ITW FoAM

Interview by Ewen Chardonnet for MCD Magazine
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When FoAM was founded and what its initial aim?

Maja Kuzmanovic: FoAM was initially founded in 2000 as a department of Starlab, a scientific research institute in Brussels. its original aim was to connect arts and science. We were asked to work with the scientists to see how we could bring their often fundamental and specialised research into closer connection with society and culture at large. Back then we worked a lot with mixed reality, primarily responsive environments. After a few years doing projects that used a lot of computing power, various materials some of which were toxic, projectors and sound systems, we started looking for other ways to work more line with our mission — which was about growing your own worlds and bringing culture and cultivation closer together. So after a few years of working primarily in mixed reality and digital media stuff, we moved into more explicitly ecological domains.

What are your backgrounds?

MK: I came from the design world. I did design forecasting — looking at how the world could change and translating that into the language of design.

Nik Gaffney: Mixed. I was working with graphic design, music, photography, computer programming; I studied computer science and chemistry. I was always interested in bringing science and the arts together, exploring the sense of wonder they share, but it was only at FoAM that I found a place to find some balance between the worlds of culture and science, which still remain largely separated.

MK: So most of us have this hybrid background. We came from one world and worked in the other. My background is in design but most of my jobs before FoAM were at research institutes. And it's the same for most of us here — we are a collection of people who don't quite fit anywhere else. Here they can find a community where artists are not just treated as people who can make others' ideas look pretty, and where technologists are not just treated as technicians. Creative partners, you could say.

FoAM's primary objective was strongly connected to ecology?

MK: Now it's become a part of our work as a whole, so it's not so much a thematic anymore, it's just a part of whatever we do. The groWorld project — which we started in 2000 and is proposed to last until 2020 — that is a red thread through all of our activities, looking at the human relationship with the non-human environment,

and how we can make this relationship a bit more symbiotic.

How would you frame groWorld ?

MK: An interesting thing is that we tried to get it funded from the beginning, but it was only five or six years later that people started understanding why those working with technology and media would be at all interested in working with plants or the environment.

NG: It was never funded explicitly as a single program — parts of groWorld were always seen as offshoots of other projects. Shorter or longer-term activities we would always fit in somehow.

MK: For example, some of the things that we did in this project included designing seed balls — sometimes called seed bombs. We did this in various parts of the world, but I think the most interesting time was in Australia where a lot of the country's native flora is under threat of extinction. We worked with some botanists to design these collections of seeds so they could become little ecosystems where different kinds of plants are combined o help each other grow. You don't have to plant them, you just throw them.

The method was originally designed by Masanobu Fukuoaka, a Japanese farmer, and we adapted it to the urban environment. We held workshops with children where they would learn how to make these balls and how to spread them through their cities. You can just throw them somewhere, since they don't need a lot of soil — just a little bit of soil to get their roots in — and it's adequate because the balls are made of compost and clay, so the seeds can basically sprout from this little ball. The selection of seeds is made so that the different species can support each other rather than compete.

Another example of what we are doing in groWorld, is a permaculture game we are developing called Germination X. It is designed as a contrast to FarmVille, which is very much centred on a monocultural, industrial farming model. Our game is designed to encourage players to see how plants can collaborate with each other as they grow. We want participants to gain an insight into the principles of permaculture, for example, how you need to observe the system before messing with it.

NG: We want to shift perspective from the style of industrial agriculture that we can see in FarmVille and look at plants as central characters in the way we interact with them. To explore how plants themselves can act together within the surrounding environment.

MK: Another offshoot of groWorld is Boskoi, a mobile app to help urban foragers recognise and record information about edible plants in cities. It can also provide information on when to harvest them and how to prepare them or what to avoid. So if you are in an unfamiliar city you can find edible local plants with the map. Boskoi is available on the Android Market and was developed by FoAM

Amsterdam in collaboration with Urbanibalism.

FoAM has studios in Brussels, Amsterdam, Stockholm and Helsinki. We didn't want to become a monolithic institution, but instead to have small studios where we would work together in a flexible way.

Currently for groWorld we are just starting work on a project to bring all these disperse components into a single story. The story might be based on a quote by Fukuoka that reads: "the ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops but the cultivation of human beings." So we are looking at human-plant communication and working with biotechnologists who are helping to design some experiments to see wether we can communicate with plants in a more effective way.

