Inter Screen, Between Humans and Avatars

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ABSTRACT

What happens when an interactive installation invites avatars and simple human beings to induce recognition and mutual understanding? *Inter Screen* has tried this experiment with a wide audience. The purpose of this paper is to explain this unusual and easily accessible apparatus, and to present initial results. In this way, it highlights the uniqueness of intersubjective relations involving avatars in an artistic and scientific context.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [social and behavioral sciences]: Sociology – Information and communication sciences. J5 [Arts and humanities]: Arts, fine and performing.

General Terms

Performance, Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Avatar, Apparatus, Simulated Universe, Representation, Art & Science

1.   APPARATUS BETWEEN WORLDS

Presented in June 2011 to Centquatre, an art center in Paris, at the "Futur en Seine festival", *Inter Screen* was created by digital artist Claire Sistach, communications researcher Etienne-Armand Amato, and artist and aesthetics sciences researcher Lucile Haute [1]. *Inter Screen* built a communication device linking in an original way our physical world and online world to bring together 3D avatars and humans. It allowed the public to experience an unprecedented situation of interaction: meeting avatars directly, without needing to use one themselves.

How? The cultural center visitors were filmed by a webcam that broadcast a video stream in real time in 3D space on the *Second Life* platform. They thus became visible to its digital inhabitants. So the public attended the meeting of 3D characters on the screen, while seeing their own images, hence the possibility of expressive gestural communication based on signs and facial expressions. In addition, an external console dedicated to instant messaging (with a keyboard and a second screen) was used to create a dialogue between the avatars present on the Sim [2] and humans. In this

way, the visitor was confronted with avatars coming from universes like *Second Life*, *WoW*, or *Eve Online*. They had agreed to speak on their own behalf, as subjects formed by the history of their digital life online.

From a theoretical point of view, *Inter Screen* is defined as both an aesthetic and a scientific device. Therefore, this proposal forms an "artistic action research" [3], here applied to communication sciences, to provoke, describe, and analyze the relationships with avatars. The apparatus itself has constructed a field study to observe the singular behaviors it favored. Similarly, to provide a reference about standard interactions, an online survey was used to examine relationships that normal players / users have with their 3D avatars.

2.   IDENTITY OF AVATARS

In computing, the term refers to a character avatar representing a user on the Internet and in video games. Yet, an avatar may have various shapes and functions: a predetermined representation based on the actions of a player as a prebuilt protagonist (a hero of a video game like Mario); a stub of a social network profile; or an interactive representation created by the user.

Inter Screen is focused on the latter category, deemed to be a cause of an emerging strong identity. Indeed, the context of persistent and 3D multi-user worlds [4] sometimes forges a complex personality in social circumstances which becomes independent of that of its creator's. To invite more of these digital personalities, a "call for avatars" [5] was launched on the Internet, which was addressed to the avatars themselves, not to their operators. This permitted the gathering of distinct avatar profiles corresponding to several combined criteria:

- Imaginary identity (separate from the life of its creator) *versus* virtual extension of the user ;

- *Second Life* avatar native *versus* "metavatars" (or meta-avatar, that is to say "avatars of avatar") from other worlds come to endorse a new synthetic body on this metaverse for the occasion.

Among these "metavatars" we can distinguish, on the one hand, migrants investing digital worlds at will because they are freed from their world of origin and context of any particular game, and on the other, those remaining bound to their MMORPG. The latter were thus still dependent on their environment roleplay. To involve them in the *Inter Screen* project, it was necessary to develop a coherent narrative with their original fiction.

These digital personalities who agreed to be involved in *Inter Screen* surprised visitors of the Centquatre. "Humans" wondered if they were dealing with artificial intelligence (bot), with pseudo-individuals, or with actors making fun of their disbelief. The staging and display of created otherness have blurred the

boundaries between fiction and reality. The results of the various reactions of the visitors: open rudeness against avatars, long philosophical, poetic, or humorous discussions, or, the most common, more mundane or conventional conversations.

3. DUALISM OF THE SCREEN

The paradigm of the screen [6] divides the world into two mutually exclusive dimensions of each other: onscreen and off-screen, tangible and intangible, reality and performances. This irreconcilable caesura seems constitutive of simulated 3D spaces: the physical space of the player / user is opposed to that of digital representations, which refer to an imaginary or a mimetic documentary. There would be an insurmountable step from one to another, each boasting its own unique qualities.

On the aptly-named Second Life platform, the ballet of avatars seems oblivious to any interaction with tangible space. Evolving simultaneously between two environments, appears a hybrid subject that would be trapped between the 3D space deemed "not real" and the space in front of the computer, with its limited horizons. *Inter Screen* is proposing to attack this dialectic to establish a completely different identity experience.

