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PHENOMENOLOGIES OF PRACTICE: Making Sense of Virtual Worlds and User-Driven Innovation

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We insert ourselves into a philosophy and it transforms us from the inside out (Kozel 2007: 4)

This research investigates the artistic practice in *Second Life* that builds upon existing practices developed in virtual environments, and other forms of technology-mediated spaces; and sits within the field of knowledge of art and technology, and the emerging field of virtual worlds research. In the wider field of media arts practice engagement with virtual worlds as spaces for artistic practice (and protest), challenges and enhances our experience of the phenomena of imagining. Artists working in the *Second Life* space are exploring the potentials of this unique combination of the user-created, and the avatar mediated space. The research presents Kriti Island, the laboratory space for the ongoing artistic and imaginative practice research, but in particular presents, discusses and analyses, the participating artist interviews that were undertaken following the *Kritical Works in SL* exhibitions that the Island hosted in 2008 and 2009.

Casey suggests that 'imagination (in Western thought) is not securely situated in regard to such decidedly different acts as sensory perception and conceptual thinking (Casey 2000: 19). This paper considers the implications of methodological approaches that have been chosen within this inter-disciplinary context, and in particular, and the case for investigating artistic and imaginative experience through phenomenological methods, is examined. Yet the process of creating the laboratory space, the selection and development of the Artworks under the themes of the two phases of *Kritical Works in SL*, applied as a method, has inevitably impacted on the conclusions drawn. The implications of the mediation of the research through my avatar, Wanderingfictions Story, are discussed.

The result of this part of the research has been an in-depth analysis of six of the Artworks in the *Kritical Works in SL* project, which draws upon the interviews with the artists, and on the analysis of the phenomenological experience of creating in the *Second Life* space, along with the artists own reflections on the Kriti Island as a laboratory space. The interviews were texturally analysed for the artist's insight and the creation of meaning in the Artworks themselves, in the context of creating immersive and interactive experiences in the *Second Life* space. However, a further method was used for the analysis. This second method draws from the phenomenological method of Imaginative Variation, and exposes a previously unacknowledged layer of experience for evaluation. Moustakas notes that in the Imaginative Variation process, 'we imagine possible structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and to others' and that through this method 'countless possibilities emerge that are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of an experience' (Moustakas 1994: 99). The research outcome presents what is, a *phenomenology of practice,* or artistic practice, that is shared by the artists creating in the *Second Life* space. Kozel notes that, in presenting a phenomenological interpretation of someone else's experience, that, in fact a 'phenomenological philosophy provides (both) the conceptual framework and methodological sketch for interpreting the experiences of others' (Kozel 2007: 58). This workshop presentation offers the methodologies chosen for this analysis for critical debate, along with a discussion of samples of the artist interviews using both methods of analysis.

The research further identifies a set of characteristics and emergent properties of the Artworks that create a unique imaginative space for the participating audience. Pearce (2009: 188) writes that, in co-created worlds, 'players are encouraged to contribute to the actual creation of the world, a design approach that leverages emergence as a production strategy'. The more agency players are given 'the larger the quantity and variety of emergent behaviours is likely to occur', yet Pearce also finds that, regardless of the level of agency, and independently of the affordances offered in a virtual world, still 'emergence happens' (2009: 188). The communities of practice that have emerged in *Second Life* and specifically in what could be understood as a community of experimental art practice, needs to be considered further, particularly in terms of their collaborative and co-operative focus. This paper argues, finally, that the relationship between physical space and virtual world space that creates the

condition for the play of the imagination, and argues that it is the work of artists in *Second Life* who are demonstrating that potential.

References

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