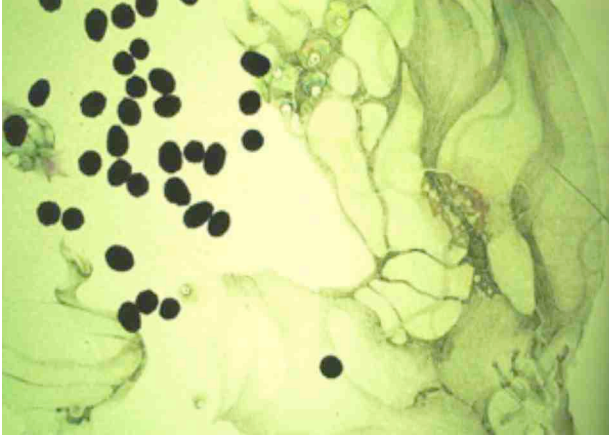# What Is FoAM?
A malcomplete precis-in-progress

(Source: http://f0.am/fr0th/2003_litha/index.phtml?dM7k_x=lavender-monster.jpg)

FOAM or advanced mysticism
foundation of affordable mysticism
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foundation of amplified miracles
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foundation of aesthetic monsters
focus of aperiodic mysticism
foundation of articulate magic
focus of applicable melting

Gaffney (2002)

If it be granted that we flounder in a sea of acronyms, and if beginnings hadn't long since passed their use-by date, one could even be forgiven for declaring that in the beginning was the acronym, while the word was something of an afterthought. And if the symbolic potency we invest in acronyms were ever in doubt, just try stripping one of those ugly little agglutinations of glyphs from the beginning or end of the title of any well-meaning academic, executive, or self-help guru and see what happens. "FoAM" both is and is not an acronym (it is also the URL to their website: http://f0.am/), with an array of variations of which the above quotation may represent merely a sample of a possibly infinite number. These variations might be said to reflect the often bewildering diversity of interests and objectives of the group to which this name (or acronym) refers. Yet it may be safe to say that some constants, both of the name and of the group, stand out. As an acronym, the letters are most often understood to stand for "Foundation of Affordable Mysticism"; as a name, the idea of "foam" recurs in many plays of metaphor in the group's representation of itself, its objectives and its practices. As a play between acronym and word, it can also give a clue to the kind of approach this group endeavours to take towards symbolic power in many of its forms.

As a group, FoAM consists of approximately five core members headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, also involving from time to time formal and informal associations within a widening, fluctuating network people, institutions, and groups who profess similar interests and aims, reaching throughout various parts of Europe, North and South America, Japan, and Australia. Funding for their activities comes from a variety of sources, including public and private institutions for the promotion of cultural and scientific interdisciplinary pursuits in Belgium, the Netherlands, the EU, and other bodies around the world. (In fact, I am given to understand that, in its

previous incarnation as Starlab, the group was supported by a private patron who had a keen interest in, among other things, space colonies. When the group failed, by a specified due date, to come up with a viable model for travelling to and living on Mars, this patron promptly pulled the plug on their funding, thus forcing them subsequently to "stabilise their pecuniary foundations" ("FoAM Newsletter One" 2003) by other means (Nik Gaffney, pers. comm., May 2003). I have yet to verify the details of this episode in FoAM's peculiar history, but whatever exactly happened, it is certain that a financial crisis ensued in which the group almost dissolved as such, but subsequently transmuted itself into its present shape.)

Many members and associates of FoAM have academic backgrounds or connections, with formal (or partial) qualifications in fields as varied as astrophysics, computer science, mathematics, cultural studies, and social science. On the other hand, most of them have also had long histories of involvement in such realms as electronic or experimental music, the techno or rave scene, alternative lifestyles and living arrangements (such as in warehouses), various forms of computer art and street performance, unusual types of social activism, and so forth. The extent of what they believe, what they do, and how they do it can be gauged simply by noting the subjects included in a typical research presentation session (something like an AGM) such as the group held in March of this year: thus, on the agenda directly after "anti-gravity, zero-gravity, 10+g force" was "alchemy and tarot in RPGs [role-playing games]," followed by "Community Wireless Networks (problems as paths towards solutions)," "Musings on Context," "How to Survive being in exile through Flusser's communication theory (the FoAM story)," "Some notes on Metaphors,"

