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“Being (t)here”: A Case for the Presence of Place in Desktop Virtual Worlds

Maeva Veerapen

Monash University, Australia
{Maeva.Veerapen@monash.edu}

Abstract

This paper draws on existing phenomenological discourse of place to examine presence during the experience of virtual worlds. By analysing the occupied and experienced places during the inworld experience – the physical and virtual surroundings, for example – this paper aims to understand how the user feels a sense of presence or a sense of being in a virtual place. I apply rigid phenomenological analysis, which privileges an experiential perspective, to data collected over the course of two and half years of participant observation in Second Life. The complex relation between self and place, enacted by and through the phenomenal body, results in emplacement (being-in-place). Places and bodies engage with each other in a dynamic manner: a body is not simply located in places but places also perdure within bodies. The activation of such places within a user’s body during the inworld session plays a critical role in the creation of presence.

Keywords---phenomenology, place, emplacement, embodiment, Second Life.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the nature of places we inhabit have changed. The architecture of contemporary metropolis and suburbia has lost most traces of the communal quality of a social meeting place, an Agora. Instead, we now have ideagoras¹. People often undertake various activities and meet others from the private place of their homes through the medium of the Internet. Virtual worlds are unique among existing online platforms. Their design, presentation and operation encourage the user to feel that she is there, present in the world conveyed graphically on the screen. As a result of inhabiting this

new place, she forgets where her physical body is situated. This sense of escaping one’s world and its related problems by entering a new place with seemingly limitless possibilities is one of the big attractions of virtual worlds. More people than ever are leading different lives through these brand new worlds.

Research undertaken by virtual consulting firm KZero suggests that there currently exist over one billion registered virtual worlds accounts (<http://www.kzero.co.uk/presentations.php>). One explanation for this rapid growth of the virtual population might rest in the above described sensation felt by users of being away from the physical world, of ‘being there.’ This new phenomenon, engendered by the shifting nature of places through technology, is called presence.

Presence is a complex concept with multiple designations. Various writers refer to it as telepresence, mediated presence, virtual presence, spatial presence, etc. Existing research covers a broad array of the multiple elements of this complex concept: defining presence [11, 21]; identifying the ‘ingredients’ of presence such as immersion, attention and involvement [19]; devising methods to measure presence [22, 28]; and identifying the relation between presence and the performance of set tasks [1]. The literature on presence has been increasing significantly since the early 1990s. However, presence has “not often been studied for online desktop VEs” [20]. The early years of research were primarily concerned with presence operating within the various forms of virtual reality (VR) experiments whose interface often consisted of data gloves, head mounted displays (HMD) or the cave automatic virtual environment (CAVE)². These technologies form part of the development of immersive VR, which relies on physical and mental immersion. A lot of current presence literature still focuses on contemporary VR systems.

However, this paper is interested in desktop VEs (virtual environments). Persistent online worlds and computer-games are examples of VEs that users access

¹ Ideagoras refer to platforms on the Internet where large groups of people interact with each other. Debates and discussion of ideas are some of the common activities.

² See articles in the first issues of the journal Presence in 1992.

through the interface of a computer. Their operation is contingent on mental immersion only. A common limitation to presence research pertaining to desktop VEs, as Schroeder rightly identifies, is that the results stem from an analysis of presence operating during the execution of set short-term tasks. There is a lack of research examining presence in the context of the actual and long-term activities that users engage in within virtual worlds [20]. This research uses data pertaining to the regular activities of Second Life residents to gain a better understanding of the structure of the sensation of presence within a user. The paper approaches presence as a specific mode of emplacement or being-in-place and examines the places a user occupies and/ or experiences when participating in the virtual world.

1.1. Introducing place to presence literature

In an attempt to clarify what the term presence means and how it refers to place, I will consider its meaning in common language as defined by The Oxford English Dictionary (OED). The OED defines presence as “the fact or condition of being present,” whereby present means “being in the place in question.” Presence, then, refers to the fact or condition of being in the place in question. Place is here introduced as integral to the creation of presence. This definition might seem quite simple and straightforward. However, I argue that it already refers us to the origin of the complexity of the term presence within the context of virtual environments. According to the OED’s definition, presence refers to a mode of being that is grounded within one single place, that is “the place in question.” The location of the experience and the ground of the body refer to the same place.

However, the unicity of place disappears when presence is used in reference to virtual environments. The OED defines telepresence as follows: “the impression of being at another location.” In other words, telepresence refers to the impression one has of being in a place which is different from the place in which the body is situated. The most striking difference we can note between OED’s definitions of presence and telepresence is a problematisation of place, how it is constructed, used, perceived and experienced by the subject of the relevant activity. As a result, I argue that place plays an important role in the sense of presence that is at issue within this research.

Presence and place are not congruent counterparts according to the OED definition only, they are also inherently linked in existing presence research. The very definition of presence implies place from the simple

understanding of presence as the feeling of being in a virtual place. Definitions of presence within the existing literature implicitly or explicitly refer to place, without necessarily acknowledging or focusing on this tangential concept. For example, Witmer and Singer provide the following definition: “presence is defined as the subjective experience of being in one place or environment even when one is physically situated in another [place or environment]” [28]. The writers clearly demonstrate that presence refers to the relation between and the operation of two places³. However, this relation differs from those which are formed in the physical world. Understanding these differences might offer us a unique insight into the structure of the sense of presence experienced by a user. Furthermore, the adjective “subjective” indicates that the sense of presence, which happens within a subject undertaking an activity, is different in each person.

