

## **The Augmented Theatre in Virtualised Society: *See You in Walhalla***

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In this article I explore the fusion of real and virtual space in the performance of *See You in Walhalla* which is inspired by the virtual game *Second Life*. Developing further the notion of virtual theatre as defined by Gabriella Giannachi (in her landmark *Virtual Theatre: An Introduction*), I will discuss the reality-virtuality continuum focusing on mixed-reality experience which breaches the delimitation of the real and the virtual, creating an augmented performance space. I tend to classify *See You in Walhalla* as 'augmented theatre' thereby emphasizing its remediated features, specifically augmentation and immersion. The article suggests that in 'augmented theatre' embodiment becomes 'posthuman'. Drawing on the characterisation by Katherine Hayles of the condition of contemporary mankind as 'virtual', I will analyse the 'posthuman' presence through which the participant feels corporeally extended and placed in the augmented world through the process of instrumentation and habituation. The paper redefines the phenomenological idea of consciousness as a sense of being-in-the-world and inaugurates the idea of consciousness as being-in-the-new-physical-world in mixed-reality theatre.

'Augmented theatre', similar to virtual theatre, is a form of media-enabled performance. Giannachi defines virtual art as where 'both the work of art and the viewer are mediated, enabling the multiplication and dispersal of the viewer's point of view' (2004: 4). In augmented theatre, as in virtual theatre, the performance occurs via mediation and remediation. In augmented theatre, I would suggest that theatre remediates itself by adopting some of the characteristics of the new media technologies of virtual reality, augmented reality and telepresence. At the same time, the same new media are reformed in the context of theatre. That is, virtual reality reforms theatre and theatre reforms virtual reality, while both media reform reality. Hence, in the highly remediated space of augmented theatre, the experience of the augmentation of the physical environment co-exists with the immersion of the participants into a virtual environment.

The article mainly focuses on the relationship – or even the dialectic – between immersion and augmentation in the context of augmented performance space of *See You in Walhalla* from both a technological and a phenomenological point of view. Whereas the technological approach deals with the elements of digital systems that produce a mixed-reality experience, the phenomenological perspective analyses the sense of “presence,” as a sense of being-in-the-new-physical-world. Walhalla in performance is a synthetic environment much like *Second Life*. According to the Scandinavian mythology, Walhalla is connected with the concept of heaven and eternity and therefore here it connotes an alternative world that shifts between information and materiality. Walhalla, or the journey to Walhalla, is a ‘communication space’ where segregated media meet and interact with each other to create a unified universe. As *See You in Walhalla* manifestly connotes *Second Life*, occasionally I will refer to the latter to explain parameters of this augmented theatre.[1]

#### *The Augmented Theatre of See You in Walhalla*

*See You in Walhalla* was the outcome of a one-year interdisciplinary project (2004-2005) called imap instigated through a trans-European collaboration of four media art organizations. The aim of the project was to promote new and innovative works of art through integration of interactive technologies and live performance practices. Additionally, this project aimed to open a European discourse examining the way today’s society interacts with technology, integrates its benefits into the structure of global communication, and the way in which digital art is changing our perception of the world. The four institutions, amorphy.org, InterSpace, De Waag and InteraktionsLabor co-organised and convened four workshops that took place in Greece, Bulgaria, Netherlands and Germany respectively so to finally co-produce a performance. After a long period of research, construction of interactive technology and architectural models, dramaturgical structures, creation of choreographic sequences and spoken text creation, the final stage of the project coincided with the production of the streaming, telekinetic performance event of *See You in Walhalla* (<http://www.amorphy.org/imap/index.htm>).

The performance concerns the story of an autistically lonely man who comes across a new virtual game, *Walhalla*, and decides to create his own avatar. The game's purpose is to guide and navigate this avatar through various experiences and journeys taking place in an imaginary cityscape made out of Amsterdam, Athens and Sofia. The user, while getting more involved with the game, finds it hard to separate reality from the virtual world of the game. In *See You in Walhalla*, there are three performers, one in each city, inter-connected in a maze of imaginative events; the Avatar in Athens, the user/creator in Sofia and the user/wanderer in Amsterdam who is trying to discern the difference between the game and his reality.

