

# Telematic Practice and Research Discourses: Three practice-based research project case studies

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## Introduction

This Paper focuses on the production, documentation and preservation of the authors telematic practice-based research in the interactive media arts. This reflects a timely practice review with significant implications on the future of exhibiting and archiving the broad range of creative arts in this field. These fundamental research questions also have relevance across a number of practice based research fields including performance arts and the ephemeral nature of open-system interactive artworks. The objective of this paper is to propose research methods that will approach the question of how to accurately document and archive this transient creative practice that is so often reliant on its cultural and historic context. Since the early 90s my artistic practice has identified and questioned the notions of embodiment and disembodiment in relation to the interacting performer in telematic and telepresent art installations. At what point is the performer embodying the virtual performer in front of them? And have they therefore become disembodied by doing so? A number of interactive telematic artworks will be looked at in detail during this paper establishing case-study examples to answer these questions. Stemming from Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz seminal work 'Hole-in-Space' to -----'s telepresent experiments with 'Telematic Dreaming' and to the current emerging creative/critical discourse in 'Second Life' that polarizes fundamental existential questions concerning identity, the self, the ego and the (dis)embodied avatar.

The preservation and documentation of this work is extremely problematic when we consider the innate issues of (dis)embodiment in relation to presence and intimacy, as experienced and performed in telematic and virtual environments. How can it become possible to reencounter a performance of dispersed and expanded bodies, multiple and interconnected identities, spectral representations and auras; in short, at hybrid bodies (/selves) made of flesh and digital technologies, and the intimate connections between them.

## Telematic Practice

My work in the field of telematic arts explores the emergence of a user-determined narrative by bringing remote participants together in a shared telepresent environment. Through the use of live chroma-keying and videoconferencing technology, two public rooms or installations and their audiences are joined in a virtual duplicate that turns into a mutual, visual space of activity. Linked via an H.323 Internet videoconference connection, this form of immersive interactive exchange can be established between almost any two locations in the world.

The audiences form an integral part within these telematic experiments, which simply wouldn't function without their presence and participation. Initially the viewers seem to enter a passive space, but they are instantly thrown into the performer role by discovering their own body-double in communication with another physically remote user on video monitors in front of them. They usually adapt to the situation quickly and start controlling and choreographing their human avatar. Nevertheless, the installation set up in the form of an open accessible platform offers a second choice of engagement: the passive mode of just observing the public action, which often appears to be a well-rehearsed piece of drama confidently played out by actors. Compelling to watch, it can be a complex issue to discover that the performers are also part of the audience and are merely engaging in a role. The entire installation space then represents two dynamic dramatic functions: the players, controllers, or puppeteers of their own avatar, absorbed by the performing role; and the off-camera members of the audience, who are themselves awaiting the next available slot on the telematic stage, soon to be sharing this split dynamic. However, the episodes that unfold are not only determined by the participants, but by the given dramatic context. As an artist I am both designer of the environment and therefore 'director' of the narrative, which I determine through the social and political milieu that I choose to play out in these telepresent encounters.

## HEADROOM – A space between presence and absence (2006)

This case study represents the first theoretical account of 'HEADROOM'<sup>1</sup>, a site-specific interactive art installation produced by Paul Sermon in Taipei as the successful recipient of the 2006 Taiwan Visiting Arts Fellowship. This residency programme was a joint initiative between Visiting Arts, the Council for Cultural Affairs Taiwan, British Council Taipei and Arts Council England. The development of this interactive art installation has been extensively documented as part of the AHRC Performing-Presence project<sup>2</sup> led by Prof. Nick Kaye from Exeter University in partnership with Stanford University. HEADROOM was exhibited at Xinyi Assembly Hall Taipei, April 2006.

HEADROOM is a juxtaposition of the artist's ethnographic research experiences in Taipei, between the way people 'live' and the ways people 'escape' this city, as an analogy between the solitude presence of the 'bedroom' (private) space and the social networking telepresent aspirations of the 'headroom' (Internet) space. Also referencing Roy Ascott's essay, 'Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?' (1990)<sup>3</sup>, and reminiscent of Nam June Paik's early TV-Buddha installations<sup>4</sup>, HEADROOM is a reflection of the self within the telepresent space, as both the viewer and performer. The television 'screen' is transformed into a stage or portal between the causes and effects that simultaneously take place in the minds of the solitary viewers. The installation overtly intertwines private and public space, and the sense of the 'inside' and 'outside' of the installation's 'place'<sup>5</sup>. It is partly in this breaking down of oppositions that the participants' sense of the 'presence' of their co-performers is amplified. In this aspect, HEADROOM radically extends a disruption of oppositions in which video art/installation and site-specific work has frequently operated. The co-performers discover themselves acting out a series of intertwinings of public/private, inside/outside. The installation itself and title emphasize the intimate nature of this overlaying of spaces - the aspect of fantasy or dream - while the public nature of the installation sanctions or appears to give permission or consent to this closeness. In this context, co-performers discover themselves 'coming closer' in a paradoxical distribution of presence - an intimacy produced by a telepresent distance. Here, then, visitors discover themselves occupying and acting out their co-performer's private space, while seeing their own private space acted out by their telepresent partner. The spatial rules of public interaction are breached, producing an intimacy, a particular and shocking closeness, and a dialectic between the explicit sense of being here (in the bedroom, for example) and being there (acting out the space of the other), while seeing and responding to their co-performer's mirrored reaction.

