ABSTRACT

In the field of art and technology engagement with virtual worlds as spaces for creative practice challenges and enhances our understanding of the phenomena of imagining. The experience of creating in technology-mediated spaces through an avatar form brings the phenomenological experience of the body into the act of creating itself. Ways of explaining this creative process and its relationship to imaginative experience highlights a phenomenology of practice of artists working in this realm. This article considers the implications of this methodological approach and presents the case for investigating artistic and imaginative experience through adapting phenomenological research methods.

Phenomenologies of Practice: The Artist in Virtual Worlds

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INTRODUCTION

According to Edward Casey ‘imagination (in Western thought) is not securely situated in regard to such decidedly different acts as sensory perception and conceptual thinking’ (Casey, 2000, p.19). Perhaps this is because ‘imaging is easy enough to enact as experience, but it is extremely difficult to capture in midair for the purposes of scrutiny and examination’ (Casey, 2000, p.4). This article considers the importance of investigating imaginative experience in relation to the process of artistic creativity in virtual worlds. Through adapting existing phenomenological research methods it discusses the ways in which the ‘virtuality’ of the space and the art created have impacted on the analysis in what is termed here as a phenomenology of practice of artists working in virtual space.

Since its inception artists have been exploring the virtual space of Second Life where the act of creating is already mediated through technology. In a review of artworks created in Second Life in the last ten years the sheer array of work created across a broad range of artistic disciplines such as art, architecture, performance, film, and media arts is salient. From early Second Life music performances by Susanne Vega (2006) and Duran Duran (2006), to the Chinese artist Cao Fei’s Second Life projects including iMirror (2007), an installation and three-part documentary about Fei’s avatar identity, China Tracy, and RMB City (2008-ongoing), to Paul Sermon’s public interactive installation Liber ate your Avatar (2007) and his more recent collaborations with Charlotte Gould in Mirror

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on the Screen (2012): these all point towards a retesting of artistic principles in virtual world spaces. Artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman worked with Stanford University to develop Life to the Second Power (2007-ongoing), documenting and archiving two of her projects, The Dante Hotel, and Roberta Breitmore. A number of performance-based works relied on a re-enactment of historical performance art, such as Seven Easy Pieces (2005) which Marina Abramovic performed at the Guggenheim, re-enacting seven significant historical and noted Performance Art works, and Eva and Franco Mattes Synthetic Performances (2009-10), exploring what they term an ‘imponderable medium’ (Lichty 2008, p.6). But what of the artist’s experience of creating mediated through the presence of an avatar form?

Background to the Research

Kriti Island acts as a laboratory space for ongoing artistic and imaginative practice research in Second Life. Central to the development of the space was the community of experimental artist practitioners who relied on a particular form of collaborative co-operation. The research process began with a grass roots development from connections made within the space itself. As an artist-researcher the main strategy was to create a presence on the platform and invite others to participate. Kriti acts as a space for the presentation of the process of thinking in relationship to the key themes of the imaginative potential of the space and the exploration of the relationship between physical and the virtual spaces.

A variety of methods were developed for the research, one of which was the development of the virtual exhibitions (Kritical Works in SL and Kritical Works in SL II) and their subsequent analysis (See Figure 1). Following the realisation of the exhibitions, interviews were conducted with six of the participating artists and analysed for the artist’s insight in the context of creating immersive and interactive experiences in the Second Life space. The accepted format of the artist’s interview traditionally explores the tacit knowledge base of the artist’s experience and draws out any impact on the artistic process. However, a further method was used for the analysis that exposed a previously unacknowledged layer of experience for evaluation. This adapted the phenomenological method of Imaginative Variation to analyse the interview transcripts to uncover the essence and meaning of the experience of being a creative practitioner in the Second Life space. This focused on the artists account:

1. Of particular experiences of time, or of space, or time and space;
2. Of bodily concerns as exemplified by an experience of embodiment, or a particular relationship or experience towards the artist’s avatar;
3. Of the challenges or understanding of the issue of materiality and/or our understanding of the physical/virtual world relationship;
4. Of the relationship to others experienced in the space;
5. Of the relationship to the self as exemplified by an exploration of an avatar identity.

In addition to this the experience of ‘vividness’ and ‘imaginative experience’ was particularly noted. Further, the relationship to and experience of avatar mediation as a participator and maker/creator in the Second Life community was considered. The subsequent articulation of a phenomenology of practice of the artists working in the space is the main focus of the research presented here.

Art and Heuristic Phenomenology

In the study of the Philosophy of Technology (Ihde, 1993, 2002) it may be no surprise that new experiences created in the field of Art and Technology would be researched as the study of the phenomenon itself. Casey remarks that ‘the phenomenologist’s basic attitude is: no matter how something came to be in the first place, what is of crucial concern is the detailed description of the phenomenon as it now appears’ (Casey, 2000, p.9). Philosopher and
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