and finally, to draw everything neatly together, "foamfood/ foamfest" (Kuzmanovic 2003). In a nutshell, the main focus of FoAM's interests and activities could perhaps be said to involve an idiosyncratic synthesis of art, science, technology, and mystical elements, harnessed, ultimately, for the purpose of social, cultural, and spiritual transformation. But this would be to say very little, and for a somewhat deeper (though by no means comprehensive) appreciation of these matters, I turn to some of their writings and notes.
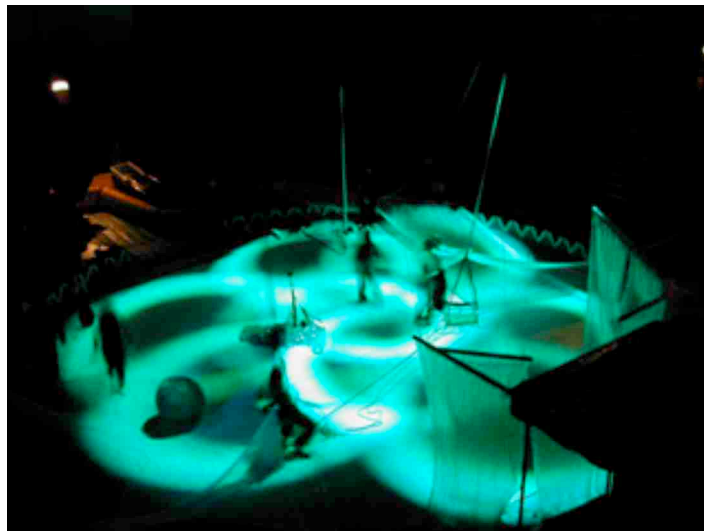
txOom at the "Hippodrome Spectacular," Great Yarmouth, UK. (Source: http://fo.am/txoom/2002_hippodrome/18-11/index.phtml?dM7k_x=test-movement.jpg)

FoAM's homepage describes the group as "an independent, distributed laboratory based on multidisciplinary models of cultural expression ... f0AM aims to become an

'edge-habitat,' working within partner organisations, toward a symbiosis of culture and science, technology and nature..." ("FoAM homepage" n.d.). The idea of the laboratory here includes the more conventional "think tank"-style workshops and research projects, but extends much further — to encompass, in particular, what are referred to as "public experiments" of various kinds. The notion of a lab reflects the ideal of continuous "becoming" which informs every aspect of FoAM's philosophy, in that they see "art as an ongoing participatory process, authors and audience as equal partners, [and] inspiration as research into the aesthetics of 'the potential'" ("FoAM homepage" ibid.). And it also incorporates an idea of focussed or serious play, a context encouraging free-form experimentation which can nevertheless lead to potential offshoots for a variety of applications. Therefore,

Some of the development at FoAM is done in a studio setting, where we work on building prototypes, developing models and conducting user tests. This type of research is usually targeted towards construction of experimental public spaces (both physical and virtual), such as (site-specific) performances, installations, collaborative arenas ('labs'), festivals, workshops and forums. This type of development relies on professional staffing. The technical development work for a production is not research, but adaptation of technologies used to express artistic concepts. ("FoAM Methodology" n.d.)

A laboratory, then, in which artistic practices are invoked for their potential to transform public life. As such, "art" and "aesthetics" take on radical implications. "Art of the future is growing out of the theatres and galleries. Artworks are not static objects that the audience has to admire from a distance, but continuously transforming responsive realities" ("FoAM communique for active translation and transformation" n.d.). FoAM, therefore, shifts attention "from representation to performance. We make the move from maintaining representations of society to performing socially, and gain more subtle ways of building and inhabiting settings for public activity" (Xin Wei and Kuzmanovic 2000). This requires a concomitant "shift in artists' roles in the world, making them more choreographers of cultural processes, rather than creators of 'original' cultural artefacts" ("FoAM communique" ibid.).

As a "distributed laboratory," FoAM is particularly concerned with networked collaboration through computer-mediated communication, and much effort is spent researching and discussing the technical, social, and philosophical dimensions of such communication. In fact, so significant is this element for them that one manifesto ("FoAM communique") states that "this process of hybridisation is accelerated by one common denominator: the use of technology." It continues:
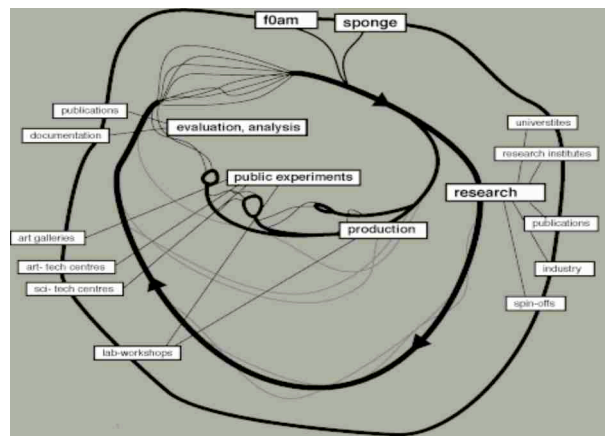

Diagram illustrating FoAM's "weedy network" model of distributed collaboration.
(Source: http://tangent@f0.am/tgarden/)

Not only does the computer move the creative process from a solitary activity towards a transdisciplinary teamwork, but the use of networked technologies encourages distributed methods of collaboration (such as computer supported collaborative work/design), where the partners form an evolving web of linked communities loosely collaborating together.

