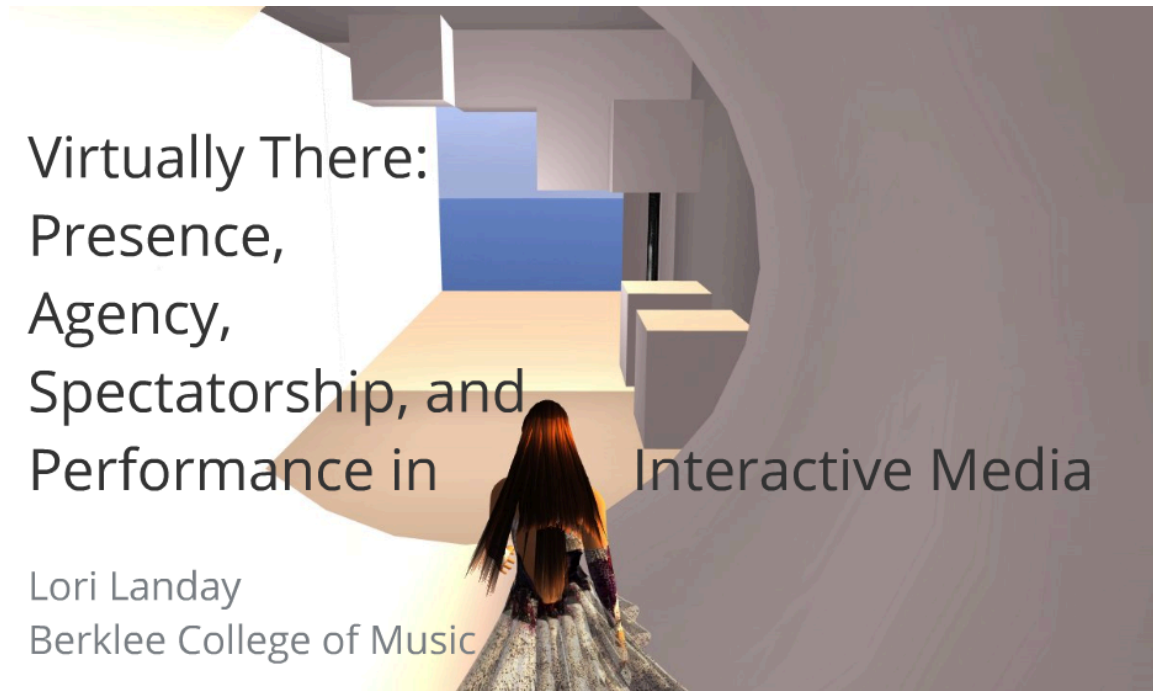Virtually There: Presence, Agency, Spectatorship, and Performance in Interactive Media
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Part of a larger project, Virtual Kino-Eye
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There are changing boundaries between observation, participation, and performance that experiences with interactive media can reveal. My title brings together four interrelated yet distinct concepts: presence, agency, spectatorship, and performance to explore how, in interactive media such as video games and virtual worlds, being, acting, looking, and seeming figure in the experience of what it means to be "virtually there" in one's experience with interactive media. Many scholars have explored these topics individually, and how they are interrelated, and I would like to contribute to that conversation.

What does it mean to be "virtually there" in an experience of interactive media, like when playing a game, exploring a 3D model, or participating in interactive art in a virtual world? Is it to be almost there? To experience presence despite physically not being there? To subordinate the awareness of spectatorship, to agency, the ability to act in a situation, even though it can only be accessed in a visual medium by looking? If performance necessitates an awareness of doubling, of performing *for* someone, even if that person is oneself, then are performance and presence mutually exclusive? That doesn't seem right.

Or perhaps is there a nexus of spectatorship, agency, and performance that fosters the experience of presence we can find in interactive media.

