

# From 'Autographic' to 'Allographic': Proliferating the Visually Embodied Self

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In this text I wish to discuss how the Live Visuals of three dimensional online virtual worlds may be leading us into participatory and collaborative 'Play' states during which we appear to become the creators as well as the actors of what may also be described as our own real-time cinematic output.

One of the most compelling of these performative stages may be the metaverse where avatars create and enact their own tales and conceptions, effectively bringing forth live, participatory cinema through 'Play.'

This said, I would like to stress that the content of this talk is not meant to apply solely to three dimensional virtual worlds or to avatars. I hope that what I have to say can also held to be valid for other electronic output in which the subject matter is an examination of 'Play,' of the 'self,' of persona,' and the multiplicity thereof.

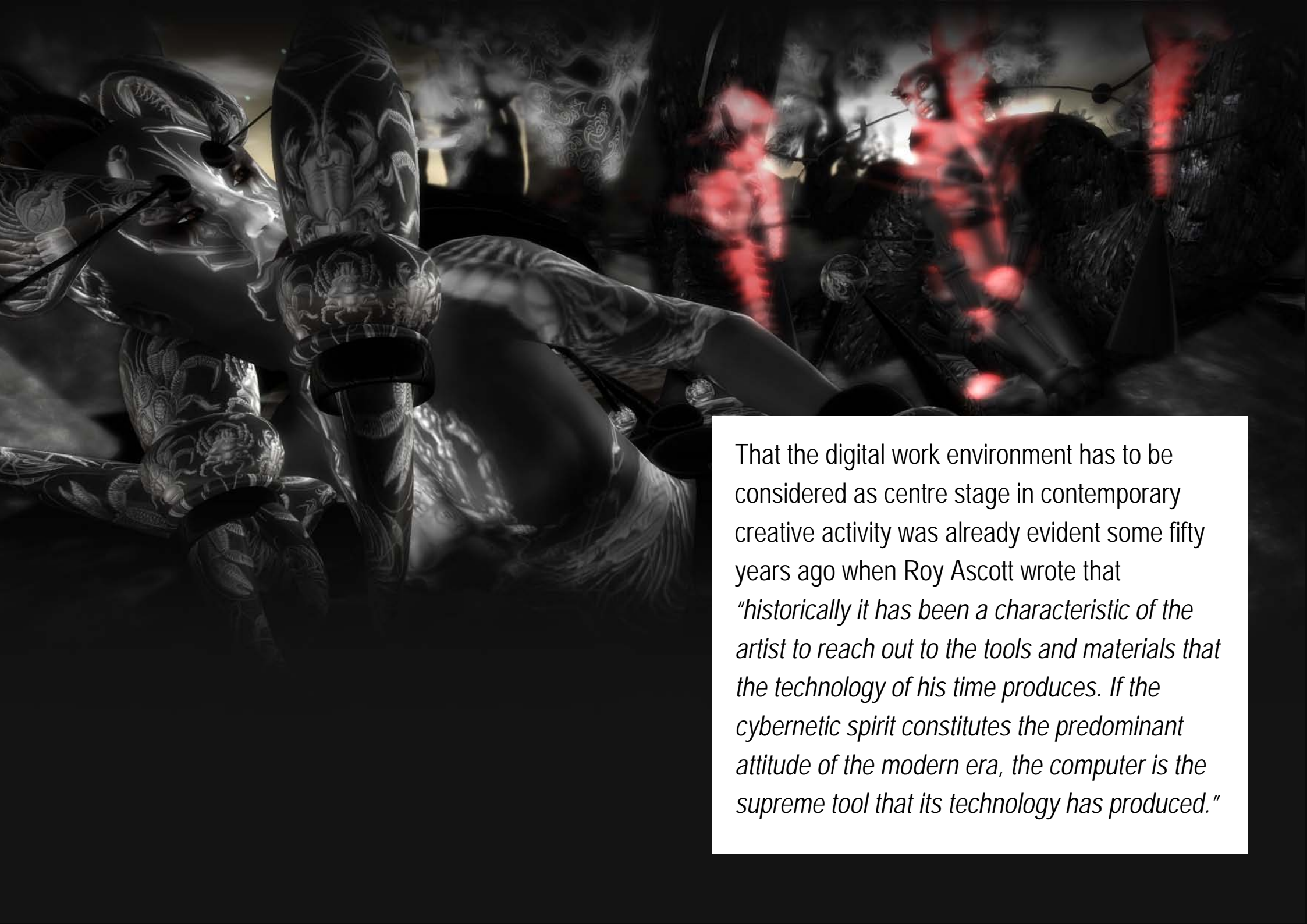
# Atoms > Bits

I would like to start out by dwelling upon what Malcolm McCullough identifies as a novel state that is deeply affecting the nature of all digital visual creativity and that manifests as a transition which has come into effect through the computer (1996). This incorporates a change in the work medium from 'atoms' to 'bits,' which unlike their analogue counterparts (the atoms) are open to infinite manipulation as well as replication.

# Autographic > Allographic

Although this change affects all creative output generated through the computer, its most dramatic manifestation can be observed in visual digital artifacts whose entire métier seems to have been redefined by what is nothing less than 'a revolution of material.'

McCullough takes his trajectory from Nelson Goodman's definitions of the autographic and allographic natures of different types of creative output, saying that in the digital realm a shift has occurred whereby autographic (visual, what used to be described as hand-crafted) artworks now share the attributes of allographic (notational) artworks due to the computer's schematic/notational language that determines the structural nature of all output – be this visual, sound or text.



That the digital work environment has to be considered as centre stage in contemporary creative activity was already evident some fifty years ago when Roy Ascott wrote that *"historically it has been a characteristic of the artist to reach out to the tools and materials that the technology of his time produces. If the cybernetic spirit constitutes the predominant attitude of the modern era, the computer is the supreme tool that its technology has produced."*