Completely obscuring the relationship between avatar and player / user, *Inter Screen* allows the public to question their own relationships with interactive representation. Simultaneously, the avatar is highlighted as a unique and complex topic, a hybrid of materialities and separate temporalities. The avatar is approached as a full identity construction, a materialization of imagination and expression in a given artificial context, constrained by the principles of algorithmic computation and connection that govern its existence.

Reconciliation of two worlds, usually strangers to one other, occurs through the intersubjective relationship built by the *Inter Screen* device. On the one hand, the "becoming-image" of visitors produced by their filming echoes the interactive body that makes up the visible part of the avatars. On the other hand, gesture interaction in real time between two publics finds its genealogy in the work of Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinovitz, especially *Hole In Space* [7]. This participating installation connected passersby in public spaces by the use of screens, speakers, and audio visual capture systems, presented in two storefronts, one in New York, the other in Los Angeles. How can we meet someone even as we keep our distance? This is one of the key questions behind this proposal. *Inter Screen* does away with this question: it no longer means physically approaching two distant spaces (a response to the fantasy of ubiquity), but rather overlapping these spaces using their materiality and distinct temporality to produce an intermediate world between the two.

4. INTERACTION OF THE SUBJECTS

The relationship with 3D characters can evoke the Latin notion of *persona*. To personify is to speak through the mask, to play a role, to provide a performance in court as well as in the theater. The "reality" of the individual replaces the "virtuality" of the person [8]. *Inter Screen* obscures this prerequisite and the background identity as the sole benefits of an encounter with a complex personality, rich in history and a singular imagination that only a conversation can update. A number of visitors asked themselves questions including: "What drives these 3D hominoids? What is their off-screen and causality: human or robot?" The mediators [9] were content to note that the avatars

had answered the call that had been made for them, to meet and interact with humans. In doing so, the mediators invited the avatars to resolve their concerns by investing, by their participation, the apparatus.

In such a performativity framework, in Austin's linguistic sense, the avatar appeared as an acting subject unit rather than as a manifestation of a second subject (the player / user) manipulating an objectified representation. He made himself a living power-and not simply an update of preprogrammed actions or the interpretation of a predefined scenario.

At the same time, the visitor with the avatar found himself returned to his own persona. The phenomenon is reflected by the specular quality of the device that arose in the integration, on screen, the filming of the video showing a participant in a mirror, with avatars at his sides. The representation of each is done by performing, while an overflow occurs from the constitutive dualism of the screen: the dissociation "real / imaginary" becomes that of the "tangible / representation". The virtual, the artificial, and the fictitious produce the real from the appearance [10] and the interaction. A hybridization of topics is at work, joined to cross the promised screen [11].

The communications technologies used in simulated worlds seem to offer humans that employ it a "being" and a "becoming" new and unique, beyond all previously known possibilities. By producing this confrontation, mirroring, and dialogue of the human "being" with his part transformed by technology, the relevance of *Inter Screen* is to resurface directly and examine the fundamental existential condition of our own in another way.

5. REFERENCES

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[2] A generic term for a region of the simulated space.

[3] A term established by Etienne-Armand Amato to describe an action research, which is a method of scientific research founded by Kurt Lewin, whose field of action and exploration is that of artistic experimentation. See C. Sistach, « Inter Screen, une recherche-action artistique », 2012, artsciencefactory : http://artsciencefactory.fr/2012/02/14/inter-screen-une-recherche-action-artistique

[4] This is either metaverse such as *Second Life* or *OpenSim*, or MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games).

[5] http://inter-screen.blogspot.com/p/avatars-recherches.html

[6] On the notion of screen in Roland Barthes and its adaptation to new technologies, see: Lev Manovitch, *The Langage of New Media*, Cambrige, MIT Press, 2001 (Paris, les presses du réel, 2010, pp.214-224)

[7] *Cf.* Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford, Clarendon Press (trad. Tricaud, Paris, ed. Sirey, 1983, pp. 161, 62-63)

[8] *Hole In Space*, Kit Galloway et Sherrie Rabinovitz, liaison satellitaire NY-LA, 1980.

[9] Tom Giraud, Vincent Levy, Romain Pechot, Aurélia Raoull

[10] Christiane VOLLAIRE, « De Hobbes à Foucault, La virtualité du corps politique réalisée dans le corps biologique », Symposium *Retour au virtuel : vie et cultures numériques*, Paris, CNAM, février 2012, acts to be published.

[11] Amato Etienne-Armand, *Le jeu vidéo comme dispositif d'instanciation*, PhD of Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication, Université Paris 8 (2008).