

Title: Experiments in Zoomumentary – Telepresence and Absence Beyond the Grid

A report and reflection on Bournemouth University Experimental Media Research Centre's investigative practice workshops held during the online '*Telepresence to Teletrust*' symposium held on 8-9th July 2021

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Abstract

This report describes and reflects on the practical workshop activity that was part of the *Telepresence to Teletrust* online Symposium in July 2021 hosted by Bournemouth University Experimental Media Research Centre led by Professor David Garcia. The Zoom workshops held on Day Two of the Symposium were a forum for experimentation by attendees to performatively investigate the notion of “the third space” in the context of an emerging hybrid environment of shared online presence and performance. The theme was set out by Garcia, acknowledging the foundational conceptualisation and use of the term in other contexts previously in the work of Bhabha, Soja, Tuan and others. The workshops explored the experience of ‘risk’, ‘liveness’ and ‘presence and absence’ in the *telepresence* context and were reflected on by participants as they discovered the value of practice as a method of enquiry in this developing field.

Keywords

Telepresence, teletrust, the third space.

SIDEBAR:

The workshops were contextualised on Day One by significant contributions from Professor Caroline Nevejan, Chief Science Officer City of Amsterdam; Professor Paul Sermon, University of Brighton; Ghislaine Boddington, Reader in Digital Immersion, University of Greenwich; Professor Atau Tanaka, Professor of Media Computing, Goldsmiths, University of London; Ali Hossaini, Co-director National Gallery X; Professor Maria Chatzichristodoulou Associate Dean Research, Business & Innovation Editor-in-Chief, International Journal of Performance Arts & Digital Media (IJPADM); and Karen Lancel and Hermen Maat, artists and researchers of shared experience of embodiment and touch in multi-disciplinary fields of media art, science, technology and society.

This report describes and reflects specifically on the practical workshop activity that was part of the Bournemouth University *Telepresence to Teletrust* online Symposium in July 2021. The entirely online Symposium was set against the wider societal uptake of the ‘telepresence’ environment over the previous twelve months, during which time the Covid-19 pandemic had foregrounded public interest and participation in what had for many years been the province of ‘Tomorrow’s World’ style futurology and newly emerging platforms for corporate communication. Whilst it might be an exaggeration to suggest that the online Symposium could be viewed as a response to these developments, it felt an entirely appropriate moment to revisit some of the issues and debates around screen presence and performance that the academic community have been long familiar with.

The timeliness of the Symposium became an opportunity to examine and experiment with the new platforms that have now become a part of everyday life of society. Indeed, in suggesting that the circumstances imposed by the pandemic accelerated wider popular engagement with the technology and the development of new skills, etiquette and modes of behaviour, it seemed prescient to dig more deeply into what was rapidly becoming another daily routine in which our physical embodiment and performance in the world was being supplanted by the construction of screen identities. It felt an appropriate time to question some of the underlying assumptions of the performance of *telepresence* as activity and performance that was rapidly becoming an accepted part of everyday life. Perhaps it had only been a matter of time before what had previously been a space conceptualized and occupied by pioneering artists, researchers and entrepreneurial innovators would become the province of corporate control, conformity and monetization. Whilst there had been a slow-burn in the uptake of the technology for some years, the response to the pandemic was the catalyst for mass participation, and it might be argued that this became the time when screens separated if not divorced us from each other’s bodies, and perhaps even our own, that for some (but not all) became a transition towards home-working and a rapidly changing way of life.

The Zoom workshops held on Day Two of the Symposium were a forum for experimentation to investigate the application of the term *third space* in the context of shared online presence. This was the theme set out in the previous day’s keynote lecture delivered by Garcia, who leads Bournemouth University Experimental Media Research Centre. He posed the need to conceptualise a new framework of hybridity in thinking about extended body awareness in the online environment. Garcia stressed the relevance of an idea that’s time has come as we navigate the normalisation of performance in the *telepresence* space and the evolution of *teletrust*. He noted the need to acknowledge the seriousness of what had taken place in the unbidden transformation of many of our daily lives, future trends, and the responsibilities in creating supportive environments for virtual relationships and virtual practices, taking into account the historical dimension of the physical place as a space for communicative performance. Garcia drew attention to the foundational conceptualisation of the *third space* in the work of Bhabha in relation to cultural ambiguity and the temporality of enunciation, and the application of the term in a variety of other contexts of understanding, for example Soja’s geographic conceptualisation of the lived *thirdspace*. In this context, however, it was clear that Garcia had identified the need to use the term specifically to theorize how we might take a responsible, ethical and creative approach to the future of *telepresence* and the evolution of *teletrust*.

