
Avatopia: A cross-media community for societal action

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Abstract

A cross-media platform was designed for a community of young teenagers oriented towards societal change. The platform involved an interactive web forum featuring creative and communicative collaborative tools in a 3d avatar environment, and a weekly show in national public-service television. Informal assessment of the platform in use indicated that (1) an integrated spiral of production and consumption across the two media channels involved is a viable design concept to support community building, and that (2) off-the-shelf avatar technology and consumer-grade Internet connectivity forms a feasible infrastructure for collaborative storytelling tools. Both of these findings are potentially transferable to other design domains and audiences.

Keywords

cross-media, community, public service, avatar world.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. Group and Organization Interfaces;
K.4.1. Public Policy Issues.

Introduction

Among young teenagers in Sweden (ages 13–17 or so), there is a small but significant fraction committed to changing society in the large and in the small. You may find them in issue-driven organizations such as Amnesty, Greenpeace and Animal Liberation, or as student representatives in co-determination groups at school,

or marching in the streets during trade organization summits, or hanging out in cafés and other meeting places together with their friends. In urban settings, that is. The ones truly committed to change who have the misfortune of growing up in villages or in the countryside generally find the selection of stimulating social and physical environments to be lacking. What is common across the country is the subcultural perception of being denied the access to media and other channels of public influence that the heartfelt issues deserve.

Swedish Television is the national public service TV network in Sweden, offering two analogue and five digital channels to virtually every household in the country, all free from commercials and funded by the state and by viewer fees. It is a cultural institution in many ways, with extremely strong figures for reach and credibility among Swedish mass media and an equally strong image of grown-up and authoritarian television. Consequently, it struggles with low ratings among teenagers as well as with the respectable tasks of identifying its roles and the public service mission in the emerging landscape of increasing TV competition and the new media.

The two preceding paragraphs may appear to have nothing in common, but circumstances happened to be fortunate in the year 2001: The intention emerged to explore the intersection between (some) young teenagers' will to change society and Swedish Television's need to experiment with new cross-media formats and new interpretations of the concept of public service. A collaborative project was formed between Swedish Television, Malmö University, Animationens Hus, the Interactive Institute, and a couple of more peripheral actors to work towards the vision of *designing, deploying and assessing a cross-media platform for a small but influential group of young teenagers throughout Sweden committed to creating change in society.*

The Avatopia Project

The vision of the project was formulated in the initial phase based on the knowledge interests of the participants, on Swedish Television's knowledge of its audience, and on initial fieldwork with young teenagers across southern Sweden [3]. It essentially posed the idea of a cross-media platform based on an interactive web forum in conjunction with a daily or weekly TV show where broadcasted material was produced inside the interactive forum by community members in collaboration with TV staff. The idea was for the two channels to form a *positive spiral of participation*: The comparatively small web forum produces material which is broadcast to a comparatively large TV audience, where some people are excited enough by what they see to join the community by committing to action in the interactive forum. In order for this spiral to work, we assumed that the interactive forum had to use audiovisual representations of a nature that were suitable for TV broadcasting. Moreover, we thought of the Avatopia community as a small and highly involved group, comprising some 2500 members of which only a hundred or a few hundred were online in the web forum at any given time. The unique access to a highly regarded national broadcast channel would ensure appropriate potential for influencing public opinion.

With this overall vision in mind, we set out to create a participatory design process involving 20–30 young teenagers with the dual tasks of (1) contributing to the design of various aspects of the cross-media platform, and (2) adopting the roles of mentors and norm-carriers in the community once it was opened to the public.

The group of teenagers was recruited in December 2001 and January 2002 by means of a rather unusual Christmas gift followed by an initial workshop at Swedish Television's premises in Växjö. The gift was a loaf of bread stuffed with some *creative exercises* and a

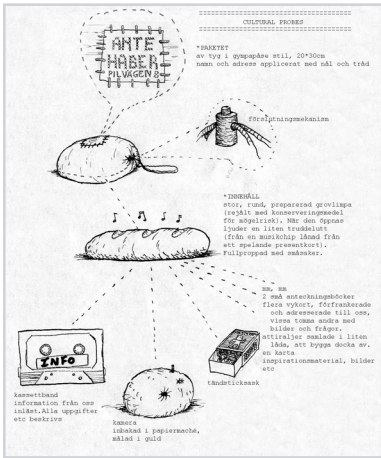


figure 1–2. Sketch for the Christmas gift (above) and snapshots from initial workshop (below).



cassette tape with instructions and mood music, along with an invitation to bring the completed exercises and come to the Växjö workshop. The exercises were largely inspired by the RCA work on cultural probes [2] and involved a disposable camera for a photo diary, a set of pre-addressed postcards with questions pertaining to values and views on change in society, a small object to be used in creating a personal avatar, and so on (refer to figure 1).

