

SLACTIONS 2013: Research conference on virtual worlds - Learning with simulations

The Meta_Body Project

Catarina Carneiro de Sousa*

*Polytechnic Institute of Viseu — School of Education, Communication and Art Department,
Rua Maximiano Aragão 3504 - 501, Viseu, Portugal*

Abstract

Meta_Body is a project first held in online virtual environment and in a “real life” art exhibition, and now carrying on in the metaverse creative flux. The project addresses two aspects — the constitution of virtual corporality and the shared creative process of avatar building, sharing, transformation and embodiment.

© 2014 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the University of Tras-os- Montes e Alto Douro (UTAD)

Keywords: avatar; virtual corporality; shared creativity; produsage.

1. Introduction

Meta_Body is a project initiated by CapCat Ragu aka Catarina Carneiro de Sousa and Meilo Minotaur aka Sameiro Oliveira Martins, in the virtual environment of Second Life (SL) in response to an invitation to participate in the 6th edition of the exhibition All My Independent Women (AMIW), in the VBKÖ (Austrian Association of Women Artists) space.

A couple of months before the exhibition opening, CapCat Ragu and Meilo Minotaur built and distributed in SL, more specifically in their sim, Delicatessen, a set of 18 avatars, freely available and open to be transformed and shared with other SL residents.[†]

A note was distributed along with the avatars, inviting users to share online whatever derivative work they produced.

* Corresponding author: *E-mail address:* csousa@esev.ipv.pt

[†] Meta_Body first set of avatars can be found in Second Life in the following landmark: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Porto/134/110/703>

At VBKÖ only the derivative work was exhibited. 120 works were selected and presented as virtual photography or machinima, with a total of 80 contributors integrating the project *Meta_Body* for AMIW.

Meanwhile, CapCat Ragu and Meilo Minotaur decided to promote a second stage of this project — *Meta_Body II*. Having the *Meta_Body* project avatars as a starting point, SL residents were invited to share their derivative avatars, using any of the parts of the *Meta_Body* project avatars, parts built by the users and/or parts built by other developers, since their specified license allowed redistribution with full permissions. All avatars had to be provided with full permissions, meaning that they had to be copyable, shareable and transformable.

22 creators built 26 new avatars, from well-known metaverse artists and designers to absolute new residents, trying SL and avatar creation for the first time. These avatars are now being distributed in the *Delicatessen* sim, in SL, in installations that were built by CapCat Ragu and Meilo Minotaur as homage to the avatars and their creators.[‡]



Fig. 1. (a) *You see my inside*, avatar by Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu, from the first *Meta_Body* set; (b) *alpha.tribe's Meta_Body* avatar for *Meta_Body II*. Both captures by CapCat Ragu.

2. Virtual Corporality

The virtual experience of the body is not exactly an experience of the flesh. Albeit SL experiences have a perceptual and sensorial aspect, they continue to be experienced in our organic body, not in our avatar body. We could look at a very realistic virtual cake and salivate, but if our avatar eats it we won't feel its flavour.

Pierre Lévy notes that virtual does not oppose the term real, but actual. Virtuality is not about possibility, but about potency. This author believes that the realization of a possible is not a creation, as a creation implies the production of something new. The possible is just like the real but without an existence; the virtual, on the other hand, asks for a resolution, is problematic, complex. The actual is not predetermined by the virtual; it is not its realization, but an answer to it [1]. In the same way the virtual body doesn't oppose the real body, but the actual body. It is not a possible body, but a potential one, problematic and complex.

Maeva Veerapen addressed the complexity of bodily presence in SL's virtual environment. The author specifically studied the constitution of a phenomenal body while using an avatar in SL. She reminds us of the concomitance of two bodies in the virtual world, the user's and the avatar's, one organic, the other image. The resident's body doesn't have direct access to the metaverse; she uses the avatar to interact with other people, objects

[‡] *Meta_Body II* avatars can be found in Second Life in the following landmarks:

Stage 1: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Porto/167/168/21>

Stage 2: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Porto/178/125/1147>

Stage 3: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Porto/143/144/3475>

Stage 4: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/capcatragu/8496385198/in/photostream/>

and space. Yet the avatar is not sensorially or perceptually able, it is the user's body that sees, senses and feels. So, how is the phenomenal body constituted between these two bodies? Veerapen advances three conceptions of the avatar: the avatar as prosthesis, extending the frontiers of the resident's body; as phantom limb, leading to sensations without direct stimulation; and, finally, as equal, because only in the symbiosis of this two bodies we can find the qualities necessary to constitute a phenomenal body [2].

Corporality in virtual worlds juxtaposes two bodies and two conceptions of materiality, co-dependent on each other to constitute an entity. In order for the avatar to link in this way to the physical body it needs to have a metaphorical nature.

Corporality as a metaphor, however, is not exclusive of virtual environments. Our bodily experience seems to considerably affect the way we conceive the world. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that the ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical — in fact, a significant part of our concepts are organized in terms of spatial metaphors: up / down, in / out, forward / backward, these metaphors are rooted deeply in our physical and cultural experience of the body [3].

Metaphors are also paramount to the way we handle computers — we “drag” items from one “window” to another or to our “desktop”, we archive data in “folders” or send them to the “trash”. In fact we are just providing commands to the computer, but we experience them through simulations, in a metaphorical way that is fundamental in the design of digital interaction [4]. In the same way the virtual body is a metaphorical one, a semiotized body, a body of expression and language.

