

**Luca Befera:** Could you talk about the genesis of *Genesis*?

**Alexander Schubert:** The project was a follow-up to the project *Control*, which happened two years ago and used a similar approach to translating the first-person view to control rooms. The idea was to take this approach further or put a different spin on it. Where the former project dealt mainly with going through different stages of control for one person, in a setting that was staged and had performative aspects, here the idea was to take every dramaturgy, performative and theatrical parts out of it, and just use an empty space.

I wanted to do something that used a similar technique as *Control* but focusing on different aspects, also taking myself out as much as possible as a composer or artistic head of the project and rather to create a space that would display certain things as opposed to me trying to display something. The process of taking away things and reducing my impact happened step-by-step.

The difference with regards to the previous projects is definitely to focus on the openness or just on the participants without narrative and performative aspects. The experimental sides got bigger and it was unclear how it would have developed specifically. This happened to a certain degree also for the previous pieces, but, still, we were offering a setting that had certain regulations and was much more specific or concrete than it was in *Genesis*. Thus, I really wanted to do something that was the opposite of things that we have done so far, in order to get the biggest insight.

**LB:** Are there any relations with *Acceptance* or *Unity Switch*? Could this project be seen as an improvement in the ‘error aesthetic’?

**AS:** I’m not so sure if I see the ‘error aesthetic’ in *Genesis*, I see more continuity from the other works regarding the topics of virtuality, distance and closeness of control, how much is needed to be in a specific space or close to the body in order to feel something. Thus, there were different levels of virtuality not just regarding VR in a different setting but also interactions or what the room is like as an artificial entity disconnected from time and space. Those are definitely the aspects that carry through much more. They were in *Control* too, people that get controlled and then control, basically to look at things from different perspectives. In *Acceptance* also, it was very physical, a bodily experience, extreme for the performer. But then again, if you look at it from the browsers it is very distant, it is very digital and virtual. Of course, you can understand that there are human beings, but this disconnection is one of the aspects there.

Also, people had a real space where to create something artificial in it, creating these wooden sculptures and in the end the artificial rendered light put on top. Here is quite the same as well, there is challenging stuff happening in real life in this hall, but there is always something missing in a way. For example, if you are in the control room or if you are acting as an actual avatar in the hall, you hear all the commands, voices and so on, you hear the activity that is there whereas the room itself is very quiet. It is kind of missing something and it has this sort of hollow, virtual or empty atmosphere to it. I find it interesting how people relate to this, if we perceive it as something missing and where we can engage into it. This involves the contrast between something very real and physical and something distant and artificial which works on several levels, regarding the activity in the room and also how you connect with that setting as a user from somewhere else and from your laptop.

**LB:** In which ways do you think virtuality influenced the interaction between players and with the space?

**AS:** As I said, the disconnection of the players to the space allows several layers of distancing. For one it is almost anonymous, evidently for the people instantly playing, but also for the ones buying a ticket could be anonymous, they had just to give their email. The rules that apply were different than the ones you could have in a physical interaction when you are meeting people. For one, it creates an open space that may be similar to other online community facets, there are lower control mechanisms which are displayed, shown and made perceivable. So, one chance is to make something obvious, which is something that happens in online communities. But there were also people trying to help, take care and construct something; or destroying things and in general having a much more negative attitude towards the game; or even something in the middle, for example, the idle mode, being there in the emptiness or people not knowing what to do with this freedom. The whole range of those ways of thinking and interacting was interesting.

Also, it has been an experiment to see what people come up with, how people use the room and it was in that way an experiment to make it possible to build something and to establish the rules or goals, which we explicitly tried to not give as a prerequisite. There were just some indications in the FAQ saying that it was not possible to harm somebody else. For one it is interesting to see what rules or ideas people come up with and on the other hand to see how people cope with the fact that there are no given rules. For some of them, it was too much this lack of information or orientation. This is something I like, I like the idea of not knowing the rules or creating a space where things are not clear, that is where the experimental part of Genesis could happen. It is something that I have imagined since I was a child, to think about how the world would have been if some rules were not applied. I liked to make something like this happen in that context. Then some people used that freedom, and some did not. It is also interesting to see the expectations that people had towards the interaction and themselves also, some players even had the feeling that they were judged.

Going back to virtuality and the possibilities of the space, in the development of the piece there was a constant balancing between two sides. The two main references regarding computer games were Minecraft on one hand and the Sims on the other: was it an experiment where people construct something out of very simple elements? Or a social experiment where there are given social settings and people interact with the avatars? Eventually, we tried to fit both under the hood. Finally, a bigger portion of the people chose the social interaction and that was totally fine.

**LB:** Also, the setting and the items were explicitly tied to that kind of goals, for example, to build spaces where social interactions could happen. Were these inputs coming from the outside to stimulate a certain kind of actions?

**AS:** It was impossible to be out completely, there were several aspects where we shaped how the piece would have been, like the location, the absence of light and the selection of items.

**LB:** Also, I am thinking about some plays of people from the staff: they built the first wall and then other players started to build something else. Also, on Carola's birthday there was an interaction with her social context belonging to her real-life through the social media and, furthermore, you, Carl and Heinrich brought a present for her out of the inventory inside the space.

