

# Unpersonified displacements

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**Abstract:** “Unpersonified displacements” deals with the question of virtualization of individuals. We argue that virtual worlds are a combination of both physical and electronic environments that focus especially on processes and actions, rather than on objects and perceptual signs. Our piece is more contemplative than interactive. Indeed, it has been designed to run indefinitely. Simple shapes with simple behavior may provoke unlimited semiosis in persons. We believe this fact is because we identify ourselves within the process of movement, not with the media that conveys the action.

## Introduction

Along digital art history, artists have used electronic devices and software to design, create, and produce their artworks. In some cases, the relevance of such tools as well as their outcomes have approached artists to work collaboratively with other professionals, mainly from science and engineering. In other cases, it has been artists themselves who have learned digital techniques and skills. Anyhow, digitalmedia have been considered as a powerful source to convey experiences and artistic objectives (Shanken, 2009). From a postmodern perspective, artists have delegated the completeness of the work of art to users and interactions. At the same time, from a cybernetic standpoint, artists have regarded communication between animals and machines to generate ever-changing and unexpected results.

Within this context, we present our artwork named “Unpersonified Displacements”, which can be described as a digitally produced and visually abstract piece. Its main goal is to support some thinking and premises around what has been called, in humanities, ‘virtualization’. We focus on the process of virtualization of individuals. We believe that by means of electronic productions we can reach and foster human capabilities that go beyond common user actions. Our piece is a contemplative artwork that shows five hundred spheres of five different HSV and several sizes. Spheres simulate displacement actions and passages. The work has been designed to run for long sessions. Indeed, there is no ending. When the process arrives to an advanced phase, i.e. once a group of spheres has been gathered together, the very last sphere

will refuse to group, will go away, and will attract spheres to displacements over again.

## Process of displacement

“Unpersonified displacements” deals with the question of virtualization of individuals. The notion of virtualization is used in the sense of philosophic tradition. Gilles Deleuze elaborated a theory where its most important characteristic is the distinction between *the real* and *the virtual* as states of being (Deleuze, 1969). Indeed, Deleuze identifies another two states besides the latter: *the possible* and *the actual*. From this, he observes that *the real* and *the actual* have both a material and latent face. On the other hand, *the possible* and *the virtual* have not yet been manifested. They exist immaterially. But while *the possible* state of being relates to a series of potential decisions –already tested and known– *the virtualis* about inventing, creating, foreseeing, dreaming, innovating solutions to given situations. The process of materializing *the virtual* is called ‘actualization’ and goes from *the virtual* to *the actual*. Inversely, the process of ‘virtualization’ goes from *the actual* state to *the virtual*. Virtualization is about introducing new problems, questioning what is here and now, thinking about new possibilities.

Does the process of virtualization have any importance nowadays? We believe it does. Today the computer has reached ubiquity. Most of electronic devices are able to compute data, digitize media, and connect to networks. Users have also developed and share acyberculture. We are somehow new media literate –although literacy could

be depicted at several levels—Users have now learned to live with pervasive computing devices.

A look into our contemporary electronic media and their content allows us to perceive that media are more than messages. Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan observed almost fifty years ago that the “medium is the message” and that “the content of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan, 1964). Drawing upon McLuhan statements, the content of pervasive electronic media would be us: our world, our environment, our memories, and our feelings. Electronic media is effectively an extension of our brains but also of our human capabilities, including our dreams and wishes. Whenever McLuhan referred to the message, he meant the change of scale of pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. We would say that the message of new media is related to the processes they convey, constrain, and allow. New media, we believe, concentrate more in actions and processes, rather than on objects and perceptual signs. Actually, there is a twofold function. First, our digital devices represent and symbolize our human capabilities, emotions, and feelings. Such is the case of animations, emoticons, or simply the multiple effects, manipulations, and versions of our digitized media. Second, there are the processes they allow. New media stimulate our immaterial being, which includes among others: being in two places at the same time, travelling in space and time, being with someone fictional or dead, being somebody else, creating new forms of life... finally, living in a virtual world.

Our approach to the virtualization of individuals relates processes to content. It seems that the possibilities promised by new media are the features that fascinate users the most. It happens that users acquire a new device with the intention to communicate with others or with the hope to learn something or with the ambition to improve on something. We have already mentioned that the content of media are other media. The materiality of media within media is latent as cultural data, in the sense that users do not think about pixels but photos; no text but documents; no animated images but movies and films. As cultural data, media are charged with intentions and meaning. But the common processes conveyed as content relate mostly to a possible state of being. Media recreate essentially functions such as writing, editing, deleting, copying, pasting, exporting, importing, modifying. These operations imply a performance, they recall that media fosters interactivity and action. If we follow the idea that processes are also content and that

processes stimulate an unlimited semiosis (Peirce, 1934) in the immaterial being, then we should start symbolizing ourselves into new media.

