

Conditions of the Imaginary in Virtual Worlds

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A pivotal concern surrounding the recent growth in Virtual Worlds, and a question this paper explores, are the locations and conditions of the imaginary when moving between real and virtual space. Drawing from eastern and western philosophy it tests definitions of the virtual and the imaginary against the backdrop of the virtual world of *Second Life*, created by Linden Lab. Launched in 2003 with barely 1,000 users (Rymaszewski 2007: 5), the number of users with an account has grown to over 13 million.¹ Following the logic of the 'real' world, it follows most of the rules of our space, providing earth, sky, water, gravity, day and night, moon and sun within a three-dimensional networked grid. Experienced through an avatar representation many users choose to represent themselves in human form.

Visualization and embodied experience

With an emphasis on embodied experience in virtual worlds, parallels can be drawn with yogic practices, and in particular, the practice of Tantra. The imaginary landscapes generated by visualisation practices and meditational techniques such as those in the Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism or from the Hindu Tantric tradition, are deliberate in their virtuality. With their focus on the particularity of the image these landscapes are not intended to be materialised; their pristine and deliberate virtuality is used as a tool for developing and transforming the body and mind. In the final stage of Tattwa Shuddhi, a tantric practice of inner purification, you are guided to visualise "a vast red ocean with a large red lotus on it. Seated on that lotus is the form of Prana Shakti. Her body is the color of the rising sun, and is decorated with beautiful ornaments" (Saraswati 1984:100). Of the relationship between the body and mind, the Dalai Lama writes that even in:

Extremely subtle states of consciousness, the mental state must have a physical base, however subtle it may be. Sometimes there is a tendency among Buddhists to think of these very subtle states of consciousness

as if there were no embodiment or material basis for them [...] the brain is the basis for all cognitive events. Without the brain there is no cognitive function of the mind. (Harrington 2006:96)

In Tattwa Shuddhi rapid progress depends on the tantric aspirant's ability to apply a detailed process of visualisation. Although:

This imaginative and creative inner visualization which tantra emphasizes, is not chosen at random, but is deeply related to, and based on, the world of the psyche, which is a world of symbolism. (Saraswati 1984:78)

Of the Vajrajana tradition the Dalai Lama explains that whilst the contemplative texts of the Sutra system acknowledges the cultivation of heightened awareness in relation to two senses, visual and auditory perception, the other senses are not considered. Drawing parallels with modern technologies, he comments that:

You can project images on a television screen, or you can project sounds through radio waves, but you still cannot transport smell and tactile sensations. But in the Vajrajana tradition [...] there is an understanding that it is possible for advanced yogis to gain mastery over these physiological elements. Those bodily energies that are normally confined to the function of specific sensory faculties can actually be co-opted or transferred. (Harrington 2006:97)

Does the interface with new technologies give us a glimpse of the effects of the co-opting or transferring of our sensory facilities as suggested by the Vajrajana tradition? Does this translation of the senses occur when we interact with virtual worlds?



Figure 1: Wanderingfictions Story, the author's Avatar in *Second Life* (2008)

Tele-presence and the Imaginary

The new imaginary from virtual worlds is a continual interplay between, and stimulation from, both image and presence. When we interact with virtual worlds we can experience the world as embodied presence but also as an absence. This tension pushes and pulls, contracts and expands. Previously, critics have often tried to define this in terms of immersion, interactivity and theories drawn from other disciplines such as the Deleuzian concept of the Fourth Wall. It has been only recently that this has been investigated in terms of theories of the imaginary, or expositions of the imaginary through the medium itself.

Toni Dove, an interactive performance artist who uses responsive interface technologies, describes the charged space of tele-presence as, “the space through which the body extends itself into the movie or virtual space. It is the invisible experience of the body’s agency beyond its apparent physical edge” (2002: 210) (Figure 1). Does the body have an imaginary of its own?

Philosophies of the Imaginary

Writing in 1940, Sartre puts forward a philosophy for the imaginary based on our being conscious of the world and the objects in the world in a particular way. For Sartre “the two worlds, real and imaginary, are composed of the same objects: only the approach to these objects varies” (1940:57). Kearney elaborates further: “the image and the percept are not therefore different objects of consciousness; they are different ways of being conscious of objects” (1998:57). Sartre sets out

four modes in which the imagination posits its objects; as non-existing, as existing but elsewhere, as existing but absent, as neither existing nor non-existing. Testing Sartre’s theory of being conscious of objects in a virtual world, do they come under the term of non-existing? If we place them in the category, existing but elsewhere; that posits that the objects exist and that *Second Life* is a particular place, just not ‘here’. Massumi suggests that imagination is the mode of thought that is most suited to the virtual. And further:

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. (2002:134)

Is there an imaginary experienced as sensation, as well as image? Is there, then, a sense imaginary? This concept has echoes in the Dalai Lama’s view of the relationship between the body and the mind and supports the suggestion that there are new dimensions of experience emerging and a complex and multiple imaginary operating when interacting with virtual worlds. My continued research, therefore, aims to develop a new theory of the imaginary in light of virtual worlds.

1 Statistics from http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php Accessed 14.04.08. Although daily online statistics suggests that there are much fewer active users.

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