

Chapter 12

Exploring Liminality from an Anthropological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The transition from the real to the digital requires a shift of consciousness that can be theorised with recourse to the concept of liminality, which has multidisciplinary currency in psychology and other disciplines in the social sciences, cultural, and literary theory. In anthropology the notion of liminality was introduced by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in the context of the development of the rite of passage. Since van Gennep's discussion of the concept, the term has been used in a variety of contexts and disciplines that range from psychology, religion, sociology, and latterly in new media, where it has a renewed emphasis because of the transition from the real to the virtual space of the digital interface.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter unpacks the term the 'liminal' or 'liminality' and examines its applicability in a wider context beyond its original formulation in anthropology. Of particular interest are the behaviours and practices that occur in the liminal state which are distinct from regulations adhered to in the pre- and post-liminal states. This is problematized in digital culture where the transitions between the states are more spatially impercep-

tible. Given that the liminal state is central to the rite and therefore to the relationship between 'self' and 'the world' the confusion of the boundary in digital culture has psychological ramifications for the participant of the video game, for example, as s/he is less able to regulate their behaviour in the absence of clearly delineated boundaries.

One of the first questions that need to be asked is: what does 'liminality' refer to? When something is described as liminal what does this mean; has it undergone a transformation in properties, or

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merely in the way that it is perceived? The terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' are derived from the Latin '*limen*,' which means *threshold* and refers to the bottom part of a doorway, which must be crossed when entering a room. Ritual passages can be described by the following spatial metaphors: crossings, thresholds, boundaries, and crossroads. In anthropology the notion of liminality was introduced by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in the context of the development of the rite of passage, which was a specific ritual that marked what he described as "life crises" (the accompanying stages that mark the transition from one stage of life to another, such as in birth, marriage, death) or seasonal changes (such as the harvest, or the New Year). Rituals in general involve repeated, symbolic activities, but they do not always involve the liminal stage, which marks the crossing of thresholds. It is only a certain subset of rituals, namely the one concerning the rite of passage, which involves the liminal. In *The Rites of Passage* (1909/English translation, 1960) van Gennep analysed different rites of passage performed by ancient tribes, which facilitated the life-changing passage in life, such as the transition from childhood to adulthood. Van Gennep envisioned life in society as a house with many rooms where the individual has to be led from one room to another. The passage from room to room represents abrupt and ritualised transitions, which mark out the different stages in life.

He claimed that they each, irrespective of type and cultural context, shared three common stages of 'separation,' 'transition' (which is the liminal stage), and 'aggregation.' These are: the stage before where the individual has a defined role in the community, the stage during, where the individual is stripped of their role within the community, and the stage after, where the individual is bestowed with a new identity or status and integrated back into the community. The reconfiguring of the new identity in the third stage is usually the cause of great celebration for the community. The three stages can be mapped around liminality as the

central concept, where 'separation' involves pre-liminal rites, and where the individual is forced to break with previous practices and extricate him/herself from the community. This is followed by the liminal stage where the rites and rituals are carried out to move the individual across a threshold. In the crossing of this threshold the individual is often spatially segregated from their normal environs. They also become stripped of any determinate identity and are set apart and rendered sacred (untouchable). After the rites have been carried out, which confer the new status on the individual, aggregation occurs and the individual becomes reincorporated into the community. The individual has surpassed the liminal stage (and so is in the post-liminal stage) where they can begin their life as a new being.

This tripartite structure can be mapped onto rites in specific terms. In the traditional formulation of the marriage rite, the individual moves from the status of being single to being betrothed to being married. Moving from one stage to another involves a crossing of the threshold. In initiation rites an adolescent who has undergone an initiation ceremony, such as a Bar Mitzvah ritual (in Judaism), returns to the community not as a boy but as a man. Whilst van Gennep argued for the presence of all stages in a rite of passage, the significance given to each stage was not always uniform. Some rites might develop one of the stages more than other stages in the ritual act. Therefore, whilst the stage of separation may be more central in funeral ceremonies, incorporation is often more significant in marriages. However, all rites involve some degree of experiencing each of the stages before the individuals are fully accepted into society or culture. In the case of death, the three stages aid the community in coming to terms with the deceased. These are complex stages that are clearly demarcated by separation, transition, and aggregation.

The anthropologist Victor Turner isolated the middle liminal stage from van Gennep's analysis and examined its significance further in his works,

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