Ascott recognizes that the computer is much more than a physical tool; that it is in fact a creative medium that may well be capable of extraordinary mental transformations:

*"Used in conjunction with synthetic materials, it [the computer] can be expected to open up paths of radical change and invention in art. It is a tool for the mind, an instrument for the magnification of thought, potentially an 'intelligence amplifier,' to use H. Ross Ashby's term. The interaction of man and computer in some creative endeavor, involving the heightening of imaginative thought, is to be expected."*



# Language > Symbols > Notation

The constitutive differences between analog and digital media extend themselves to a question of 'language,' which in the case of computational environments are complex symbol systems that the bits carry:

Formal notation is a special case of symbol usage and an understanding of it is a good way of getting a sense of the computer as a 'medium.' **Notation**, as formulated by Goodman, is defined as a symbol system consisting of a scheme that is correlated with a field of reference made up of a distinct set of characters plus a syntax for combining them.

While **symbol schema** are the basis of alphabetical and musical notation, they cannot be applied to artifacts such as drawings and sketches since these are comprised of a dense field of overlapping, ambiguous, uniquely executed marks that defy definition as a symbol scheme.

# Autographic > Allographic

Based upon this difference Goodman introduced terminology to distinguish between what he calls 'autographic' works in which case there exists only one original and 'allographic' works where a symbol system (notation) carries the work and multiple instances of the original work are possible.

The second category is more abstract and the route to such a state of abstraction is to incorporate formal notation.



While the hardware of the computer is made out of atoms, its internal logic employs symbols that quantize the physical charges that they represent by obtaining stable bits. In the microstructure of the computational medium,

- arrangements and values can always be reconstructed,
- their previous states can be stored and recalled,
- additional instances and versions can be rendered,

resulting in a continuously workable medium, in which unprecedented creative freedom for Live Visuals can be experienced.