A few researchers have already argued for the need to consider the concept of place and its implications to better understand presence. Spagnoli and Gamberini make a strong case when they argue, “neglecting the importance of the place in which the user is present is not theoretically justified and risks undermining the validity of the research into the subject [of presence]” [23]. This present paper follows in the same vein and further develops this recent push in the literature of presence whereby a conscious effort is made to link the experiences of places to the phenomenon of the sense of presence. This paper moves beyond establishing a connection between place and presence. Other researchers have already advocated the adoption of a phenomenological approach to place in the analysis of presence [25]. This paper moves beyond the mere description of existing research. My background in phenomenology enables me to develop a thorough and detailed phenomenological investigation into presence. The paper relates presence to recent and current phenomenological inquiries that identify place as their explicit focus.

This paper undertakes an analysis of the relation between the self and places, enacted by and through a phenomenal body. In other words, the research is not interested in places as existing on their own, removed from the rest of the experience. Presence does not come forth from places only but rather through the way users engage with and relate to various places. As a result, the

³ Although there are other conceptualisations of presence that do not place a strong focus on place [11], they do not reject the implicit role of place in the construction of presence.

analysis shifts the focus away from the design of virtual worlds to allow users and places to come at the centre of this investigation. The user is the ground from which the sense of presence emerges and the site for its perpetuation. This does not mean that the paper has no relevance for designers. Instead, a better understanding of users' experience can later influence the approach to designing virtual worlds. Before we can proceed with our analysis we need to have a better understanding of what places are, how they are defined and constructed, how we inhabit and experience them, etc.

1.2. Phenomenological treatment of place

Place is a concept that is attracting growing interest in recent years across many fields such as cultural studies, ethnography, sociology, architecture, ecology, geography, etc. However, in the context of this paper, I will focus on understanding place within the scope of phenomenology. There has been "a certain marginalisation or forgetting of place within philosophy" [3]. Place has instead been viewed as subordinate, secondary or derivative to the concepts of space and time, which have dominated a significant part of the history of philosophy [3, 12, 13]. Casey argues that a reason for this lack of attention to place lies in its very ubiquity: "because place is so much with us, it has been taken for granted, deemed not worthy of separate treatment" [3]. This tendency of neglect is also applicable to philosophical writings that "assume the notion, or assume some specific reading of it" [14].

Although place has only become an explicit concern of phenomenology in the past two decades or so, we can detect an early engagement with place during the modern era in the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Although "place appears central to Heidegger's thought, ... [it] appears as a problem in his thinking" [14]. Heidegger's main concern in his early work and best known book *Being and Time* is about the ontology of being, especially the form of being called *Dasein*, which refers to human existence. Therein lies a problem with his treatment of place: place is not the focus of his project because the "real theme is Being" [9]. Place only becomes a means to better understand the question of being. Heidegger argues that being-in-the-world is an ontological a priori or a fundamental mode of being. "It is not the case that man 'is' and then has, by way of an extra, a relationship-of- Being towards the 'world'" [9]. Entities, including human beings, cannot exist without being-in-the-world or in other words with being in a place. Though camouflaged among concerns with Being and temporality, the primacy of place emerges in Heidegger's work.

Merleau-Ponty further develops Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world by focusing on perception as a mode of insertion into and engagement with the world. His understanding of a corporeal intentionality instead of a mental one orients the body towards the potentialities within the world. In his earlier work *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty already indicates a very strong connection between body and world (place) when he writes "to be a body, is to be held to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily *in space*⁴, it is of it" [17]. Merleau-Ponty further develops this intertwining and chiasmic relation between body and place, which becomes a central focus of his unfinished manuscript *The Invisible and the Visible*. In his discussion about the body and the flesh of the world, Merleau-Ponty notes, "there is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other" [18]. "He [Merleau-Ponty] is claiming that *the places we inhabit are known by the bodies we live*. Moreover, *we cannot be implaced without being embodied*" [3].

Place only becomes the topic and focus of a phenomenological project with Casey and Malpas. Although they both adopt a phenomenological orientation in their investigation of place, there exists "a difference of emphasis" [4] in their work. While Casey's "approach aims to achieve a certain density of phenomenological description" [13], Malpas's "is more oriented towards a form of phenomenological grounded analysis" [13] of the ontology of place and existence. Casey's work can be considered an extension of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm while Malpas is more concerned with Heidegger's ontological project. Nevertheless, place remains the focus of their work and as a result creates a common ground between the two. Both Casey and Malpas "agree on the Archytean principle that 'to be is to be in a place.' In this respect, [they] both take place to be a fundamental 'condition of possible'" [13]. A significant difference between the two lies in Casey's perdurance of place and Malpas's fragility of place. Yet these need not be exclusive: places endure within bodies but places in the world also change over time. In this paper, I draw on Casey's conception of the enduring nature of places. However, I turn to both theorists for the task of defining place.

