SMOOTH/STRIATED, PLACE/NON-PLACE:
SPACES FOR METAVERSE AVATARS

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to connect Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conceptions of 'smooth/striated space' and Marc Augé's definitions of 'place/non-place' to the space/place usages of the avatars of online three dimensional virtual builders' worlds, also known as the metaverse. The premise is that a particular type of virtual space inhabited by avatars, the art ecologies of the metaverse, show usage and navigational attributes which dovetail with these two separate physical space related conceptions since characteristics such as the absence of hierarchies, the confusion brought about through repetitive architectural / spatial elements, as well as an absence of essential navigational aids such as floors in some virtual art spaces, and the intrinsically transitional nature of them appear to be a combination of an inclination toward spatial 'smoothness' and 'non-place.' In order to further examine the subject, Brian Eno's concept of the 'unfinished artifact' will also be dwelled upon.

Keywords: *Smooth/Striated, Space, Place, Non-Place, Unfinished Artifact, Metaverse, Avatar, Virtual Architecture, Second Life.*

Smooth and Striated

The topic will first be examined under Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's definitions regarding the smooth and striated characteristics of space – the transformation that occurs towards striation upon the entry of the nomad to previously smooth locations; that is pre-agricultural spaces devoid of clearly defined entry and exit points and navigational direction which are characterized through shifting intensities and events rather than static relational markers. These distinctions reside between the nomadic and the sedentary, the latter manifesting inclinations that eventually culminate towards creating spaces which befit the needs of the State apparatus, and its appended 'War Machine' that depends on striation for order, hierarchy as well as defence and attack procedures.

Figure 1: "Arid Dawn" by Pixabay. Creative Commons License. Source:
https://www.pexels.com/photo/adventure-arid-dawn-desert-274035/

Deleuze and Guattari state that completely smooth space can only exist in natural environments that have not yet been infiltrated by humans, whose *"primary determination is to occupy and hold a smooth space ... [] ... creating an extended confrontation between the smooth and the striated in which the striated progressively takes hold."* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 410).

'Smooth space' finds its counterpoint in 'striated space,' which is man-made, post-agricultural space (which has actually transitioned to a 'place' state) that comes about when the nomad is settled, is bounded to a specific locus that is defined by boundaries, walls, hierarchies, and easily identifiable entry/exit points.

'Smooth space' is occupied by intensities and events. The characteristic experience of it is short term, up close, with no visual points of reference or invariant distances. Instead of the metrical forms of striated space, smooth space is made up of a constantly changing orientation provided by a population of nomads who are actively entertaining tactile relations among themselves.

While Deleuze and Guattari note upon the fundamental oppositions of these two types of spaces, they nevertheless acknowledge the distinctly separate existence of 'smooth space' only in nature, claiming that when it comes to man-made spaces 'smooth' and 'striated' can exist only in a hybrid state. Although such an opposition does exist, nevertheless these *"two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, into striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed to smooth space. In the first case, one organizes even the desert; in the second, the desert gains and grows; and the two can happen simultaneously."* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 474-475)

'Place' and 'Non-place'
It is at this transitional point that Marc Augé's deliberations on 'place' and 'non-place' can be brought forward since it appears that a transition from smooth to striated inevitably brings about 'place' as an anthropological manifestation that can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity. Augé contends that supermodernity

has also brought about a very specific type of space that has no relational or historical contexts and manifests no concern whatsoever for identity. These are 'non- places' which can be seen to be transitional 'places of memory' that are assigned to specific positions: 'Non-places' are spaces that we do not live in but that we only pass through, that we have memories of without actually having dwelled in them.

Figure 2: "Airport Escalators" by Gratisography at Pixabay. Creative Commons License. Source: https://www.pexels.com/photo/stairs-people-airport-escalators-4610/

Here we are talking about a world where transit points and temporary abodes proliferate under luxurious or inhuman conditions, of a dense network of inhabited transitional spaces wherein the habitués of supermarkets and credit cards communicate wordlessly with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and the ephemeral. While 'place' and 'non-place' appear to be opposed polarities, nevertheless the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed. Instead they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten.

But, that said, according to Augé, non-places still appear to be the real measure of our times – one that also includes the complex skein of cable and wireless networks which mobilize extra-terrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself (Augé, 1995).

The Unfinished Artifact

Up until this point what we have pondered upon relates to the physical world. As we now transition into virtuality it may be useful to bring one other concept into the equation – namely the unfinished artifact, since this may help provide a clue to the riddle as to why virtual architectures will so often be uninhabitable, why they tend to prefer to remain as hybrids, as 'non-places' rather than 'places.' One of the most compelling points of virtual building is that such output is often bound in a continuous process of transformation as Brian Eno defines it in his famous Wired magazine interview of 2005:

"Think of cultural products, or art works, or the people who use them even, as being unfinished. Permanently unfinished. We come from a cultural heritage that says things have a 'nature,' and that this nature is fixed and describable. We find more and more that this idea is insupportable - the 'nature' of something is not by any means singular, and depends on where and when you find it, and what you want it for. The functional identity of things is a product of our interaction with them." (Eno, 2005).