Located in the east of Taipei city in the shadow of the 101 Tower and Taipei's World Trade Centre is a Taiwanese War Veterans housing complex built around 1949. This site has been renovated and converted into a museum and exhibition space. It sits on some of the most commercially sought after space in the city, but because of its historical importance to the liberation of Taiwan it remains a listed building. The back-to-back terraced streets have been knocked through into entire buildings, creating three large exhibition halls that retain their original appearance of the houses on the outside. The spaces that interested me most were the small facade rooms created by the larger space conversion, which have been separated from the gallery space by interior glass walls and are only accessible from existing external front doors. The two facade rooms I used for the installation were identical in size and were used to house a connected telepresent installation where the audience participants in the separate facade rooms were unable to see each other. However this allowed the audience inside the gallery to observe both participants in the space through the glass walls. The rooms were only about 2 meters by 3.5 meters wide, and 2.5 meters high. The original houses were longer, but no wider and the original inhabitants often halved the height of the rooms to create separate sleeping and living areas. This two level use of the space interested me, and also reminded me of the outside of the space with the 101 Tower in stark contrast to the little houses huddled around its base. This paradox can be seen in much of Taipei's culture, from very basic noodle bars and soup kitchens between Karaoke TV clubs, 7/11 convenience stores, high-rise office blocks to countless temples devoted to countless incarnations of the Buddha.

The project functioned by combining the two identical room installations within the same video image via simple videoconference techniques. The system worked as follows: The two rooms both had false ceilings lowered to a level of approximately 1.5 meters, which left a cavity space above each room of approximately 1 meter high and forced the gallery visitors to bend down when entering the spaces. However there was one

location in each room where the viewer was able to stand up straight and put their head and hands through a hole in the false ceiling and into the cavity space above. Although each room shared identical dimensions they had a strikingly different appearance. One of the rooms contained drab used furniture in the lower part with a very lived-in appearance, the cavity space above it was brightly decorated, appearing to be a personal shrine or Karaoke bar containing a large video screen at one end. The other room by contrast, was empty in the lower section and very bright in the cavity above, including illuminated blue walls and another large video screen. A video camera in each space recorded a live image of the head and hands of each participant and feed it directly to a video chroma-key mixer. The background in the profile head shot recorded against the bright blue walls was extracted by the video mixer and replaced with the other live profile head shot - placing the two heads opposite each other within the same live video image, as in fig. 1.

The red room represented a very theatrical, illusionary space. The blue room, by contrast, appeared to be a more functional back stage space. However, from the outside point of view there was not so much a front and back stage division as a juxtaposition of two entirely separate spaces, which, due to their sheer proximity, were meant to have something in common and yet, somehow, they never become a telepresent synthesis. For Gabriella Giannachi<sup>6</sup> there is a post-modern dialectic here, expressed visually in the impossibility of the two spaces to become one. That the external viewer, standing in front of the two spaces, actually sees 'nothing' but the real, whereas to see the telepresent space you actually have to be willing to be within it.

### **Liberate your Avatar (2007)**

Since May 2007 my practice and research has undergone what might appear to be a paradigm shift, focusing on the creative possibilities of the on-line multi-user virtual environment of 'Second Life'. Whilst this represents a major departure from my established telematic projects, there are significant parallels between the earlier telematic video experiments and the presences and absence experiments he is currently developing in Second life. Together these aspects of telepresence and the merger of first and Second Life aim to question fundamental assumptions of the Second Life phenomena.

The aim of this project is to critically investigate how online participants in three-dimensional worlds, Second Life in particular, socially interact within innovative creative environments and appropriate these cultural experiences as part of their everyday lives, and question what is 'real' in this relationship. The project brings together ethnographic and creative practice-based methods that identify and develop original and innovative interactive applications, interface design and imperative cultural and sociological knowledge that will help shape and define the emerging online society and 'metaverse'<sup>7</sup> of Second Life, significantly contributing to the quality of both 'first' and Second Life.