*See You in Walhalla* was inspired by *Second Life*, 'a 3D virtual world entirely created by its Residents' (<http://secondlife.com/whatis/>). According to the official website of *Second Life* '[s]ince opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by millions of Residents from around the globe' (ibid.). There is a *Second Life* economy and people develop social and intimate relations in this virtual world. In many cases, all these activities correspond with the ones in 'first life'. *Second Life* is a remediation of our 'first life'; that is, reality is expanded by being represented in the medium of virtual reality. The differentiation between *Second Life* and other virtual games of the same kind lies in that *Second Life* world does not stand in the narrow boundaries of a simulated space, but expands into the immediate physical world of the player. According to the concept leader and choreographer of the performance, Tzeni Argyriou, *See You in Walhalla*, much like *Second Life*, demonstrated a new physical space that identified with our everyday immediate environment (T. Argyriou. Personal Interview. 20/07/2007).

*See You in Walhalla*, staged in Athens in September 2006, was simultaneously transmitted via a complex webcam system to Amsterdam and Sofia and was also streamed live over the Internet. The performance 'fused' the cities of Athens, Sofia and Amsterdam, sending the Avatar/player on a journey across an urban, industrial landscape composed of digital fragments of Europe. A complex web of imaginative events seen from pre-recorded video, live-web cam and audio streams from

Amsterdam and Sofia, in combination with synthetic graphics, were interactively controlled by the movements of the performer Ermira Gora who played the “live” Avatar on location in Athens. Nancy Mauro-Flude (as the user/wanderer) and Ivaylo Dimitrov (the user/creator of the Avatar) were located in Amsterdam and Sofia respectively and were streamed via web-cams into the game. Only in Athens was the audience invited to witness an actual performer on stage, that is Ermira Gora/the Avatar. The other two performers always appeared as screened images either streamed over the Internet or transmitted to the three venues, in Athens, Amsterdam and Sofia. However, members of the Dutch audience could actually see or even meet the performer/wanderer, Nancy Mauro-Flude who strolled around the venue in Amsterdam, which was a tower in the red-light district. The performer-viewer interaction was captured by webcams placed on different parts of the tower. The images of that action were part of the Walhalla footage. In all three locations, audiences could view a live 3D computer game enacted by three dis/located performers simultaneously. At the same time, *See You in Walhalla* could be witnessed on the internet, where online players could log on to offer their comments and reactions to the performance. The project aspired to build up an augmented performance environment by combining elements from virtual reality, telepresence and onstage theatre. An important part of the performance was the working groups that were located in the three theatre venues in the space between the screen and the auditorium. These teams organised the whole project keeping the complex communication network in tune.

I had the opportunity to experience the performance as both an online participant and member of the Greek audience in Athens on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> September 2006. While I was sitting comfortably at home, in Reading, UK, in front of my computer screen, I witnessed the creation of a female avatar that actually looked like my avatar in *Second Life*. Instantly I started thinking whether the performance was a kind of interactive technological game where the audience could actively participate in the creation of the avatar. Unfortunately not. Nine months later, while talking with Tzeni Argyriou, she confessed to me that her initial aim was to involve participants’ instant input in the configuration of the avatar, but that did not materialise due to

technical difficulties. While watching online the avatar starting to take shape (literally turning into human, as Avatar/performer) and then strolling around her virtual cityscape, the level of engagement was growing as I was becoming more familiar with workings of the event. The concept of the performance was similar to *Second Life*, in that the avatar wanders around the space familiarising herself with the location and other avatars. In a way all the images in front of my screen were quite familiar to me; the avatar, the way she moved and behaved, the landscape. I maximised my webpage, I adjusted the volume, wrote my comments in the box next to my Quick Time performance window and felt as if I was navigating my own avatar.... but not quite. The next day I flew to Athens where I witnessed the show one more time in a theatre venue being seated between other spectators and having in front of me the Avatar/performer and behind her the digital landscape of Walhalla. So in a way I had a screen in front of me, but my keyboard was missing. During the performance, unconsciously I was trying to reach for my imaginary keyboard and mouse to morph and guide my avatar. However, in both of my attendances, the avatar was not mine (despite its connotations). In fact, the avatar and the Avatar/performer was controlled and operated by the Greek technical team that was placed between the auditorium and the stage. Hence, I could not intervene directly in the action. After all, *See You in Walhalla* was not *Second Life*, it merely referenced it. Nevertheless, why did I still feel like intervening in the 'game'? Why was I pressing a button on my keyboard in my attempt to protect 'my' avatar when objects and people were approaching her? Why was I tipping my fingers on my seat in my attempt to press the button of my imaginary keyboard so as to make 'my' avatar move?