Casey creates a dichotomy between Euclidean space and experienced place when he takes "'space' to be the encompassing volumetric void in which things (including

⁴ Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty's use of the term 'space' is problematic as they do not differentiate place from space. The earlier mention of 'world' indicates that 'space' might refer to what we understand as place.

human beings) are positioned and ‘place’ to be the immediate environment of my lived body – an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural” [5]. Although he later admits that this dichotomy is obdurate [4], Casey has successfully distinguished place from space. However, Malpas argues that it is also important to acknowledge the connection between the two. Space, and several of its uses, implies a sense of openness or extension. Place possesses this spatial quality. Consequently, Malpas describes place as bounded openness [15].

In an effort to better understand the ambiguity of place, Malpas explores three senses of place as captured in Stein’s famous comment about Oakland: ‘there is no there there.’ The last there refers to place as a simple location [15, 16]. This sense, which has become the dominant definition, is derivative of space – a “leveled-down monotonous *space for ... human enterprise*” [3]. The middle there refers to place as a significant locale, “an area that has a meaning associated to it” [16]. This is the sense that Casey focuses on in his differentiation of place from space. This thick conception of place is traditionally viewed as: location + meaning = place. Finally, the first there relates to place as ontological ground because “to assert something to be is to assert it as already being in the world” [15]. This echoes place as implicitly considered by Heidegger. Objects and people cannot exist without being in place: place is what supports and grounds their being. Casey reiterates the same sense of place when he states, “to be at all – to exist in anyway – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be grounded in some kind of place” [3]. All three senses of place hold true concurrently with each other.

Furthermore, “place ... has to be understood as essentially dynamic, that is, as having an essential temporal character” [14], especially in its relation to bodies. Although Casey does not emphasise this as explicitly as does Malpas, it is central to his concept of perdurance of place. “We say that *things* last in time, yet so do *places*... What matters most is the experience of *being* in that place, and more particularly, *becoming part of the place*” [6]. It is here important to shift our focus to the relation between selves and places, to how we are in places but more importantly how places are in us.

“The enactive vehicle of being-in-place is the *body*” [5]. We inhabit, interact and experience places through our body. The relation between body and place is a dynamic, bi- directional one: “just as there is no place without body – without the physical and psychological traces of the body – so *there is no body without place*” [6]. We have already established that place is an ontological a

priori for entities, which includes bodies. Places cannot exist on their own: lived bodies imbue the locations they occupy with meaning, significance. Even after the bodies leave, the sedimented traces of what they brought to the place remain. “Such traces establish what might otherwise be a mere locus or site *as a place*” [6]. The same is true of traces of places within bodies. Indeed, “places ingress into bodies in enduring and significant ways” [6].

Casey terms this incoming flow of places within bodies tenacity. Tenacity happens in two phases. Firstly, “once having been in a particular place for any considerable time – or even briefly, if our experience there has been intense – we are forever marked by that place, which lingers in us indefinitely and in a thousand ways, many too subtle for us to name” [5]. Bodies do not just remember places as if they were objects. They are not marked by simple features of place but by “the whole brute presence of the place. What lingers most powerfully is this presence and, more particularly, *how it felt to be in this presence*” [5], how one sensed and responded to the place in question. Secondly, “there is an *impressionism of place* by which presence of a place remains lodged in our body long after we have left it; this presence is held within the body in a virtual state, ready to be revived when the appropriate impressionism or sensation arises” [5]. For example, it happens to everyone that being in a new place acts as a reminder of a childhood place. The waft of a scent, a sound or a visual detail in the new place can remind one of the childhood place, thereby creating feelings associated with the place of the past.

2. Methodology

2.1. Ethnography

This paper draws on data collected over the course of two and a half years of ethnographic research conducted in Second Life. I use participant observation, a non-elicitation method of ethnography. An ethnographer usually studies the participants within their natural environment by participating in their activities. Participation in Second Life – such as attending events run by the community, meeting with people for a chat or participating in inworld shows – allows me to undertake the same kind of activity as other Second Life users. Participant observation poses the challenge of balancing participating inworld with observing what is occurring. The activity of observation maintains an objective distance within the more emphatic activity of participation. There is a focus on retaining an awareness

of what is new and different in this world and the experience of it.

The appeal of participant observation lies in the fact that “it does not require that aspects of culture be available for conscious reflection” [2]. I am not relying on people’s ability to talk knowingly and clearly about presence. It is highly demanding to expect the lay-user to express herself clearly about such complex and ambiguous concepts as embodiment, emplacement and presence. Instead, I am able to gain an insight into what is happening by participating in Second Life in a similar way to other users. Furthermore, this ensures that I am closer to gaining an understanding of long-term participation in a virtual world as opposed to the accomplishment of set tasks for the purpose of a study. Comments by residents help frame the analysis. I also regularly read blog entries by Second Life residents, which reveal what they conceive happens during their inworld experience.