While the physical world which is comprised of atoms is not conducive to the approach that Eno describes, the electronic environment with its building blocks of bits provides ground for the existence of creations whose inherent nature is to remain in a perpetual state of being worked upon, copied and proliferated. The outcomes tend to be creative systems which, unlike their physical counterparts, can be endlessly improvised upon, altered, re-worked and played with; and as such they appear to provide the constitutional material of all metaverse building.

Virtual Spaces, Virtual Places
Looking back on many years of building in Second Life I am always astounded by the fact that the only 'place' that I have ever built, that I actually lived in, and that has been used as a 'home' by others as well, is the tent (shown below in Figure 3), a construct that is clearly recognizable for what it is; and furthermore this is a personal dwelling, i.e., a 'place'. Almost everything else that I have built has been hybrid and transitional in nature. In other words, I have built 'non-places' instead of 'places' that also carry a contradiction in that – unlike physical 'non-places' that are public spaces where ease of navigation through signage and visual markers is a priority – these spaces are unclear, are devoid of demarcations. They are tough to understand and to navigate since they have no clear visual points of reference, and no clear entry and exit points or any type of signage. While these spaces have walls, these walls are usually placed in such a way that they do not serve hierarchies by being layered into maze-like constructions, oftentimes also further complicated through transparencies: If anything the walls are there to confuse the transient avatar populations that visit the space rather than to create boundaries which delineate intimacies and seclusion, thereby setting up personal connections to the visited space.
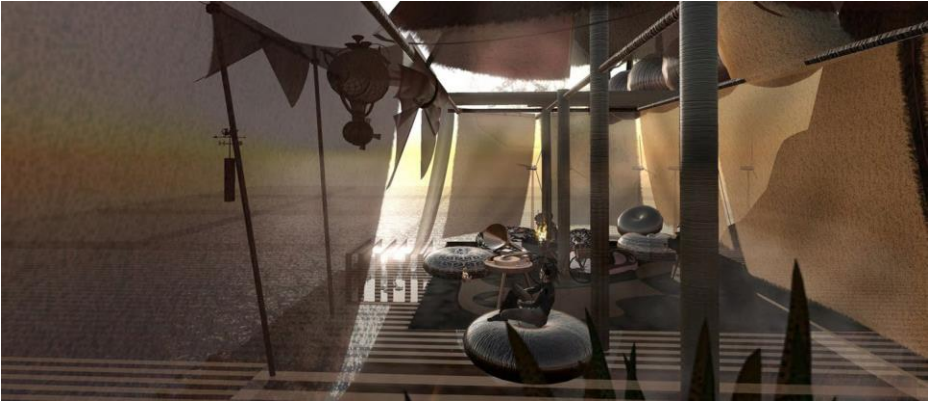
Figure 3: "The Angry Monkey Tent" by Elif Ayiter. 2009. Second Life.

Thus, although these environments are ultimately striated since – virtual or not – they are human- made, they share some of the attrıbutes of smooth space – you never really know where you are, how to get in, how to get out, and where to go next. Even more importantly, through their confusing spatial attributes, these localities also do not aim to ease a sense of personal belonging.

Figure 4: "From here on there be dragons," a virtual architecture that is built out of exact replicas of one architectural module which are repeated and mirrored not only horizontally but also vertically, creating a

considerable sense of navigational confusion for visiting avatars. Elif Ayiter. 2017. Second Life.

One important factor that brings about this hybridity between smooth and striated is repetition, which brings us back to the bit-based nature of the electronic building

