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# CREATIVE STORYTELLING

## *Transmedia & Transdisciplinary Storytelling*

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# Creative Storytelling:

## Transmedia & Transdisciplinary Storytelling

### Moderator:

Ine Poppe - the Hacking department at the Willem de Kooning Academie

### With:

Erik Joris - the CREW  
Tim Murck - the Spektor  
Floris Kaayk - film director

The session was moderated by Ine Poppe, writer, teacher, journalist and artist. Ine Poppe nowadays leads the Hacking department at the [Willem de Kooning Academie](#) in Rotterdam, makes documentaries and contributes to transmedia projects. She wrote the scenario for *The Modular Body*, a transmedia project of artist Floris Kaayk.

The panelists were Eric Joris, Tim Murck, Floris Kaayk, artists from two generations with different approaches of transdisciplinary storytelling in different fields of expertise.

The session started off from the definition of transmedia storytelling given in the session's description: "Transmedia storytelling

is about building a narrative world through multiple channels: social media, gaming, film, novel, mobile app and some aspects of real live."

Ine Poppe also recalled an anecdotic case of a Dutch funding authorities' representative explaining Christianity could be regarded as a form of transmedia storytelling (worth funding of) because the story is being told through various media: the Bible, churches, rituals, different storylines, discussion groups, etc.

Aiming at proposing a ground for a more in-depth perception of what transmedia storytelling is and what it is not or what the difference between transmedia and transdisciplinary storytelling is, the session proceeded to presenting the work of the panelists and their visions on the topic discussed.



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## Transmedia storytelling and audience engagement

### Tim Murck and Spektor

Tim Murck (b. 1982), an actor and producer based in the Netherlands, found himself into a big gap, starting his education “on the romantic arena of theatre” with a tutor like Kitty Courbois, and graduating at the same time the first iPhone was launched, in a technology driven world. So, he decided to explore the opportunities of the combination of storytelling and IT and started the Spektor company, a transmedia storytelling agency, with clients like BNN (Dutch broadcasting association), Museum Rotterdam, Het Zuidelijk Toneel (theatre company in Tilburg) and more.

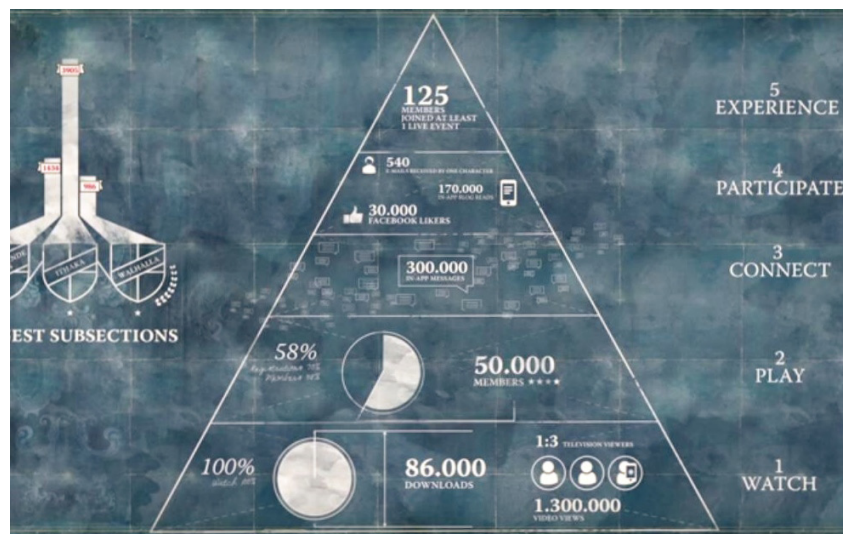
According to Tim Murck, no matter what the media is, storytelling is basically about certain **characters** in a situation, where a **problem** arises, so a solution has to be found; the **search** begins, there are **obstacles**, a **fight** takes place, the protagonists **win**, a **change** happens and one **learns** something in the end.

In the field of transmedia storytelling production, the process of composing the specific story around this dramatic structure is referred to as **experience design** which aims at moving people both emotionally and physically somehow. It usually involves a lot of gamification techniques, design of different levels and quests, urging the audience to engage, to participate and to contribute with own content.

As storytellers, the Spektor’s members do not commit themselves to specific platforms but rather seek for the audience on any suitable media, and try to evolve the story through multiple media channels.

