

Freequent Traveller: Interaction versus contemplation

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ABSTRACT

Freequent Traveller (2001) is a live interactive installation by the artist Susanne Schuricht, developed in collaboration with Tobias Schmidt [1]. The interface consists of a hammock, whose movement is tracked by a custom-made hardware interface. While relaxing in the hammock one's motion animates text across a projection-sail. The dynamics of this animation are perceived as intricately synchronized with, and connected to one's own bodily movement together with the hammock. The projected texts are short essays and excerpts about *technology*, *mobility*, *home* and *identity*. The installation is an instrument to generate awareness through rhythmic bodily experience. Interaction is considered as a process to create contemplation and change in outlook, to go beyond playful experience with an interface.

Author Keywords

Interactive installation, mobility, home, identity, embodied experience, biofeedback, communication, digitalisation, travel, contemplation

ACM Classification Keywords

[Information Systems, Arts and Humanities]: H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces, *Synchronous Interaction*, *Theory and models* J.5 Arts and humanities – Fine Arts.

INTRODUCTION

Freequent Traveller was originally produced as a playful but sensitive research element for a questionnaire concerning issues of *mobility*, *home* and *identity*. What's the aim of travelling for you? What's home for you? How much technology do we need? What do we really need? *Freequent Traveller* brings the subject in a state of moving and being moved, creating a mindset of awareness and contemplation. It's a catalyst for interaction between people and for rethinking our needs and actual living situation. In creating *Freequent Traveller*, inspirations were archaic immersive rituals, besides the HIBYE nomadic work of Martí Guixé [2], The Viridian Neologue Contest, developed by Bruce Sterling and Natalie Jeremijenko [3] and John Thackara.

TRANSNATIONAL LIFESTYLES

The dynamic of globalisation is bringing about a new and unprecedented level of interconnectedness and transnational lifestyle. Indeed, the Westerner has become a

“frequent traveller” who is not locked in the nation-state container anymore, but able to leave and to return. This picture is, of course, only half of the story. While the OECD-world has experienced a substantial decline of the role of nation state borders as barriers to individual mobility, this is not the case for other parts of the world. Many nationalities still face mobility restrictions which are difficult to overcome. Several studies have shown that the perceptions of and opinions on adjacent countries and their inhabitants are strongly influenced by personal contacts. It may also be the case that people become more and more aware of the increasing economical, political and cultural interconnectedness. This may trigger, as Sheila Benhabib writes, „the concern for the world as if it were one's polis.” As a consequence of this new awareness of interdependency and interconnectedness citizens may also be more willing to support evolving forms of global governance or supranational political regulation. Whether the process of transnationalisation will have such encouraging side-effects, however, is still an open question. If yes, we can expect that the young and transnationally connected generations will become the forerunners of such a development, being able and competent in positioning themselves - socially, cognitively and normatively - within extended social and geographical spaces..”[4].

CONCEPT AND DESIGN

The terms *Freequent Traveller* relates to *frequency* and *periodicity*, while *free* emphasizes the state of being elated. *Traveller* is used as a metaphor for our life-long journey. Using *Freequent Traveller* means to make a journey. Travel is the unification of impulse and action, movement and excitement, impression and expression - Travel is first and foremost self-movement, desire, and change. Travelling in space includes the travel inside oneself at the same time.

In describing the concept of *Freequent Traveller*, Susanne Schuricht wants to quote John Thackara: “*Beeing embodied is our nature as earth-born creatures. The danger in our infatuation with digital communication is that we feel compelled to reduce all human knowledge and experience that we have by virtue of having bodies. When we persist in trying to substitute virtual experiences for embodied ones we end up with the worst of both worlds. Digitalisation speeds the flow of data but impoverishes our lived*

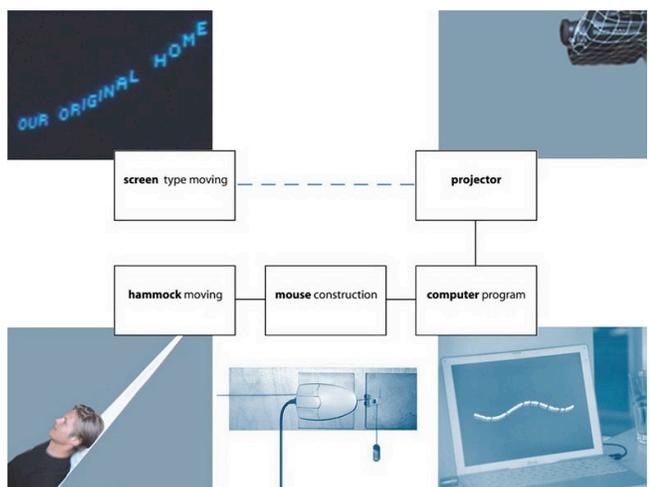
experience. Modern mobility is unsustainable. As a system, mobility is locked into a mode of perpetual growth in a world whose carrying capacity is limited. This modern development has also transformed the ways we experience “here” and “now” and “there” and “next” [5].

