

## Have Your Crops Withered? A Phenomenology of the Virtual Farming Game Experience

Becky Lee Meadows, Ph.D.

(Associate Professor of Philosophy, Galen College of Nursing)

---

**ABSTRACT :** It is with glee that farmers in the virtual farming game world see the fruit of their trees ripen for picking or their crops ready for harvest; it is with some version of sadness that they see their crops have withered because they neglected to harvest them in time. There is something akin to real farming in the gaming world. What constitutes that virtual farming experience? What draws us to the mental life of this farming world? There is an element of safety in it in that if our crops wither, we may not suffer monetary loss (although we may suffer some depending on whether we have paid money to purchase gaming dollars to purchase seeds), and there is an element of pride in growing prize roses, even though they are images on a computer screen. The life of a gaming farmer is a mental one, one along the lines of experience explained by famous phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, a mental lifeworld experience that parallels the experience of the fictive world of the novel yet allows for our own interaction—and our own responsibility for the virtual world of our own creating. This drives the farming game experience.

**KEYWORDS:** *gaming, Farmville, farming games, mental lifeworld, gaming experience.*

---

### I. INTRODUCTION

It is with glee that farmers in virtual worlds such as Farmville (since deceased with many successors) see the fruit of their trees ripen for picking or their crops ready for harvest. It is with some idea of sadness that they see their crops have withered because they neglected to harvest them in time. There is something akin to real farming in virtual worlds such as Farmville. What constitutes that virtual farming game experience, though? There is safety in this virtual farming world in that if our crops wither, we may not suffer monetary loss (although we may suffer some depending on whether we have paid money to purchase virtual farming dollars to purchase seeds, for example), and there is pride in growing prize roses, even though they are images on a computer screen. The life of a virtual game farmer is a complete mental event, one along the lines of experience explained by Edmund Husserl, the Father of Phenomenology—a mental lifeworld experience that parallels the experience of the fictive world of the novel yet allows for our own interaction—and our own responsibility—for the virtual world of our creating. In essence, a phenomenological analysis of the virtual-reality farm gaming world unveils this world as a realm between the physical and mental lifeworlds in which we experience an enhanced version of Husserl's "as-if" experience, with consequences as we actively intend and engage in creating the virtual-reality farming world. I deem this the "as-if-Creator" experience.

When Husserl wrote *Cartesian Meditations* in 1931, he had no way of anticipating the creation of the virtual-reality world. Yet, that world exists, and as computer technology continues to progress, we experience it more fully. In the 1980s, video games were two-dimensional dinosaurs that consisted of a white square on a screen that participants batted back and forth with vertical-line handles. Today, however, video games have moved from the realm where we experienced them as a complete mental event to one where we can participate in the creation of a world of our choice. We are no longer passive viewers at the mercy of the games' limitations. Instead, we are active, creative agents that craft a world of our choice in the games.

In a previous academic paper, "The Pickaxe and Me: The 'As-If-Lived' Event in the *My Bloody Valentine* 3-D Experience," I distinguish between Husserl's idea of the "as-if" experience and our experience of 3-D films, which I deem the "as-if-lived" experience. Husserl's "as-if" experience is a complete mental event, in essence an imagining of what might be or re-imagining of what did happen. My definition of the "as-if-lived" experience is a quasi-physical, quasi-mental event that puts us on the edge of our seats even as we remain passively aware that we are watching a film. Of course, the 3-D movie experience is different than the experience of participating in an actual event in the physical lifeworld. In the movie experience, even the 3-D movie experience, we are "passive" participants; we have no power to control them but can only experience them as they are evidentially given to us. When playing virtual reality farming games, though, we are active, even responsible, participants in a virtual world, and so we participate in an enhanced version of the "as-if-lived" experience. In effect, the virtual reality farming game experience falls into a subcategory of Husserl's as-if experience and my "as-if-lived" experience, which I deem the "as-if-Creator" experience. We become gods over our land and creation.

To begin, however, we must return to Husserl's idea of an experience that is not necessarily a physical event, but a mental one—the baseline “as-if” experience. We must enter the transcendental epoche as opposed to existing in the natural attitude we most often experience. This means moving into a realm where we study the actual streams of our consciousness as we “farm” in Farmville. In other words, we must move into the realm of analysis of our mental life as we farm in a virtual world and classify our experience as phenomenon (Husserl 21). Husserl writes:

The epoche can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me. Anything belonging to the world, any spatiotemporal being, exists for me—that is to say, is accepted by me—in that I experience it, perceive it, remember it, think of it somehow, judge about it, value it, desire it, or the like. . . . The world is for me absolutely nothing else but the world existing for and accepted by me in such a conscious cogito. (21)

As virtual farmers, we are actively aware of the farming game lifeworld as we play the game. However, we are also passively aware that it is not “real,” and this passive awareness is primarily why we feel no physical threat. If our crops wither, we will not starve. If we run out of gas, we can purchase Farmville or other dollars to buy more or simply wait until the game awards us more. We are never impoverished, although we can run short of game dollars. We have the option to use some of our own financial resources to purchase gaming dollars if necessary. If we do not participate fully in the virtual farming game world and our crops wither, our farms do not shrink, as an episode of *South Park* demonstrates. On the contrary—if we do not participate in the virtual farming game world we create ourselves, we can go back at any time and begin participating again. It does not disappear, unlike video games in the 1980s in which we could not save the point where we left off. This is part of the natural attitude that we bring to the virtual reality farming game experience, and this is part of the “horizon” of experience associated with playing virtual reality games. Husserl writes:

Every subjective process has a process ‘horizon,’ which changes with the alteration of the nexus of consciousness to which the process belongs and with the alteration of the process itself from phase to phase of its flow—an intentional horizon of reference to potentialities of consciousness that belong to the process itself. (44). Our virtual farming game experience aids our “constitution” of a game as a game—a non-threatening entity—and this becomes evidentially given to us.

