Helen Jamieson
Devising with Distance

As the internet becomes integrated into our daily lives, remote collaboration is becoming more common. Texts are written collaboratively via email; musicians join together in live improvised performances from opposite sides of the globe; and theatre makers such as myself are experimenting on the virtual stage.

     For the last six years, most of the collaborative work that I've done has been with people who are not in the same country as me, some of whom I have never even met. This work has been done primarily with the globally distributed cyberformance troupe Avatar Body *Collision*[1]. We are four women who met online and have been experimenting together since 2001: Vicki Smith (Aotearoa/New Zealand), Karla Ptacek (Britain), Leena Saarinen (Finland) and myself. Our by-line is: "Everything happens in real time, nothing is pre-recorded". In the last four years, Avatar Body *Collision* has created six shows and participated in many others, performed all over the world and developed an innovative new software project. Less visibly, we have laid the foundations for our practice of cyberformance, and still we have not all met physically.

     Devising with distance is a challenging task. Not only are we making up the methods as we go, we're carving out a new genre of performance that is situated within the ethereal space of the internet. I call this new genre cyberformance: live performance events that use the internet to bring physically remote performers together, in real time. We're not using the internet as a broadcast medium for pre-recorded video or animation, we're using it as the site of live performance. And we're not using the technology to add special effects to our work, we're using it to transport the performers into the space. We're using the internet as our performance site. Using technology in live theatre is nothing new, but the internet adds another level of mystique and risk. If we have lag (delay), or the internet goes down, or

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1. http://www.avatarbodycollision.org

someone's connection breaks, then that becomes part of the show.

Although much of our work is experimental and we often feel like we're groping blindly in the dark, we draw on our training in theatre and other disciplines for techniques that can be applied to the new environment. We begin with improvisation, playing games of spontaneity, free association and word jamming, throwing offers to each other and seeing where it takes us. The difference is that we're not together in a rehearsal room, we're all in separate locations and different time zones, seated at keyboards in our bedrooms and offices. Instead of voice and body, we have text and graphics. Our physical warm-up is finger stretches and re-boots.

Sometimes we struggle for hours with confounding technical problems - things that *should* work, but for unknown reasons, refuse to co-operate. We cajole our computers, stroking their plastic casings and promising treats - new accessories, back-ups and de-frags, cleaning out the cat hair from under the keyboard, anything!- if only they will just behave themselves right now! Sometimes it's the internet that lets us down. It may be called the information "super-highway" but the reality is that it's a dirt road through a wild country, plagued with potholes and beset by bandits: a frighteningly unstable environment for precise performance, but a fertile ground for experimentation and spontaneous magic.

Working at this volatile frontier requires great patience and adaptability. For example, if one of the group can't connect to the rest of us, we must all wait while they wrestle with IP addresses, negotiate firewalls and routers, restart and tweak settings to find their way through the net; and we must

be prepared for the possibility that they won't make it. When one of the group suffers from lag (delay), our avatars (characters) ad-lib through a pregnant pause until the 'forgetful' avatar's lines suddenly arrive in a jumble when their lag ends.

Everything we do is an experiment, even the performances themselves. Our shows have been motivated by one of three initial impulses: a theme or idea from one member in the group; a provocative call for proposals; or something that arises spontaneously from our improvisations. In all situations, we begin with very open improvisation, tossing ideas and images into the void and seeing what happens. This takes place online, in one of a number of chat rooms. Our primary working spaces are The Palace, iVisit and UpStage[2].

The Palace is a graphical chat room, where participants are represented by an "avatar" - a visual figure that can move and speak, a digital puppet that is operated by a real person. iVisit is audio-visual web conferencing software, where we use web cams along with text chat and audio. UpStage is our purpose-built software that combines elements of both The Palace and iVisit into a web interface, meaning that you only need browser software to participate in a performance. Multiple performers are able to compile and manipulate avatars, graphical backdrops and props, web cam feeds, text2speech (computerised) voices and written text in real time, within a single environment.

Much of our improvisational play in these environments involves pushing the boundaries, working by trial and error, asking "what happens if we do this?" We make fantastic errors which sometimes become significant elements within a show.

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2. Links to this software are available at http://www.avatarbodycollision.org/links.html

When we are working on a cyber-formance that involves a live performer in a physical space with the audience, it's a strange process for that performer. I've spent many rehearsals leaping up and down from my computer as the online performers time cues and use their powers of ESP to follow what will be my on-stage actions. Very rarely have we been able to use an additional web cam to give a live view of the audience's perspective back to the online performers. The stage performer will also spend considerable time rehearsing alone, working with the interaction between stage and screen. We have been hampered in this respect by a lack of resources - we have no physical theatre space in which to rehearse and we usually only have access to a data projector (beamer) at technical rehearsals just before a performance. Most of the time, we are working with a mental image until a day or two before the performance itself, when we are able to work in the space with most or all of the technical equipment.

