

CURATE IT YOURSELF!

Game Mechanics and Personalized Experience in the Immersive Performance Installation Strawpeople (Das Heuvolk) by Signa

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INTRODUCTION

Immersive playable theatre performances are becoming more and more widespread. These performances have a double promise: the promise to transport their audience into another fully-discoverable-world and the promise of a certain level of agency for their audience for them to discover the set design and the plot in a playful way. The form that these immersive performances are taking can vary from small-scale interactive theatre with almost no technological devices and game theatre performances (which are replicating the settings of a video game by offering a level of agency similar to video games) to big scale performances where the set design offers a narrative by itself and the actors are interacting with the audience on various improvisational levels. The parallel between video games and immersive theatre performances has also been around for a while as pointed out by some authors (e.g. Rosemary Klich, 2017; Biggin, 2017; Bakk, 2019) who draw attention to the variety of game mechanics that can be observed in immersive performances and how these mechanics nurture the development of such performances. The corpus for analysis is, however, limited (the UK-based Punchdrunk or the US-based Third Rail Project's company being some of the few examples),

and performances outside the Anglo-Saxon world are almost entirely missed.

In this paper I aim to discuss how certain forms of immersive theatre amplify the participant's sense of playability. In the first section of the paper, I will outline what societal and cultural context gave birth to this neoliberal audience attitude and why it is important to create artistic and critical immersive environments. In the following section I will present the performance *Das Heuvolk* (The Strawpeople) by the Denmark-based theatre company Signa I will also outline the audience survey that I conducted in the summer of 2017 with the aim of mapping the level of the participant's agency and immersion in the performance. After this I will explain why the concept of immersion in experience-related discussions is becoming more common and how it pushes the creators to create environments that urge the participant to discover as much as possible. I will also outline how these immersive performances are in particular using the thrilling effect of the new horror genre (Ndalianis, 2012), and the feeling of uncertainty (Bar-Anan et al., 2009) which intensify the thrill of choosing between multiple possibilities. By relying on these aspects of the performance, I will point out how certain forms of immersive theatre, with the help of horror, create a element of playability, and I will also briefly discuss the history behind the current societal context and design frameworks that created the conditions that led to the rising demand for, and therefore the development of, this kind of playable immersive phenomena.

SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE RISE OF THE "NOTION" OF IMMERSION IN THE CONTEXT OF EXPERIENCE

In order to understand the recent boom in immersive business, it is useful to digress and look at the history behind the commodification of experiences and its relation to the notion of immersion. Although the origin of this kind of immersive

performances can be traced back to the mid-20th century (Bishop 2012), performances started to be tagged with the adjective “immersive” since the rise of the UK-based company Punchdrunk. But certainly, the roots of this desire to experience immersion is related not only to carefully curated or created artistic events, but widespread in the daily life of the society. Media-specific and genre-specific distinctions, as well as historical ones, should be made when analyzing a specific immersive environment or experience, and Dorisch Kolesch notes that these immersive environments all have a narcissistic or hedonistic side: “Extra-aesthetic immersive worlds of consumerism, employment and computer games primarily seek to promote feelings of self-assurance, subjective potency, sometimes even narcissistic hubris. In contrast, artistic designs tend with striking frequency to bring the dystopian, unsettling and jarring aspects of immersion to the fore” (Kolesch, 2019, p. 9). In order to understand better how this longing for immersion developed, it is important to outline some sociological studies that influenced the concept:

1. In his book *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Experience Society) published in 1992, the German sociologist Gerhard Schulze argues that the German society after the 2nd World War turned from outward orientation towards the inward orientation, meaning that their behaviour was not only influenced by external conditions like material wealth, but they were also motivated by the “experience orientation”, meaning that they wanted to achieve a “nice life” that is also aesthetically valuable. Following this idea, in 1999 Pine II and Gilmore published their famous work *The Experience Economy*. In their seminal work they explain the concept of experience economy as the last stage of an economic progression after going through the phase of commodities, goods and services. The demand for experiences is rising as it promises a transformative experience to their

consumer that can be interpreted as the unique selling point of these goods or services. Parallel to this, we can observe the rise of a storytelling boom (Fernandes, 2017). In *Curated Stories*, Sujatha Fernandes coins the concept of political economy of storytelling, which has two intertwined meanings in the context of neoliberal economics and the subjects within it: 1. “production, circulation, and consumption of stories that are mobilized toward certain utilitarian ends”; 2. “a second activity which involves the deployment of stories in processes of subject-making” (Fernandes, 2017, p. 11). The latter is the “curated storytelling practice” which, according to the author, is a tool for “producing subjects who are guided by these principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance”. Developed on this idea, Andreas Reckwitz stressed that “[i]n the mode of singularisation, life is no longer simply lived; it is curated.” In the late modernity, the subject is living in a context that dominantly orientates toward the new: this turns the experience society towards being an innovation society, where a new and unique good, service or experience always has to be created.

2. Theatre researcher Adam Alston formulates the concept of “entrepreneurial participation” in relation to the neoliberal aspect of our society (Alston, 2013). He offers a definition package for immersive theatre, which he conceptualizes as a “participatory theatre style” that aims to serve or to produce sensory stimulations and free-roaming experiences within a space or set of spaces for its audience with the audience usually being “implicated in a situation”. Their experiences may vary between being hedonistic or narcissistic in character, “bolstered by receiving the fruits of one’s own participatory effort as well as the efforts of others.” He further remarks that immersive theatre is the “experience of risk” (embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt) and lists in what ways the risk taking attitude can reveal itself:

The risk can manifest itself in:

- not understanding the protocols of a given theatrical practice;
- participatory rules being unclear, resulting in a need for a structure to guide audiences through an event;
- the tension between risk and chaos that is key to navigating participatory risks for audiences (Jubb, 2012);
- production of affect and emotion, such as embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt and shame.

3. Another factor that contributed to the prevalence of the concept of immersion is its connection to the VR technologies and their promise of transporting their users into another, totally immersive environment. The concept of VR or of the 3D-image seen through a stereoscope has already been around since the mid-21st century. More than a hundred years later, engineers developed various types of virtual reality headsets, and from the 80s on each decade brought a new wave of these technologies, and each wave promised us that this time these technologies will work out and will be widespread. In 2020, this promise is still with us, and not totally fulfilled: the VR headsets are not accessible for everybody, not only due to their price (see, for instance, the price of Oculus Quest) but also due to shipment issues. The content that is created today for VR still cannot satisfactorily entertain full-time the VR users. However, game engines and cinematic content creation modes are constantly being developed further, and technologists consider that we might be in the era for make-or-break for VR. (Hardawar, 2019).

IMMERSIVE PERFORMANCES

Adam Alston (2013) states that “[o]nce spectatorship is acknowledged as an embodied and potentially affective activity,

all theatre and performance is, or at least has the potential to be, an immersive activity.” (p. 129) Even though this statement could be used as a springboard for our discussion, it is too broad as it includes a large variety of interactive theatre formats, so for the current case study it should be narrowed down to the genre of immersive theatre performances. The approach of Doris Kolesch’s can be useful for this purpose. Even though it might be subtle, it exactly points out where immersive theatre performances could redefine themselves in contrast with other types of commercial immersive productions made purely for entertainment: “Immersion is much more about a subtle choreography of diving in and surfacing, about the play of illusionment and disillusionment. Next to their perceptual intensity, a distinguishing characteristic of many contemporary immersive experiences is also their physical-corporeal dimension, whether it creates disorientation, dizziness, shock or (the impression of perfect) bodily control.” (Kolesch, 2019, p. 9) Kolesch emphasizes how important it is in artistic practice to always change the perspectives of the participating audience, and the importance of occasionally revealing the “interface” of the immersive performance, by creating disorienting sensations or even dizziness. In this paper, I will be presenting a performance where, on the level of the story arc and on the level of intimacy between the performers and participants, these disorientations, shocks, and states of illusionment and disillusionment can be observed.