The principles of Geertz’s thick description inform the recording, in the form of fieldwork notes, of the events and happenings encountered over the course of my two and half years of inworld participant observation. Instead of simply describing what happens, I also record the context within which the actions take place and how this context might make such actions meaningful in a specific way. I typically record my fieldwork notes as soon as I log out of Second Life. I do not write fieldwork notes while I am inworld to avoid interfering with the inworld experience: a typical user does not write notes and reflect upon the inworld experience at the same as she is participating in Second Life. By waiting till the end of the session to write the fieldwork entry, I ensure that my experience is not too different from that of other users. Due to the limits of this paper, I will consider only one extract from my fieldwork notes at the beginning of Section 3.

Finally, place is implied within ethnography. The world of the subject(s) is central to the research and a lot of ethnographies begin by defining the place of the work. Ethnography is interested in how we live in the world, in the various modes of being-in-place. “No one lives in the world in general” [7]. This is particularly relevant in the context of presence research. Finally, ethnographic research is always grounded in a location, a place. This is highlighted in virtual ethnography, which openly acknowledges the platforms being studied as places. “Once we think of cyberspace as a place where people do things, we can start to study what it is they do” [10]. This assumption underpinning virtual ethnography is conducive to this research.

2.2. Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as the etymology of the word indicates, is the study of phenomena. Heidegger traces the word to its Greek roots and the Greek verb that signifies ‘to show itself.’ He describes phenomenology as a methodological conception that aims to “let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” [9]. Phenomenology, then, is a specific way of seeing and approaching experiences with the aim of understanding a phenomenon in its own terms. Phenomenological methods do not attempt to enforce any set of beliefs upon a phenomenon but instead allow the research to be. Instead of proving or disproving a hypothesis, phenomenology allows the research to take its course and follow the paths that the research opens up. This does not equate to a lack of rigour. Heidegger makes a case for what he calls genuineness in phenomenology. He argues, “if philosophy is to attain any sort of objectivity, then this can only be through the personal involvement that is at issue here” [14]. This is where ethnography in the form of participant observation and phenomenology intersect, the bridge from data collection to the analysis of said data. Incidences and conversations that happen inworld guide the phenomena researched over the past two years and a half. For example, an experience of presence when inworld initiates a phenomenological investigation to understand how it happens.

A guiding belief in phenomenology is that “the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins” [17]. Hence, lived experience and the living body constitute the main themes of phenomenology which tries to makes sense of human beings and the world in their facticity. “It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide” [17]. Instead, an important concern for researchers working within a phenomenological tradition is essences. Consequently, “all problems amount to finding definitions of essences” [17]. Accordingly, the aim of this research is to define the essence of presence. Although the research is focused on Second Life as a case study, the described structures that create presence also apply to other desktop VEs.

Spiegelberg identifies and describes a staggered phenomenological approach. He terms the first stage descriptive phenomenology. This return to things as they are in the world is the aim of the fieldwork note. This stage is concerned with “what *is* and what *appears*” [24]. The second stage is concerned with identifying “the essential relations within and among” [24] the recorded

aspects of experience. At this stage, I relate presence to place and modes of engagement with place. I explore the relation within and among bodies and places that lead to the creation of presence. The third and final stage is concerned “not only [with] *what* but also [with] the *how*” [24] phenomena appear and happen. This is the stage at which the essence of the structure of presence is defined. Phenomenology also provides me with the frameworks of analysis, namely Casey’s and Malpas’s theories of place.

The principles of the phenomenological argument have influenced the writing: “such an argument uses language to direct our attention to something in our worldly experience, to show us something, to help us notice and see it. Phenomenological argument then is not mere description (a listing of properties), but rather a use of evocative language (for example, descriptive, metaphorical, analogical, gestural language) toward the end of seeing, noticing or understanding something in or about our direct, living experience” [8].

3. A Phenomenological Investigation of Presence

The first time I experience a rich feeling of presence in Second Life catches me by surprise: I am in Second Life, at an underwater theatre. The performance, a story about a mermaid, has just finished. I am about to teleport out when another audience member sends me a private message. He invites me to visit a theatre he owns inworld. Intrigued, I agree. We teleport to the location. As the new locale rezzes up on my computer screen, I can see a relatively small building made out of a type of wood. We walk through a doorway into a small kabuki-styled theatre built entirely with the texture of bamboo, with the exception of small purple cushions for audience members to sit on. I can smell the bamboo. I quickly realise that I can also feel bamboo under my hands. I feel relaxed and content within the silence of the theatre building. As I close my eyes and take a deep breath, I am reminded that I am at my desk and not in the theatre. Yet, the feeling of bamboo still lingers in my body.

3.1. Where does the virtual experience take place?

The fieldwork note clearly indicates a perceived feeling of actually being in the bamboo theatre. This sensation is strongly supported by the affective response in the body: smell of the perceived surroundings, tactile sensation of bamboo, sense of relaxation, etc. In fact, all these factors create a rich and thick sense of presence. I

will utilise this example to advance the present phenomenological investigation into presence. Given the connection I have drawn between presence and place, it is worthwhile identifying the place of the inworld experience.