I first began thinking about this when an interactive art project a group of artists staged for an interactive virtual art exhibition I curated failed to provide for me the experience of being virtually there, despite the way it seemed to incorporate presence, agency, spectatorship and performance. The series of performances by the group Senses Places were conceived as participatory mixed reality experiences using webcams and Wiimotes to control virtual world avatars, synchronized dancers in Japan and Portugal, their technical person in New Zealand, their avatars in Second Life, and the virtual audience as avatars in Second Life. The experience seemed meaningful for the performers and opaque to the point of boring for the virtual audience, who had little to connect what was happening where their avatars were to the streaming video from Japan and Portugal they could see on screens in the virtual space. (The weekly mixed reality participatory performances in Portugal and the virtual world, with wiimote and webcam, shown in the video trailer, were also successful for the participants in the physical location.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Scz0R-zgtRc
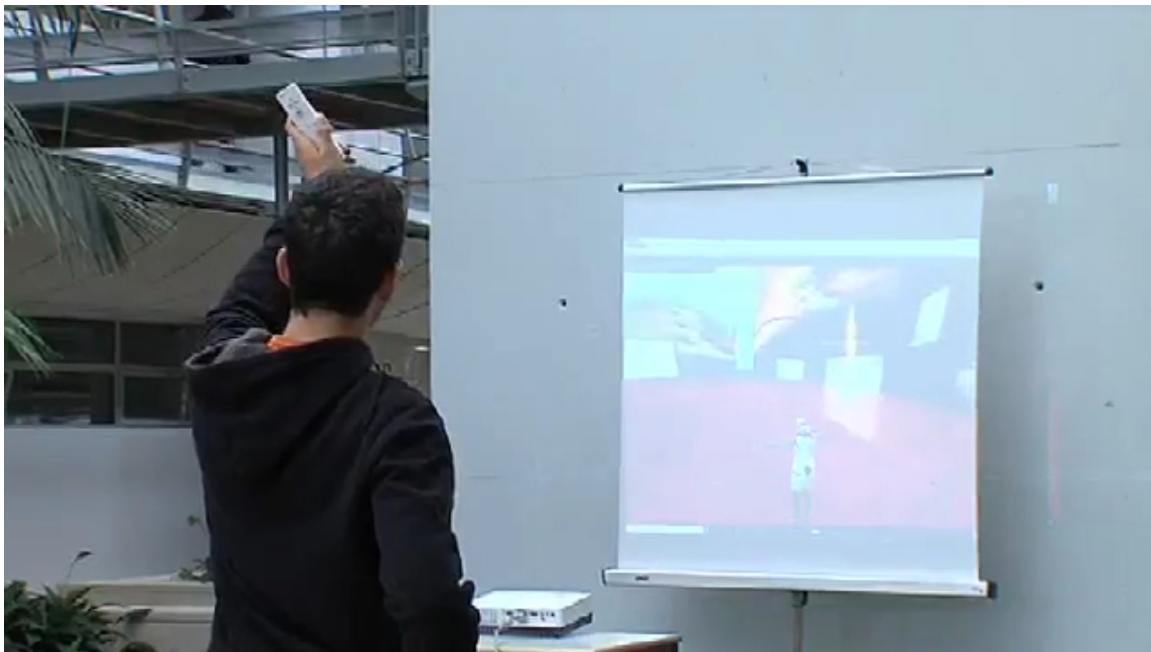
The ways that performance succeeded for the performers, moving their avatars with a webcam tracking interface, were not shared by the virtual participants, even those using the wii or webcam interface to move their avatar. Why not? In talking with the artists afterward,

I made a list of where I thought there had to be clear connections for the virtual audience in order for them to be true participants: the audience had to perceive an immediate relationship between what they were doing with their physical bodies and the movements of their avatars in the virtual space, they had to grasp that relationship for what the dancers were doing in both the actual and virtual spaces, and then how all of the physical dancing and all the avatar movements created a performance. Ideally, as many channels as possible would convey the synchronous and causal connections: visual, aural, kinetic.

Personally, I found what was supposed to be a participatory performance to be a strangely isolating experience, me moving around behind my desk, looking at my avatar, with little connection to any other "participants," or even to my own digital representation. It failed to create the context for spatial presence, social presence, or self presence, to use Ron Tamborini and Nicholas D. Bowman's categories. To continue with the terminology from their essay "Presence in Video Games,"[1] I did not get did an adequate context for natural mapping so I could not develop a mental model, and thus the activity was not pleasurable or successful, and I did not experience presence.   Or to use language familiar from Film Studies and prevalent in much video game theory, including Bob Rehak's "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar," in The first *Video Game Reader* edited by Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron: there was too much dissonance between the diegetic and non-diegetic levels of the game world and actual world.

 Don't worry, for the remainder of this presentation, I'll focus on a few examples that have interesting relationships between presence, spectatorship, agency, and performance, and are also successful, first in video games, and then in interactive virtual art installations.