NG: There is also a reference here to Terence McKenna, who suggests in his essay "Plan/Plant/Planet" that we can find a way to communicate with the interplanetary Other through plants.

MK: Germination X is currently in testing — it is playable, but not yet as a complete game. It is developed as a social game which you can play from Facebook, but we are also working on compatibility with other platforms. You can use a Facebook ID to log in but don't need to. In the next few months it should run on Diaspora, which at the moment, is more interesting as a conceptual structure for the game.

What are some of your other recent activities?

MK: Luminous Green is a series of workshops that started in 2007 to look at the relations between culture, technology and ecology in turbulent environments. It is a series in which we bring people together from spheres as diverse as possible. Individuals from business or politics, activists, gardeners, cooks, scientists, designers — we put them together in a pressure cooker, we take them out of their normal settings and spend a few days using participatory techniques such as open space to get them really talking to each other about the issues.

NG: One motivation for this is that environmental discussions are very easily polarised. When you talk to politicians, they say it is up to business and civil society, when you talk to business people they say it is up to politicians or consumers, when you talk to the activists they say it is a problem with government or big business. And almost everyone forgets the ecologists and climate scientists. So the approach has been to bring all these people with different world views together in the same room so they could really talk to each other instead of blaming each other.

We're doing this to get to a broader understanding of what these problems involve. These are wicked problems, and they are not going to be solved through simple policy tweaks or consumer behaviour changes or by blowing up some GMO farms or something like that. To build a useful and pragmatic understanding from these different perspectives it is useful for policy makers to understand better

where the activists are coming from or where designers could provide insight into the consumption cycles or things like that.

It is a continuing series and when we started there weren't many initiatives like it around, but now there are quite a few more. It shouldn't matter which sector the participants come from, but that they obviously care about the environment. Each of them might have a very different idea of what that care is, but if you start relating to each other first as people, and not as activists or business people or whatever, you can establish some interesting common ground as humans able to work together.

Is it related to Transition Towns?

NG: Similarly to the Transition Network we take the ideas of permaculture seriously and share many of their concerns. One of the differences with Luminous Green could be a more holistic view of technology. We can't ignore the technologies developed over the last few centuries and retreating to a pre-industrial rural existence is not really an option on a global scale. We are continuously urbanising and developing new technologies and it can't be a viable answer just to say, OK let's go back to living on a beautiful farm like in the old days with chickens and vegetables and smallpox. Sure there is a lot to be learnt from history, but there might be technologies that are not being explored in that context — some uses of nanotech or genetic engineering for instance. What we want with Luminous Green is not to be prescriptive about one technology or another, but to try to understand the process of Transition and find useful stuff that could be applied elsewhere. We don't want to make a movement, more to build a way of thinking about these concerns to help provide context for actions.

MK: The technology is clearly a difference, and we didn't want to exclude business or politics from the debate. Sure we may think we are alternative enough that we can build a different world without these people, but some of them do have a genuine desire to improve things, even if it is in a very different way we might not understand. Why not at least talk to them?

NG : These are people who are preparing for transition, in the way Transition Towns talk about transition, but inside large corporate entities or complex bureaucracies. There could be a lot to learn from both transitions in such hierarchies and the successful towns in the UK.

MK : An interesting thing at Luminous Green is bringing this diversity of people together to see what happens. Sometimes they fight, sometimes they really learn from each other.

You are also interested in the theme of resilience?

MK : We recently started a project called Resilients. Something like a guild for resilient superheroes, from paramedics to guerilla clock restoration. It is about speculative culture, about asking "what

if?" about looking at possible futures and exploring how we could prepare for it.

We are working with some other organisations on this; Performing Pictures, Textile Futures at CSM, Time's Up, Nadine and Projekt Atol. There are a few scenarios which include things like building tricycles for contemporary pilgrims, or placing edible solar cells in a table vivant. There is a study on future preparedness, based on social structures that have remained functional during periods of turbulence in European history. Projekt Atol is looking at unmanned aerial vehicles for sustainable forestry. We are also exploring augmented urban gardens, whether on land, water, or online. And part of the programme includes hosting workshops and apprenticeships for people who want to work together on these scenarios.