In Second Life you create an avatar that lives out an online existence. There are no set objectives, you can buy property, clothing, accessories, furnish your home, modify your identity, and interact with other users. This online community has grown to eleven million residents since launching in 2000, generating a thriving economy. However, whilst the virtual shopping malls, nightclubs, bars and beaches often reach their user capacity, there is a noticeable lack of creative and sociological modes of attraction and consequently the growing media attention around Second Life warns that this expanding community has become ambivalent and numbed by their virtual consumption and there is an increasing need to identify new forms of interaction, creativity, cultural production and sociability.

However, when the 'Front National', the far right French political party of Jean-Marie Le Pen opened their Second Life headquarters in January 2007, the Second Life residents reacted in a way that would suggest they are far from complacent avatars wandering around a virtual landscape and that they possess a far greater degree of social conscience than the consumer aesthetics of Second Life suggests. Through prolonged mass virtual protest the centre was raised to the ground in the space of a week and has not returned since. The reaction to the Le Pen Second Life office begs the question: is Second Life a platform for potential social and cultural change? And is there a hidden desire and ambition to interact and engage with this online community at an intellectual and creative level that transcends the collective 'I shop therefore I am'<sup>8</sup> apparentness of its community? Moreover, does Second Life influence first lives? And therefore could

our first life existence start to reflect our Second Life conscience as this community continues to grow and develop into the future? As the landmass and population of Second Life expands at an ever-increasing rate it is clear that essential research into the intersection and interplay between first and Second Life, and both new and old patterns of consumption, cultural production and sociability is urgently needed.

This second case study focuses on some of my most recent Second Life experiments entitled 'Liberate your Avatar'<sup>9</sup>. An interactive public video art performance incorporating Second Life users in a real life environment, as shown in fig 2. Located on All Saints Gardens, Oxford Road, Manchester, for the Urban Screens Festival, October 12th 2007 from 5pm to 6pm, this installation merged the realities of 'All Saints Gardens' on Oxford Road with its online three-dimensional counterpart in 'Second Life', and for the first time allowed 'first life' visitors and 'second life' avatars to coexist and share the same park bench in a live interactive public video installation. By entering into this feedback loop through a portal between these two parallel worlds this event exposed the identity paradox in Second Life.

This unique project, commissioned by Lets Go Global Manchester, brought together previous practice-based telepresence research projects with current experiments and experiences in the online three-dimensional world of Second Life. The installation investigated the notion of demonstration and how it has been transposed from the real into the virtual environment. 'Liberate your Avatar' exposed the history of 'All Saints Gardens'; relocating Mancunian Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst as an avatar within Second Life, where she remained locked to the railings of the park, just as she did 100 years ago, reminding us of the need to continually evaluate our role in this new online digital society. 'Liberate Your Avatar' examined this new crisis whilst drawing upon the history of the site, creating a rich, provoking and entirely innovative, interactive experience.

The installation consisted of three specific spaces, two of which were located in the virtual world of Second Life and the other one in the actual All Saints Gardens on Oxford Road, Manchester. The two virtual environments included a blue box studio and a three-dimensional replica of the All Saints Gardens, and are located adjacent to each other, allowing the Second Life avatars to move freely between the two spaces. When an avatar entered the blue box space their image became chroma-keyed with a live video image from the real 'All Saints Gardens'. This combined live video image of the avatar in the actual square was then streamed back onto the Internet and presented on a virtual screen in both Second Life spaces. An image of the Second Life version of 'All Saints Gardens' with its virtual 'big screen' was then presented on the actual public video screen in the real life 'All Saints Gardens'.

The outcome of this project identified a need to critically investigate how online participants in three-dimensional worlds, Second Life in particular, interact within innovative creative environments and appropriate these cultural experiences as part of their everyday lives as a vehicle for social and cultural change. Liberate your Avatar brought together theoretical and practical methods from the field to address this identity crisis in first and SecondLife. Although online communities have been studied in-depth for sometime now, the focus here will be upon an ethnographic, multidisciplinary and practice-based discussion in order to paint a richer picture of future experiences.