As a result of presence, there is a perceived feeling that the bamboo theatre is the place (significant locale) of the experience. However, this perception is destroyed as soon as I close my eyes. Having ceased the sole direct mode of engagement (visual perception) with that world, I am reminded that the bamboo theatre exists only in the graphical form portrayed on my computer screen and consequently that it is impossible to be in the bamboo theatre.

Is the computer the place of the experience then? It is hard to describe a computer as a place per se: it is not even a simple location. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that it plays an important role in allowing users to participate in a virtual world. A Second Life user is usually seated at a computer, with the relevant software running. She utilises the mouse and/ or keyboard to control the movements of her avatar. This activity, which gives her access to the virtual world, is not something she is conscious of during the inworld session. In fact, the computer appears in my notes just a few times and on each occasion either the hardware or software was not functioning correctly. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as immersion, which relies on the erasure of certain aspects of the experience. How does a functional computer disappear⁵ from a user’s awareness? The answer is two-fold.

Users are often described as looking at the graphical world. Yet, this graphical image is in fact comprised of the pixels of the computer screen. Users, then, are really looking at the computer screen. The confusion arises because they cannot differentiate the graphics from the computer screen by simply looking at it. If a user were to reach out to touch an object in the virtual world, she would be reminded straight away of the presence of the computer screen and the limited existence of said object as an image. Yet, the inworld activity’s reliance on sight signifies that the screen is camouflaged and enveloped within the graphics. Users cannot see the screen but they perceive the graphics only and consequently forget about the existence of the computer screen. A focus on what is happening inworld also helps to reinforce the

⁵ I utilise disappear like Leder does in his work pertaining to tendencies of self-concealment. The prefix *dis-* is indicative of negation. Hence, disappear signifies to not appear within the experiential field.

backgrounding of the computer screen from users' experiential realm.

However, this explanation is insufficient because it ignores the keyboard. Instead, the concept of incorporation offers a better explication. Merleau-Ponty [17] describes incorporation as the process whereby a new knowledge is gained in the hands, bred of familiarity through repeated usage of an object. Virtual world users know how to control the movement of their avatar without having to consciously think about which key to press, where to find the key or how much pressure to apply on it. Instead, they use the keyboard at a pre-reflective level, inherently knowing where the keys are just as they know where their body parts are. The keyboard has become "a bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis" [17]. Just as the working of bodily organs is usually concealed from us when there is no problem, the interaction with the keyboard is also backgrounded from the experiential realm as long as it functions properly [26]. Although the computer is not the place of the experience described in the fieldwork note, it plays a crucial role to sustain it.

We must now turn our attention to the user's physical surrounding. There is no doubt it is a place but it does not seem to be the one experienced in the fieldwork note. The physical surrounding is the ontological ground of users' bodies but not the appropriate significant locale. As ontological ground, the physical surrounding still serves a purpose. Places influence us. The physical surrounding can influence the state of mind of a user. Logging into Second Life from an Internet café, work or home can impact how a user feels when starting the inworld session. She might be rushed in an Internet café, conscious of being seen by others at work or more relaxed within the comfort of home. However, the place in which the physical body is located is not crucial to the creation of presence in the fieldwork note. It instead determines how easy or difficult it is for presence to be felt: a user is more likely to feel a sense of presence when logging in from home as opposed to connecting to Second Life at work while trying not to be seen by others.

Given the difficulty of identifying the place of the virtual world experience, let us consider the space in which it happens. The inworld session relies on the flow of electronic signals between computers and servers in order to occur. The binary data sent between the machines consist of a type of mathematical abstraction, which refers us to the space of the inworld experience. Coordinates in Second Life are another spatial element of the experience. They allow users to teleport to exact locations but do not carry with them any significance. The name attached to

the coordinates, on the other hand, refers us to a place. Finally, the graphics on the computer screen possess spatial qualities. They convey a sense of extension. The bamboo theatre extends outward from the avatar. There also exists a Euclidean aspect to the graphics. By identifying a building block, I can measure the graphical presentation of the bamboo theatre on the computer screen. If we understand place as being the experienced space, then the bamboo theatre should be the place we are trying to identify. We seem to have gone full circle, starting with the bamboo theatre and returning back to it.

The theatre is the simple location of the avatar and the perceived significant locale. However, it is not the location nor ontological ground of the user's body. Maybe we need to think about this differently. Although the avatar is located there, we do not call it an ontological ground. This is because the avatar is not a living, conscious entity. Yet, the avatar is an essential element of the experience. We need to find a way to reconcile users' physical bodies and their avatar by turning our focus to the embodiment formed during the inworld session. After all, being-in-place and embodiment are dependent upon each other.

3.2. Emplacement: Being there through embodiment

Before proceeding with the analysis, I want to briefly explain my choice of language. I utilise the word *emplacement* which Malpas uses instead of the word 'implacement' employed by Casey. The etymology of *emplacement* consists of the French prefix *en-*, followed by *place* and then the French suffix *-ment*. *En-*, when used in a verb (such as *emplace*), signifies putting something into. Hence *emplace* literally means the putting into place. *-ment* is a suffix that forms a noun from a verb. Its addition to a verb stem produces a noun that indicates the result of the action of the verb. *Emplacement*, then, means the result of the process of putting into place. From an etymological perspective, *implacement* carries the same meaning. The difference lies in the choice of the Latin prefix *in-*, which operates identically to the French *en-*. Casey likely chose *implacement* because the spelling of the word connotes strongly the act of putting **in** to place. However, I prefer *emplacement* because it refers us back to the word *embodiment*, both of which are intricately linked and dependent upon each other. *Embodiment* happens in a place and not in some kind of void and at the same time, one must be embodied (in one's body) in order to be-in-place.

