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The Experiential Turn: Ways of Exploring the Past Through Enhanced Senses in Digital Performance Arts

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Abstract: Digital technology research and artistic practice influence each other regarding user sensory experience. On the one hand, research on new technology brings a different dimension to performing and cinematic arts offering the user the possibility of exploring the past through enhanced senses. On the other, in the field of human-computer interaction, there is an increased interest in the aestheticization of experience, a special attention being given to performance and theatricality, considered to be the basis for new paradigms in design and operating systems. I refer to the cross-disciplinary encounters as being "experiential turns", a series of innovations that could be the basis of new paradigms of design and operating systems, with applicability in both technology and creative industry. The paper will explore some art works that are representative for the experiential dimension of technologically mediated performance art.

Keywords: digital interactive performance, digital technology, human-machine interaction

In digital interactive performance, digital technology is more than the sum of the technical elements – be them digital or analog – that contribute to building the performance, and is behaving like a partner that interacts with the human performer, in ways that are more and more akin to interactions between human subjects. This way, technology is becoming - as Dixon described in his definition - one of the characters: actor, or performer. In the

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absence of this technology, the show loses an important dimension, turning itself into something else, at best another kind of show, with another message.

In this sense, in digital interactive performance, it is true that "media is the message". In order to better understand this "message", we sought to identify areas, theories or perspectives specific to digital media, and technologies that intersect with domains or theories specific to digital performance. In the field of human computer interaction there is an increased interest for aspects related to performance and theatricality, considering that these define the new paradigms of designing and operating digital systems, both in pragmatic and artistic applications.

The "aesthetic turn" in human-machine interaction

Human Machine Interaction (IOM) is the academic study field that incorporates a number of areas directly related to the development of communications systems and their applications in real life: computers and information science are dealing with design and human interface engineering issues; sociology and anthropology address the way of interaction, collaboration and organization between technological and human systems; ergonomics is concerned with the safety of systems and the limits of human cognition; psychology analyzes human cognitive processes and user behavior while linguistics contributes to the development of languages used in the human-machine relationship.

Since the 1980s, human computer interaction and usability studies have laid the foundations for some theories, concepts, methods and practices in the design of digital product interfaces, being rooted in the perspectives of cognitive psychology, ergonomics, sociology, or anthropology[2]. The contribution of these domains to the development of digital products and platforms has been marked by the concern for the improvement of the functional features of the projected systems, ignoring other significant

2. Lars Erik Udsen and Anker Helms Jørgensen, "The Aesthetic Turn: Unravelling Recent Aesthetic Approaches to Human-Computer Interaction," *Digital Creativity* 16, no. 4 (January 2005): 205–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/14626260500476564.

contributions that these sciences may have had in the context of digital technology development. Today, the computer has overcome the status of working tool, permeating the most profound areas of private, social or cultural life. The research into human-machine interaction reflects this by addressing more complex issues and more subtle qualities of technology than those related to the functionality of the interface. Udsen and Jorgensen are calling this "the aesthetic turn" in human machine interaction studies, identifying four main areas that characterize the creative approach to exploration and innovation in human-machine interaction.

The cultural approach, promoted by scientists coming from the humanities and the media, is trying to provide new cultural perspectives to digital interfaces. Brenda Laure compared the computer interface with a theater show, stressing that the experience of using it must offer a "pleasurable engagement", similar to the viewing experience of a theater piece[3]. Studies related to web functionality and the aesthetic aspect of the interfaces have developed since the '90s, when the cultural product began to be increasingly perceived in a postmodern vision, as a result of re-mediation and manipulation of symbols. In this context, the interface itself becomes a culturally mediated interface.

A similar concern is identified at Lev Manovich who analyzes the cultural interfaces of different software, animations, 3D images, sound, and considers that, as art and culture have adapted new media and the computer interface becomes an aesthetic object, it transcends neutral screen status by influencing user experience[4]. In essence, the cultural approach provides a literary or artistic foundation for understanding the interface as a cultural artifact, capable of evoking human emotions, experiences and reflections.

The functionalist approach represents another perspective in the study of human-machine interfaces. Dominant in the beginning, this approach emphasizes theories, concepts and methods designed to improve the interface design functionality, concluding that an aesthetically appreciated interface contributes to the overall functionality.

3. Udsen and Jørgensen, 207.
4. Udsen and Jørgensen, 208.

The experience-based approach looks beyond the basic criteria of user functionality and experience, towards the more subtle aesthetic qualities of the interface. "The recurrent theme is the aesthetic interaction that promotes technologies that inform, provoke, delight, stimulate"[5]. Several researchers, including Mark Blythe, Kees Overbeeke, Tom Djajadiningrat, and Caroline Hummels, call for the abandonment of the functionality criterion and the discovery of aesthetic interaction, the exploration of playful aspects, and the study of unique socio-cultural contexts in the design approach.

The fourth approach identified by Udsen and Jorgensen *is the techno-futuristic* approach, in which aesthetics is viewed from the philosophical perspective, prevalent in the design of user experience in "ubiquitous computational environments". Basically, this philosophical approach to design reflects on how people experience environments as they become more and more technologically advanced.

Reflecting on how digital technology manifests itself in everyday life, Johan Redström and Hallnäs support the search for approaches that provide technology with "significant presence" rather than looking at it as being a tool for different uses. The techno-futuristic approach addresses the issue of alternative digital technologies, that are increasingly part of our lives and addresses their implications, even if the integration of these visionary theories into the practice of technology design has remained problematic[6].