Tim Murck illustrated the work of Spektor with Freshers casevideo (Feuten) which can be seen here (4:16 min, in English).

This transmedia project was developed for Feuten (2013), a Dutch television drama series, in which Tim Murck was acting, that evolved around a students’ fraternity. The audience was comprised mainly of young people, so Spektor decided to meet them



*Feuten audience response via Spektor video presentation*

on their ‘native’ channels and make them a part of the story world. A mobile application allowed the audience to **watch** the next episode in advance. In-app games and quizzes gave the opportunity to **play** in the story world and to earn status in the fraternity as a member. The members could **connect**: they could send invitations to other members or share content and communicate on various social media platforms. The users could **participate** in the story by sending in-app emails to the characters and thus to influence some story threads. Finally, the users got the **experience** to meet the TV series characters in real life events. Some of the events were organised by the community engaged in the multimedia story, and selected users joined the movie premiere, the launch of which was shifted after a petition initiated by the fans. On the whole, the transmedia storytelling approach was deemed fruitful to the audience engagement purposes of the project.

This project marked the quest of Spektor for projects where its “healthy financial model around art” could be implemented as working marketing tool while producing art by itself.

Another project of the team was a mobile application that interacted with a real-life game. The players (kids) moved in nature and learned about their surroundings or received in-app missions that were to be accomplished at certain GPS coordinates

on the real-life playground of the game.

Their latest project was commissioned by Het Zuidelijk Toneel, a theatre company in Tilburg, for their modern interpretation of Macbeth. Spektor took care of the digital marketing and activated the digital presence of the show. They created a number of videos in connection to certain themes of the play and started stimulating the community while keeping track of all social media activities with an online monitoring tool named COOSTO.

“This is not exactly transmedia storytelling”, Tim Murck reflected. “It uses some of the elements but the actual transmedia thing would be to launch first episode of the story online, then perform somewhere, at a zoo for instance, then publish the sequence in an article or a book, then bring the story on stage...” Therefore, he opposed the understanding that digitalising is something apart, like a digital reflection of the real story which should develop only in its author’s specific media – be it a film or a play, a dance performance, a book. On the contrary, argued Tim Murck, the story should develop through different media channels, otherwise one cannot get the audience engaged and moving from one platform to another.

## Transmedia storytelling and the immersive theatre of the self

### Eric Joris and CREW

Eric Joris (b. 1955), Belgian multimedia artist and stage director, presented the transformations of his artistic work from the beginning of the 1990s till today. He founded CREW in 1991, an experimental art company aimed “at visualising how technology is changing us”.

Eric Joris first switched to technology in the mid-1990s. It was a short period when many new technologies became widely available: computers, internet, digital cameras, mobile phones, digital drawing boards.

**Note:** Videos of all the performances below can be viewed here: CREW Projects or at the CREWvzw EricJoris channel on vimeo.

Kaufhaus Inferno (1999) was one of CREW's first transmedia projects. It consisted of and connected a newspaper comic (in De Morgen), an interactive website, a live performance, a book and an exposition. It interpreted Dante's Divine Comedy, especially the Inferno part, as a computer game and involved moving from one media to another. Eric Joris recalled it was quite an ambitious project which one critique qualified as “a very interesting failure”. This project marked the **exteriorly stage** in using technology for storytelling in CREW's work.

The next CREW projects aimed to go deeper in comprehending how technology affects and changes humans. Icarus / MAN-O-WAR (2000), and its successor Philoctetes / MAN-O-WAR (2002), introduced CREW's outlook on **multimedia as prosthesis**. For this project, the audience was enclosed together with Paul Antipoff, a completely paralysed actor, who controlled the environment through computer interface. The overall technical complexity of these performances actually didn't work quite well. There was a whole multimedia network connected to the actor as a literal prosthesis, there were cameras, projectors and disorientating soundscape that completely perplexed the audience's senses, and in Crash (2004) people even were fixed to beds).

Some people from the audience were losing consciousness, others were vomiting.

“It didn't work for the stories and it wasn't working for the next 10 years”, Eric Joris was harsh on his work and the concept of using technology for completely immersive storytelling. His explanation was that the audience was actually inside the story. When one follows a story, they need to see its structure. “You have to be outside the story for to be told the story”. An option was to make people do certain things being immersed in the experience and at the end they could make the story out of it by themselves. Dramaturgically, that marked a shift from passive immersion into the virtual towards performances in which the spectator was active and acting, performances that **combined the virtual with real-life experience**, tactile sensations and imagery, and where the story was evolving around the elusive concept of the self.