At the end of the previous section, I argued that we must examine the embodiment formed during the inworld experience in an attempt to better understand the role of place in the creation of presence. As previously mentioned, the biggest difficulty in identifying the place of the inworld experience described in the fieldwork note lies in the fact that none of the places discussed fit Malpas's three senses of place. The existence of two bodies – user's and avatar's – instead of just one body is the reason for this. This investigation into embodiment during the inworld experience aims to understand how two bodies controlled by one subject (a user) allows the latter to be emplaced in a manner that leads to the creation of presence. The task of understanding how two bodies qualitatively different from each other – one is a physical, organic body while the other is a graphical presentation on the computer screen – can function together through one embodiment is challenging. What is the common ground that allows us to reconcile an objective body with a graphical one? The answer lies in the concept of phenomenal body. This is also the body Casey refers to when he argues that the body operates as the enactive vehicle for the self to be-in-place.

Merleau-Ponty differentiates between an objective and phenomenal body. In simple terms, an objective body refers to the body as a physiological entity, which is concerned with its mechanical, physical, biochemical and bioelectrical functions. This approach is mainly interested with how the organs and related systems operate. However, this is not how one views, knows or experiences one's body. The objective body is how others view, know or understand one's body. A phenomenal body, on the other hand, is interested in the body as more than a physiological entity. It places the focus on the body as lived and experienced by the self and thus refers to the experiential aspects of the body such as its motor, sensorial, perceptual, visceral and tactile qualities. We do not experience our bodies as an object consisting of organs. Instead, a phenomenal body is "the true version of the body that we live by" [17]. We tacitly experience our bodies as a unified whole which exists with its capacity to accomplish several acts. This potential for perception and action is directed outwards towards the world and things within it. Furthermore, interaction with the world (places) happens on a phenomenal level. This refines our investigation into embodiment: what and where is the phenomenal body? Is it the user's body or the avatar's body, or perhaps neither or both?

In order to understand how the sense of presence described in the fieldwork note operates, we must first

explain how a phenomenal body is emplaced in the virtual world, i.e. the bamboo theatre, in our example. Users' physical bodies do not literally enter the virtual world. Although avatars are present in the virtual world, this alone does not generate nor guarantee presence: avatars are always in Second Life during inworld sessions but the user does not always experience presence. Instead, presence hinges on the consolidation of a self through the relation between user and avatar and the consequent re-creation of a suitable phenomenal body for the inworld experience. An analysis of the user-avatar relation reveals a symbiotic embodiment or what I have termed symbembodiment. I will in this paper focus on three (out of five identified) conceptions of avatar [27], namely, avatar as prosthesis, avatar as phantom limb and avatar as equal.

3.2.1. Avatar as prosthesis. In simple terms, a prosthesis is an object that acts as an extension of a phenomenal body's realm of potentiality. A Second Life user does not have direct or unmediated access to the virtual world. Avatar as prosthesis extends the boundary of users' bodies to encompass the otherwise inaccessible places of Second Life. It allows users to maintain their position as subject in relation to the things in the world of Second Life: they can move around, sit on a bench, etc. A process of habituation to an avatar, the length of which depends on previous experience with computer games and other virtual worlds, is required before users are able to adopt a subjective position within the virtual world. If avatar as prosthesis enables the inclusion of the virtual world within users' perceptual sphere, its habituation must have one aim: controlling this avatar should not provoke explicit awareness of the physical body controlling it. This desired result also depends on the proficient use of the keyboard and mouse and their subsequent incorporation.

3.2.2. Avatar as phantom limb. "The phantom limb is the presence of part of the representation of the body which should not be given, since the corresponding limb is not there" [17]. The amputee still feels sensations in his amputated limb, which remains present instead of receding into the past. There are several differences between the phantom limb described here and avatar as phantom limb. The latter, unlike the amputated limb, was never an integral part of the body. Nevertheless, they both create a similar effect on the concerned person. Avatar as phantom limb adds an affective dimension to the inworld experience. It enables the creation of sensations, which are not provoked through any direct sensorial stimuli, within the body. Avatar as phantom limb, like the amputated

limb, is engendered by users' "impulse of being-in-the-world" [17]. Reacting against the inability to be-in-the-virtual-world, an avatar through a mix of psychic and physiological factors assumes the role of a quasi component of the phenomenal body in its role as phantom limb. It functions as the vehicle of being-in (virtual)place⁶. However, the fabricatedness of the sensations, which do not originate in response to corresponding stimuli, reminds users of role of the avatar as a facilitator to the perceived affective response to the virtual place. This reminder can in turn have an adverse effect on the sense of presence.