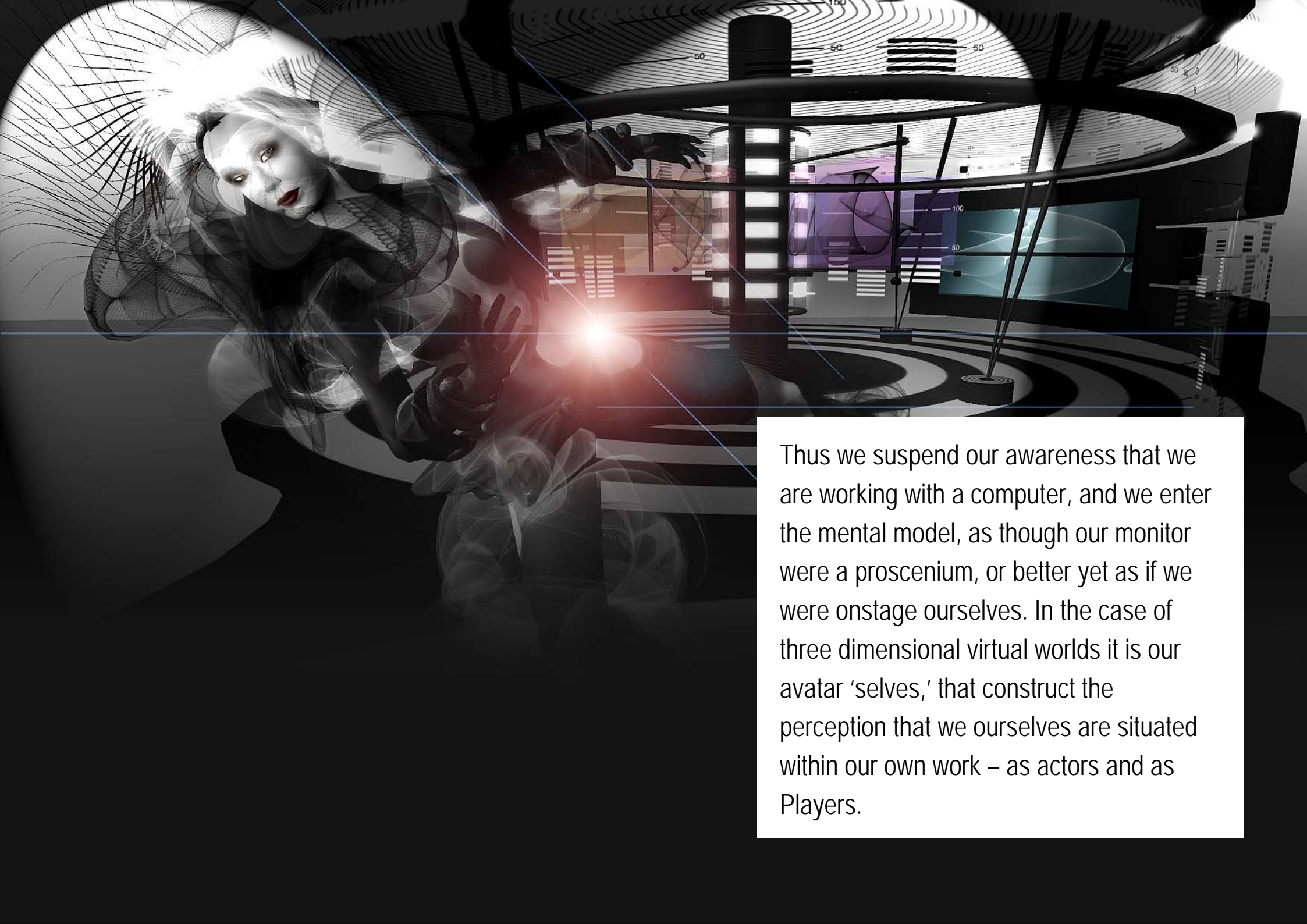
# Enter: 'Play!'

It is consequently a distinct advantage of computation to introduce unprecedented levels of 'Play' into creative output – this is a natural consequence of working in bits, since bits enable us to bypass the irreversibility of the traditional processes rooted in the physical laws of material, in the atoms. The very structure of the medium contains variables that invite 'Play,' especially manifesting as improvisation along established parameters.