## Producing “Unpersonified Displacements”

“Unpersonified Displacements” is an animated visual artwork produced with programming code. One of its main characteristics comprises contemplation against interaction. Somehow, it could be said that it was designed to run indefinitely, or at least in very long sessions. Visually, it contains five hundred spheres of five different HSV (hue, saturation, value) and several sizes. When the program is launched, the spheres display a random position over the screen, then they simulate to paste to the border of the application window. Next, spheres begin to follow each other according to their color in a slow animation. The intention is to simulate that spheres attract and form a gathering. Other visual elements are lines, representing links between spheres with the aim of tracing paths and observing networks (see Figure 1). After a session has been running for a while, i.e. when it seems that all spheres have finally formed the group by color, the remaining sphere will refuse to attach, will move away and will attract the gathered spheres into another place of the border frame, hence restarting the process over again (see Figure 2).

Our attempt with “Unpersonified Displacements” is to symbolize movement actions performed by individuals. For us, the difference between users and individuals is major. We mentioned before that some levels of literacy could apply to cyberculture. In this respect, *users* would be actors related to some sort of cyberculture, i.e. they could have already used digital devices in a conscious manner. An *individual*, on the contrary, would be more natural... more analogic. Our definite goal would be to render in abstract visual form our human capabilities, to represent actions and to confront users—or individuals—to processes rather than to cultural data, to stimulate imagination by means of digital generated objects.

A first version of our piece was exhibited in a university context and venue. It consisted of eighty-five spheres of different solid colors, without any lines linking between them (Reyes, 2010). It was installed on a 42” LCD display and ran for ten consecutive hours. Technically speaking, “Unpersonified displacements” was created using the Processing developing environment (Pro-

cessing, 2001). Besides the fact that Processing is open source, art-oriented and has become the primary tool of many digital artists, it is robust, well document, supports the programming paradigm OOP (Object-Oriented Programming) and is mainly based on time/animation principles (e.g. loop and frame rate).

During and after the exhibition, we informally interviewed some viewers. The average spectator usually contemplated the artwork for several minutes. It is interesting to note how simple shapes with simple behavior may provoke unlimited semiosis. Some viewers mentioned that the meaning conveyed by spheres evoked sentiments of membership, of oblivion, and of absence. How do viewers remember a past travel or the desire to go on vacation from the slow movement of spheres? How come they remember a forgotten item at the supermarket? How come they remember failed decisions or even a break up? We believe that it is because we identify ourselves with the process of movement, not with the media that conveys the action. The virtualization process is then un-personified: generalized not to iconic images of users but to processes of displacement.

For our future work we consider to develop more pieces, to compare them and to talk to viewers. We pretend to include variants in forms, speed, projection surface, and context of viewers (e.g. rural farms and communities). We have already added a hidden feature: users may slightly alter the direction of spheres by moving the cursor. Finally, it is necessary to simulate more processes. Displacement is only one amongst the huge array of human capabilities.

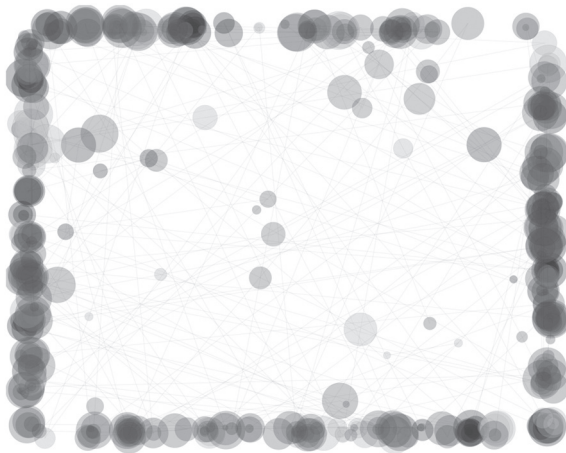


Fig. 1. "Unpersonified Displacements" at early phase

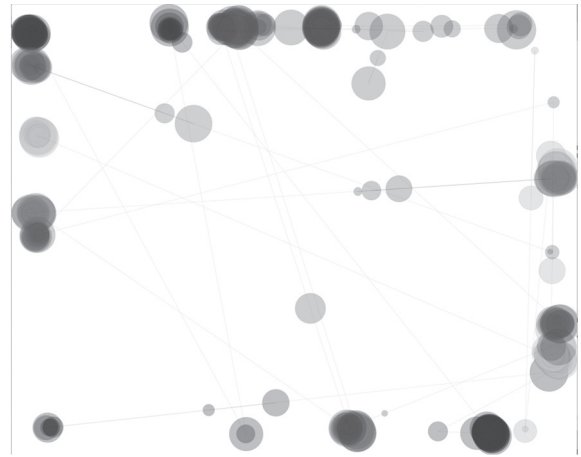


Fig. 2. "Unpersonified Displacements" at later phase

### Technical details

Title: Unpersonified displacements

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Date of completion: 2011

Screen dimensions: 1000 \* 800 pixels

Size and extension of source code: 4 Kb. File extension .PDE

Developing environment: Processing

Exhibition requirements: computer, beamer and projection screen.

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