But computers are ubiquitous in other areas besides networked communication. They are integral to the creation of "hybrid media events," and, in tandem with the emphasis on a necessary shift in artistic practices, FoAM advocates a corresponding shift "from purely digital representation and simulation to material, embodied experience, augmented by responsive digital media" (Xin Wei and Kuzmanovic 2000).

Only one of FoAM's many recent projects, but the main focus for the group in 2002, txOom showcases the way in which some of the threads mentioned above have been woven together in a partly tangible way. (How they have also, at times, frayed apart is another story.) "txOom" is not merely an acronym; it is no less than "an exercise in heteroglossic tongue-twisting" ("txOom textures in bloom" n.d.). However, an interpretation is provided: "we pronounce it as [tks'u:m], an amalgam of 'texture' and 'bloom'" ("txOom" ibid.). This Joycean wordplay is intended to emphasise that

the space the phonetic brackets enclose is thick, malleable, polyglot, and reveals a multitude of understandings and pronunciations. It stretches the territory between the physical and the digital, carving an ephemeral zone where pliant exobiological media worlds coagulate into physical existence, absorbing their dwellers in an alien, but strangely familiar reality. ("txOom" ibid.)

txOom at the Hippodrome.
(Source: http://fo.am/txoom/2002_hippodrome/21-11/index.phtml?dM7k_x=monster.jpg)

"Tactile Media": an example of an idea for "materials and media that can be shaped by the activity happening within and around them." (Source: http://tangent@f0.am/lyt_A/)

It may also sound familiar – if indeed the reader has been following up to this point – but what exactly *is* it? An ongoing project, a "laboratory," or a number of them, in the various senses mentioned before. txOom's guiding objective was to create "environments having an ability to adopt behaviours and properties similar to living organisms – spaces, objects, materials and media that can be shaped by the activity happening

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within or around them" ("Newsletter"). It consisted, firstly, of a research component in which efforts were focussed towards developing the experimental technologies necessary to facilitate an immersive multimedia environment: wearable computing, "intelligent" textiles, bio-mimetics, and "the interfaces for visualisation and sonification of human behaviour" ("Newsletter"; "txOom"). This clearly had to involve a diverse range of researchers and technologists, whose efforts had to be co-ordinated between the technical minutiae, at one extreme, and a highly idiosyncratic overall vision, on the other. To achieve this FoAM consolidated and formalised its partnerships with several other groups who shared a similar vision, including Time's Up from Austria (http://www.timesup.org/) and Future Physical from the UK (http://www.futurephysical.org/pages/fphome.html) ("Newsletter"). This may have been one of the most demanding tests of FoAM's ideas and ideals for collaborative artistic projects thus far, having as they did to co-ordinate each element of the project – spanning from research to multiple public experiments – across Europe and between groups each with its own ideas about how things should be organised (or disorganised).

Secondly, three public experiments were arranged, occurring in such places as Torino, Italy, at the BIG Torino Festival, and culminating in the "Hippodrome Spectacular" at Great Yarmouth, UK. This event could have represented the high point of the whole project. Experimental not only in its intentions to create a "hybrid reality," but also in a much more pragmatic way – as a trial of its wearable computer system and sensor data acquisition software, among other things, it was a "laboratory" in more than one sense. Moulding the txOom environment to "its host structure: the Hippodrome circus, a 100-year-old edifice, built specifically for the purpose of two daily circus shows," the installation ran for ten days in which the space was filled

not only with sound and visuals, but also with human bodies, who hung on ropes and bungee cords, moving and twisting the stretchable projection screens as well as manipulating the media worlds. On the ground, the players could 'wear a part of the architecture,' tangled

in a web of responsive electro-luminescent filament, or play with an animal-like sphere, modelled as a hybrid between a tumble-weed and a sea-urchin. The design of the environment was based on the dynamics of a circus show – imaginary air-flows that the circus performers would generate in acts – shapes that would encourage similar actions of the untrained players. ("Newsletter")