3.2.3. Avatar as equal. If all human experience is incarnate, then the inworld experience must also be incarnate. Within this paradigm, a phenomenal body is crucial. This phenomenal body comes into existence as a result of the meeting of a user and her corresponding avatar as equals. As already mentioned, a phenomenal body possesses a set of qualities. During the inworld experience, users' bodies cannot perform all the tasks of a phenomenal body. They have lost the motor skills and the other qualities are restricted. Although users maintain a tactile body, they are unable to directly have a tactile experience of the world of Second Life. On the other hand, avatars act purely as a motor body – a quality that users are deprived of – while being devoid of sensorial, perceptual, tactile and visceral qualities. Avatar and physical bodies fulfill between them all the qualities of a phenomenal body. However, the creation of a phenomenal body is not as simple as the addition of these two bodies. The qualities of a phenomenal body are dependent upon each other. In the fieldwork note, I can only perceive and feel the bamboo theatre because of the placement of my avatar, made possible through its motor skills. By existing in symbiosis, the two bodies become inseparable and fuse into one another to become a phenomenal body for the duration of the inworld session. As their boundaries blur, the experience of the virtual world comes forth.

3.3. Being there or being here?

With this newly acquired understanding of embodiment during the inworld experience and its possible impact on the creation of presence, we are now

well positioned to engage in a detailed examination of what is happening during the example provided in the fieldwork note. However, we must first acknowledge and find a solution to the contradictions and tensions inherent in the commonly used presence term 'being there,' especially in the context of this paper's phenomenological approach to place.

"An immediate corollary is that if my here were to be detached from my current place – my here-place – *I would have to go with it*. I cannot become not here and remain (myself)" [6]. One can aim to go there but once the body reaches the destination, the there becomes a here. The body- self, as we know and understand it, cannot remain the same if one is not here, that is if one is there. Such an understanding of being there carries significant implications on not only a phenomenological level but also on an ontological dimension. This significant re-assessment of a possibly new form of being is beyond what happens during an instance of presence when one is participating within a desktop virtual world such as Second Life. However, the notion of here in the context of virtual worlds remains problematic. As the here-there dyad is deeply rooted within ideas of place, it is worthwhile determining the significance of there as it is used in the term being there and how it relates to an understanding of here.

While we might only have one here, many theres exist for us at all times [6]. The theres refer us to possible future heres. When I move to a there, it becomes my here. However, this does not explain the there used within being there: the physical body will never be able to be in the there described and what is called a there should in fact be the phenomenal here. Alternatively, the there can refer to "the there of perceived objects" [6]. In this instance, the user is in the here of the physical world and visually perceives the bamboo theatre on the computer screen. Adopting the role of an object among things in the world, the bamboo theatre then belongs to the there of perceived objects. However, this explanation is also problematic: one cannot feel a sense of presence in an object. In order for the user to feel present in the bamboo theatre, the latter must transcend its objectness and adopt the experiential features of place.

A more productive approach must begin by looking for the source of the tension and contradiction inherent in the term being there. An assumption of "the implicit corporeal equation 'here = body = place'" [6] does not hold true in the case of virtual worlds. The equation can be specified and re-written as follows 'here = physical body (= phenomenal body) = place.' However, the physical and phenomenal bodies no longer mirror each

⁶ Casey argues that the term being-in-place is a more concrete formulation of Heidegger's being-in-the-world. I have here adjusted Casey's term to the context of virtual worlds.

other during an inworld session. The inability to equate the phenomenal body with the physical one is the origin of the problematic nature of the term being there.

Given these circumstances, I argue that the here-there structure during the inworld experience is three-fold. Firstly, the user has a here and many theres. If a Second Life user is seated at a computer, her there consists of her immediate surroundings such as the chair, table and computer. The theres exist within the rest of the room, other rooms in the building, places she might be going to in the future, places she has been to in the past, etc. Secondly, an avatar also possesses a here and several theres. We can safely say that the bamboo theatre is the avatar's here because it is what makes up the immediate surroundings within which it is located. The underwater theatre, which was previously a here, has now become a there. Interestingly, an avatar's here is also a there that is beyond any of a user's theres. Thirdly, the phenomenal body also possesses a here. Its here refers to the place where the virtual world experience occurs, at a phenomenal level that implicates both user and avatar as a unified entity. This there is the bamboo theatre. The existence of phenomenal theres is a more complex matter. If the theres refer to all that is not part of the virtual world experience, they would refer to theres that are beyond reach because this phenomenal body does not exist outside of the virtual world experience. Instead, its theres are identical to those of an avatar. A phenomenal body mirrors the location of an avatar body during the inworld experience instead of that of a physical body. The reason for this is because the avatar body is the one with the motor skills, crucial to the act of putting into place or of emplacement.

Being (phenomenally) here, a possible alternative to being there, is not a helpful term because it does not differentiate the construct of telepresence from normal physical presence. The term being there privileges the physical body over the phenomenal body. This might happen out of habit: we are used to the physical body also referring to the phenomenal body. Alternatively, the physical body might be privileged because unlike the phenomenal body, it is a tangible and visible entity. Being (t)here might be a more accurate reformulation as it refers to both the phenomenal here and the user's there. Furthermore, it emphasises the fragility of presence. There are numerous factors (the computer, the state of mind influenced by the user's location, the fabricatedness of sensations produced by avatar as phantom limb, etc.) which can disrupt the sense of presence, thereby returning the user to a here that mirrors the physical here and

transforming the phenomenal here of the virtual experience into a there.

