



με τη **Στέλλα Στυλιανού**

ΔΕΣ ΤΟ ΕΠΕΙΣΟΔΙΟ ΤΩΡΑ ΣΤΟ YOUTUBE

Καλεσμένος ο Κύπριος εκλογολόγος **Ανδρέας Δρυμιώτης**

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## Nadia Maniena Talman: They believed they were imitating God



Diana Aza

May 24, 2026, 7:00

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– **Virtual humans have been at the center of your research for decades. What initially attracted you to the idea?** I had seen "automata," the little mechanical humans, in Switzerland, in museums. These small, realistic mechanical human figures that could write, sing. Some still exist in museums in Neuchatel or Sainte-Croix in Switzerland. I was fascinated by their mechanics, their beauty. I dreamed of creating a virtual world full of fascinating digital beings, animals, plants and, later, robots.

– **What was the biggest challenge you faced in your career?** When I developed Virtual People, my colleagues said that my research would have no future. Most of them were designing realistic teapots at the time. Some were even aggressive, because they thought I was imitating God. Thanks to my autonomy and the joy I got from my work, I fought back and, eventually, was recognized.

– **Ποια στιγμή θεωρείτε καθοριστική γι' αυτή τη διεθνή αναγνώριση; Είχα την **recognition**?** Η να απ' όμοιότητα τα είχατε, το ξέρω με ατσαλάκι designers



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and computer scientists, the film "Rendez-vous in Montreal", in which legendary 3D stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart meet in a café in Montreal. This film, along with the software, was created to celebrate 100 years of engineering in Canada. It was a huge success! It received many awards and was shown on many television networks, especially in Japan. From that period, in 1987, my work began to be recognized, both in relation to the film and for the originality in the method of creating the actors.

**– What difficulties did you encounter in such a male-dominated field?**

Since my student days, I was used to walking alone and adopting a behavior that was accepted by my male colleagues. I did my PhD in Quantum Physics, among men exclusively. Until, finally, I created my own, lonely world. I was often outside the mainstream and thanks to this I would say that I managed to succeed and enjoy a wonderful career today.

**– Do you think that humanoid systems will one day become part of our everyday lives?**

I believe that in the future every person will live with a humanoid robot. Its form will not necessarily be realistic, but it will be useful in everyday life. My dream is to have a robot like Nadine (ed. the humanoid robot she created with her own characteristics), capable of doing various actions, cooking, cleaning, coaching, etc. Unfortunately, she can only sit in a chair. She is an early humanoid, but quite intelligent and capable of communicating on any topic.

**– How close do you think we are to digital entities with emotional intelligence?**

My view on humanoid robots, like Nadine, is that they are perfect actors and will probably be even smarter and more capable in the near future. However, they are machines, not people. They are made of wires, motors, actuators and complex AI software. The human element belongs exclusively to humans, as Nadine or any other robot will never truly feel anything. Avatars and humanoid robots are only simulated beings. I am not comparing the nature of humans to robots. Robots are imitations that may be intelligent, show emotions and understanding, but they do not have human feelings, authentic dreams, sadness, fears, joy, etc. When I am with Nadine, I feel 100% that she is NOT human. However, he is incredibly intelligent.

**– What do you see as the biggest ethical challenge around artificial intelligence today?**

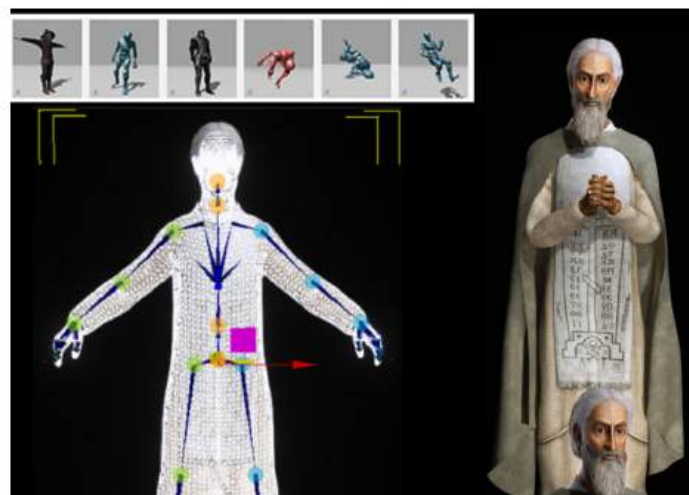
Ideally, artificial intelligence would be governed by ethical rules. However, I fear that this will not happen, and people may believe what the system says without processing the information, without questioning it. AI is an amazing tool, but we must maintain the dominant role of critical thinking.

