Chapter 5

Living between Worlds: Imagination, Liminality, and Avatar–Mediated Presence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates the notion of the liminal in relation to the virtual and the imaginary through a consideration of the field of art and technology and current creative practices in virtual worlds and avatar-mediated space. In particular, the art project Meta-Dreamer (2009) is considered through the manifestation of the avatar as digital object. In its attempt to explore the experience of “living between worlds,” it reflects the concerns of contemporary arts practice exploration of time and space relationships.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of Art and Technology, the ease in which we experience the liminal through virtual space is even more pronounced when the space is avatar-mediated creating an oscillating state of existence between the virtual and the physical. Yet both consciousness and the imagination depend on this liminality of space. With a focus on the ‘threshold,’ this continual ‘about to become’ is almost a necessary condition of being. Some virtual environments (or worlds) deliberately play with this “existential overlay to the physical” (Lichty, 2009, p. 2). Working with a new framework of the emergent imagination consideration is given to the transitional spaces created in artworks in virtual world spaces where aspects of the liminal come to the fore.

The chapter considers to what extent we can examine imaginative or liminal states that are, as Edward Casey notes, “remarkably easy to enter into,” yet their “very ephemerality renders
[them] resistant to conceptual specification of a precise sort” (Casey, 2000, pp. 6-7). It considers to what extent transitional spaces share similar characteristics to the liminal.

- Does the liminal always find the point of the threshold?
- Does avatar-mediation (re)space the imagination to a place geographically distant from the body?
- Do we experience liminality in a similar way? Or is the liminal more closely bound to the temporal?
- To what extent are both conditioned by the virtual?

The relationship between the transitional and liminal, and the avatar experience, sets out a particular view of the imagination and its elusive, and sometimes liminal, qualities.

A PRELUDE: ON THE VIRTUAL, THE IMAGINARY, AND THE LIMINAL

Casey comments in his book *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Casey, 2000) that, at the time of its first publication in 1976, a “concerted phenomenological study of the imagination had yet to be done” (Casey, 2000, p. xi). Further, there is yet to be a substantial study in which the virtual and the imaginary are considered in relation to each other. There have been some passing associations, such as Massumi’s link to the imagination as a “mode of thought” that is most suitable to the virtual (Massumi, 2002, p. 134), or that of Levy, describing the imagination as one of the three vectors of the virtual (Levy, 1998, p. 28). Any dialogue on the virtual and the imaginary might begin by placing them in direct relation to each other (with the two terms on an equal footing). This pairing throws up some initial thoughts on what pulls or pushes them together, what attracts them, and conversely what pulls them apart. When paired together, as relatives, or at least as an associated grouping, three shared characteristics or impulses are revealed. Firstly, both terms are often associated with an ‘elsewhere’ or to a place or space not immediately associated with the real. Secondly, each appears to be multi-faceted, whose meaning changes quite dramatically when seen as an act or as a description, when a verb (imagine), a noun (virtuality, imaginary), or equally as an adjective (virtual, imaginary). Finally, each term can be as elusive and fleeting as the other.

When identifying what would differentiate them, one can make the distinction in what may be the very impulse that stirs or moves them. In fact, other than the imagination being more closely aligned with creativity, or a creative impulse, (which does not necessarily incorporate or include notions of virtuality), one may quickly flounder in attempts to keep them separated, rather falling back on the transitional or liminal qualities that they both share. Yet each term cannot necessarily be exchanged as freely as an initial analysis may suggest. Two aspects of what we understand to be the meaning of the liminal are of relevance here; firstly that it denotes “a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold” (Oxford Dictionary, 2012), and secondly it relates to a transitional or initial stage of a process” (Oxford Dictionary, 2012). Spaces such as Second Life, with their combination of immersive qualities, avatar mediation, and user-generated content, are presenting new circumstances and conditions under which to undertake a study of the imagination and in particular to study its own liminal states.

BACKGROUND

Art and the Virtual

Some would agree that there has been a relationship between art and the virtual at least since the Renaissance, with the invention of linear perspective. More recently, in the field of Art and