We could indeed say that improvisation is the a priori manner of inhabiting the digital creative medium; a world populated by evolving objects that give the ability to navigate a continuum of possibilities. The key to working with computers is an understanding of them as a medium, in which there exists a perpetual mediation between action and notation. This means that while work takes place in an abstract métier, it can also actively reshape the very medium within which the user is operating.

This brings forth deep levels of psychological engagement that depend upon building convincing mental models which are an essential requirement for the computer to be perceived as a medium. Brenda Laurel has observed that this process is similar to what we experience when attending a good 'Play':

*"Engagement is similar in many ways to the theatrical notion of the 'willing suspension of disbelief,' a concept introduced by early nineteenth century critic and poet Samuel Coleridge. It is the state of mind that we must attain in order to enjoy a representation of an action."*



Thus we suspend our awareness that we are working with a computer, and we enter the mental model, as though our monitor were a proscenium, or better yet as if we were onstage ourselves. In the case of three dimensional virtual worlds it is our avatar 'selves,' that construct the perception that we ourselves are situated within our own work – as actors and as Players.

# Homo Ludens

A noteworthy context to the pre-digital divide between autographic and allographic artwork is articulated by Johan Huizinga who in his famed book Homo Ludens (1938) observes that notational artworks and the plastic arts also differentiate themselves when it comes to 'Play.'

According to Huizinga, 'Play' is not nearly as apparent in the plastic arts (of his time) as it is in literature, performance and music, since in (analogue) visual work the rigid nature of the materials requires pre-planned approaches and careful handling – mind sets that inevitably preclude 'Play,' which in itself seems to reside upon uncertainty.

# Uncertainty

Huizinga is unable to determine what 'Play' is about in its essence – it can only be truly understood by what 'it is not,' rather than by what 'it is.'