medium in which things can endlessly be replicated through identical copies which make for loss of hierarchy, a loss of direction, and ultimately a loss of sense. When you place scores of exactly identical, as well as sometimes mirrored building elements on a transparent floor it becomes quite difficult to know where you are (Figure 4). However, it isn't just the replicated or mirrored elements. There are further visual clues (or absences thereof) of quasi 'smoothing' that make it difficult to identify with such a space as a 'place' that you belong to, thus aiding in the creation of a 'non-place' that you just wander through: In a world where you can fly, do you really need floors? After all, how striated can a floorless space really be? Would you ever make a 'place' out of a floorless space, or would you just fly through it? (Figure 5)
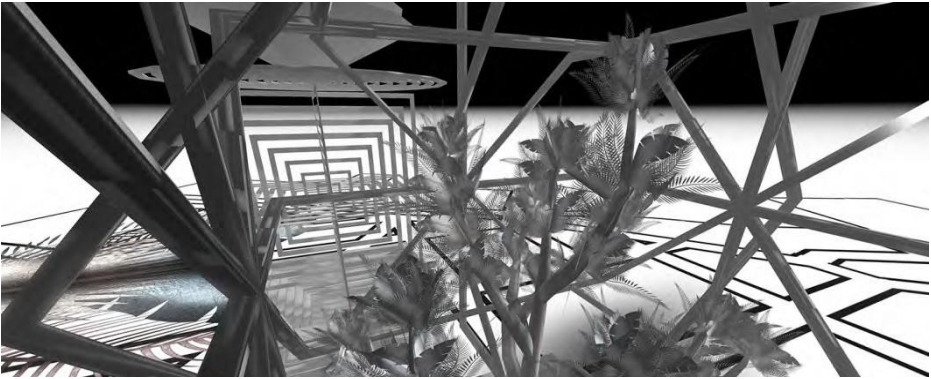

Figure 5: "Calima" is a vertically mirrored abstract ecology / architecture devoid of clear entry and exit points as well as a uniformly visible floor. Elif Ayiter. 2018. Second Life.

It is not only the visual attributes of these spaces, such as transparencies, repetitions, absences of floors and ceilings that are significant. When it comes to a search for 'place' these spaces are devoid of intimacy and personal appropriation, perhaps resembling site specific art works in the physical world. Yes, you may well build memoires inside these art ecologies, but they will probably not be memories of belonging or of identity – unless you begin to utilize these ecologies as grounds for engaging relationships, as will be considered further below.

Conclusion

It would be foolhardy to claim that the metaverse abounds with the type of artistic building discussed in this paper. Most of what manifests inside virtual builders' worlds has been built with the physical world in mind – to the extent where copies of real life buildings and locations are re- created virtually down to the last detail. However, even when constructs are fantasy based, more often than not they manifest as clearly recognizable medieval castles, cyberpunk cities and so forth. But, does the manner of building – whether it reflects spaces that in the physical world we can relate to as 'places,' change the identification with them from impersonal to personal? Even if the

sort of hybridity between 'smooth and 'striated' described in this text cannot be applied to metaverse building in general, the dichotomy of 'place' and 'non-place' appears to be omnipresent, leading us to the question as to whether avatars actually live in the metaverse or whether they should just be considered as cyber-agents who traverse these locations very much in the sense that Augé defines them as transitional 'places of memory' that are assigned to circumscribed positions?

The answer may reside in the concept of 'virtual presence' which is defined as a sense of 'being there' in a mediated environment. At its best 'virtual presence' creates an illusion of non-mediation in which a user no longer perceives the display medium as a separate entity. A high level of presence will help users in remembering a virtual environment as 'a place visited,' rather than as 'a place seen.' (Slater et al, 1999)

One of the determinants of our human biological design may be said to be our compulsion for social engagement which leads us to the research of Giuseppe Mantovani and Giuseppe Riva in which they examine 'virtual presence' from a social perspective by challenging the idea that experiencing a simulated environment is only a matter of perceiving its objective features:

'Presence' (real or simulated) means that individuals perceive themselves, objects, as well as others, not only as situated in an external space but as immersed in a socio-cultural web connected through interactions between objects and people. (Mantovani and Riva, 1999, 540 – 551)

Anthropological research conducted by Tom Boellstorff in Second Life shows us that avatars do in fact become 'virtually present' inside virtual spaces (Boellstorff, 2008) to an extent where a deep personal identification that would suggest an immersion into 'place' rather than 'non-space' comes about.

My own experience and my observations as a long-time habitué of builders' worlds bring me to the veracity of Mantovani and Riva's findings: What turns an impersonal 'non-place' into a personalized 'place' is the relationships we build within that space, and not the physical attributes, or indeed the intended usages, of the space itself. And not only is it the avatars that we build relationships with that are of essence to a transformation from virtual 'non-place' to virtual 'place' – such heightened spatial engagements can also be brought about through objects; in other words, through creative activity.

Such creative activity does not have to be building alone; play will also qualify, as will the type of creative activity very commonly engaged in by metaverse avatars– artistic documentations through virtual photography or video. These will turn the most 'smooth-like,' hard to navigate spaces into playful mazes where the object may in fact be becoming lost and found, or turn confusion into exquisite backdrops for self-expression through a virtual lens. No matter whether you find yourself in a virtual Venice or inside vertiginous art ecology devoid of floors or ceilings and entries or exits, becoming creatively active therein will in all likelihood be the virtual counterpart for the nomad's setting up of tent and thereby taking the first step from transforming a virtually 'smooth non-place' into a 'striated place' within which meaningful relationships can be

built and furthered.

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