*See You in Walhalla* was an ambitious project which due to computer crashes and technological complications did not allow each member of the audience to acquire its virtual replica in the simulated world of Walhalla. Although, *See You in Walhalla* connoted a computer game, in effect it was a project based on the human-to-human interaction but which occurred in a virtual environment via network technologies. By human-to-human interaction, I mainly refer to the complex system of communication that was developed between the different groups in Athens, Sofia, and Amsterdam that together built up Walhalla and also between the teams and the performers. The

project aspired to create for its audience the impression that it occurred in an uninterrupted virtual space. Pragmatically, the project was located in the workshops of the performance venues of the three capital cities and across their cityscapes highlighting the ways in which technologies invade our immediate physical space. Most of the participants, that is, the performers, the audience, the technical teams, existed both as physical bodies in front of computer and wall screens and as digital identities in the online gaming world moving through the different cities. Through the merging of the real and the virtual *See You in Walhalla* created a different kind of material space, reflecting conditions of communication and posthuman embodiment in virtualised society.

#### *Augmentation/Immersion in Augmented Theatre of See You in Walhalla*

Bearing in mind its dramaturgical and technical dimension, I would suggest that *See You in Walhalla* is an 'augmented performance'. The audience, performers and working groups' relationship with their material environment demonstrates that the space of the project is mainly physical, however diffused by information signals via internet, wearable computing and webcams. Lev Manovich defines 'augmented space' as the material space that is 'overlaid with dynamically changing information' creating a 'new kind of physical space' (2002: 2). Manovich derived the term 'augmented space' from the term 'augmented reality'(AR) which is a variation of virtual reality. However, according to Manovich the two concepts appear to be 'opposites of each other' (2002: 5). In the case of virtual reality (VR):

the user works on a virtual simulation, in the case of AR, she works on actual things in actual space. Because of this, a typical VR system presents a user with a virtual space that has nothing to do with the user's immediate physical space; while in contrast, a typical AR system adds information that is directly related to the user's immediate physical space (2002:5).

In his essay about *The Poetics of Augmented Space* Manovich, discusses the development of a new physical environment 'filled with electronic and visual

information' (2002: 1). *See You in Walhalla* is a reflection of Manovich's ideas about a new physical space, that of augmented space. *See You in Walhalla* much like *Second Life* is not just a simulated space where 'physical space becomes unnecessary and its vision is completely blocked' (Manovich 2002: 4). On the contrary, the virtual is an extension of the participant's immediate physical space where the first augments the latter with additional information. The participant in the augmented theatre of *See You in Walhalla* 'is present in physical space; the display adds to' his/her 'overall phenomenological experience,' but does it take over (Manovich 2002: 5)?

In *See You in Walhalla*, virtual reality and augmented reality are not just placed in opposition to one another, but they share common ground in the continuum of mixed reality experience. Virtual reality as one of the substantial constituents of the augmented performance space is reformed and adjusted to a new physical environment which maintains and modifies its characteristics. In the performance, immersion, as an experience of entering into the simulation, does not happen, although a three-dimensional environment is suggested. However, all the participants in the project are involved in an experience that embeds them into a world that coincides with the real world, the physical space of the audience, the groups and the online players. And this involving experience transforms the physical space of the different theatre venues, of the labs, of any domestic environment of the online users into a new physical space that 'is filled with electronic and visual information' (Manovich 2002). All the participants involved in the project interact, to some extent or another, with digital media and this mediated experience differentiates their perception of physical space. I would suggest that this experience of entering into the new physical world could be labelled 'immersion in augmented spaces'.

Lev Manovich, while defining the relation between augmentation and immersion, contends that 'it all depends on how we understand the idea of addition: we may add additional information to our experience – or we may add an altogether different experience' (2002: 5). In the context of augmented theatre, the concept of immersion

gets more complicated as it becomes closely related to the experience of augmentation, that is, the process of expanding people's immediate perception of their physical space.[2] I would claim that in augmented theatre the concept of immersion is 'reinvented' through the process of reformation of theatre by virtual reality. In effect, the relationship between the real and the virtual space is re-established in the context of a mixed-reality experience. This 'reinvention' of immersion comes close to Bolter and Grusin's 'prediction about future media which will isolate some features of established technologies (point of view, motion, interactivity, and so on) and refashion them to make a claim of greater immediacy' (1999: 271). In *See You in Walhalla* theatre appears to remediate reality and virtual reality so as to accomplish what virtual reality has failed so far to do, to create an interdependent extensive relationship with the physical space and to unblock its vision; in other words to create an experience that is similar to reality yet more elastic.

