

Chapter 4

Exploring Liminal Practices in Art, Technology, and Science

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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, science, 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. The art project is re-examined in light of key arguments in the provocative text *Liminal Lives* (Squier, 2004) that advocates a new approach to the liminal in light of current biomedicine and the shifting and emergent qualities of contemporary human life.*

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 physical¹. 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.

This chapter discussion reconsiders a previous text written by the author entitled *Living between Worlds: Imagination, Liminality and Avatar-Mediated Presence* (Doyle, 2012) in light of the key issues and arguments explored by Susan Merrill Squier in her pioneering and provocative text *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine* (2004). Arguing from the fields of literature and feminist science studies Squier challenges Victor Turner’s notion of the liminal as a purely cultural con-

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struct that is played out in key moments in a person's life. Turner presupposes that biology is a constant, something that is fixed; it is rather culture that offers the potential for liminal spaces to be created (Turner in Squier, 2004, p.4). As Squier notes, 'as Turner understands it, while the liminal is shifting, *life* is still stable [original emphasis]' (Squier, 2004, p. 6). However, she argues that 'contemporary biomedicine necessitates a significant revision of Turner's thesis, one that acknowledges the shifting, interconnected, and emergent quality of human life' (Squier, 2004, p.6).

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, p.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. Squier advocates that 'we need to move beyond Turner's exclusively cultural framing to understand liminality not merely as a cultural state but as a *biocultural process*' [original emphasis] (Squier, 2004, p. 8). Creating from a liminal space or a liminal zone, making manifest from these transitional spaces raises questions about the relationship between technology and biology that will be discussed further in the chapter. Squier notes that creations from the space of the liminal (for example the case of adopted embryos) they are neither one or the other, neither life nor not life, suggesting 'a new biological personhood mingling existence and non-existence' (Squier, 2004, p.5).

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

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