Emotionally, however, when we actively participate in the virtual farming game world, we experience it much like we experience the fictive lifeworld of novels, short stories, or films. The virtual farming game world is different, however, because it is a world of our own creation, and it responds to our touch; we are not just passive viewers of it. Instead, we are gods of the world we create. As players, we do different things with that world. While we do conjure mental images of characters and events in the fictive world or the world of early video games, we are at the mercy of the events the author puts before us. In virtual farming games, we are gods of our farms, and when we fail, we feel it emotionally. We have failed our animals, our crops, our trees, or our own selves. To rectify, we spend our own financial resources to unwither our crops, or we email friends and ask them to grant us an unwither. We watch our clocks to ensure we harvest our crops and flowers before they wither. Luckily, animals will wait patiently upon us, as will our trees, so if we are late harvesting them, we lose nothing. Still, there is an element of guilt, almost a feeling of neglect, when we cannot harvest them on time. After all, dairy cows must be milked every day. And here, perhaps, is a clue to the type of experience the virtual world gives us—we bring our own lived experiences and knowledge to this virtual world, and we cannot leave those behind. Instead, we layer them upon our experience of the virtual world, and even though the virtual world does not respond physically, as the natural world does, our mental bind to the natural world, our horizon of it, crosses into the mental experience of the virtual world. We cannot neglect our animals or crops in the natural world, and so we should not in the virtual world, or so we feel. We have moved from the “as-if” experience, a total mental event, to a different form of the “as-if-lived” experience I deem the “as-if-Creator” experience, where we experience the mental event physically in some way with an added element of responsibility and possibly even morality.

One aspect of this as-if-Creator experience is morality. We bring our moral principles to this world because it is one of our own creation. While we do not experience the as-if-Creator world exactly like the physical lifeworld, we do actively participate in its creation, and as a god of that world, we feel responsibility for it—at least, some of us do. The difference in the moral laws we apply to the as-if-Creator experience result from our experience of it. In that regard, I see two subcategories of the as-if-Creator experience in regard to Farmville—the “as-if-Creator” and the “as-if-Capitalist” experiences. Those who have the “as-if-Creator” experience in the Farmville world create a beautiful world; their focus while playing is on the aesthetics of their creation, and they create a world much as God in Christianity created the physical lifeworld. We see their cows scattered around their green pastures, lovely Spring or Fall trees, crops chosen for their beauty as often as their monetary value, and items used to deliberately create an artistic vision. In the “as-if-Creator” experience, we are arguably as close to true creation of a world as we will ever be. Those who engage in the “as-if-Creator” experience often feel a sense of loss if they sell farm animals for cash; after all, who wants to send animals who smile at you to the

slaughter house? Instead, as my professor friend Mikki Tatum says, she is sending her animals to a beautiful home. The focus of the “as-if-Creator” experience is the aesthetic value of the game world of the player’s creation.

In addition, the farming game virtual world continues to exist even if you are not intending it. For example, I have not farmed in a year or so, and it took several minutes to load my farm when I finally opened it. This mirrors the physical lifeworld in that even if we are not intending it, it continues, and this feeds the “as-if-Creator” experience. Unlike “Grand Theft Auto,” a video game in which we can save where we have stopped if we exit the game and which includes a mental lifeworld in which we manipulate people and events, the Farmville world around our virtual farm continues in our absence. Our animals are standing there when we leave, and we “see” them standing there when we exit the game. Our crops continue to grow in our absence.

In contrast to the “as-if-Creator” experience is the “as-if-Capitalist” experience, seemingly the complete opposite of the “as-if-Creator” experience. The focus of the “as-if-Capitalist” experience is game dollars and promotion to the next level of the game. Moving up a level in the game opens new crops one may sow and harvest for even more farm dollars, as well as opens new markets for animals that will earn more money and the possibility of “mastery” dollars. When I visited my brother-in-law’s farm, I saw the “as-if-Capitalist” experience demonstrated perfectly. Cows, horses, sheep, and other farm animals were lined up, row-by-row, crammed together in fenced pastures. Crops were sewn as closely together as possible, and there was nearly no vacant land. Instead, every inch of the land of his farm was lined with something that would earn Farm Cash. In essence, the “as-if-Capitalist” experience is the factory farm experience in our everyday lifeworld because everything in the game is experienced as a commodity.

## **II. Conclusion**

I engage in the “as-if-Creator” experience when I play Farmville because my focus is the aesthetic experience. I am bothered when I visit farms and see animals lined up, row by row, instead of them grazing peacefully in beautiful, open, green pastures, and I think of what the player is missing in his or her experience of the Farmville world of their creation. Of course, these same people are probably appalled to see my horses, cows, sheep, goats, dogs, cats, and skunks wandering aimlessly around my farm, even up to the very door of my own little house in my virtual farm world. Perhaps this difference of experience is the heart of the Farmville experience.

## **References**

- [1]. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).