Augmented theatre inaugurates a new era of human interaction that enables the multiplication and dispersal of the participant's point of view. In the frame of our cyberculture, Giannachi describes virtual theatres as 'open works in which the viewer is variously participating to work of art from within it, this is why, in the world of virtual theatre, the work of art and the viewer are mediated' (2004: 4). *See You in Walhalla* is a mediated spectacle that aspires to mediate its participants to the extent *Second Life* does. The audience participates in the work from *within* it even if they watch the event online. The spectator stands before a different yet familiar event in which s/he is involved. S/he is augmented via the repeated contact with the interface that provides the hypermediated work. Mine and the others' involvement into the game of *Walhalla* relies on the fact that we understand augmented theatre as a reformed version of an earlier or another medium; either theatre, virtual reality or augmented reality or even another kind of augmented performances. In essence, these other media elicit a feeling of familiarity and even intimacy in the participants who 'usually know what to do even if they have never been in the environment before' (Giannachi 2004: 130). I try to operate the avatar without the equipment to do so and I end up tipping the arm of my seat unconsciously looking for my keyboard. What I experience



bears a resemblance to theatre, virtual reality and augmented reality but it does not exactly match any of these experiences. I do not feel as if 'transferred' to another parallel world, but rather part of the world of *Walhalla* that coincides with my everyday physical world. In the augmented theatre of *See You in Walhalla* the parallax between the real and the mediated starts to be explored and expanded and finally converges, creating a new physical world, a 'communication world'.

The augmented theatre of *See You in Walhalla* itself is mediated and also located in the real world where visual and aural information and materiality meet. Giannachi argues that 'it is the viewer that constitutes the other 'real' of the performance' (2004:7) in virtual theatre, but in this performance the viewer, the performer, the participant, and the space are mainly real. An integral part of the augmented space is occupied by the working groups that build up the project via a communication process. In Athens, in front of the stage, a conspicuous group of people physically operates the whole project in cooperation with the other groups in different cities. It is their activity that fills the space with visual and electronic information. The process of communication that is developed between the three countries adds to the team members' experience while confirming their presence in our world and world's presence in theirs. Manovich characterises this world as a 'new kind of space which is slowly becoming reality' (2002: 4). Therefore, the project of *Walhalla*, as a case of augmented theatre expresses the desire for reality and communication which presupposes our presence to our world and world's presence to us; we both 'add information to our experience' and 'add an altogether different experience' (immersion) (ibid. 5). Hence, in augmented theatre of *See You in Walhalla* augmentation and immersion are much like the double side of a coin which always leads to the same result, that is, 'overlaying layers of data over the physical space' (ibid. 6).

*See You in Walhalla* is not the event that occurs just in Athens, it is an overall project that takes place over the Internet, in Amsterdam, Sofia and Athens, in the venues and outside the venues, in the urban landscapes. All the human constituents of the performance are not corporeally present in the same place at the same time, though

they all interact with each other. The participants can bring various locations together and also 'affect change on material reality over physical distance in real time' (Manovich 2001: 174). The performance combines both onstage presence in the immediate physical space, telepresence and virtuality to construct environments which are closely connected. Therefore, as Virilio contends 'with the interfacing of computer terminals and video monitors, distinctions of here and there no longer mean anything' (Virilio 1991:13). What is substantial about the telematic function of the performance is that it allows the participants to bring together different spaces so as to create and modify an elastic, united and integrated physical space. In virtual theatre, as Giannachi explains, both telepresence and virtual reality remediate real space and the space of the performance remains virtual (2004: 10). By contrast, in the augmented theatre of *See You in Walhalla* telepresence brings together three physical urban environments which are translated into one virtual space accessed by the online participants before it 'seeps back' into the material world.

The three technical teams based in different cities create the project by teleporting data from one computer to another, from one physical location to the next. The physical space of each of the participants (audience, performers, and technical team) is filled with data. Therefore, in this augmented performance space different technologies reinforce a sense of telepresence/teleaction which allows the participant to direct not just the simulation but reality itself. The whole project of *Walhalla* is structured and organised via the operation of different communication software and hardware programmes that facilitate instant contact between the three technical teams. The Avatar/performer in Athens, through her sensors, manipulates the images in front of her without having a tangible relationship with the screen. She 'touches' and interacts with objects and also with random and professional actors over distance. Through a pair of headsets, she receives information from the Greek technical team so as to function on stage. The on-line users can have access to the project as it occurs in Athens. Also, the audience of the three theatre venues has access to data in a space that is 'location specific'. *See You in Walhalla* has been created and developed around the notion of seeing and acting at a distance dramaturgically and technically. Hence, visual and electronic information is

embedded into a physical environment via multiple devices that are distributed throughout an extensive and mainly physical space in real time. Manovich contends that the contemporary artist has the chance and the challenge to create 'an object that a viewer would' not just 'look at' but also place him/herself 'inside this object' (2002: 7). This new 'challenge' coincides with the placing of users inside a space filled with dynamic, contextual data with which they can interact; that is, an immersive augmented performance space.