Garcia captured the performative risks of this pivotal moment by framing the debate around (dis)embodied presence and absence with an appeal to seek out strategies that leant towards existential critique and reclamation, employing the heading of *The Third Space*, and posing the following questions to attendees:

- How is the proliferation *telepresence* changing what it means to be reflexively 'present' to one another?
- What scope might there be to shape new directions for these platforms that go beyond the ghostly dance of endless 'talking heads'?
- How are we to avoid the emergence new forms of alienation?
- Given that billions of live feeds can be seen as just one more stage in a process of endless fragmentation what are the possibilities for creating a third space between tangible and mediated presence, stepping outside the usual binaries of the real and the virtual?
- How do we provoke creative responses that break the frame and go beyond the limitations of existing platforms?

Thrown into societal engagement with the novel media of *telepresence* at this juncture by the intersection of necessity and surprise imposed by the pandemic, and realising the opportunity it presented for critical response, it was helpful to turn to Gingrich, post-doctoral researcher in the National Centre for Computer Animation at Bournemouth University, for an overview of the conceptualisation and taxonomy to date, who reminded us that the term *telepresence* was coined by Minsky (1980) in his seminal article '*On Telepresence*', and that whilst the notion of *telepresence* has persisted, its definition and conceptualisations have changed significantly over time, not least because so many seismic technological shifts have occurred since.

Gingrich identified a constant thread running through the last four decades, however, in the persistent counterpointing of intimacy and disconnect in the digital domain, neatly underpinned by Ascott's (1990) question, 'Is there love in the telematic embrace?' Whilst this seemed to plant the conceptualisation firmly in the sphere of cybernetics and its articulation in popular cultural expression at that time, it was Sheridan's description of telepresence as the 'experience of being there', which recovered the notion into the realm of individual human engagement and embodiment, picked up by Lombard and Ditton's article 'At the heart of it all' (1997) when they proposed the definition of *presence* as the 'perceptual illusion of non-mediation', a conceptual prism in which mediation through technology recedes behind an 'illusionary perceptual experience'. Subsequently, the International Society of Presence Research developed the theme, describing 'presence as a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of the individuals' current experience is generated by or filtered through a human-made technology, part or all of the users' experience fails to accurately acknowledge this experience'. Gingrich suggested it was pertinent to ask now whether this focus on perceptual illusion and the absence of critique remained relevant 20 years on, or whether different aspects such as the social dimension of the term, might be a more fruitful subject of discussion and to explore how our own creative experimentation might play out in the context he outlined. Referencing Garcia, Gingrich asked, does the concept of body-data-space still hold on to the idea of transcending the body? Is there any continuing value in the notion of the transcendent?

Perhaps the most grounding comment in the context of the workshops that followed came from Tennent, researcher in virtual and mixed reality at the University of Nottingham, who anchored us firmly in the notion of shared engagement from home and urged thinking about how we break out of the unquestioned and constraining telespace as it is currently designed.

Further prompts came from Boddington discussing the importance of trust and transparency in telepresence experience. Nevejan extended the discussion around trust, speaking about the ethical in relation to the mediated and witness concepts of presence and raising the question of whether there might be a need to develop a new ethics of the mediated presence.

Tanaka drew on the theme of witness through embracing delay and latency and building it into the creative practice and the protocol of the performance, which was complemented by the practice

illustrated by subsequent speakers including Sermon whose practice in composited reality has long focused on the themes of intimacy in telepresence experience and the important role the arts in paving the way for new forms of intimate interactions over distance using technology.

The focus on *tele-intimacy* was further illustrated by Maat and Lancel's work in 'tele touch' and trust in co-creation that explored the very personal, intimate act of kissing and its public, networked framing.

Chatzichristodoulou (Maria X) presented her work on risk, vulnerability and liveness which concentrated not on the technicality of real time but the criticality of transparency in data capture, data use, data harvesting as well as image authenticity and deep fakes or catfishing, reminding us of the tension in the conflicting dynamics of anonymity and authenticity online. The implications for our sense of self and other and the need for inclusivity of neurodiversity, democratization of access and trust in civil society and its future design were neatly drawn together in the final contribution from Hossaini who suggested that we have transcended our bodies already and need to identify network convergence as a technological and societal reality.

These prompts set the scene for subsequent experimentation during the workshops on Day Two of the Symposium facilitated by the team from Bournemouth University's Experimental Media Research Centre. Using Zoom as a platform for creative experimentation, participants consisting of an internationally diverse range of both experienced practitioners and neophytes were asked to make a short live or recorded collaborative response to a given theme. The experiments were introduced by Garcia as being a ludic time and space and participants were encouraged to consider the use of sounds/music, improvised performance, found material, interruption, and back channels and any other methods or approaches they chose to explore some of the questions set out on Day One.