**AS:** As I said, there were some influences from performers' or authors' background, we were human beings acting in that situation after all. Events such as Carola's birthday were probably conscious, but regarding the present, I think it was not so influential for the outcome of the project. It was just to make something nice for her, I do not see any specific reason to speak against it.

**LB:** Did you calculate a human interaction coming also from other social-media environments?

**AS:** Not so much. There was the idea that people would exchange ideas or look at it from the outside. In the set-up already, there was the YouTube channel, the chat, Facebook and Instagram groups. Thus, there was the idea to make it possible to access things over or beyond just playing. Although, I do not think that the integration of existing networks had a specific goal.

**LB:** What about the avatars acting outside of the strict rule of being controlled?

**AS:** There were several reasons for this. The first one is that they are human beings, so it is almost impossible that they did not do it; the other is that we had not much time to rehearse completely due to some circumstances and it was not clear what would have happened on days 2 or 3, many parameters were unclear. Finally, things changed at the last minute and, because of the short rehearsal time, the avatars entered the technology for the first time two or three days before the project started, which is insane.

So, there were different reasons why we had to adjust the project as it went on. But even if we had more time, I do not think we could have solved everything. When we did one rehearsal and talked it through afterwards, we were already discussing how high-level the avatars' knowledge should have been and we realized that it is hard to give an answer to that. That is how we left the rehearsal, it seemed very difficult to find a general answer because the adjustment, detail and every human-to-human or human-to-avatar interaction were so subtle. But we tried to not allow too high-level instructions, for example, 'build a house' would have requested more specific instructions. But whether the avatar knew how to pour a glass of water or not, it was debatable whether the gamer should have said 'bring the bottle, screw the tap, fill in water, screw the tap again' or not, it was a grey zone. Anyway, I always liked the idea of very specific descriptions, this is how I entered the project. Also, because I came from Control, where there were very detailed instructions. But whether that project was less flexible and open, Genesis needed more space in how to work with these aspects. Anyway, sometimes it could be easier to interact with high-level instructions. Also because of this more open format, it has been something in between Minecraft and The Sims.

On the other hand, the will of the avatars should not have been part of the reactions. If somebody would have said 'draw a pig on a sheet of paper', not wanting to do it would not have been a good reason to not do it. The personal wishes of the performers were not considered in the concept of the game, for sure. The only reason to not do something would have been if it was going to hurt yourself or damage the setting. But it was a grey area again, which had to do with the destruction principle and what that means. Then, the high-level instructions were about making it easier to control an avatar, which should have been in the foreground, but not on personal wishes.

The other thing that has been a lot up to debate is how far the avatar is responsible for making a show, performance or in general an interesting thing. Here again, different

perspectives met each other, and I strongly believed that even if a slot was boring and people did not know what to do, then for me that was also fine. I did not think that the avatar had to offer something or put on a show, the goal of this project was not entertainment like one-hour of cool things happening, but more on displaying a space of possibilities, full stop. How to use it, is in the hands of the users. Even if the player found it boring, that does not mean that it is a waste of time, slots or anything. It is still insight and a memory which the player will continue to have, a chance not used or an impossibility to connect through the setting. For me, it says something, especially if there were 600 tickets over 7 days, it could work for some people or not, for me it would have been fine. I also like this boredom and emptiness that could come in an idle situation even if the player is online with an avatar. Nothing is happening, it is a non-place, zoned out of the setting. As a metaphor, it works for me. And I do not think it is boring also because it happens in further settings: people could have experienced that. To make it possible for this sort of thing to happen it is important. But also it is a challenge for the performer and there is always this grey area of what needs to be done in order to be sure that a player can use the settings if she/he wants to, in order to make it technically possible without giving too strong inputs about what to do.

**LB:** Even if it could be possible to reduce the performers' influence to zero, do you think that it was present as part of the performance?

**AS:** Yes, aspects like where the limit for the performers was, what did they want to destroy, what made them sad, what did they want to change in the room, in which kind of interaction did they have problems were definitely part of the friction. As I said, there were rules which were not black and white. There were different core components and one of these was the friction between an artificial avatar and a real human being, those are just two different things.

**LB:** Of course, and the avatars had to choose between these states over time.

**AS:** Yes. But it could be possible to formalize the performance's aspects of the avatars, so to say, to come up with a kind of 'rules book', to make it even more abstract. Thinking of the big steps and how the piece came along, for one was taking the audience out and the other one was to take the speech out. So, going from the starting idea which I proposed, those were the two big steps made over the last 6 months in the rehearsal process and so on. Taking the speech out made it more abstract right away.

**LB:** I noticed that you made the avatars participate in the setting preparation, asking them for putting the black foil on the roof to obscure the performance hall. Also, they slept just behind the hall with a few minutes break between the slots. You also participated in the performance and lived the place most of the time. Do you tend to this kind of immersivity within the performance?