### *Habit and Instrumentation. Presence and Posthuman Embodiment*

In *See You in Walhalla*, the new media technologies offer the participants the chance to experience simultaneously the real, the virtual and the space in-between, signifying our contemporary conditions of communication and our projected 'posthuman' existence in virtualised society. The invasion of the performance space by new media reinforces the creation of new forms of embodiment that challenge existing performance discourse. Mixed-reality theatre explores the ubiquitous presence of the virtual in everyday spaces which is established through the human's relation with instrumentation out of habit. The idea of a "posthuman age" in which the human is reconfigured with the technological is illustrated in detail by cybernetics and literary theorist N. Katherine Hayles. In this section of the article, I elaborate the concepts of immersion and augmentation through the phenomenological notions of habituation and instrumentation and under the framework of posthuman embodiment.

According to Tzeni Argyriou, choreographer and initiator of the project, '*See You in Walhalla* is the outcome of its creators' interest in the relationship of humans to technology which appears to be a continuing concern for a lot of theatre practitioners' (Interview with T. Argyriou, 20/07/2007). My phenomenological analysis of the mixed-reality experience of *See You in Walhalla* will be framed by Hayles' ideas on the posthuman realm that focus on the unleashed interplay between humans and intelligent machines. Hayles' claim that 'there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer

simulation' (1999: 3) reflects the performance's ideology on the human/machine interface which renders machine prosthetic extension of the human body. In the performance, the different computing devices augment the presence (or connote the extension) of the participants so that they exist as informational entities which are placed in the material world.

In *See You in Walhalla*, the binaries real/virtual and material/information are disrupted and intermingled as the participants become corporeally connected to a new physical world. The relationship between the participants and the augmented performance space of Walhalla reflects on the Merleau-Pontian idea which argues that 'to be a body is to be tied to a certain world' and 'our body is not primarily in space; it is of it' (1962: 148). In order for the viewer to have access and be involved in an augmented world of Walhalla, s/he needs either to acquire a digital existence or to be interpenetrated with digital/electronic information or both. In the case of the audience, their presence is imposingly confirmed in Walhalla through the presence of the Avatar/performer which stands at the front of their screens (or on stage in Athens), personifying their participation in the game. The Avatar/performer, surrounded by a semicircular screen and with technology attached to her body, blends with the virtual part of Walhalla world, thereby merging with materiality when they are retrieved by the users/participants. The members of the technical groups exist both physically and through their data bodies in Skype. They need their iconic entity in order to communicate with each other, synchronize the event and exist in it. That is, 'the perceiving subject is always changing, always going through a process of rebirth' (Broadhurst 2007: 20) and the world that the body is 'tied to' is constantly modified.

In *See You in Walhalla* the relationship between the audience and their 'ostensible' avatar, the relationship between Avatar/performer and technical group in Athens and the relationship between different technical groups in the three venues is defined by a two-way flow of information which functions as a kind of 'electronic prostheses' (Hayles 2000: 92) and renders the boundaries of the lived body and performance space elastic. In mixed-reality theatre, the use of new technologies augments the

participants' *body schema* while new media become the body's counterpart in the performance substantiating the idea that 'body does not end at its skin, but rather extends into the world' (Murray 2004: 308).[3] In performance, the boundary between the body and the new media technologies is blurred and deliberately vague. It is hard for the audience to say where the Avatar's/performer's digital space ends and the physical one starts, as her habitual body is extended via her wearable computing into the digital landscape. Hayles, elaborating the idea of the boundaries of bodies in the condition of virtuality, focuses on the phenomenological notion of 'proprioception'. The concept of 'proprioceptive coherence', as Hayles labels it, refers to how these body 'boundaries are formed through a combination of physiological feedback loops and habitual usage' (2000: 88). The members of the different working groups are physically located in every of the three theatre venues closely connected with their computers and the physical components attached to them. These 'technological extensions' of their bodies enable them to (tele)interact both with each other and the performers and eventually make this project happen. Hence, the technology becomes a prosthetic extension of the human body, in the performance space of *See You in Walhalla*, and interactivity between human and machine reaches its ultimate manifestation where separate activity ceases to exist and is replaced by the co-activity of merged elements.