The participant of *Freequent Traveller* doesn't cover a real distance, the user moves at the very same spot, moves in the mind, while the interaction is an embodied and unconscious experience. Laying in the hammock this swinging motion is synchronized with the sentences animated across the projection screen. The hammock's movement is in real time translated into animated type. Analogous to the pendulum like movements of the hammock itself, the animations are based on sinewaves.

The hammock has been chosen purposeful as it creates a situation of peace and contemplation, though one is passive and active at the same time. The hardware components are simple, plain mechanics. The visibility of this simplicity is part of the aesthetics of the installation. A computer mouse is deconstructed and again new constructed, instead of a ball, there is a twine going through. The twine is fixed at the end of the hammock, transmitting the amplitude and frequency.

The text consists of statements from artists, friends and visitors from all over the world, and is about *mobility*, *home* and *identity* and emphasizes a global awareness. The text is entered beforehand and left in its original language. The text-passages also contain contemplations by the artist and excerpts from collected interviews and conversations with the audience during or after their use of this travelling installation. The content is frequently updated.

Freequent Traveller is explorative, sensuous and playful. Its use is intuitive. Interactions are continuous and not in discreet steps; it is unencumbered, poetic, involving, engaging, has cognitive (visual/textous) as well as sensuous (tactual) qualities.



FREEQUENT TRAVELLER



USER EXPERIENCES AND SELECTED PASSAGES

“While laying in the hammock I experienced a stadium between wakefulness and sleep and even if I didn't carefully read all the text, I remember many parts of it and my feelings toward it.” [Alessandra]

“Sull 'o maca mi sentivo zilossata, libera da ogni pensiero che prime mi opprimero. Non sentivo piu, problemi, ero sciolta dai legami con il mondo.”

“What technologies or tools - official - nomadic - domestic - objects - stories - to interact in person, face-to-face, stories instead of objects – meet somebody like you “ [Yui]

Home: “To de-center and at the same time become grounded, centered. To get from A to B, to this conference, for example. To experience some of my personalities.” [Bettina]

Senior Project Manager: “After spending a week in the woods on a corporate Outward Bound trip, with almost nothing - My trip changed my whole way of thinking, as far as what "being connected" means. I no longer need the "stuff" I thought kept me connected to home, and office. Today's technology keeps me as connected as I choose to be.”

“Without technology I feel safe from breakdowns. I feel HOME, if I don't have to be scared about other peoples reactions. Travelling? WORK!!!“ [Lorenza]

“Home for me is my wallet! I create businesses that require travel - I lived all over the world, travel is for me like breathing. I look for excuses to travel all the time. Often my luggage is lost, waiting somewhere at an airport. But I'm already used to it. First thing people ask me is where are you from? The most identifying category... The more you travel, the more you feel part of something bigger than what you come from. For the others I'm from New Zealand, but I don't feel not so much connected to a special group, but more just connected to myself. Travelling makes you also aware of global problems.” [G. Harding]

“What we need ? Actually not much! A notepad, maybe a camera to take some photographs (but not so many that we lose contact with our environment) and a lot of sensibility and curiosity. go play da“

“How much technology do we need? Unfortunately "need" and "have to live with" are irretrievably mixed up. The world is so full of technology and inter-mingled systems that we can't just throw them away. But I'm confident we are moving away from the idea that tech is a good thing by itself. Most of us feel far from in control. We're filling up the world with amazing devices and systems-on top of the natural and human ones that were already here-only to discover that these complex systems seem to be out of control: too complex to understand, let alone to shape, or redirect. But things may seem out of control-but they are not out of our hands.” [John Thackara]

“For me, much interesting about the dream - I sometimes think that kind of the dreams, is it same for people who are living in different area - Japanese, German, British, African, whoever? Because, I've always slept as Japanese, so I never know. Do you know what I mean?” [Masa]

From Max - aged 8yrs: *“Home means a nice warm bed. Travelling means new places and new food.”*

From Joe - aged 5 yrs: *“I don't think that God is real. Home means all my toys and animals.”*

“Without technology I feel nice at first, nervous and detached second, nice thirdly. Home for me is nowhere right now and at this point tends to be wherever I am laying my head. For me the aim of travelling is to get away from home.” [Zachary Mc Donald]

“Senza tecnologia:Tranquillo. Casa: Silenzio. Viaggio: Movimenti” [Mauro]

EXPANDING BOUNDARIES

As artist Susanne Schuricht is looking for processes to see the well-known with new eyes and thus *re-perceive* oneself as well. She creates and jointly constructs objects, environments and situations to use them as catalyst to find out more about our and others culture and, to better understand our position in the society. How can we see the objects, people, the world around us with new eyes. She sees her role to inspire people to expand their boundaries, to broaden one's mind by changing ones position and

perception. Every traveller needs this ability to be able to open up to the new and unknown in foreign situations.

