

Commentary on the aesthetic/technical contexture of this lab

(Johannes Birringer)

Avatars

Women will discover the unknown. Will her word be different from ours? She will discover things that will be strange and unfathomable, repulsive and delicate. We shall take them from her and we shall understand them. (Nancy Mauro-Flude)

In this project, Interaktionslabor 2006 partners with teams from other locations in Europe: independent media performance groups and media arts centers. The concept and the dramaturgy for the research production, to culminate in a public/distributed live performance in Athens (14 September 2006), is described on the pages of the "i-MAP" website (www.amorphy.org/imap). It is worth pointing out that such a European partnership project, linking artists and media arts centers in the east, south, southwest and west (if we bother to re-introduce geo-political or cultural-geographical markers), forms its process as it undergoes its organizational, financial, logistical and artistic formation, over a series of meetings, constant communications, mail-lists and mailings, websites, and locally arranged workshops that brings the participating members of the project together.

The instigators of the trans-european "I-Map" project were in Athens, and thus it is logical that the cycles of workshops will return, at the end, to the city where the ideas for the project were born. The live installation of the new work is currently titled "See you in Walhalla." As always in media and live art processes which involve a large-size group of professional artists from the performing arts, visual arts, computer science, design and digital media, there are languages and areas of expertise to cross and artistic perspectives to combine. Process is always a process of negotiation and of course collaboration. Research into the

programming of interactive game environments as live performance (with web-cams, with sensors/wearable computing) is research into performance but also research into the relationships between media and genres, between aesthetic positions and understandings of the particular function or language of a media. At this moment, I am not even addressing any larger philosophical and ideological issues, and I have not yet commented on the nature of the cultural collisions in such a trans-European project, even if one could also get the impression, watching behaviors and conversations, that we share a common advanced postindustrial culture of the west (and its naturalized communications systems and systems of mediation). But even if technical processes (the long and complex development of the programming of the patches for this interactive performance, the long and complex process of adapting the sensors to the requirements of the work/performance, the inclusion of webcams or live telematics into the interaction design) and artistic rehearsals, dramaturgy developments, scripts, the film shoots, editing, composing of sound tracks or real time patches for live mix, the physical vocabularies, and the whole range of visual scenographic elements (screen projections space, "stage," lighting, costumes, etc) are correlated and integrated, the critical reflection is still necessary, and reflection on integration, on changes, and on emerging aspects of the contents needs to be re-negotiated all the time in an open and peer-to-peer relationship between collaborators. Thus, at this moment of writing, the title "See you in Walhalla", the content direction, the semantics and the 'characters' in the game are all under scrutiny. In these last days of July, the second week of the production workshop at Interaktionslabor, the assemblage of all elements into a digital/interactive live performance provides the first opportunity to see the whole emerging work. In this sense, it is quite correct to see the Interaktionslabor Göttelborn, as the southwest German "iMap" partner, in the role of the "test-bed" --- here the simulation of all elements of a distributed work can be accomplished, all Real Players, Avatars, Confused Players, Screen Avatars of the "Walhalla" performance are meeting now: in front of the screen in the 3D/4D/5D space, inside the screen, outside the building, on webcam, off webcam.

Sensordance, interactive game, webcam dramaturgy

Extending previous studies of physical camera, sensor choreography, and interactive design for real time networked performance, the lab this year used a combination of indoor and outdoor space at its new Gallery.

The commentary I propose to develop here concerns the experimentations with avatars, "sensor dance", "sensor choreography," real time interaction design for performance with digital 3D worlds.

We invite feedback.

(e.g. testbed 4: <http://interaktionslabor.de/lab06/gase.htm>)

The term "sensor choreography" is not the right term. But I would be glad to define more closely, in debate, what I see happening in our workshop --- as we moved from the general daily rhythm of warm ups, body mind centering/yoga based exercises, and somatic techniques to movement choreography rehearsal with three performers (dancers/actors), to the current performance with sensors. The three performers each rehearsed individually with a dramaturge, which is perhaps unusual as a method for many of you, but I think the connection in this production, and in this research, builds on the following areas, and dramaturgical decisions are necessary in all:

1. Theatre / performance -- devising with digital media (a dramaturgical script has been written by the team directors: this script is a complex piece of sketching actions on many levels (screen projection of the triptych/video actions, webcam actions in the remote sites, 4 characters [Player 1, Player 2, Real Avatar, Screen Avatar] , direction of local and distributed action; sound direction, text/voice-over direction, scenographic direction, interactivity direction, precise lighting design).

2. There is scenography, as there is a local venue where the distributed performance will be first performed (in Athens). Stage design, screen design, lighting design.

3. Interaction design:

----level A: digital video or 3D animation on three separated screens creating immersive world (the screen architecture is 12m x 3 meter; playing area for Real Avatar / live dancer is 2 meter wide and 12 long. Hundreds if not thousands of film scenes have been shot on location, in a special triple camera set up, many tracking shots, now edited in small clusters. Amount of digital film material roughly 1 terabyte.