In the performance, the computer, and all the gadgets attached to it, appears to be the instrument that facilitates participants' presence in virtual environments and prolongs their presence in the physical world. Merleau-Ponty points out that 'habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments' (1962: 143). The mouse, the joystick, the screen, the microphone and the speakers, all function as extension of human senses and allow the subject's access to a space that is more liquid and less fixed than the physical space, yet not very different from it. Broadhurst, elaborating on Merleau-Ponty's idea of instrumentation, points out that 'to have experience, to get used to an instrument is to incorporate that instrument into the body' (2007: 23). The wearable computing of the Avatar/performer functions in a similar way to blind man's stick that is extension of the person's sight and touch. The sensors of the Avatar/performer

extend the scope of tactile and optic experience and enable the body to follow a route that the performer has already decided upon for herself. I would believe that in the performance habituation and instrumentation extend the body by altering and recreating its embodied experience.

As with *Second Life, in See You in Walhalla* the spectator's actual body space appears as the unifier of his/her body and his/her virtual body. Taking into account that 'the habit in general enables us to understand the general synthesis of one's body' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 152), I would think that user's interaction with *Second Life* through the computer interface rearranges his/her body spatiality. The user's habituation with different technological devices enables his/her automatic awareness of his/her virtual body. Whereas the computing devices are embodied as 'familiar instruments,' the user's body now begins not at his/her hand but at the avatar's hand. Out of familiarity both the computer and the avatar become extensions of the bodily synthesis. As 'resident' of *Second Life* myself, I am used to operating my digital double and my fingers know how to make her move, fly and scroll around the space. This knowledge in my hands (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 144) makes me tip my fingers nervously in my seat while being a Walhalla participant in Athens. My habit makes me look for my embodied instruments that will activate my virtual extension. The user of *Second Life* presses a button on the keyboard and it is as if s/he feels the object that her/his avatar touches. Similar to mechanical prosthetic devices, the computer interface technologies expand the range of the actions of the body by extending its reach. Out of habit, the user is sensorily immersed into the world to which s/he is cabled and attached via his/her computing. The projection of the user's self, the avatar, functions as 'the outer skin of the hand', or should I say 'the end of the stick' that is the embodied instrument of the blind (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 152). The avatar is the informational pattern of the self which expands the self.

### *The Posthuman in Augmented Theatre of Walhalla*

The phenomenological idea of instrumentation in life equally applies in *See You in Walhalla* where the different technological media are introduced to the audience in

order to disappear as perceived objects and obtain an embodied quality as being part of the participants' bodies. I would suggest though that in a posthuman age, augmented theatre can also be part of our daily experience. The computer in relation to the participant of the mixed-reality experience is not just the medium; it is an embodied instrument that offers an immediate, augmented and immersive experience to its users as part of their corporeal entity. The habit of the daily interaction with computers, cyberspace and virtual spaces is not a surprising obsession of the last years. It is the outcome of occupation with an instrument that has become part of our body, world and life, in all sectors of human activity, interaction and existence. As a *Second Life* resident, as a computer user and as a researcher myself, I feel that my laptop and its physical constituents have concealed their independent mediating and objectifying presence and become an extension of my sensory perception. As bizarre as it might sound, I regularly feel that my body becomes extended through these technological instruments as I exist for more than 12 hours per day as an information entity (as *Second Life* avatar and Msn messenger, Facebook and Skype icon) in the material world. The augmentation of my body through new technologies not only changes my perception of the world but also contributes to the transformation of the world to which my body is tied, into a new physical world.

The augmented theatre of *See You in Walhalla* expresses a trend in multimedia performance whereby the technology reconfigures and extends the presence of the spectator so that his/her subjectivity fluctuates between physicality and information pattern. The posthuman point of view shapes 'the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines' (Hayles 1999: 3). Katherine Hayles argues that the posthuman condition encourages the emergence of a new kind of subjectivity which 'is constituted by the crossing of the materiality of informatics with the immateriality of information' (ibid. 193). The posthuman vision does not suggest that the human body has disappeared, but that the new kind of subjectivity experienced by the participant is a composite configuration and is no longer a discrete body (ibid). Inspired by *Second Life*, the four project teams create a story based on this idea of human's reconfiguration through embodied technology. The

performance connotes that the user of the avatar gets very closely involved with his/her virtual extension to such an extent that s/he finds it hard to separate him/herself from his/her avatar. That is, body boundaries become ambiguous. I would think that the user of *Second Life* is constructed as posthuman, as a 'material-informational entity, whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction' (Hayles 1999: 3). The user's actions affect what happens in the simulation, 'so that one both is and is not present in the body and in the simulation' (Hayles 2000: 14). The participant exists in a hybrid space as neither present nor absent but as simultaneously both. And that becomes the problem that many *Second Life* residents deal with; their difficulty to separate reality from the game. According to Hayles, in the posthuman, there are no distinct demarcations between body entities and computer simulations (1999: 3). That is, the participant simultaneously exists in the real world as both a physical body and as an informational pattern. That means that the game is not a game anymore, but an extension of our reality.