Some forty Christmas gifts were sent to young teenagers whom we had reason to believe would be interested in the goals and development of Avatopia. Twenty-seven signed up for the *initial workshop*, a surprisingly good result which we attribute at least in part to the slightly unusual and perhaps inspirational nature of the invitation. The participants at the initial workshop spent two days understanding the overall project vision, developing initial ideas for the web forum and for the social mechanisms of the community, and generally getting to know and trust each other. The contributions requested in the invitation were used as raw materials for joint creative work (figure 2) and for discussions in small groups and in plenum.

The workshop ended with the formation of four *task forces* committing to spending efforts during the Spring on, respectively, the look and feel of the interactive web forum; the functions and features of the web forum; the norms and values of the community—and ways of upholding them; and formats for the TV show.

By the Summer of 2002, a *concept design* was synthesized from the four areas of activity, with a main emphasis on functional and visual aspects of the interactive web forum and strategies for building and sustaining a desirable set of values in the community.

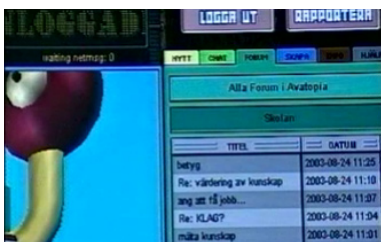
The interactive web forum was to become a *3d avatar world* with a highly eclectic, collage-style visual quality. The world is small and limited, with room for no more than a hundred avatars or so, in order to create friction and energy. The general character is an outdoors setting, somehow like a public urban place, with a small number of buildings each providing a dedicated function (figure 3.1). For instance, one of the buildings is the Knowledge Bank where collaborative stories, the mythology of the community, memorable community occasions and useful activism information are stored for future use.

The primary form of interaction is synchronous typed text and the spatial metaphor is upheld in the sense that your avatar has to be quite close to the avatar you wish to talk to (figure 3.2). In addition, there are *communicative tools* for arranging hearings and other forms of public debates, for initiating and participating in asynchronous text conversations (figure 3.4), for creating propaganda-bots, for placing posters and flyers in the avatar world (figure 3.3), for posting protest lists for other members to sign, and for collaborative creation of avatar animations.

The *animation tools* are based on the idea of using the avatar world as a recording studio with objects as props and avatars as actors, to capture realtime action in the avatar world and then to edit it in a parallel-time “universe” where action can be changed, deleted and added by means of timeline tools until the final result is satisfactory. Asynchronous object download and editing by reference is used to create an editing and playback environment in which full-screen animation can be produced and viewed also via low-bandwidth connections.

Concerning the social aspects of community building, it was striking to us as adults how much faith the young teenagers placed in *open and critical dialogue*. Virtu-

figure 3. Screenshots from the interactive web forum.



ally all ideas on technological enforcement of community rules were ruled out and the general direction was one of an open democracy where all voices deserved the right to be heard, even though some could then be thoroughly refuted. One young participant referred to Avatopia as “an anarchistic experiment—what happens in a completely open debate?” but at the same time, it was clear that she and the other participants shared a certain amount of values on the desirable outcomes of a “completely open debate”, namely a collaborative environment marked by tolerance and by an emphasis on judging proposals and ideas on their own merits rather than based on who stated them and how.

As part of the community building strategy, we planned a series of half-hour TV programs leading into the launch of the interactive web forum. The TV programs would feature a number of young teenagers travelling around in Sweden and initiating actions together with local people in large and small cities. The actions would be of the general nature that Avatopia would be expected to be involved in, and the travelling teenagers would move on from TV exposure to roles as primary mentors for newcomers in the interactive web forum. The final part of the series would coincide with the launch of the web forum and contain very strong lead-ins to carry the audience from the TV set to the computer.

A rather significant *implementation* phase followed the concept design and the Avatopia community was launched in September 2003 with four half-hour TV programs leading up to the opening of the interactive web forum and a weekly TV episode as part of the young-teenager programming block at 7pm on Thursdays. The public version of the web forum (figure 3) offered a significant subset of the functions designed in the concept phase. Most notably, the collaborative animation tools

were never part of the public version. Our resources only allowed for a beta-version of the animation tools, which seemed to validate the technical feasibility of the chosen architecture but never allowed for inclusion in the public version and full-scale testing in use. The other difference between the concept design and the deployed web forum was that functions to create propaganda-bots were lacking.

The launch plan posed a slow but steady growth in numbers of community members, and similarly a slow but steady growth in the proportion of relevant topics being addressed by the community, to the point where a critical mass of approximately 1000 (more or less) active members would be reached after six months and the longitudinal evaluation would start by means of cyber-ethnographical methods.

