The post-human imaginary and the body of the avatar

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Introduction

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 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? Don Idhe (2002: 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' (2002: 6). Do we experience skin, virtually? Is virtual skin simply artifice, only a response to the visual and thus remains on the surface, only skin deep? Or does the imagination of virtual skin provide something else, an interstice between the sense of presence and our experience of absence? Can we have a sensory experience of virtual skin?

Drawing from Benedict de Spinoza and Gaston Bachelard, this paper explores the relationship between the post-human imaginary and the body of the avatar when interacting with virtual worlds, and in particular the virtual world of *Second Life* (SL), created by Linden Labs in 2003 with barely 1,000 users (Rymaszewski 2007: 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

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[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).

to have a high level of control of the creation and manipulation of an environment. This research has previously used narrative as a method to explore the post-human imaginary in virtual worlds and to de-code the complex layering of conflict between the real and the virtual. The focus of this paper is our relationship to the body of the avatar and to the represented self in virtual space.

The body and the imagination

The virtual embodiment of people as avatars is a term used in many online worlds, according to Tom Boellstorff (2008: 128). Avatar, is the Sanskrit word originally referred to the incarnation of a Hindu god and particularly the god Vishnu. (Boellstorff 2008: 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.
> (ibid: 128)

He also suggests that, 'avatars make virtual worlds real, not actual: they are a position from where the self encounters the virtual' (ibid: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. Whatever the change in use of the term avatar, towards the invirtual, if we begin to examine this represented self in virtual space, how do we 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 and 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' (ibid: 12). They go on to say that his version of the imagination has an equally strong emphasis on the reality of the mental and, for Spinoza:

> […] 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].
(ibid: 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 (1988: 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'. (Bachelard 1983: 113)

Virtual body: virtual skin

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' (Connor 2004: 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. (ibid: 40)

According to Bachelard (1969: 203), what we imagine, works on our being, in our substratum. Connor suggests that the phrase material imagination 'must signify the *materiality of the imagining* [my emphasis] as well as the imagination of material' itself. Of the skin, Connor writes, that, '[it] provides a good opportunity for enquiring into the material imagination because it is bilateral, both matter and image, stuff and sign' (Connor 2004: 41). He continues:

If you touch your skin – and think how hard it is to think without touching your skin, forefinger to lip, say – then you feel yourself and you feel yourself

feeling. You are simultaneously an object in the world and a subject giving rise to itself as it advances to meet the world in that object.

(ibid: 41)

Brian Massumi suggests that imagination is the mode of thought that is most suited to the virtual. And further that the:

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

(Massumi 2002:134)

To draw these ideas together, it appears 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, then, do we imagine when we imagine the body of the avatar; what of the skin of the body of the avatar? Is there an imaginary experienced as sensation, as well as image, as Massumi suggests? Does the body have an imaginary of its own?

Third body: post-human imaginary

Don Ihde investigates the duality of the notion and experience of, what he terms, the here-body and the image-body. In asking questions of our phenomenological experience of virtual space he observes that:

A(n) analysis shows 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.

(Idhe 2002: 4)

The here-body is where we can have a full, multidimensional experience and 'gestalts in the here-body of the embodied perspective, whereas the visual objectification out there is spectacle like' (ibid: 4). The image-body is where the

body of the avatar lies. Idhe explores the ambiguities experienced in virtual space, particularly when our presence is identified through a third person avatar perspective, and suggests that this is 'the opening to a sliding perspective from the multidimensional experience of my here-body toward the image-body perspectives lie within these ambiguities (ibid: 6). If the here-body exceeds its physical bounds, does the image-body have a sense of materiality that enables us to dream over it, and in turn, have a sense of the body of the avatar? This third space is occupied by a third body, neither human nor non-human, neither here-body nor image-body.

In *Performing in (virtual) spaces* (2007), Jacqueline Morie begins with the ontological assumption that the body has been re-contextualised in the age of digital technology. 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 points to the research of visual and performance artists and their contribution to the exploration of virtual environments as key to our future understandings of ourselves in the physical and digital domains (Morie 2007: 123).

In her article she explores the representation of the body, or presence, in virtual environments in five ways: as no representation/no avatar, as the mirrored self, as a partial or whole graphical personification, a third person/observed avatar, and the representation as experience in shared environments. According to Morie, using the observed or third person avatar, in this form of embodied image the participant takes on:

> […] an experiential locus that is outside their perceptual self. An avatar appears, at some distance out in front of the experient's physical and imaginal locus. (ibid:132)

She returns to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological standpoint as he views the body as 'the common texture of which objects are woven' (Merleau-Ponty in Morie 2007: 13), but suggests that he did not have to grapple with 'new forms of immaterial bodies beyond the phenomenal' (Morie: 2007: 133) as we do now in light of new technologies.

Conclusions

If these new immaterial bodies can be experienced through new technologies, we can also experience ourselves in avatar based virtual worlds through embodied presence. The virtual world experience is an interplay of a number of elements: of ourselves experiencing telepresence, our imagined presence in virtual space, and of ourselves switching to the disembodied perspective of Idhe's 'image-body'.

Morie's claim is that the centre of our understanding is our body and through this felt phenomenon, we know the world. Yet, according to Morie, the avatar perspective still has an experiential locus, even though it is 'out there'. The image of ourselves represented in space, creates a tension, rather than the unobserved or unrepresented body in virtual space. There is a third 'imagined' body that is beyond the image-body and is a response from a sense imaginary: it is a virtual body with virtual skin. The imagination, as Massumi describes it, is thought and sensation arriving together (2002: 134). The senses are, or can be, interconnected with an imaginary of their own. Hayles (2005: 242) qualitatively distinguishes between embodiment which is fleshy, and that which is from other life forms. The body of our avatars challenge us to expand our sense of materiality through the sense imaginary. At the centre of this experience is the imagination. The post-human imaginary emerges.

My continued research aims to develop a new theory of the imaginary in light of virtual worlds. One aspect of this, as outlined and explored above, is our understanding of the impact of new technologies on our real and virtual bodies, the experience of the bodies of our avatars, and on the imaginations that breathe life into the post-human.

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