In *See You in Walhalla* the participant's activity in the virtual world has real effects on the presence of his/her co-participants. While the participant becomes enmeshed in the technology, s/he moves beyond the limitations of the interface and impacts upon material reality in different ways. The Internet not only extends their bodies into virtual reality, but also extends their presence in the real world. The members of the different technical groups extend their physical operations through the Internet and modify the journey to Walhalla. The structure and construction of the project is based on the transmission of information cues from the technical teams to the Avatar/performer, the performer/wanderer and between the members of the technical teams. The participants access distant cityscapes and observe 'their' avatar/Avatar which is recognised as both present (as she is transmitted in real time in different spaces), and of course, physically absent (as only in Athens the performer/Avatar is physically present). The members of each team are recognised from their European colleagues as both present, and physically absent, within the same augmented performance space. The distinction between absence and presence becomes blurred and the concept of presence is no longer associated with



corporeality. The members of the Greek team have online instant contact with both the members of the Dutch and Bulgarian team. So the members between them experience their European colleagues' telematic presence, but not their corporeal ones. According to Katherine Hayles, 'the body marks one kind of presence; the point of view [...] that constructs the user's position within the simulation marks another' (1996; 14). *See You in Walhalla* demonstrates how the perceived multiplication of existence across different media spaces results in a posthuman convergence of information and materiality. In *Second Life*, the body of the user cannot be considered as absent, but rather as 'other.' Therefore, the virtual exists alongside user's physical body in the real world, indicating how materiality can be 'interpenetrated by information patterns' (Hayles 1999). That is, the user's simultaneous existence in the real world as both a physical body and as informational pattern illustrates how augmented theatre moves beyond the associations of presence with "reality" and absence with simulation.

The project of *See You in Walhalla* suggests that as we become posthuman, we apparently experience a new physical world, an augmented world where we are interpenetrated with information. *See You in Walhalla* illustrates that in augmented theatre, through the live and mediatised participation, the duality of materiality and information implodes. Augmented theatre inaugurates an era where technology has become distributed throughout the environment. The effect of moving in these distributed environments is often to enhance human functioning, as this article has argued. In augmented theatre the participant's simultaneous experience of *being in* the world (immersion) and *being of it* (augmentation) expresses a situation that does not encourage a dichotomy of the real and virtual but rather the increasing entwinement between the natural and the artificial.