Such a performance was U Raging Standstill (2005), an immersive play for one participating spectator, or one immersant, at a time. The project was developed together with the Expertise centre for Digital Media (EDM) at the University of Hasselt and allowed the immersant to move along with the immersive tech gear, thus feeling physically the space. Memories were manipulated and rearranged with the help of series of real-time video footages of what the immersant was doing that were

projected back through the virtual reality goggles. Thus the immersants viewed and at the same time constructed their own story in which they played the protagonist's role.

W (Double U) (2008) developed U-performance for two immersants based on the 'head-swap' technology developed by EDM/CREW.

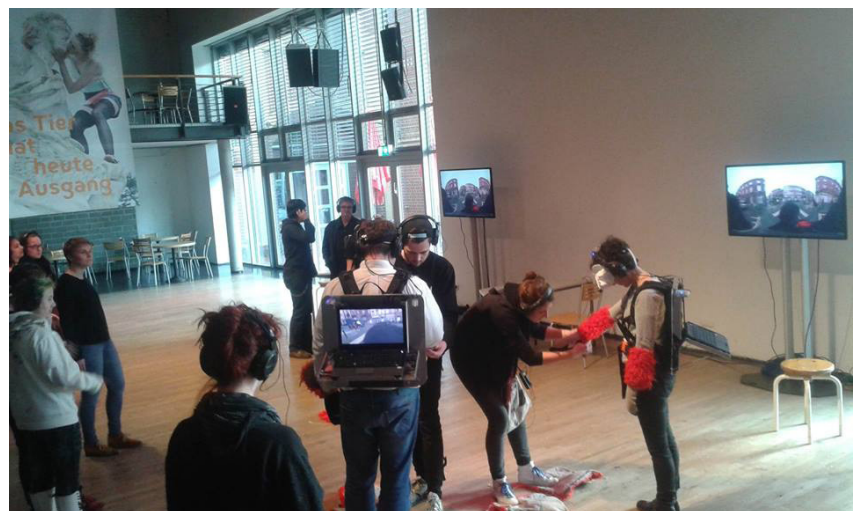
EUX (2008) went further on, encountering the immersant with a mirror image of the self.

O REX 1.3 (2008) marked the next step in CREW's experiments with immersive technology. The **immersive experience was integrated within the classical theatre set-up** where one person of the audience was selected to be the immersant.

With Terra Nova (2011) CREW continued to explore the ways in which a live art performance could combine theatre and immersive experience. It featured mixed reality for multiple immersants.

The C.A.P.E. series (2010–2014) were aimed at transferring experience and illusion into the body itself (the abbreviation stands for Computer Assisted Personal Environment).

One of CREW's latest works, EXPLORER/ Prometheus Unchained (2015) is a mixed reality collaborative project, part of



*C.a.p.e. KIT sessions at tanzhaus nrw via CREW vzw/Eric Joris*

**The Internet trilogy.** It uses the motion capture technology to **combine live performance and virtual acting** on stage.

Turning back to the core topic of storytelling, Eric Joris consolidated CREW's abundant artistic production into two major divisions:

- immersive works that were about making you someone else by completely transferring the spectator into a virtual world; these were mostly the works from the early years
- works that kept the spectator both in the virtual and in the real world thus allowing for the existence of a transitional space: the very right space where the spectator is.

This "one leg in reality, the other in virtuality" approach proved to work best for the kind of stories CREW wants to tell. Works that experiment with this space of transition aim to make spectators aware of their presence at this exact point and make them experience how fragile their perceptions – of everything and of the self – actually are.

## Transmedia storytelling and media distortion

### Floris Kaayk and OSCAR

Floris Kaayk (b. 1982) is a Dutch animator and filmmaker, known for [The Order Electrus](#) (2005) and [The Origin of Creatures](#) (2011) short films. He presented two of his transmedia storytelling pieces.

[Human Birdwings](#) (2012) was an online storytelling project with a well-known plot: a human invents artificial wings and manages to fly freely with them; yet another incarnation of the Icarus myth. It evolved on several online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and a blog.