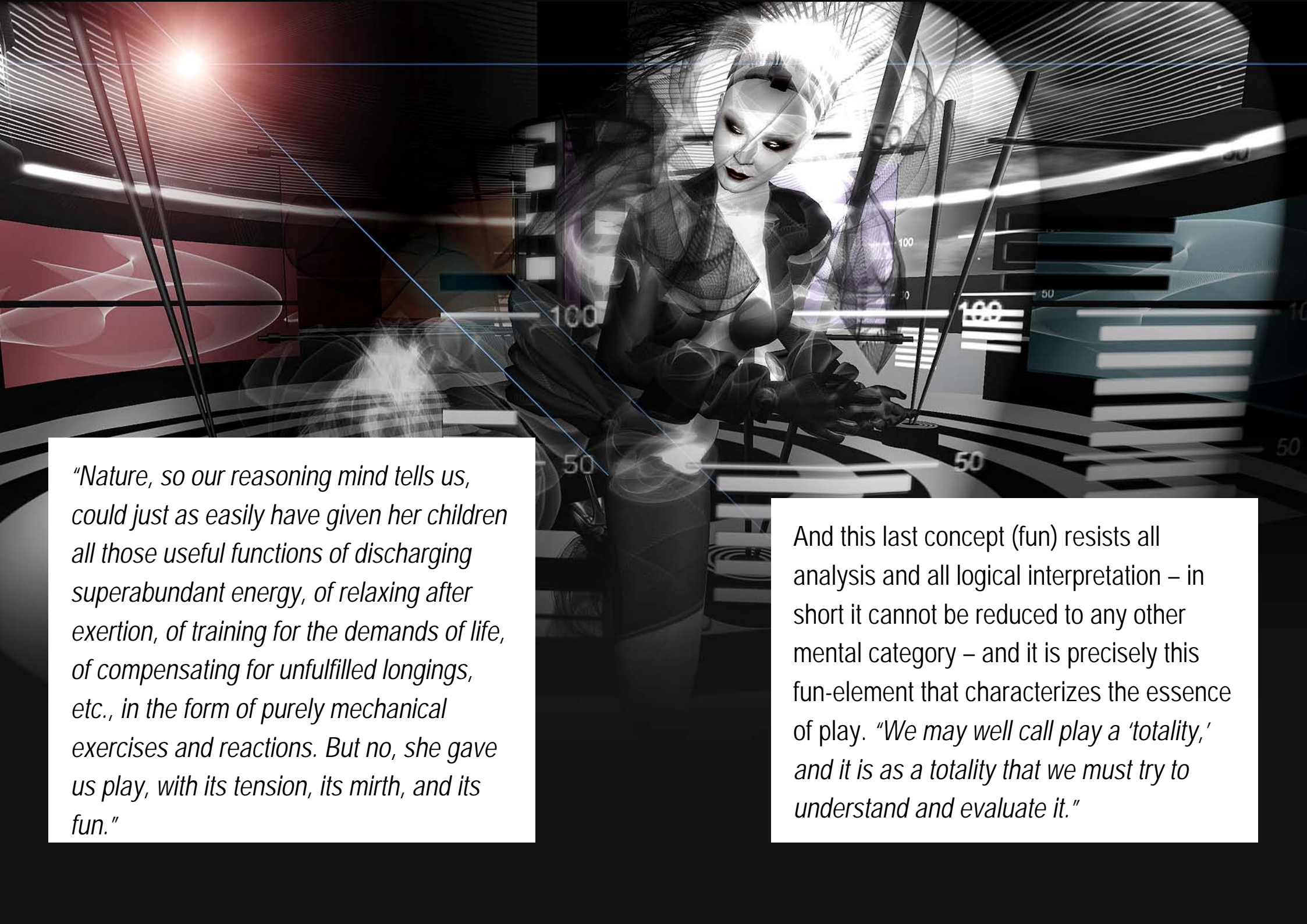
Just like his predecessor Huizinga, Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) too is uncertain of what the essence of 'Play' may be; describing it as 'amphibolous,' i.e. 'moving in two directions at the same time.'

To further illustrate the ambiguity in 'Play' Sutton-Smith also refers to Gregory Bateson who said in 1955 that 'Play' is a paradox because it both is and is not what it appears to be,' and Richard Schechner who in 1988 suggested that 'a playful nip is not only not a bite; it is also not not a bite.'

Another important point that Huizinga makes in 'Homo Ludens' is that "Play' is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing."

However, biological conditions appear to be insufficient for explaining behavior that is as extraordinary and as idiosyncratic as 'Play,' since nature, he says, would surely have provided far more efficient means for the fulfillment of those functions (such as learning) that scientists have always associated with 'Play.'





*"Nature, so our reasoning mind tells us, could just as easily have given her children all those useful functions of discharging superabundant energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings, etc., in the form of purely mechanical exercises and reactions. But no, she gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun."*

And this last concept (fun) resists all analysis and all logical interpretation – in short it cannot be reduced to any other mental category – and it is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play. *"We may well call play a 'totality,' and it is as a totality that we must try to understand and evaluate it."*

Although Huizinga is unable to determine what 'Play' is about in its essence, nevertheless he does identify a number of tangible attributes that this intangible thing holds:

'Play' is a voluntary act: It is free – it is in fact freedom itself. 'Play' is 'extraordinary' since it sets the player outside the confines of the 'ordinary' or of 'real' life for the duration of the play session. 'Play' creates its own order as well as its appended rules (which, again, stand outside of the order of 'real' life); and demands absolute and supreme allegiance to these from the player. 'Play' cannot be connected to material interests, and thus a 'Play' state is always entered into with no gain or profit in mind.

# Secrecy

Yet another attribute that can be related to 'Play' is the secrecy with which players very often surround themselves with. This love of secrecy, which is also evidenced in very early childhood play, points at the exceptional and special position of 'Play' as 'a thing apart' from the 'ordinary,' that evokes feelings along the lines of "this is for us, not for the 'others.'"

Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently."



When it comes to avatars – their many identities and the elaborate appearances thereof, Huizinga's thoughts on disguise and representation are most appealing when he tells us that *"the 'differentness' and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in 'dressing up.' Here the 'extra-ordinary' nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual 'plays' another part, another being. He is another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises. The child is making an image of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime, or more dangerous than what is ordinarily beheld. This representation is not so much a sham-reality as a realization in appearance: 'imagination' in the original sense of the word."*

# ‘Play’ and Mythopoiesis

Not only the elements of myth but those of poetry are also best understood as ‘Play’ functions. According to Huizinga, poetry derives its purpose from the timeless, ever-recurring patterns of beat and counter-beat, rise and fall, question and answer – in short, rhythm. Its origin is thus bound up with the principles of song and dance, which in their turn are best comprehended in the immemorial function of ‘Play.’



As soon as metaphors begin to describe things or events in terms of life and movement, we are on the road to personification, and this points at a strong correlation between 'Play' and 'mythopoiesis,' whereby the representation of *"the incorporeal and the inanimate as a person is the soul of all myth-making and nearly all poetry."* However, are we justified in calling this innate habit of the mind, this tendency to create an imaginary world of living beings, a 'Playing of the mind,' or 'a mental game?'

# Visual Arts and 'Play'

When examining the relationship between 'Play' and artistic activity Huizinga distinguishes between music/dance/poetry and the plastic arts: For him the former possess an inherent affinity with 'Play' in that they can be seen as immaterial, participatory and performative experiences whereas the plastic arts involve a far more deliberate approach, that involves pre-planned actions which are performed in isolation. This is due to the nature of their materials that do not easily accommodate improvisation. Huizinga traces this differentiation between the poetic arts and the plastic arts back to Greek mythology, where the former were relegated to the jurisdiction of Apollo and the Muses, while the visual arts were assigned to the domains of Hephaistos, the master craftsman, and Athene Erganē, the goddess of the handicrafts. Indeed, the visual arts seem to be one of the very few areas of human activity in which Huizinga cannot seem to find an easy correspondence to 'Play.'



Returning to McCullough's thoughts on how the digital medium has brought into effect a major transformation in which visual 'autographic' output has become 'allographic,' we find that Live Visuals are now effectively in possession of the same age-old attributes of linguistic and sonic output that allow for multiple instances of one artifact which are all open to unlimited further manipulations, mergers and 'Play.'

**Homo Ludens** was written in 1938, at a time well before this startling transition from atoms to bits as the new medium of visual creativity was in evidence. Would not Huizinga have taken such a vast change into consideration had he written *Homo Ludens* today?

Would he still have seen an insurmountable difficulty in the visual medium when it came to 'Play,' if he could have situated the plastic arts within what I like to think of the ultimate visual 'Playground' – the computer?

The metaverse avatar is a uniquely hybrid being that I imagine would have delighted Huizinga in its ability to combine the allographic with what in his lifetime was still autographic: Avatars are visual creatures. They are visual artifacts. However, avatars are equally troubadours and storytellers, poets and dancers and performers and movie stars. And ultimately avatars, at their absolute and consummate best, are – Players!

## Avatar Ludens

Avatars 'Play' in more ways than I could possibly hope to capture here – indeed I would like to posit that most avatar activity is centered on '**Play**,' regardless of whether we are looking at gaming worlds or at the metaverse.

While in gaming worlds this activity is focused upon achievement oriented 'games' that Brian Sutton-Smith places under a 'Rhetoric of Power,' in the metaverse such 'games' often come out in ways that are far less easy to categorize: More so than structured activities that work towards a predefined outcome or goal (as games tend to be), what makes the metaverse into a very powerful playground for adults is '**Pure Play**' that takes place voluntarily and spontaneously, has no predetermined duration, and no expected outcome.



