Chapter 16
Virtual Communitas, “Digital Place-Making,” and the Process of “Becoming”

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ABSTRACT
In Aristotelian philosophy, the process of change from a lower level of “potentiality” to the higher level of “actuality” is known as “becoming,” or to become more and more of what one is, or capable of “becoming.” For this process to take place, the dissolution of the normative values or understanding of one’s self and context is necessary (Turner, 1968). Such dissolution, although initially destabilising, can create an environment conducive to the values and normal modes of behaviour being reflected upon and transformed. The chapter considers how selected context-responsive projects that use the Internet, develop and harness “communitas” (Turner, 1967) and function as “liminoid” (Turner, 1974) space, facilitating new understandings of place. The virtual manifestations of place highlighted are then reflected upon for their potential in the process of “place-making” to enable the process of “becoming,” for people and the specific location.

INTRODUCTION
Informed by ideas and theories from anthropology, deep ecology, and psychotherapy, the chapter explores how virtual communities and online interventions into offline realities are conducive to the production of a form of communitas. It is proposed that an experience of virtual communitas when related to physical locations rather than an event can enable re-presentations that lead to new understandings of place through the dissemination of situated knowledge. This new knowledge could be harnessed to contribute to a regenerative ecology, through developing more intimate less abstract relationships with our locations and co-inhabitants, potentially repairing any fragmentation from the physical world. The chapter makes the argument that mindful interventions in the
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Virtual could transfer to our physical reality and be considered as a process of ‘becoming’, moving from ‘potentiality’ to ‘actuality’ or to become more and more of what one is capable of becoming.

‘Communitas’ refers to ‘an unstructured community in which people are equal’ or ‘the sense of sharing and intimacy that develops among persons who experience liminality as a group’ (dictionary.com). Stemming from the Latin communis, common or public, communitas is often used to denote a sense of community, public spirit, or a willingness to serve one’s community. Communitas is the condition of equitable relationships, or comradeship, which Van Gennep and Victor Turner argued occurs within the liminal phases of rituals. The term Liminal derives from the Latin limen, or threshold coined by Arnold Van Gennep in Les Rites de Passage, 1909. Van Gennep discusses three stages that accompany movement from one ‘cosmic or social world to another’ (Madge & O’Connor, 2005, p. 93), separation (pre-liminal), transition (liminal), and reintegration (post-liminal). Victor Turner (1967) in his often-cited text ‘The forest of symbols’ picked up on Van Gennep’s ideas, re-defining them within the context of 1960s counter culture to develop a new anthropological perspective on liminality. A more secular understanding of the liminal within Turner’s work, which referred to as liminoid (1974) is applied to the spaces created online within the projects discussed.

The projects, Deptford45s, Live from Memphis, and Yellow Arrow which utilise social media and the Internet, “a natural environment for liminality” (Waskul, 2004, p. 40) are considered for their potential in the creation of a liminoid space and communitas, producing what Guattari refers to as a ‘rift or rupture.’ It is argued that such interventions afford an opportunity for the deconstruction of given understandings of place by offering an interruption to a dominant narrative, which can aid reflection and contribute to the transformation of place through challenging existing narratives. These projects in conjunction with the ethos of open source software/culture can be harnessed to undo given understandings of place. Through the deconstruction and consequently the co/re-authoring of place, a making and remaking of place that can extend from the virtual into the physical, is potentially a process of ‘‘becoming’’ both for the participants and place involved. The process of change from a lower level of ‘potentiality’ to the higher level of ‘actuality’ could be considered as a process of individuation for people and place.

This co-authoring could make a valuable contribution to the practice of ‘place-making’ through an opportunity of community and place-based blended learning that utilises various learning modalities e.g. auditory, visual and potentially kinaesthetic. Regeneration practices, development, and planning policies have impacted on the nature of public art works that have been commissioned, historically manifesting in monumental objects, as well as the commissioning process. The development of extended practices that are more holistic and context responsive, are being more regularly supported, with a move away from the monumental. Perhaps such practices have a more vital role to play with monumental objects being an unsuitable response to 21st Century global concerns, with contributions to the practice of ‘place-making’ the creation of legacies not monuments having valuable consequences.

‘Place-making’ potentially emerges as a process of ‘becoming’, both through a ‘bottom-up’ approach and the inclusion of a diverse expression of a place’s personality. The place’s personality becomes more fully understood, integrating the contributors to the projects ideas, values and resultant discussions and the re-presentations of the physical location. Connoll (1985) defined personality as the distinguishing characteristics of an individual, which differentiate him/her from others when displayed in a wide variety of situations and circumstances especially social ones. Through facilitating a reflective and transformative process by and for residents, social media art interventions could manifest the personality of a location, the collective understanding of that