The interaction patch is written by programmers on open source software (PD)

---- sound design/music (not interactive, it is created by composer and performed in real time synthesis)

4. Sensor design

---- level A: physical sensor design for various types of sensors (orient, flex, tilt, and rotation sensors; switch/clicker; turn/resistor-switch sensor; heat sensor, photo-sensor) --- which are all from the same family of accelerometers and sensors, looking slightly different..... providing different information depending on where they are attached to the body or rub on the flesh in the garment or are moved and pressed as you would when you touch garment fabric or skin. The sensors we use in rehearsal come from I-CubeX (Wi-miniSystem) and La Kitchen (Kroonde Gamma, a wireless, high-speed, high-precision data-acquisition system dedicated to real-time applications/performance using embedded sensors).

The transmitter sends the data from the motion to the computer laptops, via wireless Bluetooth transmitter (I-Cube X) or OSC/UDP (Kroonde), and on the computing side the information/data is received into PD patches (we are also using Max/Msp patches).

--- level B: programming of the interfaces (motion data/sensorial data control what we could call, citing Manovich, the "image instrument", i.e. the digital images and data and thus the game world.

5. Sensor Choreography; Movement Behaviors

To come back to my initial point, the movement vocabulary, involving our Real Avatar (dancer) and the remote Players (streamed into our triptych video projection scenography) was rehearsed and developed for the characters in the game world (which is, largely movement and behaviors), and in the first week our engineers and programmers were still working on the interaction design, and 12 sensors were put together (an additional set of click switches was built and sewed into hand made "gloves") to be eventually worn by the real avatar dancer Ermira Goro.

Since Sunday, July 23, Ermira Goro has been dancing the scenes of the game world choreography ("Walhalla") wearing 12 sensors. That is to say, she is re-choreographing her movement choreography incorporating the sensors on her body, which allow her an immediate, direct relationship to the virtual worlds (digital film and animation) in front of which, into which, she literally moves and navigates.

As with an avatar one would navigate in a game, the dancer in our production is navigating her character into the digital world, and she is also responding to the programmable interactions she does not control, such as the appearances of the other players streamed in from the webcams in Amsterdam and Sofia.

For the time being, we are using the Interaktionslabor as a "test-bed", during the following days we are putting together the various elements of the digital performance, and simulate the remote Players by having them perform here with us, but outside, in the Coal Mine, in public squares we have lit and to which our Wifi

network connection for webcasting reaches. Interestingly, here is the telematic component of "organization": since the dramaturgy obviously has a sequence of scenes and cues, these cues have to be transmitted via chat lines and chat operators to the remote Players/ Performers, they need to hear the cues, and enact their actions in precise range of the webcams. So for the remote sites, each performance requires a network director, a chat operator, and a stage manager or mediator. If the remote Player is out in public squares, the cues will be signaled to them via mobile phones.

More elements of the design, choreography, film, editing, sound, etc can be brought into the discussion, but in the next section, I will add some comments on the notion of the avatar as game character in this performance.

The Game World as System

The streaming, telekinetic performance ("See you in Walhalla") is created following the logic of a computer game, but the audience will not have a direct interactive experience of the game, the avatar will stand in.

Created by the Player, the avatar is a creature of the game design world. The most significant, difference to a computer game played via console or keyboard is the fact that the interaction in this work is externalized into a 3-D or 5-D environment – the avatar leaves the flat screen animated computer-generated world. She is a dancer/actor performing in front of the triptych film projections and animations. In the 18 scenes divided for the performance/game "See you in Walhalla", she encounters real people, streets and occurrences in parallel/combined/mixed urban realities. All digital film material was filmed on location in Athens, Amsterdam, Sofia and Götterborn.

Through collaborative inter-media creation process, developed simultaneously by teams of artists in three different locations, a dramaturgical structure for a[sensor/dance game] [live 3D computer game] [interactive art work] [avatar dance] [journey] is created.

This telekinetic performance event will be simultaneously presented in three European venues (Athens, Amsterdam and Sofia) on September 14, the "main" stage being Athens. These venues will have fully interactive capabilities, allowing for live control of media in all three locations, creating a shared virtual environment, guided and utilized by the participating artists. The teams have come to Götterborn for a "test-bed" phase, rehearsing the new work and completing the collaborative programming. One of the questions raised in the team feedback sessions concerned the role of the avatar, and the "character" of the Player (the average guy who loves gaming and plays this particular game). Even more difficult to understand, at first sight, is the character of the Confused Player (who perhaps stands in for a confused audience first made comfortably ready to adapt a game scenario as their reception of the work, the game character of synthetic worlds is subverted or reversed -- the avatar is not walking through CG worlds, she walks through streets of Athens, Amsterdam, Sofia, European cities merging, flowing together, public squares, alleys, canals, trams, walkways, buildings, people walking across public spaces, private spaces, nights and days, days and nights.

(to be continued)