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Publication Date

2009-12-12

Peer reviewed

Embodied Presence: The Imaginary in Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

This research has previously used the term ‘embodied narrative’ [7] to explore the imaginary in virtual worlds. Using narrative as a method, it explores and de-codes the complex layering of conflict between the real and the virtual. Second Life is a performative space par excellence. Hayles [10: 39] explains that when the pov (Hayles’ terminology) is ‘metaphorized into an interactive space, the datascape is narrativized by the pov’s movement through it’. The performativity of interaction in this shared space moves across geographical space though the temporal dimension remains. This paper explores embodiment and performativity as a strategy to understand the impact of new technologies on our real and virtual bodies, and on the imaginations that breathe life into the post-human.

Key Words

Second Life, Avatar, Embodiment, Imaginary, Phenomenology, Virtual Body

1. INTRODUCTION

Images of presence give rise to images of memory, imagination and dream.

[15: 44]

With the recent growth in Massively Multiplayer Online Games and Virtual Worlds there are emerging opportunities to explore our understanding of the mind body relationship and its implications for the experience of embodiment when moving between real and virtual space. How do we understand our avatar as our represented ‘presence’ in virtual space? What are we identifying with when we identify with an avatar? Do we have a phenomenological experience of the virtual body? In other words, do we experience the body of our avatar? Idhe [11: 15] notes that virtual reality bodies ‘are thin and never attain the thickness of flesh’, although he does acknowledge that ‘one’s “skin” is at best polymorphically ambiguous, and, even without material extension, the sense of the here-body exceeds its physical bounds.’ [11: 6]

This paper, in exploring the relationship between the imagination and embodied presence in virtual worlds, focuses in particular on the virtual world of *Second Life* (SL), created by Linden Labs in

2003 with barely 1,000 users [16: 5].¹ A particular feature of *SL* is the accessibility of the platform to build and customise spaces. Using *SL* building tools to create objects and manipulate terrain, along with the application of the *SL* programming language, it is possible to have a high level of control of the creation and manipulation of an environment. The focus of investigation in this paper is our relationship to the body of the avatar and the experience of embodied presence in virtual space. It draws upon theories developed by Benedict de Spinoza and Gaston Bachelard, and on reflections of the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, on the relationship of the senses to architectural spaces. In *Performing in (virtual) spaces* [14], Jacqueline Morie comments on the phenomenological standpoint of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as he views the body as ‘the common texture of which objects are woven’ (Merleau-Ponty in [14: 13]), but suggests that he did not have to grapple with ‘new forms of immaterial bodies beyond the phenomenal’ [14: 133] as we do now in light of new technologies. It is here I place the body of the avatar as a new form of immaterial body that forms our experience of embodied presence in virtual world spaces.

A new kind of imaginary is emerging from our experience of embodiment, and is stimulated from both the ‘image’ of our presence in the form of our avatar and the ‘sense’ of our presence in virtual space. This imagined third space is occupied by a third body, neither human nor non-human, neither here-body nor image-body. The tension here is full of push and pull, as we negotiate and attempt to understand our newly embodied experience. Our avatar is not ‘us’, however much we try to overlay its surface. I argue that the third body is beyond the image-body and is a response from a sense imaginary. This paper explores the relationships between the experience of embodiment and this sense imaginary, using the backdrop of the virtual world of Second Life. Consideration will be given to the implications of Bachelard’s theory of the material imagination.

¹ The number of users with an account has grown to over 16 million, although monthly user statistics suggest a much lower 1.5 million active users. Statistics from http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php Accessed 16.06.09.

2. THE BODY AND THE IMAGINATION

The virtual embodiment of people as avatars is a term used in many online virtual worlds, according to Tom Boellstorff [4: 128]. Avatar is the Sanskrit word that originally referred to the incarnation of a Hindu god and particularly the god Vishnu. [4: 128] However:

While avatar [...] historically referred to incarnation – a movement from virtual to actual – with respect to online worlds it connotes the opposite movement from actual to virtual, a decarnation or invirtualization.