First, in order to have a better grip on what immersive theatre can be, I will outline certain characteristics common to immersive theatre performances:

1. Panoramic 360-degree physical environment (however limited), where the set-design in which the performance takes place can be explored in very fine detail by the members of the audience, enabling the spatial storytelling to unfold.

2. Involves all senses of the audience members, that is, not only the visual and the auditory senses, but also the senses of touch, taste, warmth and cold, and even the sense of balance is “in-game”, in order to create a strong immersive effect.
3. The medium of immersive performance bears no meta-reference (for example it is not an adaptation and it is not based on an existing well-known narrative).
4. Anything that independently happens in the vicinity of the performance (such as the ambient sound from the surrounding environment) can be integrated into the storyworld of the performance.
5. The performers of an immersive performance don't have a fixed text, but rather a well-defined character, which they express through improvisation and interacting with the members of the audience.
6. The audience can have the sense that they have some control over the plot (even if this sense of agency is only illusory.)
7. Intimacy as an atmosphere arises (usually) from interpersonal relationships, which means that it is formed and it materializes in interactive practices. It is an atmosphere-creating trigger feature that defines these spaces and it creates a compulsory need for the audience to have a participative attitude. I also find the practice of intimacy (especially in the context of LARP practices) a discursive practice, especially due to the close body encounters that happen in spontaneous ways and that offer the possibility for expressing deep feelings even between two strangers who have just met for the first time.

In the following section, I will present the immersive performance installation *Das Heuvolk* (Strawpeople) by Signa, where the above mentioned characteristics can all be found. After discussing the performance, I will present the audience

survey with the help of which I aimed at double-checking with the audience the existence of these features. At the end of the paper I will present the socio-cultural context of the reason why I argue that we are in a time which is very apt for this type of performances to be developed fruitfully as the audiences are open to let themselves be “totally immersed” in these productions.

ABOUT SIGNA AND THE PERFORMANCE STRAWPEOPLE

The Danish-Austrian company SIGNA¹ was founded in 2007 and usually stages performances in Germany or Austria. The two founders, Signa and Arthur Köstler, describe their works as performance installations: the setting of their productions are big houses or complexes, where 30 to 50 actors perform in an evening. Their performances usually last 5 to 12 hours. They use mechanics from LARP (such as framing the magic circle), theatre, and their performances can also be interpreted as open world games or MMORPGs (see Köstler, 2017; Bakk, 2019).

Strawpeople (Das Heuvolk) was presented in 2017 in Mannheim, Germany, in the frame of Schillertage Theater Festival. It took place in the suburbs of Mannheim in Benjamin Franklin Village. While entering that suburb by bus, one could already see a gathering of performers. When the bus stopped, the audience was welcomed by performers wearing costumes that resembled the solid monochrome dresses of cult members. The performers divided the audience members into several rooms where they received initiation training: they learned that they were there because Jack, the head of the cult, had recently died and the group was recruiting new members in order to find their missing gods. This was necessary for surviving the end of the world and

1. Portions of the following three sections have been published before in Bakk, Á.K. (2019). Epiphany Through Kinaesthetics. In: F. A. Igarzábal & M.S. Debus & C. L. Maughan (Eds.) *Violence. Perception. Video Games*. (pp. 213-223) Transcript Verlag.

