

## **“Being there” in New Media Art: Evaluating the feeling of Presence during Mediated Art Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the possibility for presence to inform the development and study of new media art. The paper links the concepts of art spaces, new media art, and presence. The authors argue that presence has already been incorporated into new media art and that such a union offers social scientists as well as artists a unique opportunity to study the interaction of these areas. The paper concludes by posing several research questions and has the potential to be a rich area of research.*

### **1. Introduction**

Art of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries increasingly engages with questions of consciousness, presence, agency, interactivity, and time [1-3]. A hallmark of this art is its self-consciousness and intentional engagement, even play, with media theory and concept. Our goal in writing this paper is to articulate the relationship between new media art and the concept of presence; to explore the potential of presence research methods to quantify viewers' experience of presence during a mediated art experience (MAE), and to suggest strategies for future presence research of MAEs in and out of art spaces.

### **2. Aesthetic Encounters and Art Spaces**

The significance of the aesthetic encounters cannot be overstated. During this experience, artist and audience engage, to varying degrees, with the raw material of human consciousness: dream images and echos of primordial pain and pleasure [4]. This material is mediated through music, written or spoken word, painting, sculptural installation, interactive computer-generated projection, and other materials and means. According to Nietzsche, it is during the encounter with the symbolic matrix of dreams, and that which lies behind dreams, that a person transcends illusion and encounters his or her “very self” [4, p. 11].

Set apart for aesthetic encounter, the art space, like the sacred space, intentionally extends consciousness, creating an environment in which it is collectively understood that participants may engage meaningfully with, and through, works of art. The iconic and transcendent functions of art are therefore more effective when they happen in art spaces.

### **2.1. Context: New Media Art**

New media art and MAEs have been an increasing feature of the cultural landscape since the mid-twentieth century. The Fluxus movement, beginning in the early 1960s, included an influential group of artists, musicians, writers and performers from the U.S., Europe and Japan. Among them was the Korean-born artist Nam June Paik. Through video installations, electronic collages, video sculptures, and other work, Paik has directly engaged with global communications theory [5]. Exemplified by his Video Buddhas (which combine sculpture, monitor, and camera), Paik's work asks such questions as: who is looking?

Since the beginnings of Fluxus, new media artists around the world have looked into the mediated environment with much the same curiosity which social scientists bring to it: a desire to penetrate into the workings of the human mind.

Art by its nature is interactive: an interface among artist, viewer, and artifact. This is true of a drawing, painting, or sculpture, whether representational or non-representational, as well as of a photograph, film, or VR experience [6]. The interaction can be introspective or relational. However, new media art allows for new and continuous interactions allowing both the artist and the “viewer” to have a dialogue, critique another work, collaborate on projects, etc...

Clearly, then, the relationship between new media art and communications theory is not a new one. While artists respond to the questions posed by communications research through their artistic creations, communications researchers probe the human engagement with works of during MAEs to test and further develop the communications theory of presence.

### **3. Presence and NMA**

Presence has been conceptualized in a comprehensive overview as the “illusion of non-mediation” [7]. Lombard and Ditton also provided a variety of useful guidelines for testing sensations in virtual environments, particularly for the realms of the visual (image size, distance and quality; motion and color; dimensionality; and imaging techniques) and auditory (sound quality, frequency range, signal to noise ratio and dimensionality).

Presence researchers are interested in new media arts because of their potential to illuminate the human experience of presence in mediated environments. Lombard

and Ditton [7] provide a useful model for researching presence in MAEs; elaborate models of presence that take into consideration physiological, psychological, cultural and social aspects of human consciousness [8,9,10]. Each has ramifications for research into (and creation of) new media art, MAEs and VEs. The Illusion of Being was created to test perceived presence and duration [11]; analyzed works by contemporary artists in art spaces to study presence and interactivity. With the exception of Leggett, each of these articles has focused on VR, immersive experiences, and/or interactivity, although these are only the most complex forms of mediated experience. The models have much to offer to researchers working with other forms of MAE, including video projection, video installation, computer-enhanced installation, and other lower-immersion mediated environments.

We propose the following types of questions to presence researchers interested in new media art:

- In the early twenty-first century, what can we know about the experience of viewing new media art in (actual) art spaces?
- Can presence research provide insight into the nature of the art experience and how might this insight be used to augment the encounter between visitors to art spaces and works of new media art, particularly lower-immersion MAEs?
- Are there differences in the types of presence experiences in identified art space (either physical or mediated) compared to generic public spaces?
- How does the feeling of presence vary with method of presentation: projection onto a screen versus display on a monitor? Does the size of the image/art matter to visitors to art spaces?
- Does the artistic content impact presence and/or the emotional states of the viewers?
- How does a gallery visitor engage with a projected work that juxtaposes the real and the virtual; With a room that becomes a stream-of-consciousness visual poem of color and motion via computer manipulation; With a computer-generated environment that changes in response to the visitor's movement or breath?
- Does the feeling of presence change in relation to solitary versus communal participation in MAEs?
- What does it mean for a visitor to an art space to see sounds, to hear colors, to feel emotions through the skin (e.g., haptics)?
- As new media artists increasingly move along these paths, what will these altered experiences mean to the consciousness of their viewers/participants?

We acknowledge that some these types of questions have been investigated by [15]. There are others who are interested in exploring the phenomenon of presence with in new media art. However, these questions (and others) offer the possibility for a rich research agenda. There are many directions in which this area of research could pursue. We encourage others to begin to answer these questions and to develop there own.

## Conclusion

The potential for presence research to shed light on new media art experiences is clearly worth further study. Art in the twenty-first century is often concerned with matters of human consciousness. As a mediated experience, art is of direct relevance to social science research that seeks to penetrate into the workings of the human mind in mediated experiences – presence research.

While presence researchers are asking questions about artful mediated experiences, their research most often takes place in non-art spaces. Leggett has suggested that presence researchers look at new media art created to be experienced as art in art spaces. The authors hope that presence researchers will become more aware of the interesting and fertile area of research new media presents.

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