Coombe Hill or High Water

Following the completion of the *Telepresence Stage* project in May 2022 I used the project outcomes, resources, and techniques to produce the online telepresent encounter *Coombe Hill or High Water*, between October 2022 and March 2023. Whilst the *Telepresence Stage* project was specifically targeted at performing arts companies and essentially how they can reach audiences online during lockdown, my own artistic interest was in their unique experience of telepresence and the effects it had on them as interacting participants. Although they were perhaps more adept with performing in public to audiences, *Coombe Hill or High Water* was developed purely for an online public audience to participate in, giving them the unique experience that the actors had. The new work builds on online telepresence techniques such as green-screen compositing, networked video production and virtual set design to provide coexistent telepresent interactions between remote performers. However, I could not assume or rely on an online public audience having the time, resources, and experience to set up green screens, cameras, preview monitors and lights. Therefore, I introduced background segmentation techniques instead of green-screen technology to create a networked telepresence artwork for online public participation, requiring only a computer, webcam, Internet connection, and web browser to participate.

Coombe Hill or High Water is simultaneously a story, game, drama, and meeting, perhaps best described as an interactive improvised tragicomedy for two online participants, presented in a dystopian post-Brexit, 'end of days' narrative. The work consists of twelve interconnected scenes or environment settings, placing the participants' overlapping webcam images within scenography backgrounds and foreground overlays, inspired by images from my past – growing up on a road named Coombe Hill. The participants appear in a range of precarious, intimate, and awkward situations, waking up in bed together to discover the room is in flood water and washed-up detritus. The scene transitions and they find themselves outside in the flood, swimming in raw sewage and taking refuge in a floating wheelie-bin (see figure 1). Meanwhile, Jeff Bazos makes his escape in Blue Origin, launching in the distance as the scene zooms out and appears as a breaking news story on a makeshift TV news channel, hosted by the two participants.

Figure 1. Online participants swimming and floating in a wheelie-bin, in a breaking news story of floods, raw sewage, and rocket launches in Coombe Hill or High Water, 2023.

Each scene lasts for approximately 4 minutes and the only people who appear are the participating protagonists, who can make whatever they want of it. The open narrative moves to other scenes, reminiscent of my earlier telematic works, appearing on a sofa (as well as in bed together), complete with augmented legs, sitting at a table in a dilapidated kitchen attempting to distil their own fuel. They take to the road behind the wheel of a clapped-out car, driving into the hills to escape the flood water. The car eventually breaks down and they are forced to camp out overnight, appearing as shadows in a tent infested by flies and midges. Just as things couldn't get worse, fire breaks out on the high moorland and they have no option but to return home by foot, to find themselves back where they started, in bed amongst the floodwater debris. Before the scene transitions back to the flood, they appear immersed in holes in an ambiguous dream-like hallucination (see figure 2), perhaps resulting from something they might have ingested from the floodwater or something picked up on the hills, but this is for them to decide.

Figure 2. The online performing participants find themselves immersed in holes in an ambiguous dream scene in Coombe Hill or High Water, 2023.

Unlike my earlier telematic gallery-based installations, *Coombe Hill or High Water* is accessed and experienced completely online, and in this respect, the work shares similarities with earlier 'net.art' projects from the 1990s. But chiefly, the work is a deliberate move away from the gallery space installation, and the carbon footprint its logistics demand, including travel, venue, installation, and the carbon footfall of the visiting public – although notwithstanding its network requirements on the earth's resources to function. But moreover, it reflects a post-internet art context, the work is not clicked, hyperlinked and scrolled through. *Coombe Hill or High Water* is entered via a web browser but is physically acted on, a do-it-yourself installation that implies and proposes a proprioceptive engagement by moving away from the keyboard and using the body and physical space to perform, play, and embody the 'self' as 'other' in an online coexistent experience. In this phenomenological respect, the underlying intent of the work is the rejection of the 'self' – as the self-centred, selfish, capitalist-driven individualism at the route of our climate catastrophe.

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