becoming the “Himmelfahrer” (Ascencioners). The audience was told by the performers that they could encounter various rituals at certain times in the different rooms, where they could follow the cult members as they called upon the gods to return. There were also certain house rules that had to be obeyed (e.g. when entering or leaving a room one had to greet the mythological tricksters with a hand signal). After this, the audience could wander around in a two-level building that contained many thematic rooms where the performers carried out rituals. For example, one could enter a room filled with red, blue, and black carpets, heavy furniture, and drinks with high levels of alcohol. This was the Peacock’s Room where men were fighting each other (in the frame of the ritual). The audience, in close proximity, experienced the weight of the punches and kicks, how the fighters were sweating from physical exertion, and how their skin was reddening from being struck. In the Cowboy Room, the audience faced a real life struggle, as they witnessed the “bull” (a performer) suffering from being possessed by a god. After five hours spent in this house (which is not enough time to visit all of the rooms), the audience was guided into a nearby chapel. Here, everyone was seated near the walls forming a circle. A ritual started accompanied by songs about gratefulness, where the audience members could finally decide whether they wanted to join the cult or not. There was only one condition: they had to undress in the middle of the circle and join a washing ceremony. Those who chose this option could stay one hour longer (while the rest of the audience was brought back to the city with a bus) and attended a further performance. This final event was a private after party with the actors, where the old and new members of the cult sang together and embraced each other. The cult members appeared content, as they were able to recruit more members to help them with their search for the missing gods. If an audience member who joined the cult revisited the performance, they were greeted at the start as a member.

Survey: attempt to measure immersion

As mentioned above, the performance was presented at Mannheim Schillertage Theatre Festival in June-July 2017. The audience members were transported to the performance venue and back by a bus. I took advantage of this opportunity and conducted an audience survey in cooperation with the organizers. Altogether 201 audience members answered the questionnaire on their way back right after the performance.

The survey was conducted with the aim of measuring the player experiences of immersive performance participants by asking questions related to the characteristics of the immersive theatre performances (see the list above). It was important in the survey to understand the spectators' level of literacy in 'immersive performances' and other 'immersive genres'. The level of agency and immersion is also crucial when discussing these performances: this is where it can be measured how successfully these productions can achieve their aim. The responses to the survey show that those members of the audience who were already familiar with the practice of immersive performances were also those who enjoyed the production's ludic immersion (see Ryan, 2009, p. 54). This has parallels with what Kilch (2017, p. 226) observes about ludic immersion in a Punchdrunk performance, that the audience "...has agency in terms of their pace and direction, their interaction with the set, and their response to the performers' actions. Some choices are more or less rewarding; a decision to follow a particular character or to stay in a particular room will lead to different encounters. 'In the know' audience members develop strategies to traverse the vast environment and employ tactics to increase their likelihood of receiving the elusive goal of the one-to-one performance." This self-pacing agency made possible by being presented with a wide spectrum of reward is very similar to what the visitors of an amusement park may feel. Interestingly, one of the creators of SIGNA also referred to some of their visitors as amusement park

visitors, those who want to better exploit the variety of bodily and mental states that such performances can offer (Köstler, 2017). The aim of this particular spectator attitude is to gather as many experiences as possible, given that it is up to the subject to curate her own collection of experiences.

The results of the survey can be summarized as following:

- Measuring audience expectation about the performance. It was important to find out how many of them knew about or have participated in this format of immersive theatre and whether they have chosen specifically this performance as they knew what to expect: approximately 80 participants knew about it and 80 did not. (105 noted that they wanted to experience something new. It was interesting to see that those who mentioned that they accompanied a friend or they came as a result of someone else's suggestion had less pleasurable experience than those who knew what was expected of them.)
- Measuring the level of immersion from the participant's perspective: the survey mapped how the participants have felt about taking a more active attitude (137 participants marked themselves as an active participant and 128 claimed to have put themselves "totally" into the fictional world of the performer) and how much they could "live" the fictive world of the performance (more than half of the participants marked that they totally let themselves into the fictional world of the performance). In the survey I also attempted to map and to ask about immersion by using examples from other media, asking, for instance, how would the audience compare this genre with playing video games and/or using VR (in order to understand whether there is any correlation between their media literacy and perception of the performance): some of them (7) found a resemblance with the genre of video game or with LARP, but only 3 found resemblance with interactive VR productions.

