

CENTRES OF GRAVITY

Leila Johnston, October 2018



As is often the case, this work arose from two colliding thoughts.

The first was to do with our relationship to created things. It strikes me that our creations usually need to be noticed. It's as though we have a basic human intolerance to the idea that something might exist meaningfully outside of our immediate needs. Perhaps we fear indifference to us, and can't help but imprint this neediness onto everything we make.

The second source of inspiration was an image that's haunted me for more than 30 years. The CS Lewis book *The Magician's Nephew* is a sort of origin story of Narnia. Throughout the adventure, the young protagonists, Polly and Digory, experience a number of in-between places, including a continuous loft space much the one above my terraced house. This exciting rat run joins all the attics, ultimately allowing the children access to their neighbours' homes (and lives). The magical counterpart to the linked lofts is an ethereal place called 'The Wood Between The Worlds', a beautiful forest filled with dark pools, each one leading into a different reality.

Without spoiling the plot for you too much, the children soon find themselves leaping into these pools and tumbling through the sky into unknown universes. Imagine the courage required to submerge yourself in a mysterious liquid – the faith, or at least hope, that there will not only be air on the other side, but that it will be breathable. Picture the long, awful moment of uncertainty, sinking into this strange water, just waiting for the magic to kick in.

Water takes us back to the beginning, whether we believe in the Flood or evolution or just a mother's womb. It represents a moment before decision, and is freeing, I think, because it gives us chances. Anything can happen when we're submerged. We can be anyone, or *anything* as, suspended in there, we start to lose track of our humanness. But water brings with it a condition to this freedom: we must relinquish the known for the unknown, and there's no guarantee of safety. It can take us everywhere, but it can also take everything we have. Water *dismantles* us.

In the end, it is always easier to stay where we are.



The Real Wood between the Worlds

Part of the point of this project is about the future of tech, with water obviously symbolising a classic sci-fi technology dream – glittering fluid intelligence liberated from wires and messy physicality.

The goalposts of magic keep shifting, and the idea of truly autonomous tech, free from physicality and free from us, seems to be the secular Westerner's last bastion of impossibility. As science's senses get sharper, mysteries are chased into the pits of the oceans. Liquidised

machine minds seem full of potential and somewhere (we hope) a common language might inexplicably emerge. Water is always an in-between world, but using this wonderful communication medium comes at a price. Something will usually be taken.

It has never been more normal to aggressively define who we are by means of a wall keeping out who we are not. We have never been more visibly polarised than we are in the identities we construct online. Here, we no longer see ourselves as individual bodies, but as political instances speaking on behalf of bracketed collections of ideas. Cynical algorithms keep us in line with our disembodied political armies, and shield us from challengers. I sometimes think we're not really afraid of virtual minds arising at all, and that what we really fear is the prospect of meeting real humans with views just as valid as our own. That kind of confrontation would cost us a lot: identity, pride, time, energy, community. The idea of losing ourselves in this way, the revelation that we've been wrong, and wrong, and wrong again, and that furthermore none of the things we've constructed are even centrally important, might be so traumatic we can't contemplate it directly. It's much easier to pretend we're really worried about a self check-out machine coming to life.

How does the Wood Between The Worlds connect to these hazy windows, and creations that don't care if they're seen?

We need to be OK with not being involved. Polly and Digory were alone in the woods. They did what they had to do, and while I have no doubt it would have looked amazing, they weren't performing their feats for anyone else. Beautiful rituals without spectators go on all the time, and digital technology is a master of them, running its algorithms for its own reasons, forever. Highly realised virtual worlds are already there, carrying on around us all the time, they're just not for human eyes.

I think about all this in terms of translation. If there is a common motivation, a similar need, emotion, value, even way of moving, then some alternative sort of conversation is theoretically possible between any two entities, regardless of their respective backgrounds. There is a natural joy to this kind of 'meet in the middle' conversation. When we wade out into the waters of the in-between world, anything is possible, but our culture is sometimes as fragile as our identity, and we often feel the risk of losing it is too great.

While most of us are busily training ourselves to resist the possibilities of this alternative conversation, dancers study its value without fear. That's why I feel dancers are the natural mediators of these cultural binaries: human and other; human and human; human and machine – three expressions of the same inherent crisis. Everything that moves can be conversed with through everything else that moves, and dancers are masters of the bridging power of physical language.

Is it possible for our minds to imagine something significantly different to us? Or can we only really imagine the things we see in ourselves?

This isn't about the silly hysteria around AI becoming sentient; the key to understanding in the modern world won't be found in Christmas cracker riddles about imaginary apex predators. The real 'hard problem' is much more difficult and interesting, and we encounter it every time we attempt to interact with another human. If we can find a way to shift our starting point away from our own points of reference, even for a moment, then perhaps we will really have transcended something.

Technology might actually offer some clues to understanding other minds, just not in the Terminator way. Analogy is the key, and tech is a treasure trove of comparisons that we have yet to properly plunder. Computers are like us because we made them. They are a bit like a time-bound body, but also a bit like immortality. They are supposed to speed us up, but are ultimately physical, and more often than not, get in the way of our interactions. Tech is the difficult alien in our midst, the black box, the similar-but-different 'someone else' with which we all must deal, every day.

If you had the power to make anything, you would make a new world, eventually. Here, the religious and digital approaches draw from the same impulse. Both behave as though created material arises only in the orbit of an observer, that things are made marvellous not for their own sake, but principally to be seen.

Like all things digital, virtual worlds often surround the experiencer in a carefully curated bubble. But what if tech is most instructive on empathy when it is indifferent to us, when it's being its truest self, and not performing? Maybe tech has most in common with humans when it is broken, poorly realised or oblivious. Maybe the in-between places linking the digital realm and the physical world are the spaces that spring up to please themselves, rather than to delight a particular pair of eyes. We could then be true *witnesses* to virtual worlds, not entitled to experience them but simply very lucky to be there, empowered by the happening, and sensing the language – if not yet understanding.

Where does that leave us? Are we still us, if we are not at the centre of every story? Can immersion in indifferent digital worlds give us our first push down a path to something else?

The first step in an inversion of VR's impulse to surround us would mean an instant change in our status. We peer, like ghosts, through clouded windows, anonymous witnesses to the mysterious, eternal rituals. But this should be a sort of relief, too. Whether we're here or not, these worlds will keep going. We have been granted a taste of otherness and a choice: as we are no longer the point, we can leave any time we want. We are off the hook.

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