Meta_Boy avatars ranged from realism to improbability, yet they never became entirely abstract, and they never lost their metaphorical dimension. By sharing them as transformable artefacts we intend to open this avatar language to different forms of expression. The embodiment of the avatar itself could become, simultaneously, an aesthetical experience and a creative process.

3. Shared Creativity

The SL platform gives its residents the ability to customize their avatars to a great extent, enabling the upload of content, textures, meshes, animations, etc. Thus making residents themselves the avatar designers, by conceiving their own avatars or using what other residents share or sell.

The method used to implement this project was a shared creative process. There were, however, two different approaches to the concept of shared creativity — collective creation and distributed creativity.

We refer to collective creation as a creative process in which participants act as one creative entity. The complete dissolution of one's identity in a group is utopical; a co-creative process, where everybody is an equal partner in the process [5] is very difficult to occur in large and medium groups. To work as plural organism requires a high level of intimacy between co-creators. An equal partnership basis has more chance of success in a cellular structure, in which each of the participants relinquishes hers/his own authorial mark in favour of the group's authorship. This is how Meilo and CapCat built the Meta_Body avatars, more of a companionship than an association. Being mother and daughter in real life provided the perfect bond for this kind of creative relationship.

After the avatars' distribution, however, a new stage of shared creativity begins.

For Axel Bruns, distributed creativity occurs in “projects which harness the creativity of a large range of participants to build on and extend an existing pool of artistic material” [6]. In this case, the set of avatars and all the artefacts related to them. He also developed the concept of produsage to acknowledge the new reality “emerging from the intersection of Web 2.0, user-generated content, and social media since the early years of the new millennium” [7]. He realized that the conventional sense of production, specially related to the industrial economy, no longer applied to a “massively distributed collaborations [...] constantly changing, permanently mutable bodies of work which are owned at once by everyone and no-one” [7] in which the participants easily shift from users to producers and vice versa, originating a hybrid role in between.

We built and distributed Meta_Body avatars free, transformable, copyable and sharable to the SL community, which in that platform is called “full perm” (short for “full permissions”). We produced content that others used to produce new content that they shared with us, which we in turn used for the AMIW exhibition (in the case of virtual

photography[§] and machinima^{**}) or to redistribute in new virtual installations (in the case of the Meta_Body II avatars, produced by the users). The term produsage can, therefore, be considered appropriate to describe this project's methodology.

4. Conclusions

On project Meta_Body we highlights the tension between physical and virtual body. We focus on the metaphorical aspect of the latter, a body / language open to experimentation and possibility.

We provide eighteen avatars, which were not only offered, but were also copiable, transformable and transferable, giving total freedom of use to produsers. We use this term instead of public or audience, because this project promotes a creative and participatory relation with SL residents.

As an artwork, Meta_Body can only be fully grasped through the embodiment and transformation of the avatars, as its aesthetical experience is itself a creative process. As authors, we feel privileged to play a part in this creative flux, turning our artwork into a constantly changing organism that we can observe as it grows and mutates.



Fig. 2. *Beneath the Stream*, virtual photography by Harbor Galaxy.

[§] All virtual photography exhibited at AMIW can be found in the following link: <https://vimeo.com/31369231>

^{**} Machinimas exhibited at AMIW can be found in the following links:

Proverbium by Mimesis Monday: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whCJ_tas4Dk

Meta Bird - Meta Body Project by Ruth Latour: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ruthlatour/6218085502/in/photostream>

Ragdoll - Meta Body Project by Ruth Latour: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ruthlatour/6217275873/in/photostream>

Electric Hell by SaveMe Oh: <https://vimeo.com/30385628>

Papageno and Papagena... in SL by Alexandra Shepherd: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOpsT_7p0l4

Ragdoll's fear of falling by CapCat Ragu: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciClu9ArqGc>

Meta_Body Dragonfly by Fuschia Nightfire: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fuschianightfire/6226676260/in/pool-1753498@N24/>

Meta_Body Godiva by Fuschia Nightfire: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fuschianightfire/6230589527/in/photostream>

the me i could not see by Chic Aeon: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfcFSVWa4WQ>

Sound Of Colors - Meta_body experience by SpyVspy Æon: <https://vimeo.com/30534519>

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Sameiro Oliveira Martins, without whom this project would never be possible, Manuel Portela, Elif Ayiter and Luís Eustáquio for their brilliant insights, and all the producers that made this project meaningful.

References

- [1] Lévy P. *O que é o virtual?* São Paulo: Editora 34; 1996.
- [2] Veerapen M. Encountering Oneself and the Other: A Case Study of Identity Formation in Second Life. In: Peachey A, Childs M(). *Reinventing Ourselves: Contemporary Concepts of Identity in Virtual Worlds (Springer Series in Immersive Environments)*. London: Springer; 2011. p. 81-100.
- [3] Lakoff G, Johnson M. *Metáforas da Vida Cotidiana*. Campinas/SP: Mercado das Letras; 2002.
- [4] Murray JH. *Inventing the Medium: principles of interaction design as a cultural practice*. Cambridge: The Mit Press; 2012.
- [5] Bauwens M. The Political Economy of Peer Production. *post-autistic economics review*. 2006 33-44.
- [6] Bruns A. Distributed Creativity: Filesharing and Prodosage. In: Sonvilla-Weiss S. *Mashup Cultures*. Vienna: Springer; 2010. p. 24-37.
- [7] Bruns A, Schmidt JH. Prodosage: A Closer Look at Continuing Developments. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*. 2010;17(1): 3-7.