**AS:** Yes, I think it is part of it. For the performers, it was a balance between four hardcore approaches - 24-hours and 7-days never going out, which would also have been good on several levels – and realizing good work conditions. That was kind of the compromise for making sure that they stayed healthy. That sort of immersivity was definitely a goal, and for this production was the maximum we could go for.

About the rest, part is just about practicality, just to be there. Probably, if had had 12 hours off, I would have gone home during that time, but I liked that there was something

from me also and to enter that world. Even though I had been outside most of the time I also enjoyed going into the hall to do maintenance, clean up or work as an avatar. It is a different facet of the piece, which is not a 100 per cent perceivable for the majority of the players, to construct and live a space which jumped from time and space and existed on its own always in the same way. For example, the light did not change and the music kept repeating to a certain degree. Even if there was a certain evolution it was very self-content. This aspect of engaging into something like this, letting it go or surrendering to such a place is definitely something that I find interesting and I have been dealing in a lot of pieces.

**LB:** Were you searching for some kind of beauty?

**AS:** The question about whether the performance was beautiful or not, hollow or poetic is something that drove me in a way. I think that it is hard to say if that place was beautiful or not, in a way it was very sad also. nobody speaking and people acting like robots are inhuman aspects, probably the opposite of what a social setting really is. On the one hand, it could display something that might appear in society or other contexts as well. On the other, through virtuality, technology and many other things were aspects of distancing from something: things became artificial and distant.

Visualizing this and making it perceivable was the negative part of it. On the other hand, a place that does exist without the constraints of what is surrounding it was beautiful. I felt like, once entering, one could have sucked into it and forget to get out again, like a dream, an alternate or an escape space, something like a paradise. In that projection space, you really leave behind a lot. Even if I did not spend so much time inside the hall, it was something like this anyway. I was supervising all the technical stuff, and when going in I actually forgot about all of this and just stayed there living in the moment. There is something poetic and beautiful about constructing this space out from zero. So, being virtual it had a very unsocial side and, at the same time, it was a projection space where to leave other things behind.

**LB:** In my experience, it was beautiful to walk around the room after the performance to me, it was the result of people's interactions and thoughts over time. Also, it was there just for that night.

**AS:** And that is the thing, nobody else saw it. At some point, people asked if the final result would have been exhibited like an artwork. But for me it never had been like that, even though I liked the effect of constructing spaces in there, I never saw it as a way to create an artwork as the final goal, it was just a point in time and I like the fact that the final result disappeared before anybody else could see it. Thus, we took away from the audience some of the things we have just discussed, to be a human being entering the hall and enjoying it. Nevertheless, this increased the virtuality of it, the fact that you had no idea where this happened, that it was gone before there was any chance to ever see it, no final result and no object in the end.

**LB:** Was it like a trace in participants' memory?

**AS:** Yes, and I liked this, I liked that it was not possible to touch it. Talking about the genesis of this piece, one of the most important reflections was about whether the audience could or not enter the hall. When we first started it there was still the idea to do it as in Control, where the avatars could also be the audience, so the audience telling other audience what to do. At some point, I decided against it. Aside from that, the original idea for the

piece at 80 per cent was already there. When I met Carl and Heinrich, we started directly from this, and the big change that came was taking the audience out of the hall, no audience members would have a seat in the space. This emphasized the immersivity and the extremeness for the performers, introducing other aspects of it even further: four people willing to be in the setting for such a while, the amount of dominance in control, exploitation, immersivity, surrender to the setting and the hierarchy. Thus, some other aspects became more prominent. An alternative or future possibility could be that people either could have a virtual ticket or they are in the hall.

**LB:** Can you give me some more information about the technical aspects?

**AS:** Yes, sure. What happened is that the four avatars in the room had a camera and a microphone and both were sent wirelessly to the control room. The control room sent those two things over the internet and over the server to websites of people who had a ticket. Normally there were four ticket slots available at any given moment and four people were sitting in front of their laptop and each of those four players, who could be anywhere, perceived the video image of the first-person perspective of an avatar and the sound that an avatar ears. In return, the players used the microphone of their laptop and send the spoken commands to the avatar.

**LB:** Which software, programming language or technical equipment did you use?

**AS:** The arm interface was done in Arduino, the speaking through the arm interface and transforming into the messages in Max. Max was used to sending information from the room through the website, which worked with JavaScript. Also, there was a lot of hardware involved, this is the big perspective but there were several other stages: the camera sent to a wireless receiver, which went to a diversity switch that then passed through a video switch. The latter sent part of the information to local-control screens and part of it to two video-streaming servers – one for the sequence view and one for a test video – which went through mobile LTE routers which provided a link to the video that could be accessed by users. The website that Dominik programmed created links or access to those videos whenever somebody had an available ticket. The audio connection worked on an audio stream client that ran on a commercial server embedded into the website, so that accesses the microphone of the browser of the users. On our side we had four computers that would work as the corresponding basis: they received the spoken language of the player and get the microphone inputs from the room and avatars. So, we established four working stations, the ‘partner stations’ so to say, for the avatars. Through those four stations, the connections were built whenever somebody had an available ticket so that the audio connection and the video link were accessible directly through the video server. Then, there were computers that did the streaming on YouTube and so on.