How to win and loose beyond classifications?
Collaborative agency in *the Game of Imaginary Beings*

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ABSTRACT

The Game of Imaginary Beings was an artistic outcome of the Cultural Usability -research project carried out at the Media Lab, University of Art and Design Helsinki, UIAH, during 2000 and 2001. The collaborative research focused on the questions of how the user is constructed in design of the interactive computer mediated environments and how the critical cross-disciplined theory and the design practice could be brought together. In this paper I am focusing on the question of how collaborative agency is constructed in *The Game of Imaginary Beings* as a work of interactive art. How the illusion of participation and agency, the role of the user as a designer, is created in the process of constructing an imaginary being and what kind of meanings the aesthetics of these interactive mirror-images suggest?

Keywords
art as collaborative process, interactivity, aesthetics, agency, surrealism

Mirroring "the other" of a designer
The Game of Imaginary Beings is an interactive installation. Originally it was an aesthetic study of following questions concerning designing and creating interactivity: Who are the designers imagining in the place of the user? Themselves or somebody else? How do they cope with what is different, with the "others" of design?

We, the group of four authors of the work, shared the opinion that some of these decisions are made subconsciously We suggested that the discourse of unconscious, the non-verbal, conflicted and embodied psyche, always effects on resulting design objects. Clearly, it also effects on resulting mode of interactivity. We decided to shed light on unconscious and the not so rational part of the design process. We also agreed, that for us, as a group of artists, researchers and designers, this "other" was the user who escapes classifications and taxonomies – the embodied, situated and conflicted subjects of different age, race and gender. Our aim was to picture the discourse of the "others" with the means of interactive aesthetics - and design an interface which would act like a playful mirror for the designer's "other" reflecting also subconscious processes of a designer's decision making.

Remediating the work of a tailor
As a result, the purpose of *the Game* is to construct an imaginary being, a wish image, which escapes and surpasses rational everyday classifications by creating new and surprising meanings in the interactive process of choices. As an interactive game constructing a certain role for its player it also turns the immanence of the design process inside out and places the user in the position of the designer.

The player is given an illusion of being a tailor almost: she cuts, chooses and sews different objects together so as the final outcome, a Being, is constructed by her acts. Purposefully the interface of *the Game* also combines interface metaphors used in common designer's software for manipulating digital images: the player can drag and drop objects, use scissors for cutting out wanted pieces and compose her piece of design inside a working area. The Being becomes her own creation in a way.

The process of interactive construction in *the Game* is likewise similar to the acts of creating simple avatars in some on-line virtual communities. In many of these environments the participator can choose the head, the body, different body parts or accessories from a selection of symbolic objects for her on-line representation and sew them together in social action. She designs her own avatar and by directing it in the interactive environment gives it the agency. Is it her? the often contemplated question goes – or just a semi-automated cyborg reflecting her real self? Or the designers hidden "other"?

In *the Game,* as in the most of the so called avatar worlds, the process of creation is an illusion after all: The player creates the imaginary being step by step by making choices of pre-determined visual and textual objects and lets them be composed in "the mirror"-area of the interface. The composition and the possible threads of the choices as well as the hybrid meanings it arouses are carefully designed and programmed before hands and symbolically presented in the interface of the game. But without the acts of the player the meanings embedded in the objects would never exist and would never construct the creature either.

The Being constructed in *the Game* is not an avatar in the real sense of the the word, in the discourse of on-line communities neither, but is playing with the associations of post-human identities, constructed as chiasms of human and machine agency.

Making sense a'la exquisite corpse

The Game's aesthetic interpretation of the collaborative agency shared between human and machine factors is realised also on the plane of constructing and sharing meanings between human and machine agents in the process of interaction it makes possible.

In virtual worlds the tools for designing an avatar by the participator don't usually include the poetic comments added in the objects of choice. The participator is free to create her personal meanings implied in the object and the final combination of them and communicate and share these meanings with other avatars in the social environment. Nevertheless, in the moment she chooses the objects for constructing the character, she is already following culturally shared meanings, which the designers of the object database probably have followed too.

In *the Game* the player becomes aware of different stages of choices involved in the design process having to choose between objects with different ethical, political and cultural statements and between the meanings that doesn't really make sense. The fragment of a text inscribed to each object simulates cultural and personal meanings which might be implicated in certain design objects or the choices and combinations of them. The articulated meanings are expressed in manifesting, provoking, poetic, narrative or ambiguous style among others. Trough the aesthetics of interaction we also wanted to make visible such meanings which are normally shared in an interactive situation only unconsciously. In addition this aimed at showing how uncanny hybrid identities are constructed and made human-like. In order to reveal the subconscious discourse as well as the non-sense involved in a design process and the co-construction of meanings we studied collective forms of artistic processes: games of the early surrealists as well children's games of construction, where the aspect of chance and surprise were involved in.

Artists of the surrealist group are very well known for their approaches in deconstructing and revolting the status of an artist, the status of individual agency, by using chance, automatism, and mechanisms of games and collaborative processes in creating a work of art. The game of *Exquisite Corpse*, the familiar play of chance and subconscious associations, was one of the springboards for *The Game of Imaginary Beings.* The surrealist game is based on a mechanism of composing new surprising and hybrid meanings collectively, without a rational plan or contributors rational knowledge of what the other contributors were composing. In the interactive realisation of the *Game* this mechanism was remediated to a critical poetic reflective design practice in which the user was intimately engaged. This engagement might result in an experience of being an eyewitness in a situation where your right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. Consequently, I claim, that the collaborative agency of the designer, the user and the programmed machine agents are reflected and played out not only in the visual and textual imagery of *the Game* but mirrored even more thoroughly in the interactive aesthetics of it. With this I referring to the way that *the Game* turns the immanence of the design process inside out.

Becoming an imaginary being

The interactivity of *the Game* is based on the idea of winning and loosing beyond dichotomies of rational thinking and having to deal with objects arousing fragmentary, corporeal, poetic and uncanny meanings. By now. we have come to see how the players of *the Game* recognise something hidden of themselves in hybrid creatures called for example "A Melancholy Head-hunter of the Avatar Heaven", "A Telepathic Matriarch of Immersion" or "An Autopoietic Bachelor Mammal" - or of the other of them selves?

The interactive process following poetic as well as manifesting statements is also an ironic comment on making categorisations and taxonomies. In the end, the imaginary being will reflect the hidden desires of the designer of the being – the user of the game – and create new mythologies and fantastic zoologies of our collective subconscious.

Jorge Luis Borges describes the bestiary of fantastic imaginary beings of the past and modern times and mythologies, Golems, Chinese Dragons, Norns and Sphinxes, in his *Book of Imaginary Beings (1967). The Game of Imaginary Beings* constructs a miniature bestiary of post-human imagination in the process of interaction: it is not just an experience of going to a zoo of mythological hybrids, but becoming a one -- a hybrid being of collaborative agency.