3.4. Place-in-body

The place of the bamboo theatre described in the fieldwork note is not tangible. It exists as a result of and through the experience of it within the user's body, which senses the smell and feel of bamboo and consequently reaches a new emotional and affective state of relaxation and contentment. We have established that this experience of presence consists of a relation and interaction with place that happens at a phenomenal level. We examined how the phenomenal body is created through embodiment. In this last section of the paper, I will focus on the temporal dimension of presence, a quality it shares with place. Presence as a mode of being-in-(virtual)place is grounded within the user's body, which happens to be at the very crux of the here. In order to gain a better understanding of how presence is formed, we must recognise that it is as much about body-in- place as analysed above, as it is about place-in-body.

Applying the concept of tenacity as a framework of analysis, I can now explain how the sense of presence described in the fieldwork note is created. As a child, I often spent the school holidays at a cousin's place. The house was located on the highlands, removed from the urban centre compared to my parents' house. The air was fresher. It felt like everything was significantly quieter compared to my house, which was off a main street with nearly non-stop

traffic. She had three dogs while I had then never owned a pet. We used to spend long hours running around with the dogs in the backyard or playing pretend kitchen, an activity during which we would cook dishes from a mix of ingredients obtained from the backyard itself. Several bamboos grew in the corner just a few metres from where we played. They were the tallest and thickest ones I had ever seen. I remember being impressed by them when I first saw them. I inspected them briefly. However, my cousin thought nothing of them and consequently I did not give them any more attention.

Teleporting to a theatre built out of bamboo in Second Life revived the impressionism of my cousin's backyard corner with the bamboos. It is not something I have thought of for many years. In fact, I never realised those bamboos had even left an imprint in me. The smell of bamboo I mention in my fieldwork notes is the smell of the ones from my cousin's backyard. The bamboo I feel under my hands has the same texture as the smooth and cool bamboos I have slid my hands upon in my cousin's

backyard. This place and the associated memory are positive. They engender in me the same feelings I would likely feel if I were to go back to my cousin's backyard, something I have not done in about a dozen years. There is a deep feeling of stillness, of peace and contentment. They are a joint reaction from remembering a childhood memory and entering the inworld theatre. In fact, the olfactory and tactile data I experience would likely not match what I would have sensed in an identical physical theatre. I would have instead probably smelt and felt the dried and prepared bamboo used to construct the theatre as opposed to fresh ones from my childhood memory. However, these remembered sensations added a strong experiential and affective feature to my (phenomenally) being in the bamboo theatre. As a result, the latter develops into a rich and thick conception of place and I feel without any doubt that I am (t)here in the bamboo theatre.

The temporal dimension of tenacity refers us back to the avatar as phantom limb. The latter plays an important role in the creation of the tactile and olfactory sensation of bamboo in the body, crucial for the user to feel present in the virtual environment. However, it does not fabricate these sensations out of nowhere. The avatar as phantom limb reacts against the imposed disablement (inability to physically be in the theatre) by drawing upon a previous embodied experience. Through its quasi presence within the phenomenal body, it re-creates the past sensations to compensate for the present limitations. As the user already has a subjective position in the theatre through avatar as prosthesis, avatar as phantom limb works with the impressionism of past places to re-activate those experiences. This happens at a phenomenal level, whereby avatar and user bodies are working in symbiosis with each other to form a unified experience, thereby creating the sense of presence perceived by the user and described in the fieldwork notes.

Conclusions

Presence is indeed a subjective experience, as Witmer and Singer mention in their definition. Subjective, in this context, does not only pertain to the subject of the experience/ activity but also indicates that the creation of presence is unique for each individual participating in virtual worlds. Furthermore, presence is not a response to one aspect of the inworld experience. It is, instead, a multifactorial result of an embodied inworld experience through the re-creation of a phenomenal body that acts as ground. It also relies on a process of foregrounding places-in-body and their reactivation while the computer

interface and physical surroundings are backgrounded from the user's experiential realm. Given these observations, a strong sense of presence can be created and experienced by users without any overly complex technological system. User do not require the full array of sense data, such as olfactory and tactile sensations, to create presence; a visual or aural stimulus can evoke a rich and complete sense of presence, as described in the fieldwork note. However, this sense of presence remains fragile, with the risk of fading away if other aspects of the experience, such as the computer, come to the user's attention. Telepresence does not correspond perfectly to the experience of the physical version of the place experienced: I smell fresh bamboo as opposed to the dry one used to make the theatre. It is difficult to recreate an authentic experience of physical locations through desktop virtual worlds. Instead, juxtaposing aspects of usually unrelated places within one virtual location can create a new affective response within users, unique to virtual worlds. However, a limitation exists: the inworld environment creator does not know if and how a trigger will create a sense of presence within users.

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