The transition from autographic to allographic output has also brought forth a dramatic new component to an old game – the creation of novel and/or alternative identities. While, until recently, these became actuated mostly in the realm of literature, that is to say on the mental plane of words; the avatar is now enabling us to create novel identities that are also visual beings, complete with virtually embodied personas that may aid in underscoring their psychic distinctiveness.



Once again, I wish to go to play theory – this time through Paul Harris, who describes children's 'role play' using externalized objects, such as dolls or other toys, as a prop for projecting different personas with which a child will fully identify for as long as the play session is in progress; saying that children *"create such characters out of thin air, positioning them at various points in their actual environment."* According to Harris, these extended play sessions do not need to involve multiple players; indeed they are most often performed by a child playing in isolation. Role play, says Harris, is further striking since children will temporarily immerse themselves fully into the identity, or indeed concurrent identities that they create; also often shifting their moods and their tone of voice in ways that are appropriate to the part(s) which they are enacting.

This description may serve to explain the fascination that adult metaverse players evince when it comes to 'alt' avatars, through whom such doll 'Play' sessions that evoke Role Play through multiple personas also comes into being. However, Harris's description may be incomplete. What may be at work with both children playing with dolls, as well as adults playing with alt avatars, may be far more complex since we may in fact be playing with the multiple facets of what is commonly held to be our singular and unified 'self.'

## The Multiplied/Divided 'Self:' Heteronyms and Avatars

When it comes to an examination of the multiplicity of the self for purposes of creative 'Play' **Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms** should be considered at the centre of the stage. **Not only did Pessoa write under more than 50 personas, including the famed four – Bernardo Soares, Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Alvaro de Campos – but he claimed that these were not mere pseudonyms since it was not just their names that were different to his.**

**Rather, they were fully fledged 'others,' with uniquely developed individuated personalities and appearances of their own, whom their inventor called 'heteronyms.'** Showing commonalities with Yeats's 'masks' or Pound's 'personae,' these independent authors also wrote essays on one another, including commentaries on Pessoa's own writing. Such indeed, was their disparity that Pessoa even created elaborate horoscopes through which he charted their individual futures independently of his own.



The heteronyms were not simply a game; they were a highly intellectualized construction that occupied Pessoa's entire adult life. They were the co-travelers of a voyage of self-discovery, or self-invention which he worded as "to pretend is to know oneself," an existential circumnavigation that would not end until Pessoa did.

'Pretending' was actuated through these discrete personalities lived by the author within himself and was given expression through the books which they authored, to the contents of which Pessoa did not claim ownership of.

Nor did he necessarily agree or disagree with what was in their prose and poetry, saying that 'they' wrote through him as if he were being dictated to. Indeed in his most extreme proclamations regarding this literary content, he insisted that the he himself, the human author of these books, had no personality of his own.

*"Whenever he feels a personality well up inside, he quickly realizes that this new being, though similar, is distinct from him – an intellectual son, perhaps, with inherited characteristics, but also with differences that make him someone else... As the helpless slave of his multiplied self, it would be useless for him to agree with one or the other theory about the written results of that multiplication."*

Although Pessoa resolutely maintained the autonomy of the heteronyms, nonetheless he tacitly acknowledged that he was the owner of the overall literary system that he created through their writings. He also divulged that he may have been only contributing "... to my own amusement (which would already be good enough for me)," in this way also defining his creative act as 'Play.'

This acknowledgement is tragically furthered when he expresses the deep seated loneliness out of which these alternative selves have manifested as the quenchers of a thirst for companionship, for playmates:

*"In view of the current dearth of literature, what can a man of genius do but convert himself into a literature? Given the dearth of people he can get along with, what can a man of sensibility do but invent his own friends, or at least his intellectual companions?"*

From Pessoa's example it is evident that assuming multiple identities or spreading one's singular being over many 'selves' is an age-old game to which doing the same with avatars only adds a new component.