Human Birdwings was designed as a **mystification** and featured a fictional character, Jarno Smeets (played by Floris Kaayk himself), as the protagonist of the story. Jarno's character was designed as a real person with online presence in various social media platforms and even a professional profile on LinkedIn. So, for around 8 months Jarno Smeets posted about the developments of his construction on social media and on his blog, the number of his followers grew, an online community of people who shared the

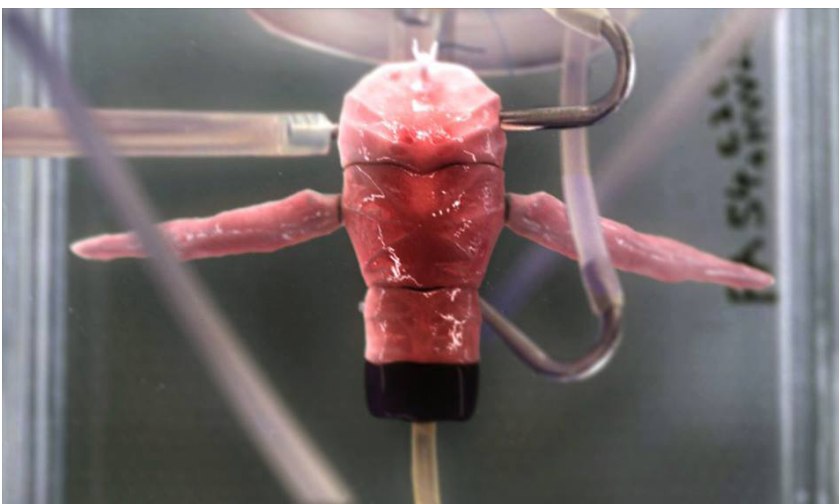
dream of flying was formed. The media got interested. Jarno and his test flights were featured on the [Wired](#) magazine.

When the final video [Flying like a bird | part 14/14](#) with the successful flight was launched, it immediately went viral. The story was busted as hoax soon and Floris Kaayk decided to reveal the whole design behind the story in a TV show. There were a lot of disappointed people, but there were also some who were happy that the dream for human wings and flying remained unfulfilled, still an aspiration, a hope.

The other transmedia storytelling project (ongoing) Floris Kaayk presented was [The Modular Body](#) (2016), an **online science fiction project** about the creation of OSCAR, a modular human organism built from human cells. Floris Kaayk directed a video blog featuring videos of how OSCAR tissues, modules and systems are made by the protagonist, a real-life biologist named in the project Cornelius Vlassman. The visitors enter the website and are free to choose their own sequence and path through the story of OSCAR and can share it on social media with others.

The Modular Body project consists of 56 video-clips, that come together in a website. Almost all clips are based on real science-clips, the visual language of scientific research is used as well as those of start-ups, news-items and fan-vlogs.

Although the project was announced as science fiction, some real-life elements constitute in its structure. A discussion with real scientists and philosophers on various matters on the bionics and the ethic of creation of such a modular body was held and broadcasted on TV. Quite large and active community formed on the social media where contests and contributions to the project take place.



OSCAR via [The Modular Body facebook page](#)

# Questions & Answers

The central topic in the discussion was how elements of the presented works could possibly be implemented in a live performance, having in mind they were designed to be largely experienced on someone's computer screen (except for Joris' works of the immersive theatre).

While Spektor's work, for example, relied heavily on apps and social media, its final goal was to make people take part in a live event accompanied by a concerto. Online interaction and social media stimulate quick formation of large and actively involved online communities. They can be used successfully to raise awareness for a theatre company, a performance, etc. or to shape a live event or performance. Online communities could be easily attracted to take part both as audience and as participants in real time events.

According to Tim Murk, theatre should utilise these new channels and take the opportunity to add new layers to its production. An ideal type of multimedia storytelling would be fulfilled if creators in different media – writers, filmmakers, stage directors, choreographers, digital content managers, etc. – join together and evolve the story by all specific media methods; contrary to making a separate book, a film, a play of the story. Theatre would always have a smaller audience than the digital forms. It would stand on the top of the pyramid because real-life experience is what matters most.

Some other topics of interest in connection with the presented works were also discussed. Amongst them were: the dividing line between science fiction (Floris Kaayk's work) and scientific fiction (Eric Joris' work); how to differentiate mystification from hoax or how to reject accusations in lying on such occasions; what does breaking the boundaries between media cause to the senses in immersive projects like those Eric Joris creates; could the senses and the human mind trick the machines; why is the modular body so repulsively looking; would the DNA of future generations change to accommodate better to the digital, the virtual and the transmedial?