

2030 International RHIZomatic Assembly (IRHIZA)

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ABSTRACT

In an interactive design fiction performance we explore the notion of non-human intelligences and their active agency in political discourse. Through speculative means a future context serves as both backdrop and design space for debates between humans and plants, exploring how the scientifically envisioned increased means of communication between the two could shape new solutions and realities. The performance hence deals with an expanded notion of “participation” and debate beyond mere human actors. In a multidisciplinary setting, participants stemming from both design and other fields of research (e.g. (ethno)botany, (neuro)biology, anthropology, etc.) will engage in a role-play and joint speculative storytelling effort aimed at exploring new questions regarding the challenges and opportunities shaped by such a future world.

Author Keywords

design fiction; foresight; speculative ontologies; non-human intelligences; immersive storytelling;

INTRODUCTION

“The 2030 International RHIZomatic Assembly (IRHIZA) celebrates its 10th anniversary in Manizales, Colombia. 10 years since first deep contact was established with the plant world - mainly recordings of a variety of distress signals from plants across the globe - the dialogue between humans and plants has reached new symbiotic heights. Moreover it has led to a variety of successful human-plant collaborations over the past

decade. Yet new challenges - both threats and opportunities - arise all the time. Over 20 species will attend the 10 year anniversary assembly and discuss a range of topics of key importance for humans and plants to co-evolve and thrive now and in the near future.”

Excerpt from the “IRHIZA 2030 invitation letter”

In the past years several countries among which Ecuador and Bolivia have granted constitutional rights to Mother Nature (Pachamama). As the ecological crisis/crises jettisons all of humanity from a state of warning into a state of planetary emergency, increasingly, humans step in for other actors in the ecosystems on which we all depend. Through representative or more pro-active/activist means their interventions broaden the scope of political agency, extending the notion to non-human lifeforms such as plants and animals. Authors like Bruno Latour describe a shift towards a reframing of the very notion of politics in an era in which we need to move beyond anthropocentrism [12]. Simultaneously, biological research is exposing in increasing detail the intricate ways in which plants for example communicate amongst each other and with other species [5] [10].

The proposed design fiction performance brings these three elements together in an exploration of what the future might bring in terms of the evolving dialogues between terrestrial species in general and between humans and plants in particular. What if we could understand plants’ responses to changes in our ecosystems as an early warning system? What if we could ‘ask’ plants for help and jointly work on solutions for challenges we face as humans? What if our dialogues could go beyond ‘instrumentalist’ views of the plant world? What if the wisdom of indigenous cultures’ understandings of the plant world would find

new grounding in and actually galvanise future scientific discoveries? What if we as humans would find ourselves politically manipulated - or economically outplayed - by plants [6]? What if political conflicts would arise?

Beyond dedicated disciplinary research in biology etc., some of the above and related questions have already reached the field(s) of designers, as critical reflections or “prelections” on a future potentially becoming reality. (see for example [3])

IRHIZA builds further upon a successful (ongoing) series of design fiction performances such as “Adrestia” [1] in which the notion of a future grounded in an expanded notion of political agency, including the non-human (natural or artificial) is explored. As a way to frame the immersive storytelling experience, we use an existing format people are familiar with as a springboard to a future reality. Constitutional elements, building blocks of a future reality are grafted onto a known format, such as that of a traditional political meeting or democratic debate. This lowers the threshold of participation, by creating a set of basic ‘rules of engagement’ for participants to follow, which generally do not need to be explained in an extensive manner.

While others have played with the “council” setting as a metaphor before (e.g. [8]), IRHIZA animates the setting by immersing participants not merely in an orchestrated spatial setting, but in a narrative context in which they are positioned as co-authors.

GENERAL SCRIPT

The design fiction performance takes about 2-3hrs, including a reflective discussion, and proceeds as follows:

Participants (preferably designer-biologist duos) enter the room - set up in an open circular pattern - and take place besides a specimen of the plant species they are expected to represent/translate for. Other props such as nametags (including a short role/position description for the resp. participant and key plant characteristics) as well as fictional “listening devices” to interact with the plant are placed in their vicinity as well.

The chairman of the assembly (Nik Baerten) welcomes all assembly members and attendees to the anniversary event, commemorating the first edition as to give some context to the event and proceeds to discuss the issues on the agenda. Each topic addresses a different speculative situation in which humans and plants face a challenge regarding their co-existence, collaboration and/or co-evolution.

After giving the assembly members a chance to briefly introduce themselves and explain their roles, the chairman guides them as well as the audience through the agenda, topic by topic. Supported by a secretary and assistant (Virginia Tassinari & Liesbeth Huybrechts) - providing background info on each topic on the agenda - and a visual chronicler (Elisa Bertolotti) - documenting human-plant interactions/solutions that pass the revue in botanical sketches - discussions take place among assembly members and between assembly members and the general audience. This also gives people willing to participate in a less active way the opportunity to do so.

Examples of topics on the agenda might be: “distress calls have been received by plants X in area Y pointing to resource hoarding by species Z due to human interventions in the area. who (humans/plants) could help and how?” or “in yet another climate change challenge humanity is facing, plants A, B & C propose to accelerate natural cross-breeding by synthesising one of three new species ... which one to pick and why?” or “recently found indigenous scriptures reveal a new means of interaction with a species that remained beyond communication so far ...” etc. The eventual topics will be inspired by the selected plant species as such and interviews with experts to be organised on beforehand.

Once positions have been debated and taken, the chairman closes the meeting. Participants reflect upon the course and outcomes of the debate, the format/method etc.



Figure 1. Installation Meeting of the 2050 Urban Assembly of the City of Adrestia (Photo courtesy of Pantopicon).

SETTING THE STAGE

The performance is hosted in a setting related to the topic, e.g. a park/botanical garden/greenhouse. Small (low) tables and chairs/pillows - placing humans and plants on equal height/positions of importance - are placed in an open circle/u-shape, reminiscent of

a traditional ‘council’-like setting. Assembly members wear a scarf featuring their role/function/representational identity and soft gloves. They remain in touch with their plants by means of the gloves and/or through the ‘listening devices’ provided. Audience members take place on pillows/low chairs in the circle surrounded by the assembly members and/or around them. On the back of their name tag positioned in front of them, each assembly member finds a set of character traits, role description and argumentation points to support them in playing their role, as well as key info regarding their plant species.

Together with a local botanical garden/biology department, life-size specimens of plant species are selected as key protagonists in the performance. Background information with respect to the unique characteristics of each plant is gathered through (email/videoconferencing) interviews with experts (also invited as participants).

Considering the topic at hand, we include people from beyond the design disciplines, e.g. ethnobotanists, (neuro)biologists, anthropologists, etc.

DISSEMINATION

Beyond the botanical sketches generated as part of the performance, the event is documented using photo and video materials. Both are to be utilised immediately after the performance as part of a conference exhibition. After further post-production the materials will also be made available online through the various channels at the disposal of the authors (both academic and otherwise), incl. social media. More methodological reflections on the performance as an instrument of exploration on the crossroads of foresight and design will be included in follow-up academic publications.

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