Nevertheless, what avatars bring into this old game may yet be significant:

# Inside/Outside

One of the contributions that avatars make to the discussion of the **'Play of the Selves'** resides in the circumstance that while we identify with our virtual representations to the extent where the boundaries between our physical and our virtual beings seem to blur to quite a remarkable degree; no matter how strong this identification may be, the avatar still resolutely stands outside of us, is an externalized being that does not have to rely upon our physical apparatus to become materialized.

# Inside/Outside

We can therefore observe our representation through the avatar as a tangibly visualized and externalized manifestation, while at the same time still being 'inside' the body of our avatar from an emotional point of view.

Which brings a very bizarre twist to the conundrum of the 'Play of the Selves' – especially when examined from a creative point of view, and especially so when the whole notion of the heteronym is brought into the realm of Live Visuals.



## Avatar Actors

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the human being behind the keyboard is part of an ongoing movie from the moment of stepping into a three dimensional virtual world.

This effect of being immersed in a cinematic environment (in which we are participant as well as viewer) is effectuated through the circumstance that we are watching our virtual body(ies) as externalized beings whilst at the same time actively being inside the selfsame body, engaged in interaction as well as effectuating changes in the world that surrounds us.

Looking at avatars and virtual worlds from a performative vantage point Jacquelyn Ford Morie suggests that there has been a recent paradigm shift in human experience that has been brought on by these phenomena. Morie points at the research of performance artists that contributes to the exploration of virtual environments as a key to our future understanding of ourselves in physical and digital domains, taking on *"an experiential locus that is outside the perceptual self."* This, according to Morie, signifies *"a shift to a dualistic existence that occurs in two simultaneous bodies through which the lived-in body has now bifurcated and become two."*



Richard Schechner notes upon several different aspects of a performance that he draws from different performative traditions. One of Schechner's primary considerations is the term '**transport**,' which he tells us should always be present in any successful performance, since the performer/participant should literally 'go into another world' to partake in such action.

A second term that Schechner applies to performative undertakings is '**transformation**' which brings about a change in the performer's self-representation during the performance itself and furthermore this change is expected to retain a lingering effect after the performance is over.

One may thus conclude that Morie's observations on avatars dovetail with Schechner's concept of 'transport,' albeit in a dualistic sense of the word, given that while we are transported into another world through the bodies of our avatars, we yet remain in our physical bodies simultaneously.

My own observations and personal experience verifies that avatars are in fact powerful creative agents that are capable of evoking 'transportation' and 'transformation.'

And as such they can also be seen as potent performers, bringing to the fore even possibly unexpected talents in their human handlers within these creative domains.



While it is indeed true that we are automatically immersed in an ongoing cinematic event from the moment that we step into an online three dimensional world, there are also countless instances where a performance is staged deliberately – complete with costumes, props and scenery. While avatars that belong to discrete individuals will often come together to stage such performances, an equally fascinating practice is to create your 'movie' solely by yourself, through an assemblage of your very own 'alt' avatars who then become the cast of your performance.







I am an enthusiastic instigator of such activities myself, staging and enacting performances through my many personas, my alt avatars. While many of these events come about spontaneously on the fly, and are thus not documented, with others I had the presence of mind to capture videos and screenshots while I was actively playing inside the virtual world. These were later used as the material of narrative websites in which a non-linear story is being told – also in combination with soundscapes/music of my own making and accompanied by text that I take from my favorite poets and authors, who are usually the inspirations of the 'tale.'

## Conclusion

It may be that all of us, child and adult, work at fantasizing metaphysical paracosms all our days. We are eternally making over the world in our minds, and much of it is fantasy.

The difference is that while children have toys, adults have images, words, music, and daydreams that are deemed to perform in much the same way as toys do. Our fantasies are the microworlds of an inner life that all of us manipulate in our own way to come to terms with feelings, realities, and aspirations as they enter our lives; and in this way children and adults may not really be so different in their use of fantasy 'Play.'

The difference lies only in the concreteness of the symbols, and in the maturity of their purposes, not in the universal existence of fantasized inner lives.

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