- Measuring agency, by asking about how they would describe their attitude, how strongly they felt that they were able to control what was happening or to hack the storyworld of the performance. It was also important to measure with these questions whether the audience felt that they had entered the “magic circle” of the performance that acts as a border between daily life and the performance storyworld. It was additionally important to find out whether there was anything in the performance that they would have done differently if they were to participate in it again.
- In the survey, I also asked the participants about specific senses that influenced the phenomenological aspect of the performance. We were aiming to map whether the audience had any specific body feelings such as disgust. 115 participants answered that they felt something “in their chest” or nausea or dizziness, which means that their sensorium was very much affected by the detailed set design, and their attention was always kept busy.

AMPLIFYING THE SENSE OF PLAYABILITY

Non-player vs. player characters

The above description of the performance does not focus on the narrative framework, but on how all the characters have a pre-established biography, with a set of characteristics and behavior. Within the community, everyone talks freely about other cult members, but a constant fear of the future can also be observed, while sometimes secrets are only partly revealed, encouraging the audience to gather further information. As an active audience, the experiencers can also choose which room to visit, with which performer to interact, how to act themselves, or whether they want to stop a certain act of violence. Even though the spectators cannot have a direct influence on how the narrative path develops, they can have an effect on which

experiences they gather throughout the evening. They can choose to have more (superficially) joyful moments or to investigate the dark side of this community. In these heavily themed rooms the experienter engages with other people in various ways: they act together with the performers and other experiencers, and in this way they can encounter various social emotions such as guilt, disgust, embarrassment, or shame.

In the “traditional” game theatre performances (such as the Germany-based *Machina Ex*, a company the practice of which is based on video game adaptation for the stage) the actors are the non-player characters: they can only perform pre-written tasks and game mechanics on a very narrow spectrum. Meanwhile, the participants are the player characters: they have to figure out the game mechanics and the solutions for how to overcome the challenges in the games. In *Signa*’s performances the performers, due to their having an established and well-developed autobiography, still cannot step beyond what is allowed to them by their roles, but they can actively influence the way the story arc is perceived by the audience members. Beside this, the actors can also actively pay attention to the variety of the behaviour of the audience members, and help those who are lost or calm down the more aggressive participants (see Köstler, 2017).

Spatial Storytelling Character

One peculiar characteristic of immersive theatre performances is their incorporation of some aspects of environmental storytelling, by making preconditions for immersive narrative experiences in four ways (see Hameed and Perkis, 2018, p. 327; Jenkins, 2004, pp. 118-130). It is a common feature of immersive theatre performances that they actively make use of spatial storytelling as a tool to keep the spectators’ attention engaged. We can follow Jenkins and deconstruct spatial storytelling methods into the following characteristics:

1. Ability of spatial stories to evoke pre-existing narrative associations;
2. Providing a backdrop where narrative events unfold;
3. Embedding narrative information within the mise-en-scene;
4. Providing resources for emergent narratives.

In *Strawpeople*, the carefully arranged, meticulous stage design helps the audience members to figure out the socio-economic and cultural context of the narrative (e.g. in which era the performance takes place); and also such issues including what the relationship is between the performers or in between the performers and their personal objects. The variety of symbolic set design elements also offers an abundance of meaning-making strategies, which help the performers when improvising background stories for unfolding events.

The real backstory of the performance's venue is merged with the story-world of the performance: real-world facts are mentioned by the performers when talking about the place or the venue, and these can emerge in various formats (in the case of the *Strawpeople* performance some questions that the performers often discussed to keep the alternate reality immersion level high was "what happened with this military base", "how the cult members occupied it" and the like.)

As I mentioned above, the performers could not "act" freely as they had a prescribed biography, but on the other hand, thanks to their highly skilled improvisational skills, they could offer new, emergent narratives to the audience, by answering all kinds of questions that the spectators were asking.