[4: 128]

He also suggests that, ‘avatars make virtual worlds real, not actual: they are a position from where the self encounters the virtual’ (Boellstorff 2008:129). Using the terms the virtual, the real and the actual, Boellstorff links his ideas to Bergson’s examination of the real and the virtual in the early part of the twentieth century. Bergson makes this distinction between the real and the actual, which reframes his concept of the virtual. Whatever the change in use of the term avatar, towards what Boellstorff terms the invirtual, we can begin to examine this represented self in virtual space, so as to approach the term the ‘body of the avatar’. What part does the imagination play in our acceptance of our represented presence in virtual space, through the body of our avatar? Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, identify Spinoza’s treatment of the imagination as integrated with ‘his treatment of the nature of mind and its relations with the body’ (Gatens & Lloyd 1999: 11). Disagreeing with the dominant beliefs of the time concerning the dualism of the body and mind, the imagination, for Spinoza, had ‘a powerful ontological dimension – a direct and strong contact with bodily reality’ (Gatens & Lloyd 1999: 12). For Spinoza, the imagination is such that mental is as real as physical as:

[...] the figments of the imagination are just as real – just as appropriate objects of systematic investigation – as the modifications of matter. Imagination involves the coming together of mind and body in the most immediate way: *mind is the idea of body* [my emphasis].

[8: 12]

So the imagination, according to Spinoza, is rooted in the body, or to put it slightly differently: the body has a mind of its own. In *Air and Dreams*, Bachelard [3: 4] proposes that ‘the imaginary is immanent in the real, (and) how (there is) a *continuous* [original emphasis] path (that) leads from the real to the imaginary’. In *Water and Dreams* he writes that by following the daydreams of a man:

[...] who abandons himself to the imagination of matters [...] a substance will never seem sufficiently worked over for him because he never stops dreaming of it. Form reaches completion. Matter, never. Matter is a rough sketch of unrestricted dreams’.

[2: 113]

3. IMAGINATION AND THE SENSES

The meaning of the ‘material imagination’ for Bachelard, according to Steve Connor, is described through two intersecting ideas: firstly, that the material world is imagined by everyone all

of the time and this is termed the ‘imagination of matter’ [6: 40]; and secondly, that imagination is itself:

[...] always implicated in the world that it attempts to imagine, made up, like the gingerbreadman enquiring into his dough, of what it makes out. This is not least because the merely visual or image-making faculty suggested by the word ‘imagination’ is always toned and textured by the other senses.

[6: 40]

According to Bachelard [1: 203], what we imagine, works on our being, in our substratum. Connor suggests that the phrase the material imagination ‘must signify the *materiality of the imagining* [my emphasis] as well as the imagination of material’ itself. [6: 41] Here Connor suggests that there may be a materiality, a kind of physicality to the act of imagining, and explains that it is the organ of the skin that ‘provides a good opportunity for enquiring into the material imagination because it is bilateral, both matter and image, stuff and sign.’ [6: 41]

In discussing the dominance of vision in philosophical thought, also evident in the development of western architecture, Pallasmaa notes, however, that:

[...] the privileging of sight does not necessarily imply a rejection of the other senses [...] the sense of sight may incorporate, and even reinforce, other sense modalities.

(Pallasmaa 2007:26)

Expanding on the concept of sense modalities he writes that it is the eyes, more than any other sense organ, that want to collaborate with the other senses. He suggests that all of the senses can be regarded as extensions of the sense of touch:

All the senses [...] are extensions of the tactile sense [...] all sensory experiences are modes of touching and thus related to tactility.

[15: 10-11]

Brian Massumi suggests that:

Imagination can also be called intuition: a thinking feeling. Not feeling something. Feeling thought [...] the mutual envelopment of thought and sensation, as they arrive together.

[13: 134]

It seems that Spinoza and Massumi agree, that there is a strong relationship between the body and the imagination. Bachelard talks of the material imagination, although his poetic theory of the imaginary is often about an elsewhere, that is not here, not a place that begins with the body. However, if we dream over the material, we must also dream over the body. What lies between the body and the imagination, what connects one to the other is the sense imaginary. Here, the senses become the translator and interpreter for the imagination.

4. EMBODIED PRESENCE AND THE IMAGINATION

Robert Bosnak, in discussing the ‘dreaming brain’ agrees with a current set of ‘stories’ of neuro-science as expounded by both Mark Solms and J. Allen Hobson, that dreaming is related to an

experience of space. [5: 36] In fact, a key element of what Bosnak terms the ‘embodied imagination’ is that there is ‘an *inversion* of the notions of inside and outside (that) [...] *changes the very nature of the space* [original emphasis]’ in which we find ourselves. [5: 20] Giving a fascinating explanation of how to visualize the experience of multiple embodied emotions, Bosnak explains that if dreaming was considered to be a narrative of simultaneous embodied states that unfold along a timeline, then equally, if the timeline ‘tilts [...] into a vertical *axis* [original emphasis], a cross-section of multiple embodied stories [...] making its many story times visible at a glance.’ [5: 39] In suggesting that emotions are ‘fully embodied states existing throughout the physical body’ he further explains that dreaming could be considered to be ‘a simultaneous spatial experience of multiple embodied emotions’ [5: 38]. He uses the term ‘image-presence’ to explain the environment, or space, we might find ourselves in when experiencing the embodied imagination. For Bosnak the process of embodiment precedes any mental or emotional knowing. For him ‘embodiment is the fundamental archaic way of knowing’ [5: 71].