In this respect the project uncovered more question than answers, principally concerning identity and self. The ontological questions of virtual reality and identity, be it online or offline, have been at the centre of the contemporary media arts and science debate for the past three decades, Liberate your Avatar points at the social, political and cultural significance of Second Life by questioning the emerging relationship between 'first' and Second Life as a platform for potential social and cultural change - which is potentially appropriated as a mirror image of first life? Through this discourse the project questioned whether Second Life is a reflection of a first life or if first life is actually a reflection of Second Life? By consciously deciding to refer to this mirrored image as "first" life rather than "real" life, this central question polarized a paradox in Second Life when we consider Lacan's<sup>10</sup> proposition that the "self" (or ego) is a formulation of our own body image reflected in the mirror "stage". However, there are no mirrors in Second Life, which raises the fundamental question of whether it is possible to formulate our second self (or alter ego) in Second Life at all. Or is the computer screen itself the very mirror we are looking at?

## Hidden Voices: Memoryscape (2006)

The final case study project 'Hidden Voices: Memoryscape'<sup>11</sup> was Commissioned by the Taipei City Department of Cultural Affairs for The 4th City on the Move Art Festival, November 2006, Taipei, Taiwan: From Encounter to Encounter - Expounding the Playground, which took place at the Children's Recreation Centre Taipei. 'Hidden Voices: Memoryscape' invited visitors to enter the amusement park and, guided by PDA's and maps, to randomly search out stories taking place amidst the physical terrain for example, unusual past experiences of different people at the amusement park when they were children: "a strawberry ice cream dripping on an orange skirt, a lost shoe, falling over and grazing a knee or how the space appeared then..." Stories and incidental experiences allow adults to reinterpret this place, which is the "territory of children", while memories in synch with the archetypal concept of the venue induce the expansion of the subconscious, constructing an aesthetic of imagined memories in relation to the venue. Thus, the augmentation of individual memories is transformed into collective memory. In addition to the augmented mediascape, ----- presented a series of video projected images in the tunnel of the miniature train ride. These video sequences referred to a momentary transition between the past and present experience of the amusement park and thus further assisted in augmenting the participants journey around the environment.

This project commenced by interviewing parents and visitors at the adventure playground over a one week period and recording two to five minute episodes about their own childhood experiences and memories of the adventure playground. Intimate personal stories and strange and unusual memories about incidental experiences. In order to create this dynamic audio and video narrative the work was partly constructed/dramatised and partly real life stories/interviews.

This layering of augmented memories over the actually experience of visiting the adventure playground today was further assisted by providing visitors with a map that guided them through the locations and stories attached to them. Whilst further conceptual information was provided in this guide, other discreet and unusual sounds and visuals were included that the user stumbled across, providing an abstract story or chain of events that brought the piece together within an interactive experience of a collective memory of the playground. The audio sequences were recorded using binaural microphones which spatially placed the sounds as they were when recorded. Additional visual references to this augmented narrative were provided as video clips projected in the interior of the tunnel of the children's train ride. A combination of slow motion and strobe flashing image sequences took the visitor further into this augmented memoryscape, a momentary return to the history and collective memory of the environment.

Augmented reality involves the overlaying of digital information onto real space. By moving through the real environment users experience the digital information at the location to which it refers. Headphones are connected to a small HP computer, called an iPAQ (PDA), that plays the appropriate sound file depending on where they are in the playground. Their location is determined by a GPS (Global Positioning System) receiver unit attached to the iPAQ. GPS is a worldwide radio navigation system that uses satellites to calculate your position. A GPS receiver needs visibility of at least three satellites orbiting the earth to get a good position reading. Sound and video sequences are defined how to play according to a software authoring tool. The authoring tool uses a map of the area as a background onto which regions are drawn. Specific commands are associated with each region and define what the user should experience when they enter or re-enter the space, and a client program running on the iPAQ works out which sound file should be played depending on where you are in the region. Software development by HP Labs Bristol. Supported by The University of Salford UK with financial assistance from Arts Council England and the British Council Taipei.

## NOTES

- 1 Artists web site and documentation <http://www.paulsermon.org/headroom/>
- 2 AHRC Performing-Presence project. <http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500>
- 3 Ascott, Roy. 2003. *Telematic Embrace*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 232-246.
- 4 Nam June Paik's TV-Buddha. <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/tv-buddha/>

- 5 Kaye, Nick. 2000. *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, Documentation*. London: Routledge.
- 6 Gabriella Giannachi <http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/500>
- 7 The term **metaverse** comes from Neal Stephenson's 1992 classic science fiction novel 'Snow Crash', and is now widely used to describe the vision behind current work on fully immersive 3D virtual spaces.
- 8 The term **I shop therefore I am** was used by artist Barbara Kruger in 1998 as a pun on consumerism and René Descartes' statement 'I think therefore I am'.
- 9 Artists web site and documentation <http://www.paulsermon.org/liberate/>
- 10 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).
- 11 Artists web site and documentation <http://www.paulsermon.org/playground/>