To do so, let's consider what phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty noticed: that we recognize our own silhouette or walk when it is filmed, that "Each of us sees himself as it were through an inner eye which from a few yards away is looking at us from the head to the knees" (173); it is as if we see ourselves in a medium long shot, a *shot Americain*. However, Merleau-Ponty continues, "But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it."[2]

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[1] Immersed in media: telepresence in everyday life, edited by Cheryl Campanella Bracken and Paul D. Skalski, Taylor & Francis, 2009.

[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) trans Colin Smith, 173.

I focus on Merleau-Ponty's description for a few reasons. Reminiscent of the spectator position in film, it also reminds me of the ways we look at avatars when we play videogames, particularly in 3rd person, or some of the camera positions a person using a virtual world can choose. Moreover, the contradiction of seeing, either in the imagination as Merleau-Ponty means, or realized on a screen in a game environment, but not being in front of the body, but in it, is made more complicated in the levels of doubling involved in gaming, when the locus of agency and fun is not in our bodies, or only in our bodies, but in the digital counterpart we control. The dialectic between diegetic and non-diegetic levels of the game experience is central to much video game theory; when there is awareness of the levels, there is an element of performance for the participant in interactive media, whether it be a game, interactive art, creative, or informative. Further, the internalized visualization of ourselves from the outside, as we appear in the environment, is a kind of doubling, and provides a connection to how doubling is used in Performance Studies: as a common thread among the contested definition of "performance" to indicate that, whether on stage or camera, or in everyday life, performance is an action done *for* someone, even if that person is the performer him or herself. There is a sense of an Other, either in the actor taking on a character, or the idea of performance for an audience[3] that has compelling implications for gaming and other interactive media.

The two examples I'll show you today focus on the controllable camera in 3D navigable gamespace, resulting in doubling, with implications for presence, agency, spectatorship, and performance. The first video game to introduce Mario fans to 3D navigable space, SuperMario 64, offered players two characters from which to choose, Mario, seen in the third person, and the new controllable camera, Lakitu. Let's watch:

VIDEO Super Mario 64 Opening Scene, machinima by CGC Grayfox (Chris Solis)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjziFJ4mDBU

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[3] For good overviews, see: Marvin Carlson, *Performance: a Critical Introduction* ,2nd ed (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 3-5; Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction,* 2nd ed (New York and London: Routledge, esp. 28-51.

As Chris Solis[4] and others have mentioned, in this intro, the video game remediates the long tracking shot of film to establish 3D space to player accustomed only to 2D side scrolling environments. It is a literal use of camera control that is separate from and in addition to the traditional way the camera follows Mario, the character whom we control. As Michael Nitsche observes in *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*, "The player remains focused on the main character but explores the game environment on both levels: as hero and as detached camera operator" (97-98). What's significant for us as we think about being virtually there is that the Lakitu cam places the controllable camera within the diegesis of the game, or invites us to do so.

Another example of visual viewpoint being integrated into the gameworld is a spell in World of Warcraft that you cast to create a floating eye, the awesome Eye of Killrogg. With the spell, you can, for 45 seconds, see much farther and in places you couldn't with the normal spectator position within the game. All agency, for that 45 seconds, is in your gaze.

Fun with eye of kilrogg, machinima by
Sclerosis http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9tBBbiyj6c

This magical, time-delimited deployment of the controllable camera creates a brief moment of a different kind of subjectivity constituted by the kinetic camera, a topic I've explored previously in the multimedia working theory piece, "Virtual KinoEye: Kinetic

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[4] "Super Mario 64 and the Introduction of the Camera,"
http://cgcgrayfox.blogspot.com/2009/10/super-mario-64-and-introduction-of.html

Camera, Machinima, and Virtual Subjectivity in Second Life."[5] The eye of Kilrogg is actually a kino-eye, a World of Warcraft magical incarnation of Dziga Vertov's hopes for the mechanical eye who, in Vertov's first-person personification, declares: "free of the limits of time and space, I put together any given points in the universe". [6] For 45 seconds, because that is how long the spell lasts.

"I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. . . . free of the limits of time and space, I put together any given points in the universe . . . . My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world."

Dziga Vertov

In fact, Lakitu is a kino-eye operator, giving you—Mario—access to what Mario cannot see from his physical location. In these two examples, and others that perhaps you know of (and can email me about), spectatorship takes on a new kind of agency, one that exceeds the boundaries of the body, even the virtual body, because it is in addition to it, not an enhancement of it. The virtual kino-eye camera devices in videogames offer a way to be in front of the gameworld body and also in it.