Figure 1: The Avatar/performer

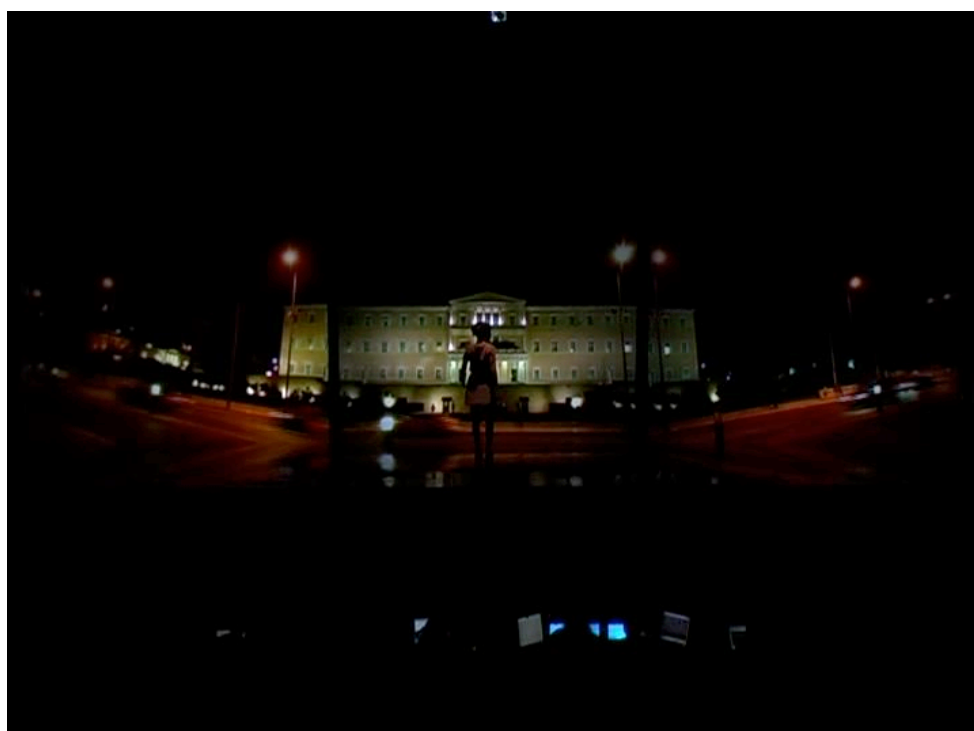


Figure 2: The onstage Avatar in Athens

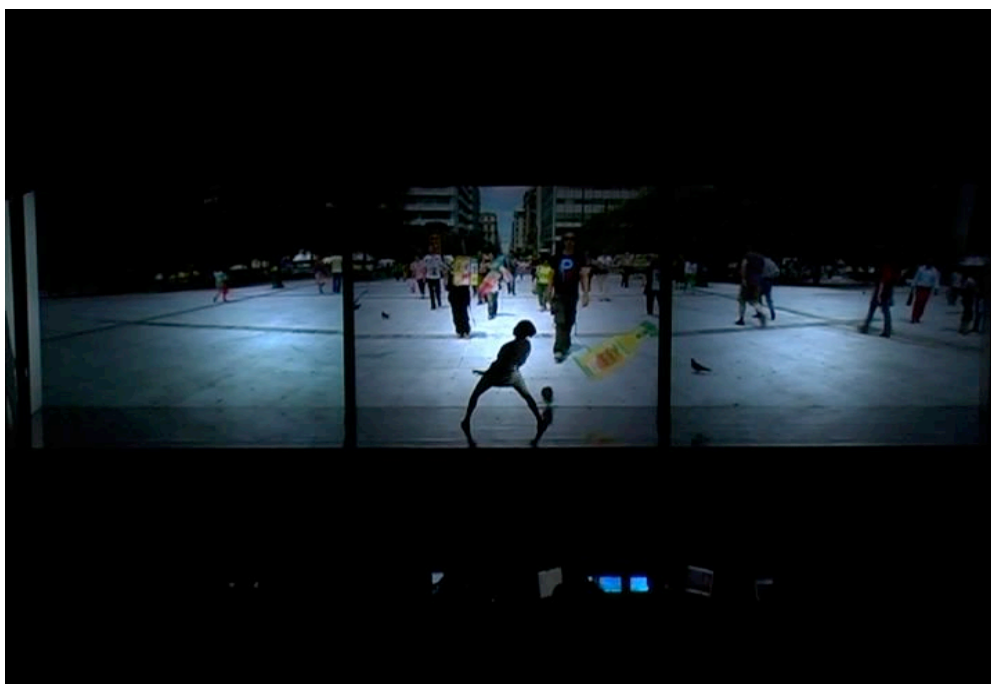


Figure 3: The Avatar on stage and the Greek technical group in front of the stage

## NOTES

1. See *You in Walhalla*, as an augmented theatre project, shares common features with other performances that search for new groundbreaking forms to evoke the experience of contemporary culture. Blast Theory, one of the most 'adventurous' and important multimedia practice groups in UK, experiments with interactive technologies as to create mixed reality experiences, while breaching the duality of materiality and information. *Can You See Me Now* (2001), *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), and *I Like Frank* (2004) are three of the most characteristic projects of the group that fuse virtual and real cityscapes through the use of handheld devices so as to compose three complex mixed-reality games (<http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/>). Station House Opera is another UK performance company with 'a unique physical and visual style'. From 2004 to 2006, Station House Opera created a series of performances under the name of *Live From Paradise*; each of them combines simultaneously actual and streamed actions from multiple locations to compose a united augmented theatre event (<http://www.stationhouseopera.com/>). All the above

performances move beyond the conventional theatrical frame emphasizing the ways in which new technologies invade everyday physical environments.

2. Marcos Novak in his essay *Eversion: Brushing against Avatars, Aliens and Angels*, elaborates the concept of 'eversion' as the obverse of immersion. He contends that 'immersion is not a complete conceptual apparatus, as it lacks a complementary concept describing the outpouring of virtuality onto ordinary space [...]. 'Eversion' is this complementary concept and signifies a turning inside-out of virtuality, a casting outward of the virtual into the space of everyday experience' (Novak 1999: 72-73). In this article, I prefer to use the term 'immersion' (identifying it with augmentation) so as to emphasize the mixed-reality identity of performances which breaches the duality of the real and the virtual.

3. The body schema is a central idea in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that defines humans' bodily unity and refers to a general pre-conscious awareness of their body position in relation to the coordinates of the environment (Shilling 2005: 55).

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