How does this approach to, or view of, embodiment through Bosnak’s embodied imagination relate to our experience of virtual world spaces? In contrast to the space experienced, or even created, with the dreaming brain it is interesting to note that through a phenomenological analysis of our experience of virtual space, it is Don Ihde that concludes that there is:

[...] a variation between what would be called full or multidimensional experience and a visual objectification of presumed body experience. Where does one feel the wind? Or the vertigo in the stomach? Can it be felt “out there” in the disembodied perspective? The answers quickly show partial primacy to the embodied experience.

[11: 4]

In exploring these ambiguities in virtual space, Ihde suggests that this duality of experience lies between what he terms, the here-body and the image-body. In particular, when our presence is identified through a third person avatar perspective, Ihde suggests that we move between the full multidimensional experience of the here-body and the disembodied experience of the image-body perspective, as represented by the image of the avatar. [11: 6] If Bachelard suggests that we dream over the material elements, whether metaphorically through earth or air, water or fire, in the material imagination, and if the here-body exceeds its physical bounds [11: 6], does the image-body have a sense of materiality that enables us to dream over it?

According to Jacqueline Morie, when a participant engages in virtual space through a third person avatar, the form of embodied experience they take on has ‘an experiential locus that is outside their perceptual self’. She explains that this is, in fact, ‘in front of the experient’s physical and imaginal locus’ [14: 132]. Morie claims that there is a specialised and intrinsic set of qualities of ‘Being’ in immersive virtual environments, and suggests that there has been a paradigm shift in what humans are now able to experience. She suggests that the act of emplacing a body into an immersive environment signifies ‘a shift to a dualistic existence in two simultaneous bodies.’ [14: 127] She claims that, now, the lived body has ‘bifurcated and become two.’ [14: 128]

5. CONCLUSIONS

The virtual space experienced in *SL*, as in other avatar based virtual worlds, encourages us to embody simultaneous experiences, and to an extent, occupy multiple bodies, if those bodies are considered to be sites of sensation and emotion. The virtual world experience can be an interplay of a number of elements: of ourselves experiencing our imagined presence in virtual space, and of ourselves switching to the disembodied perspective of Ihde’s ‘image-body’. Identifying ourselves through an avatar in virtual space, creates this tension. In virtual world space we also have the opportunity to experience space heterogeneously rather than experiencing its homogenisation. Pallasmaa suggests that:

Homogenous bright light paralyses the imagination in the same way that homogenisation of space weakens the experience of being, and wipes away the sense of place.

[15: 46]

Space and the imagination are connected for Bosnak, and experiencing simultaneous embodied states is part of the process of the embodied imagination. [5: 39] For he suggests that it is in the state of the embodied imagination that the spirit of a place takes hold of us. [5: 70]

If new immaterial bodies can be experienced through new technologies, as Morie claims [14: 133], we can also experience ourselves in avatar based virtual worlds through embodied presence. Our imaginary expands in virtual space, as it oscillates between the response to the images of presence and the sense of presence through the embodiment of our avatar. This third imagined space is neither here-body nor image-body, but is an ‘imagined’ body and is a response from a sense imaginary. Bosnak’s concept of the embodied imagination goes some way to explain this double or multiple embodied experience. If placed on a timeline, the flickering sensations of the embodied state of the here body and the flickering sensations of the embodied/disembodied state of the image-body can be seen through and in time. Yet the remembered physical, sensational, emotional, and even memory experience is that actually experienced as though on a vertical axis as Bosnak would suggest for our understanding of the experience of the dreaming brain. The flickering is so fast, so momentary, that the sensations, and memory of the feeling of embodiment stays. It is Massumi that suggests that it is imagination that is the mode of thought that is most suited to the virtual. The imagination, as Massumi describes it, is thought and sensation arriving together. [13: 134] The senses are, or can be, interconnected with an imaginary of their own. This multiple embodied experience challenges us to expand our sense of materiality through the sense imaginary. At the centre of this experience is the imagination. An aspect of this research, as outlined and explored above, is our understanding of the impact of new technologies on our real and virtual bodies, and on the imaginations that breathe life into the post-human.

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7. AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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