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[5] Lori Landay, "Virtual KinoEye: Kinetic Camera, Machinima, and Virtual Subjectivity in Second Life" http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/2/xmlpage/4/article/340 *The Journal of e-Media Studies* 2 (1) (2009).

[6] Vertov, D. "The Council of Three" reprinted in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien. University of California Press, 1985, pp. 17-18.

There are not many examples of controllable cameras in videogames and the folks at cameracontrol.org say not much has changed on that front in 20 years.[7] Perhaps the rise of the Unity 3D platform, which has significant potential for camera control, will change that. It's interesting to consider how the camera could become a more dominant game element, and how that might inflect the experience of being virtually there. Can we have a high degree of agency in how we see at the same time as we play? It depends on the controller interface, and perhaps the development of haptic, kinetic, eye-tracking, and voice controls will facilitate a new relationship for looking as well.

In the final examples for this presentation, but we veer away from games even as we stay in the game-like environment of virtual worlds. People play games in virtual worlds like Second Life, InWorldz, ReactionGrid and the open source OpenSim grids, but the platform itself is not a game because there are no recognized goals or rules.   We'll turn to interactive virtual art created and experienced in a virtual worlds for three reasons: first, the experience of interactive media happens in an avatar-based 3D game environment; second, there is a controllable camera detachable from the avatar, as well as 1st person point of view, and the camera viewpoints can be manipulated by the artist as part of the experience, and third, because there are about to be new game-creation tools released for the Second Life and inevitably OpenSim platforms, with which artists, educators, and game developers are already experimenting on the test grid.

The avatar is crucial because it is the locus of agency, involved with presence, the object and sometimes, as we've seen, involved in spectatorship whether first-person, third-person, or via camera control, and can also be the site of performance. To quote Ken Hillis's intriguing book *Online a Lot of the Time: ritual, fetish, sign,* The avatar "expresses an avant-garde yet very ancient desire for unity between the ideal (and virtual) realm of meaning and the materiality of the object or human for which it stands. Extending Geertz (1961:153-54), the avatar indicates *and* epitomizes the actualization of a more general cultural

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[7] http://cameracontrol.org/blog/2011/06/08/camera-control-in-computer-games-what-has-changed/

phenomenon—the networked desire for a form of virtual embodiment that could somehow still retain and transmit qualities of the animated material referent."[8]

The virtual artist Selavy Oh's recent installation, "Construct," is a tour de force of a playful and sometimes disturbing use of transformation, instability, control, and change. It confounds the conventions of navigable 3D space we have come to expect. There is no way to predict what will happen when entering the seventy-five cubes built over seventy-five days between February and May 2011.

Each yields a different experience, and not always the same one, almost all without a context other than an experience of being in a space constructed in one way or another, that may or may not change. Sitting on a chair might trigger an animation, or whisk the avatar to another location. Walls might disappear, be able to be walked through, or might close in around you.   An "identity check" performed a google search on my avatar name that displayed on a cubicle wall. A small blue rectangle showed where my avatar was in a model of the whole installation, and stayed there, a trace that I had been there. The word "construct" showed up, mostly in red, in different ways. Other text, asking questions, appears throughout, a hint of the artist's thoughts on that day, perhaps, but more of a tease than a record, and always an invitation to think.