Experiment 1 – Theme: New Embodiments

This workshop developed through collaborative improvisation the idea of risk, in which participants were invited to follow prompts to dream whilst awake and on-screen. A gentle guiding voice asked everyone to stand up, relax their posture, undertake relaxation exercises as directed, to think about their breathing and connection to the ground, shake and be still and respond to the voice. They were asked then to bring unconscious dreams to mind, to be mobile, to walk away from their usual Zoom space or take their mobile phone camera with them, to walk mindfully, be conscious of each step, to seek out a flower, to tell their flower their dream out loud, before being asked to return to their sitting space in front of their camera and screen. They were told: "We trust your flowers and your dreams".

Participants reported a unique Zoom experience in which their usual spaces were disrupted, and an 'audio weirdness' in which there were a multitude of voices speaking and singing simultaneously, a cacophony, 'exciting to feel so connected in our own body but also to others', a sense of 'passing between dreams and between screens', 'a beautiful melancholy going on with the voices', 'an unexpected montage', 'not a way I would have expected telepresence to have been expressed'.

The liveness of the shared moment or 'third space' was commented on as being 'both harmonious and risk-taking': 'there was a risk involved but as we were all doing it together there was connectivity and harmony' – 'the best of both worlds – risk diluted by a multitude'. Someone referred to F. Scott Fitzgerald's observation that there was 'more privacy at large parties'. The outwardly facing performing and projected body 'came back to being embodied' in the *telepresence* context. 'The camera receding into the background created a shared space of collaboration that existed beyond the computer because you could hear it – a really nice aspect for me'. 'A much more interesting, layered experience because we were all talking at once'. 'Dipping in and out of other people's dreams, that was unique'.

The ambiguity and the fragmentation were also highlighted: 'Trusting the fragment – in the practice, in dreams – sometimes we think the dream is the full narrative – and also trusting the third dream that comes out of the sharing, so your butterfly for me becomes another thing and in this counterpoint there is a third dream that is emerging that we don't really know but it is nice because dreams and virtuality and telepresence have kind of similar addresses and it is good to risk, to have this conversation, this interaction with what is this space. So risk the fragment – the value of the dream'.

The experience of a shared collaborative, but not submerged, experience seemed to be a universal response. 'Weird, quite an intimate experience – initially I felt conscious of my own voice and being heard'. 'Sharing and anonymity at the same time'. 'I stopped worrying about it because I could hear occasional fragments from elsewhere'. 'I felt heard but not necessarily understood and I think that's ok because once everybody was speaking at once in a slightly dreamy voice it became more musical – this sense of merging – I sometimes struggle with that, that aesthetic of merging – it can have other dimensions which some part of me resists'. 'Surprisingly nice. There was a compelling control journey there – thinking we don't often surrender control to somebody else and certainly not in these contexts, all of us are completely trusting in the guide to what we were doing so – a certain amount of choosing our own path to walk around, your own dream, who to listen to, taken back with the bell at the end'. 'I was moved by the movement and by the opportunity to reposition [the frame], to circle the computer, and also to look at the sky and using the words I was using, filling the landscape'.

Experiment 2 – Theme: Liveness

This workshop foregrounded the awkwardness of eavesdropping on absence of connection by being evidently present but doing nothing and saying nothing, intending to emulate the silence of John Adams' Four Minutes thirty-three seconds. In this regard it was impactful in reconfiguring a well-known understanding for the disembodied environment in which some of those present were actors as well as observers, and the observers too became actors as the conceit dawned. The presence of natural or artificial interventions beyond the control of the participants such as occasional chimes, birdsong, a door opening, along with some participant's sounds such as a cup put down on the desk, reinforced the alienation as attention was switched automatically by the robotic automated Zoom vision-mixer choosing to highlight the view of whatever picture became the source of the sound, such as renewed bird song or a blown nose. The closure of camera lenses then indicated the end of the performance.

The work raised questions about the qualities of an embodied experience as distinct from a mediated *telepresence*. In subsequent discussion, it was suggested that the lack of interaction enforced a more sustained study of people than might normally be the case. It was noted that the idea of a 'comfortable silence' was being transgressed. The 'ping-pong' of audio-driven automatic vision-mixing was highlighted as was conceptualisation of stillness to draw attention.

For some, in the context of lockdowns brought about by the pandemic there was an unhappy resonance with memories of the use of Facetime becoming a feature of end of life and the poverty of such encounters compared to actual presence. However, the experience suggested that further exploration might lead to ways in which that the impoverishment of the virtual encounter might be addressed differently.

It was also perceived that 'liveness' also sits uncomfortably with the reinforcement of absence: for some there was a very strong sense of melancholy in the experience while for others there was a presence of quiet togetherness.