Thackara sees the aim and responsibility of new Media Art in searching *“for aesthetic, political and individual messages that touch people and help us to better understand the present. (...) to create critical interfaces that allow the spectator to keep certain distance that surrounds all the hype about virtual spaces and suggestive computer worlds.”* [6]

Freequent Traveller explores these boundaries of Media Art and inspires people to become creative themselves through participatory elements of the work. Engaging informally with the participants during or after their use as well as observing reactions in different surroundings and locations helped to understand the challenge and strengths of this new interface.

The participant is from the beginning subconsciously in full control, Participants use a computer without being aware of it but are given the possibilities to discover it. During the usage the installation becomes intuitively accessible: The speed and form of the animated text depends on the amplitudes and dynamics of the movements. Nine basic-patterns, from simple animations to more extraordinary patterns of type and character-waves, change randomly and make the text more or less readable. The user will always be surprised by the new cycle of motion. The user automatically starts to play with making the text slow down or plays with the rhythm and appreciates the changing dance of the text. He is being immersed in the stimulating synchronous loop of own physical motion and perceived visual dynamics. A changing state of receiving information and reflection is created. He can step out and observe the experienced system from an outside perspective. The piece does not conceal its interface but reveals it as part of its appearance; its transparency often creates a surprising effect of becoming aware of the own action in relation to the construction. In *Freequent Traveller* bodily motion and technology, the analogue and the digital coalesce. It becomes another exploration of the question: How much technology, which technologies and which tools do we need?

RHYTHM AS MEDIUM FOR CONTEMPLATION

A central component of the work is rhythm. On one hand this is a physical rhythm and on the other a metaphorical one an ebb and flow of themes and events. All indigenous cultures have rituals that include repetitive motion to get into an elevated and engrossed state of mind. At the same time this rhythmic activity increases the activity of the brain [7]. It inspires the process of thinking and reflection.

The common explanation is that these practices release a certain amount of adrenaline which induces altered state of consciousness. The adrenaline plays it 's role too, but the main reason is to be found in the movement of the liquids. The movement of rhythmic swinging was already reported

in the antiquity, in Greece, among the Maenads, and the Branchids of the Delphes temple. They were also whirling and were throwing their head back. The ancient Norse were also using these techniques for their development. The young muslim pupils, sat on the floor in the mosques, or in Koranic schools, are swinging their bust while repeating the verses of the Koran. The Jews are also swinging the top of their body. The same for the Turks, the Orthodox Greeks of Athos Mount, some Orthodox Russians, the Shamans of Altaï (Siberia), the Shaman Bohns of Himalayas, the Hindus Yogis, Swamis and Brahmins, the Jainists, the Tziganes of East Europe.

The feedback loop of the installation created by the soft, swinging motion of the hammock linked to the dynamics of the animated text imbues the consciousness and creates a mild form of intoxication one can happily submit to. Using *Freequent Traveller* makes happy!

Freequent Traveller makes use of this method to transport the visitor into a state of mind beyond the everyday providing the possibility to engage in the universal themes but at the same time reflecting personal needs of home, mobility and identity. Thoughts of fellow participants from different backgrounds and cultures become unintrusively visible, raising a local and global awareness.

Being elevated and set into a symbolic state of dislocatedness people might feel confronted with themes such as constituting a transnational society, global information exchange, the loss of the notion of place, the breaking of boundaries.

AN INSTRUMENT TO SHARE EXPERIENCES IN PUBLIC

As a research element one aim is to offer a space to share these personal experiences.

Freequent Traveller recognizes the problematic, sometimes uncomfortable atmosphere of the melting of personal and public situations and provides an adaptable sensitive tool for engagement with individuals in public space.

Supporting a rhythm based feeling of pleasure, the hammock offers a flexible, personally adaptable space in a situation of exposedness to the public while being in a receptively, emotional therefore also vulnerable state.

The projection screen creates a situation, where the text messages can be viewed by everybody and the installation can bring strangers playfully together. People can lie together inside or keep an appropriate distance and enjoy pushing the person inside. It's an instrument, which offers a special relaxed and social atmosphere to make people feel comfortable talking about personal issues to share them with others. However closing the hammock further about the body, a visitor can create a cocoon like space, where he can experience the text messages in a more intimate atmosphere if desired.

Text input is intentionally generated through personal conversations or writing on analogue piece of paper with questions, to avoid a distraction by a technological interface. With every public presentation its content grows with newly added statements.

CONCLUSION

Life is a frequent travel - travelling more consciously, being aware of the various options and perspectives, supports to better navigate (through) the world.

Freequent Traveller [8] makes its users look at their surrounding from a fresh perspective. It is a catalyst for starting to re-think our way of life in today's times. Laying in the hammock and swaying through the text helps to set your mind into a moving state of flow. Some didn't believe that it would be such a strong experience.

As mobile research tool *Freequent Traveller* is on its way to different places and cultures collecting statements and experiences about different behavior, interaction and contemplation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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