

Projecting Presence: A Mimetic Approach to the Creation of Presence

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Abstract

The nature of computer mediated presence and its relationship to our everyday reality are complex, and the study of its nature is relatively new. Theatrical presence, on the other hand has been the subject of analysis for thousands of years. Looking at these two manifestations of presence, the theatrical concept of mimesis is used to better understand their relationship. In recontextualizing presence as the final goal of creation rather than an internal process, this paper aims to expand our definitions of and perspectives on presence.

“There is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated. It can be a very powerful illusion in the theater, but it is theater and it is *theater*, the truth of illusion, which haunts all performance whether or not it occurs in the theater, where it is more than doubled over.”

– Herbert Blau ([1], 164-165)

1. Introduction

As Brenda Laurel pointed out in *Computers as Theatre* in 1992, theatrical metaphors are particularly rich when it comes to exploring our interaction with computers [2]. This paper extends her examination of the interface into the realm of presence, using theatrical metaphors and methods to help expand our definitions of and perspectives on computer-mediated presence.

A distinction is made repeatedly in this article is between theatrical presence and telepresence. Theatrical presence is, quite simply, the presence felt during a theatrical production. This can refer both to the audience's sensation of the actors' presence, and the actors' perceptions of the audience's presence. Both are current in our use of presence in theatre, and demonstrate the complexity of the mediated environment which is the theatre. Telepresence is used to describe the presence a user experiences while using a computer-mediated environments or other computer interfaces.

Though these forms of presence are distinct, they both have a mimetic relationship with everyday presence. This shared relationship form the basis of this analysis which strives to enrich our understanding of presence, regardless of its medium.

2. The Mimesis of Presence

The discussion of presence is one of the fundamental issues in theatre, treated as early as the 4th century BCE in Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Aristotle, the audience's relationship with the hero, their presence throughout the performance, is enabled by the use of *mimesis* on the part

of the actor ([3], 1449-1453). Mimesis is usually translated in English as “representation” or “imitation,” but is much more complex than that. The artist's intent to create a representation is also key, and the act of creation is in and of itself a mimetic act. As such, mimesis comprises a moral judgment that the artist makes on the world, both in his choices of how to represent the original object, but also in his selection of what object or traits of that object are to be represented. The artist is thus able to affect our perceptions of the original object by subtly altering or masking certain elements.

I want to suggest a shift in our usage of mimesis, applying it to the abstract model of presence, in order to better understand the nature of mediated presence, whether theatrical or digital. This assumes, of course, that we have an original model, an unmediated form of presence. While our everyday experiences can be considered as mediated, for the sake of this paper, our reference point is direct face-to-face communication between two or more people. The mimesis of presence can be applied to presence in the mediated environments of the theatre as well as computer-mediated environments.

In theatre, the separation of the audience from the stage creates a hierarchy. This separation is then reinforced by conventions, the darkening of the audience part of the room, for instance. The actors, who normally follow a script, present the action to the audience who, while they can subtly affect the performance, have no say in the outcome of any given play. The attention of the audience is focused instead on the concentrated narrative flow of the play they are watching.

Similarly, in virtual environments, the user is faced with an environment which, while obviously artificial, represents a potentially vast field of interactivity. As Lev Manovich suggests, such interactivity is essential for any computer-mediated experience ([4] p. 56-57). The focus then shifts somewhat away from the idea of a fixed narrative towards a model, as that suggested by Janet Murray, which puts greater emphasis on the agency of each participant ([5], p. 10).

Both theatre and computer-mediated environments depend on presence to capture our interest and drive our interactions with them. But both also make use of forms of presence that are similar to everyday presence, but differ in important ways. In short this purposely created presence, this mimesis of presence, is the backbone of both theatrical and computer-mediated creation.

3. Presence as the goal of creation

The movement towards a mimetic model of presence requires a reevaluation of the ways in which we

treat presence, both for theatre and computer-mediated experience design. In both of these domains, presence has traditionally been understood as a method for achieving the ends of each particular performance or piece of software. Once we understand that presence itself is created, a new possibility emerges: the consideration of presence as the final creative product and guiding principle of the work.

Indeed, once we admit the possibility of presence as a purposefully created end product, it is easy to see how any art form can be reinterpreted in terms of the ways in which it creates presence. In 1936, Walter Benjamin analysed the subject in depth, most famously in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In this essay, he associates presence (which he calls aura) not only with great works of art, but with the viewer's physical or conceptual proximity to the original work [6]. The goal of artwork is thus to create a sense of presence in its audience.

When we understand the process of using presence as being mimetic, there is a subtle but powerful shift. What is experienced when we are affected by a work of art is not presence itself, but an artificial and purposely created sense of what the presence might be. The role of the environment, then, is to facilitate the (re)production of presence in order to enrich the audience's experience of the work.

Which brings us to the consideration of telepresence. To use a mimetic model of presence, which is essential for any consideration of the artistic nature of any creation, telepresence must be treated as its own end, rather than as an enabler of other more tangible goals. In short, a recognition of presence in computer-mediated environments as being mimetically created enables the growth of a new artistic concept of presence which is separate and apart from the existing scientifically-oriented model.

4. Understanding the impact of mimetic presence

If we consider computer-mediated design as art, there are lessons to be learned from the wide ranging artistic experiments of the last 150 years. Our current tendency towards photorealistic graphics, for instance, is brought into question by this analysis. The effects of the adoption of a mimetic model of presence are more wide-reaching than this, but the question of graphical realism provides us with one of the more controversial consequences.

In theatre, there was a brief but influential movement towards realism at the end of the 19th century. However, those plays which did not make use of stylized language and a wide range of symbolic or poetic meaning did not last. Realism was equally problematic in other art forms, such as painting (where incongruous elements are often presented together in a realistic fashion) or cinema (where time is segmented and distorted to control the narrative flow). In fact, most often it is the departures from reality which prove to be the most interesting, and presence-inducing, aspect of

any work of art.

A distancing of computer-mediated creation from the realistic paradigm is also supported in some research studies done regarding telepresence. One such study, by Kristine Nowak and Frank Biocca, found that users reported increased levels of presence when faced with less realistic avatars [7]. While this study may not be conclusive in this regard, it definitely suggests that, when it comes to presence, a more symbolic approach to the creation of computer-mediated environments may provide a functional advantage over realistic ones. Video game designers have also discovered that players want to be able to recognize reality but don't want its restraints, and it has been suggested that a certain amount of "virtual unreality" is required to maintain the user's attention ([8], 59-60). This tendency towards the symbolic or unreal can be understood as a simple consequence of the mimetic nature of telepresence. While this may be surprising in some models of telepresence, it is the natural consequence of recognizing the mimesis of presence.

Conclusion: Presence as Artistic Product

Treating presence in different media as a mimetic subject opens up an entire range of reflection which would be otherwise impossible. It allows us to better understand and analyze the creative elements of computer-mediated design, without having to understand presence within a positivist or scientific framework. New models of interpersonal mediated communication also become possible using mimesis as the central conceptual tool. By shifting to a mimetic model of presence, we can begin to push the limits of both the expressive limits of computer interfaces and our ways of understanding our reactions to them.

References

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