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[8] Ken Hillis, *Online a Lot of the Time: ritual, fetish, sign* (Duke University Press, 2009), 44.
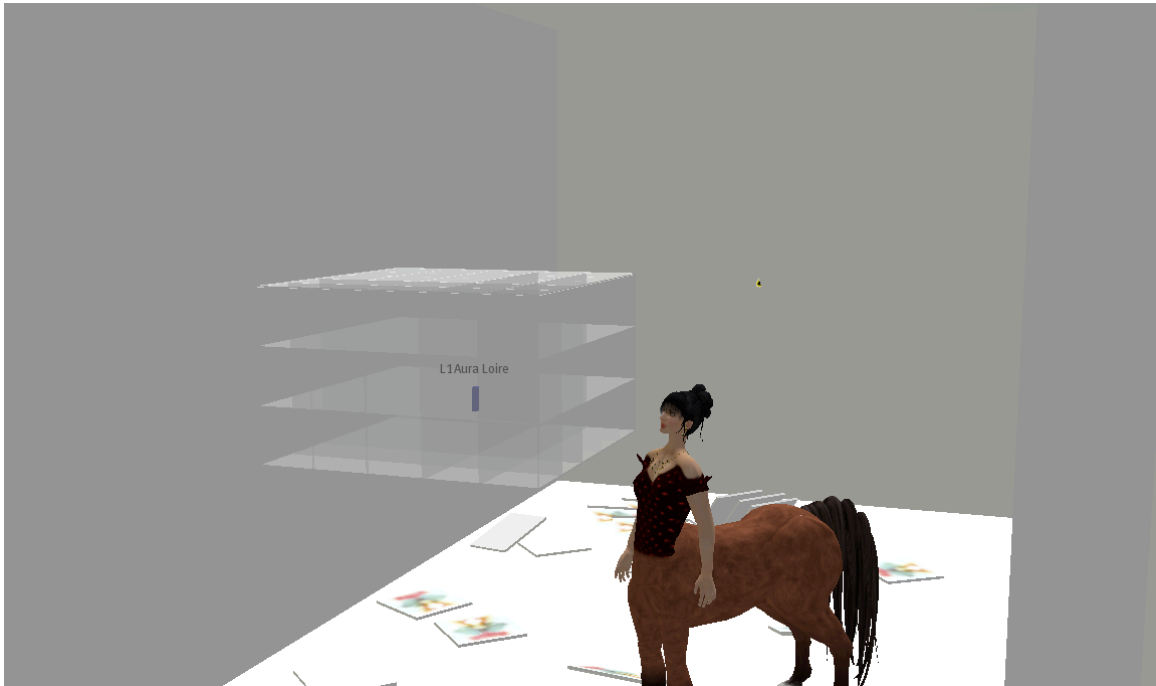
VIDEO CLIP

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNhMMpih_tI&hd=1

Selavy Oh's "Construct," 2011

As artist Oberon Onmura writes about the installation, "Selavy is among the very few artists working with this "new medium" who fully explores its conceptual space. Her resulting artworks, over the past few years, have consistently shown the rest of us how to expand the boundaries, exploit the resources, examine expectations - in short, she shows us what it means to make art in a 3D virtual environment that is very definitely not 'real life.'"[9]

The interactive art experience, for me, is a ludic exploration of the possibilities of 3D gamespace. I felt spatial presence even though the unstable space was unlike anything I've experienced because the environment reacted to my actions, changing and creating the structure. It was always surprising, sometimes frustrating, and I marveled at the myriad of virtual world interactive elements involved. "Construct" is analogous to Vertov's film *Man with a Movie Camera* in the way both works exhaustively use every technique of their medium.

One more example from the fringes of mainstream gaming that illuminates the possibilities of and contradictions of being "virtually there." Maya Paris's virtual art installation, called "soon, soon, quick, quick, soon" adopted a cartoon aesthetic in a virtual world already quite cartoonish. With bold black outlines around the brightly colored shapes and a whirling, spinning ride for the avatar to experience, it broadcast a sense of fun and levity, at least from a distance.

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[9] ("Explore 'Construct', the Latest Second Life Installation by Duchamp-Influenced Conceptual Artist Selavy Oh," http://nwn. blogs.com/nwn/2011/05/second-life-artist-selavy-oh.html#more).

soon, soon, quick, quick, soon
a virtual art installation by Maya Paris
filmed at InterACT! on LEA4
by Lori Landay/L1Aura Loire

VIDEO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyFRBBHbUM0

The installation invited avatar participation, but the animations that the avatar performed when he or she clicked on the various parts of the installation were frantic, mismatched in tempo to the more leisurely pace of the larger structure, and the words "soon" emitted from the build. The sounds were odd, too, not what you might have anticipated from the distance, more distressed. What is soon? When?

Just this would have been a clever and good interactive experience, the ironic, contrapuntal relationship between sound and image, between avatar movement and expectation, the cartoon fun undercut by something more serious. But Maya Paris provided a pair of objects for the avatar to take into inventory and then wear—a kite with an animation that would make the avatar soar and skim along the surface, spinning, knees bent up, and also a suitcase, called baggage, that weighed the avatar down.

The movement was unlike anything else I had seen, performed, enacted, experienced; it was the movement of poignancy, hopes lifted and at the same time, waiting for "soon" weighting me down.

It exemplifies what I think is the great potential of virtual and game environments, the ability to make metaphors manifest, providing symbolically rich experiences that, while I was virtually there, performing the kite and baggage moves, creates the experience of living a poem, both in front of my body and in it.