the anguish and joy of responding to a calling to face up to their finitude. Nietzscheans would see Second Life as a masquerade that offers cautious experimentation but misses the rewards of the sort of bold experimentation only possible in the risky real world. Kierkegaardians would say that the attraction of the safety of Second Life makes unconditional commitment unlikely. And finally, Heideggerians would point out that for a meaningful life one must be able to engage in focal events, and that that requires a sensitivity to the power of the shared moods that give mattering to our world, make possible focal events, and thus give meaning to our lives. But such sensitivity is impossible given the current Cartesian model of a concealed computer user deliberately controlling his public avatar.

Thus, as long as one works within the Cartesian framework of inner minds and object-bodies, a fundamental cross-cultural ancient and modern way of making life worth living would inevitably be absent from virtual worlds such as Second Life. The idea that one could lead a memorably meaningful life in the kind of metaverse we currently can envisage would be a myth. For the time being, if we want to live life at its best, we will have to embrace our embodied involvement in the risky, moody, real world.

Conclusion
We have now seen that our body, including our emotions and moods play a crucial role in our being able to make sense of things so as to see what is relevant, our ability to let things matter to us and so to acquire skills, our sense of the reality of things, our trust in other people, and, our capacity for making the unconditional commitments that give a fixed meaning to our lives, and finally the capacity to cultivate the intercorporeality that makes possible meaningful focal events. It would be a serious mistake to think we could do without these embodied capacities - to rejoice that the World Wide Web offers us the chance to become more and more disembodied, detached, ubiquitous minds leaving our situated, vulnerable bodies behind. The increased disembodiment of information leads to difficult trade-offs.

In Chapter 1 we saw that up to 1999, as the Web grew alarmingly, people were faced with a painful trade-off between high speed statistical syntactic search of meaningless hyperlinks, and slow old-fashioned human judgments of meaningful connections among pieces of information. This led to desperate attempts, in the face of repeated failures, to formalize intelligence and natural language. But now in the new millennium, thanks to Google and Wikipedia, we can stop wasting time and money on AI and natural language processing and enjoy the best of both worlds – high speed syntactic