Other comments included: it was kind of leaving the ball on the ground'... 'the technology decides when the sound is loud enough to be heard and seen'. In this observational 'Zoomumentary',

‘there was more going on than expected at first’, and it was suggested that cataloguing and classifying might be a valuable approach to developing an understanding of online ‘liveness’.

Experiment 3 – Theme: Presence and Absence

This experiment was a medley or sequence of vignettes involving remote switching in one person’s space that seemingly triggered random action in other performers’ spaces. Effects included, for example, lights turning on and off, parts of bodies switching, frames being matched, people leaving and entering frames, reappearance, randomness, ignoring another’s behaviour and one’s own behaviour ignored, unguarded private moments and a transition to absence.

Associations were drawn with familiar artists such as Bill Viola and David Hockney. The theme of absence and presence prompted practice that seemingly asked, ‘can I be present in someone else’s house by making something happen in my space?’

The experience returned us to the notions of robotic presence, presence across time and space and performative presence in a place that is not our own physical environment. Responses included ‘the virtual leaves no trace’... ‘coherence came out of being playful’... there was a sense of ‘everyone in their own worlds – prioritising their individual presence – liberated from the pressure to merge’ and ... ‘trust needs a part of us to be inaccessible’. Whilst it was important to reflect on degrees of marginalisation, the transition to absence recalled for one contributor the violent act of the ‘gesture of hanging up without saying goodbye’, or even the final breath, raising the question of how we represent someone who is absent, make them present enough to be absent, in the way silence cannot exist if it is to be represented – the screen is empty but the screen is still there.

Final reflections

In an age defined by the ubiquitous image of a Zoom meeting resembling a cross between a Mondrian grid and an Advent calendar we have so quickly become accustomed to looking into each other’s lives through our multiple windows that even the one-to-one dial-up seems to have become anachronistic, we have slipped, perhaps too easily, into a new era we hardly know how to speak about.

This was a position rehearsed throughout the Symposium, notably by Boddington and reinforced by others: the call for a new taxonomy with which to critically frame the discourse. It seemed apposite therefore to talk less and play more in the facilitated workshops, prompted by Garcia that the ludic opportunity was an important starting point for our engagement as researchers and to ask what does it mean to frame our lives in this way: aesthetically, ethically, socially, psycho-socially, and emotionally? To ask what does it mean to be present in the hygienic space of the glass frame and absent from the sweat and smell of ‘in person’? As was pointed out during the plenary, “We make strong memories when we have a kind of affective experience, something that affects us emotionally, those are things that stick out in our memories. And whether that's different if it's through a screen or embodied I don't know but probably there is a physical element to the memory, which we have lost” (Davis). Previously, others describing the telepresence condition have reached out for metaphors such as Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon (Bennett and Grant 2020), in which the prison inmates are effectively compelled to regulate their own behaviour through observation, to explain the performative experience of curating ourselves online. Yet the technology for public display and the accelerant of the pandemic with the consequent blurring of previous normative boundaries between public and private selves has outpaced the understanding. The search for a ‘third space’ prompted by the *Telepresence to Teletrust* Symposium was a timely intervention that reminded us that we are still casting around for

the lexicon, the taxonomy, and the terms with which to frame and conceptualise the interaction of our performative selves in the online space.

It became evident however, that the workshops offered an experience of risk and the concomitant trust that took participants into uncharted territory and gave permission to learn beyond words. The opportunity to acknowledge feelings as well as thoughts in the search for new ways of understanding stimulated valuable insights in response to Garcia's keynote questions, notably: "how is the proliferation *telepresence* changing what it means to be reflexively 'present' to one another?" Whilst engaging with Garcia's stated intention to theorize telepresence and trust, perhaps the most significant impact of the workshops lay in discovering the value of 'beyond text' responses through adopting a practice-based methodology to "discover a sense of where the parameters lie" (Garcia) when the vocabulary is missing.

The risks experienced in performance through the workshops pointed towards some possible directions for creating 'a third space between tangible and mediated presence' that 'break the frame' and go 'beyond the ghostly dance of endless talking heads' (Garcia). However, questions remain about the constraints of using corporately-derived technology as a framing tool for our third space encounters whilst we remain trapped as ghosts in our screens much like the Harry Potter characters in the portraits on the wall. Like them we can react but we are unable to step out of our disembodied confinement to challenge the power dynamics of ethnicity, gender, and class inherent in the construction of the gaze and its translation into our online screen encounters. This returns us to thinking about Bhabha's original postcolonial conceptualisation of the Third Space and its subsequent absorption in discourses of dissent, and how it might be adopted in this context to challenge homogenising conventions with contradiction and ambivalence. Experiments such as those embarked on here have prompted new ideas to explore in line with Garcia's contention that there is a need for "a responsible and ethical and creative approach to the future of *telepresence* and the evolution of *teletrust* as an idea that's time has come".

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