In the free improvisational stage of devising, we usually have an abundance of material and many ways that the performance could develop. We don't have a director, but usually one of us becomes the 'driver' of a show, leading the process and making decisions at certain points about the shape of the material; this is always done in consensus with the whole group. In some situations a director would be useful, and I have had very helpful advice and feedback from directors that has influenced the shape of particular shows; but so far our time and resources have been occupied with developing processes and techniques among the four of us.

A vocabulary for these methods and forms is emerging, including many words and abbreviations that are commonplace in today's cyber communication: avatars, lag, LOL (laugh out loud) and so on. Now that

I'm trying to think of examples, I'm surprised that we haven't coined more terminology specific to our work, but if you were to eavesdrop on our rehearsals, you would probably get lost in our shorthand.

Text logs of all our improvisations and rehearsals are kept; the log is an exact record of all the dialogue or 'chat' that we've typed during the session. From these logs we are able to go back to moments that worked well, extract sections of dialogue, and write up notes from the session. We may also take visual screen-grabs of scenes, make notes about image ideas, or quickly mock up images in a graphics application to show to each other. We build a body of text and images and from this we begin to shape the work and write a script.

So far, all of our cyberformances have had what we call a "script", although it's quite different from a play script. A chart detailing everyone's cues is an important key to the script, as often the online performers are unable to see or hear the onstage performer and are totally reliant on very precise triggers and cues. The script will include descriptions of what's happening on stage (if there is a stage performer) as well as dialogue, instructions about images and avatars, and "screenography" - the layout of elements on the computer screen. The script will go through several drafts, with input from everyone in the group, and often continues to evolve with each performance.

Outside of devising and rehearsing, there is a lot of work to be done in the creation of images for avatars, backdrops and props. We become set and costume designers as well as performers, making our avatars from digital photographs, illustrations, images found online or created from scratch. Our scenery and lighting appears in graphical backdrops, our costumes are our avatars that walk and talk across the stage, our props are digital objects.

The performance is part of the process, as we are often presenting to audiences who are experiencing their first cyberformance. After each performance we try to gather as much feedback as possible from the audience and hold a debriefing session between ourselves to discuss the show. There is always something that went unexpectedly well and always some disaster - even if the audience didn't know it.

Now that we are beginning to make work in UpStage, which encourages audience participation, we are recognising the need to create shows that are not so strongly tied to a script or that have areas for improvisation built into the structure. With *DTN2* (May 2004, an online show in UpStage) we discovered that our audience was very vocal and eager to participate. The show had a narrator, whose lines were greatly enhanced and embellished by the audience from the very beginning of the show; future narrators may have much fewer lines, encouraging the audience to narrate their own show and in turn demanding greater flexibility of the online performers. Loosely scripted shows with large elements of improvisation and audience participation have a different sense of immediacy and aliveness than those that are precisely scripted.

The tightly planned and structured scripts of shows like *swim – an exercise in remote intimacy* and *Lagging with the Lololols* (both of which have live stage performers) are necessary in part to cue the remote performers and ensure that no-one gets completely lost. Much of the magic of the show relies on careful timing. With the inherent instability of the internet it seems crazy to rely on timing, but when it does come together perfectly, the sense of being "in the moment" with four people in dispersed locations is incredibly powerful.

Generally, the original impetus for a show will be considerably transformed by the process, as we are constantly experimenting with the technology, triumphantly discovering new tricks and reluctantly discarding grand but unworkable ideas. Sometimes a show will swerve off on a tangent because of someone's current reading and research; sometimes an ending will be found in a chance moment of play or an accident with a web cam. And just when we think we're getting up to speed with the technology, it goes and reinvents itself again.

Ultimately, cyberformance is a form of devised theatre, with some different challenges and tools. At this point in the journey, I can look back with satisfaction on the last few years of intense activity and reflect on the practice that is emerging; I can't predict where it will take us in the future, but I'll keep trying to find out.

HELEN VARLEY JAMIESON (Aotearoa-New Zealand) is a citizen of cyberspace and responsible for the Magdalena Project's website. A theatre practitioner since childhood, Helen has had three original cyber-plays professionally produced, and has produced and directed others. To pay her way in life, she provides writing and project management services for the web, digital media and the arts. Her latest occupation is cyber-formance, live performance incorporating graphical chat applications on the internet, which she does with Avatar Body Collision and desktop theatre.