Winning or losing

In *Strawpeople*, there are some gestural elements that are required in order to unfold the story (e.g. always greeting the trickster

when entering a room, or keeping some “traditions” alive.) The aim of the participant is to visit as many rooms in the building as possible and to talk to as many performers as possible. By this, the participants can assemble a well-curated storyline, which creates for them a sense of comfort and a sense of being at home with the performance. If the participant feels challenged enough and feels open towards the environment, at the end of the performance she can commit to the cult by facing one last challenge, namely to undress in front of the other participants and performers. As the performers are also undressing in front of the audience the visual effect of this act may not be so striking, but for participants it can be an element that stops them from entering the cult. This particular performance of SIGNA offers a reward for the winners, namely the one hour long extra performance, that only the new cult members can attend. Here they can sing together with other members and establish a cozy physical encounter that can raise the endorphin level. (And it is also worth mentioning that those who joined the cult and stayed for an extra hour had no organized vehicle to bring them back into Mannheim center, so they had to face a one hour long walk back to the city.)

Horror as guiding element

In her book *The Horror Sensorium*, Angela Ndaliansis states that “[t]he spaces of horror media not only fictionalize—in vividly sensory ways—their own sensorium, but they also demand that we cognitively and physiologically respond to their fictions by translating their sensorial enactments across our bodies.” (Ndaliansis, 2012, p. 3). As I mentioned previously, immersive theatre performances have to directly engage multiple senses of the participants, and through this they can create very striking physical responses. But how can the horror genre create this direct physical effect? Ndaliansis explains this by saying that “[a]s a genre, it’s capable of intensifying the range of reactions and experiences in which we can become enmeshed when

connecting with media texts and, over the last decade in particular, the proliferation of horror texts across media have amplified their focus on sensory encounters” (Ndalianis, 2012, p. 6). And as I have remarked elsewhere, in the case of the cinematic medium, the horror environment constitutes the “aesthetic of disgust.” In this performance the participants gain experience through “carnal elements” such as sweat, saliva mixed with dirt, real time violence, and also taxidermies. We can say that these “sources of disgust boost the hunting attitude of the audience, and it is this attitude that actually guides the experiencer through the performance space and unfolding story” (Bakk, 2019, p. 217). The continuous disgust that one can encounter in almost every room enhances the expectation of the next shocking element in another room. This expectation is strong, as the feeling of uncertainty can often intensify affective reactions. Bar-Anan et al. conclude in their study that uncertainty intensifies affective reactions to an ongoing positive event, but this can also intensify negative emotions in case of negative events. It is also important to note that the feeling of positive or negative uncertainty depends less on the actual knowledge of the participant, but more on their feelings (Bar-Anan et al. 2009, p. 126).

Strawpeople is an in-between performance: It uses the mechanisms of unpredictability, and the violence that can be viewed from very close and the symbols of occult cults to give the audience the feeling that something horroristic might happen. On the other hand, the performance also offers many “happy moments” for the audience members, that intensify together with the rise of the level of intimacy and improvisation that the performers are mastering. As the director of the performance Signa Köstler admits in an interview (Schütz, 2019, p. 55) the environment in this performance was “positively harmless”, which is also a reason why some visitors, even though a minority of them, decided to join the cult, as their uncertain feelings were

intensified but the expectation of something positive will happen was stronger.

CONCLUSION

As I have stated at the outset relying on an observation by Doris Kolesch, immersive performances and environments should feature a balance of illusionment and disillusionment. Although Signa company's performances involve the kind of narratives that create not so harmonious feelings and very directly present the inequalities (and, as a consequence, violence and humiliation) inside a community, *Strawpeople* is more of a feel-good performance. In this paper, I have analyzed this performance to present through its various aspects of immersive theatre and its ludic character, as I wanted to demonstrate that it is not only the performances with tragic elements and negative, uncertain atmospheres that can create a sense of immersion among their spectators. This is important, given that the spectators of such performances can try out not only shameful or disgraceful situations (that in daily life are usually avoided), but they can also get a chance to experience being in a community that is attempting this collectively. Signa's immersive performance can reveal the multilayeredness of every socio-cultural situation, by allowing the participants the agency to try out situations that they would like to try out (e.g. entering the room they want or following a protagonist that they found interesting to follow). This way, the production can offer personalized experiences for their visitors by allowing them to exploit some degree of freedom while still possessing a solid game mechanics system to maintain the narrative of the performance.

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