"Players" in txOom included "a very diverse range of focus groups, such as artists coming from a textile, audiovisual or movement background, and community groups such as young single mothers, young offenders, and teens with communication disabilities and a very heterogeneous audience during the public presentation" ("Newsletter"). It was therefore a very "open" experiment, taking place tangibly in a so-called "real" world setting (as opposed to a so-called "virtual" world). However, many of FoAM's projects appear not to reach such a wide public, focussing instead on a small group, all of whom would be more or less "in the know" as to what the experiment is about. P~lot, "Play Lab on Open Grown Territories," was one such project, another "laboratory" which brought together a "motley crew of artists, designers, students, theorists and enthusiasts" ("Newsletter") with the objective of examining "notions of 'play' and 'game' as methodologies to research, develop, and present results of interdisciplinary practices" ("p~lot [Play~Lab on Open-Grown Territories]" n.d.). It emerged from two observations: first, that while the "institutionalised movement towards control" in art galleries, cultural organisations, and museums "often results in a loss of the slipperiness, the pleasure and the surprise of encountering new modes of artistic expression," there is a "very dynamic social and cultural system of development within online multi-player games," where in contrast to "the over-satiated art world, there is a lot of genuine
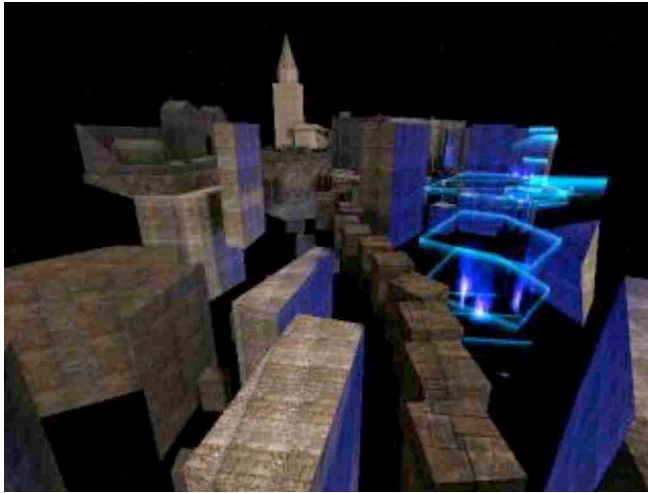

The village of Groznjan in Istria, Croatia: physical site for the "PlaySpace" of P~lot.
(Source: http://fo.am/p~lot/groznjan/index.phtml?dM7k_x=17.jpg)

enthusiasm ... with a community forming around the creation of the game world, which could easily be called an art work" ("p~lot" ibid.). However, such game worlds are characteristically associated with "the detached isolation of the gaming communities, the scarcity of access to these worlds in physical public spaces," and other limitations ("p~lot"). Which leads to the second observation, that it could be possible to integrate such technologies into existing public spaces where, rather than promoting the acceleration of cities "with people so massively atomised by mobile communication and ubiquitous computers," they could "alternatively sustain the emergence of new forms of creative and shared experiences" ("p~lot").

Therefore, P~lot was conceived as consisting of two facets, PlaySpace and GameSpace, the first taking place "on the ground," the second in a "virtual" computer-generated game world. The players took themselves out to Groznjan, a tiny

village in Istria, Croatia, "situated on a hilltop, almost scraping the clouds, Groznjan's surreal landscape is suffused with the promise of magic, ideal for conducting the p~lot experiment, which required a fair amount of suspending of disbelief" ("Newsletter"). Here they spent their time not only "drifting through the streets and abandoned houses, as if walking through a MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) and learning how to communicate with its inhabitants in order to understand its governing principles," but also embellishing the concept of two "spaces" into a mythological master narrative in which the "01 Continuum" was ruptured by a "reality cataclysm that severed both worlds," it being "p~lot's task to reunite the worlds and create portals so both realities could bleed into each other and slowly reform one unified 'real'" ("Newsletter"). The second stage of the exercise involved moving to "another level of the game: where the world dwellers became world creators," in which an imaginary geographical and mythological model of the village was transmuted by a "master alchemist" into a computer-generated model, "an ethereal extension of Groznjan ... defying the laws of physics, temporality, and reality.... Traversing the world, the players wander in a replica of Groznjan that gradually shatters into increasingly abstract planes of

Groznjan transmuted into its GameSpace replica that "gradually shatters into increasingly abstract planes of crystalline-blue unreality."
(Sources: http://f0.am/p~lot/groznjan/gamespace/index. phtml?dM7k_x=shot0014.jpg;
http://f0.am/p~lot/groznjan/gamespace/index. phtml?dM7k_x=shot0020.jpg)

crystalline-blue unreality" ("Newsletter"). Long after the "physical" aspect of this bizarre experiment took place, an "intricate bestiary of characters" is still being created and elaborated, based on the workshop participants' "personalities and behaviour during the week, transformed into the magical entities entangled in the local myths." Soon a card game deriving from these characters is to be made, loosely structured in the manner of a Tarot deck; and the game may constitute "the starting point for a new experiment, in the same or similar location" ("Newsletter").

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In the preceding I have merely sought to present a report, a sketch, however incomplete and incoherent, of my proposed fieldwork subject(s) and site(s). I believe there are a considerable number fascinating anthropological questions that could be investigated in this context. An elucidation of those which I propose to look at, including a review of the relevant literature, will follow shortly.

Alkan Chipperfield
July 2003

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