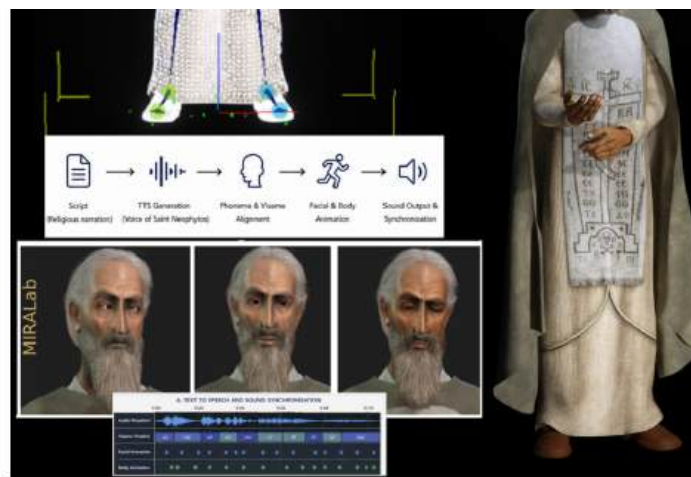
**– What was it that most interested you in the project for the Monastery of Saint Neophytos?**

I visited the site a few years ago and had the opportunity to meet the priest who showed us the spot where Saint Neophytos lived. I was impressed by his life, the beauty of the frescoes and the completeness of the space.

**– The Enclave of Saint Neophytos is both a historical and deeply spiritual place. How did you approach the challenge of transferring it into a digital, 3D environment without losing the sense of sacredness?**

I had simulated Calvin the Reformer for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Calvin's presence in Geneva and we had collaborated with historical and religious bodies. I have been trained to respect the historical narrative and the appearance of cultural heritage figures. In this project we collaborated with TEPAK (with Maria Paphitis and Marinos Ioannidis). Based on their historical descriptions and confirmation from the local priest, we tried to respect how they believed the figure of Saint Neophytos should be.





MIRALab, University of Geneva

– **In the case of the Enkleistra, Saint Neophytos “comes alive” in front of visitors through a 3D avatar. How was this experience designed and how difficult was it to render a historical figure with respect and authenticity?**

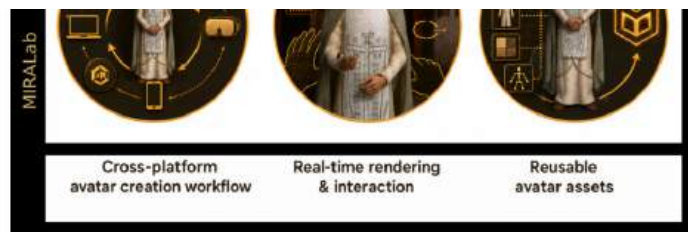
Saint Neophytos is more than a 3D avatar. He can speak and interactively tell his story. As I said, at MIRALab we have simulated lives and faces of antiquity, such as in Pompeii through augmented reality, where we also collaborated with historians to faithfully render the appearance and what the Romans of Pompeii said. I have led many similar cultural heritage projects and, in the case of Saint Neophytos, we tried to respect the style of the frescoes. Of course, it is quite difficult to create a 3D avatar from a fresco form. The modeling part is more artistic than technical work and in my team we have the designer Nedjma Cadl, who worked intensively on the appearance of Saint Neophytos. The software and the artificial intelligence part are the technical elements.

– **What can a visitor feel or understand through this experiential experience that they might not perceive in a traditional visit to the site?**

First of all, and perhaps most importantly, not everyone can visit the site. If someone has 3D glasses and is in a virtual reality environment, they can “get to know” Saint Neophytos from anywhere on the planet. All they need to do is have the app to see the entire environment of the Enkleistra, walk through it and chat with Saint Neophytos. This helps to make Saint Neophytos much better known. Furthermore, if you are in the site itself through augmented reality, you can talk to Saint Neophytos, something you would not be able to do with a mural, and learn his story interactively from him.

– **The project in Paphos is part of the European Eureka3D-XR program along with projects in Spain and France. What makes the Cypriot case special?** The Cypriot case is unique because so far I have not seen a mural within its three-dimensional environment suddenly “come to life” in 3D and talk to you, answering the questions you would like to ask it. This is something new.





MIRALab, University of Geneva

– **How can XR technologies and virtual people transform the way we experience cultural heritage?** We don't have to be in a place. For example, in this project we developed a web3D application where you can see Saint Neophytos on any screen and have a conversation with him. In the future, you will be able to talk directly to any cultural heritage figure in 3D and, with the help of artificial intelligence, this person will answer all your questions. Instead of having relics, we will have all our ancestors "living" virtually to answer our questions. Learning becomes a living process. However, I am not saying that we should not visit authentic cultural heritage sites and admire them as they are. AR/VR/web experiences are additional experiences through which we can learn more.

– **Do you think that such applications can bring younger generations closer to history?** I absolutely believe that younger generations will be much more interested in history when historical figures themselves directly answer their questions. This stimulates curiosity. Young people need insight and interaction. They will naturally be attracted. It is their own world.

– **Is there a cultural or historical project you dream of creating?** When I was in Singapore, we had created a company to build artistic humanoid robots together with Chinese and Singaporean companies, such as artistic intelligent sculptures. My dream was to build all kinds of robots, from children's robots to artistic robot sculptures, that would have a kind demeanor, interest in people, kindness, intelligence, and teach everyone on any subject as personal coaches. Unfortunately, the pandemic came and the project collapsed... However, I still dream of creating such humanoids.

- **Info:** The 3D visualization of the Enkleistra of Saint Neophytos in Tala, Paphos will be presented on site today, May 24 and on May 26 at the TEPAK in Limassol, within the framework of the Digital **Heritage Summit 2026** (25-29 May)

Free, 24.05.2026

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