The operation of the community entailed a small running cost for web hosting and a part-time staff member of Swedish Television, which proved unfortunate when Swedish Television suffered an unexpected budget cut in late 2003 and had to concentrate on their core business. The Avatopia experiment was not perceived as part of core business, and it was terminated in early 2004. Hence, no systematic evaluation was performed and whatever data we have to assess our ideas are anecdotal.

Results

In spite of the poor data quality, from a research perspective there still seem to be two pieces of knowledge that can be taken away from the project and transferred to new design domains with some level of confidence. The first has to do with the concept of a positive production-consumption spiral, and the second concerns tools for collaborative storytelling.

When developing cross-media products, it seems to make sense to aim for a *positive production-consumption spiral* built on the particular qualities of the media involved. In the Avatopia case, one of the core media was broadcast public-service TV which combines strong audience coverage, high credibility and high audiovisual demands. The other core medium was the web, and to make the spiral work we designed the web part to offer collaboration tools with as strong an audiovisual impact as we could, set in a 3d avatar world with a rather distinctive audiovisual expression. (If we had only concentrated on the communicative aspects of the community—i.e., on putting similarly-minded people in touch with each other—it would have been much easier to propose a text-and-image-based web forum combined with more resources for conventional TV production by Swedish Television staff using the web forum as source for journalistic ideas and contacts.)

An additional aspect of the production-consumption spiral is that 3d avatar media turn out to be experientially quite different from broadcast TV. In order for Swedish Television staff to produce a journalistic piece of broadcast TV from inside the web forum by, e.g., recording a hearing and interviewing community members, we found that a significant amount of post-processing was necessary. If you were to view the event in the web forum by being live on the scene through an avatar, the experience would be very different from viewing a recording of the same screen view frame by frame. To make it worthwhile TV, it needs to be edited quite heavily to increase the pace and the visual variation. One strategy that the TV journalists developed to address the lack of proper broadcast-production tools in Avatopia was to visit the web forum with at least two avatars simultaneously in order to get the equivalent of two cameras on the event to be covered.

We may speculate that the experiential difference between avatar media and broadcast TV is due to your perceived sense of participation in the online case, stemming from the knowledge that you could move somewhere else in the world, or speak up on any topic at any time—even if you choose to stand still and be quiet for the full duration of the event. Another part of the explanation is, of course, the genre conventions of rapid cuts and visual variation in many broadcast-TV genres.

Through informal assessment of the beta-version animation tools, it would appear that our emphasis on *collaborative creative tools* was a promising direction for facilitating commitment and societal action. In the design process, we anticipated main uses of the animation tools to revolve around creation of satirical and expressive pieces, and around social mechanisms relating the collaborative production to the positive-spiral concept. Examples of such mechanisms include themed movie festivals with prizes, an open-source approach around an in-forum animation archive, and so on. Unfortunately, we were never able to test these ideas properly before the premature shutdown. What we are able to claim, however, is that consumer-grade computing and communication technology seems to form an adequate infrastructure for collaborative animation tools.

Future work

The cross-media approach to interactive TV seems sensible not only because it fits within the limitations of current consumer technology, but also because it draws on the inherent strengths of two rather different media. To simplify, we might say that TV is low-effort, high-reach and creative web environments are high-effort, low-reach. By connecting them in a positive spiral of production and consumption, synergy effects appear possible.

Our experience from Avatopia has provided some exciting glimpses of the “particular challenges of studying and designing for sociability in social electronic media” and it is straightforward to identify a few relevant directions for further work in the field.

- Design, deploy and study a sustainable cross-media community in another field and for another audience, to validate the ideas developed in Avatopia on the positive cross-media spiral and the use of tools for collaborative storytelling.
- Refine, implement and evaluate further interaction techniques for collaborative animation tools aimed at producing broadcast-quality audiovisual contents on consumer-quality infrastructures.
- Experiment further with the idea of a small and focused cross-media community to influence public opinion, with relation to ongoing work at the intersection of media studies and interaction design on the roles of city-block TV, mobile-phone video recording and dissemination, blogs and other local-production media in societal development. Davis’ prescient and intriguing notion of “computational video as mother tongue” for younger citizens [1] is clearly relevant in this respect, as is Jenkins’ work demonstrating the amount of commitment and creative skill invested in audiovisual expression on a voluntary basis in various fan cultures [4]. Another obvious source of inspiration is Lambert’s work on digital storytelling [5], even though the focus for him and his colleagues is perhaps more on personal expression than on collaborative societal action.

To conclude, we feel that sociability in new media is an emerging topic of massive significance in interaction design and media technology as well as media and culture studies. We are pleased to see the first signs of a critical mass of research and development emerging in this exciting field.

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