Performative experience design

Both man-machine interaction and performance have as main topic the interaction with one or more people within a system. In the first case, it is about the interaction between man and the technological device, or the digital platform. In the case of performance, the focus is on how *"individuals engage with a specific combination of physical, social, temporal and, sometimes, technological factors that contribute to the mediality of a performance."*[7]

5. Udsen and Jørgensen, 209.
6. Udsen and Jørgensen, 211.
7. Fischer-Lichte, apud Jocelyn Spence, David Frohlich, and Stuart Andrews, "Performative Experience Design: Where Autobiographical Performance and Human–Computer Interaction Meet," *Digital Creativity* 24, no. 2 (June 2013): 99, https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.808964.

Thus, a common place is defined, subsumed by the space where overlapping theories and practice involve the interaction between one or more people and a digital system, naming it "performative experience design". That common place seeks to develop, understand and explore the interaction in response to a system that includes digital technologies. Based on this perspective,[8] the authors describe three categories of performance which comprise the performative experience: *mixed reality performance, Digital Live Art,* and *digitally augmented autobiographical performance*.

Blast Theory. Rider Spoke and the experiential performance

Mixed reality Performance is a type of emergent theater that includes "*the creation of experiences that mix real and virtual worlds in complex and rich ways.*"[9]. The work of the Blast Theory company are representative for this type and – in the volume *Performing Mixed Reality*[10] set the stage for a "dramaturgy of *performance*" to express the different modalities in which digital technology can be integrated in the performative experience. One of the works of Blast Theory company, which is representative for mixed reality performance, is Raider Spoke. This work can also be included in the concept of experiential performance, which is another type of mixed reality performance.

Blast Theory, a British company from Brighton, England, led by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj, brings together a group of world-renowned intermedia artists, famous for their innovation in the field of digital interactive media. Through their knowledge of digital communication, the participating public from all over the world get to interact in the most

8. Spence, Frohlich, and Andrews, "Performative Experience Design: Where Autobiographical Performance and Human–Computer Interaction Meet."
9. Benford and Giannachi, apud Jocelyn Spence, Stuart Andrews, and David M. Frohlich, "Now, Where Was I? Negotiating Time in Digitally Augmented Autobiographical Performance," *Journal of Media Practice* 13, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 269–84, https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.13.3.269_1.
10. Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi, *Performing Mixed Reality* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).

unexpected ways. The experiences built as a result of this approach, challenged us to rethink the categories discussed above, and their works, built based on the model of games or popular culture films, make the distinction between real and fictional go away.

Their first works were made in nonconventional spaces, starting in the 1990's, and took the shape of multimedia performances inspired by the culture of clubs. These were followed by transmedia projects, often inspired from games or films, which created complex experiences on different levels. Such an example is Kidnap (1998), during which, as part of a lottery, certain members of the public were kidnaped, and the results of the lottery were broadcasted live, online. The themes approached by Blast Theory have to do with violence, pornography and politics, and the interdisciplinary, innovative work involves developing projects that sometimes take place over long periods of time or in specific contexts.

One of the most well-known projects made by the Blast Theory is Rider Spoke (2007). In this performance, which had the whole city as a scene, the public is an active participant, being at the same time both audience and participant, who write the text. The participants may use their own bicycles or may borrow ones from the headquarters of the project. The bicycles have a digital device installed, with a map which functions as a geolocation machine. Then, the participants receive a question and are guided to a secret location to record an answer. In this journey, through the geolocation system, they will have the opportunity to discover places where other participants recorded and stored their answers. Once they get to the physical location where other answers were recorded and stored, the participants can access this content, but this is possible solely with the equipment they received. In this project, the participants fulfill both the role of the public, and that of creators of the content of this project.

Because the results are now available online on a webpage, even though the content is built based on the model of classical mixed reality performance, the performance can be experienced also as a digital artefact.

Figure 1. Blast Theory – *Rider Spoke (2007)*[11].

In 2011, Blast Theory extended the initial project, launching Riders Have Spoken. This project contains an archive of a few thousands of recordings taken so far during the tours of the project around the world. By accessing

11. Source: capture http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/rider-spoke/

the points marked on a series of maps of cities in which the project took place, the public can be a witness to the stories recorded, this time through the computer, regardless of location. Therefore, we are no longer dealing with an experiential performance, but an experience of watching multimedia specifically tailored to digital media.

Blast Theory realized numerous other interactive projects, mainly mixed reality performances, which are difficult to categorize in classical media genres, therefore becoming one of the most well-known active companies in interactive digital media. One of the projects is My One Demand, an interactive film about love, realized in 2015 in Toronto in collaboration with The Patching Zone (Netherlands), Translocal (Finland) and Ontario College of Art and Design University (Canada), with the support of the European Union Cultural Program.

Sara Heitlinger and the Talking Quilt

Digital Live Art – "intersection between Live Art, computing and human–computer interaction" – investigates the way in which we design and develop the experimental, improvisational and the transient interaction, as defined by Sheridan[12]. The theories and the practices that comprise this approach include not only Goffman's theory, but also the works of artists such as Goldberg or Heathfield. They also create the space for the design of tangible, performative interactive contexts, in order to transform the spectators in participants or even performers. Even more, Sheridan asserts that the methods and the theories used in performative arts can be used to assess and measure the human-machine interaction. The example of *live* digital art given by Sheridan is the work *The Talking Quilt,* a collaborative work of Sarah Heitlinger in London. In an intergenerational project, the artist explored the links between the concepts of community and food/eating.

The project resulted in a workshop in which a quilt was made (a textile work made up of small pieces assembled together in a unifying project) as a result of the contribution of several people in the community, in a sort of community gathering. During the workshop, the participants were recorded

12. Apud Sara Heitlinger and Nick Bryan-Kinns, "Understanding Performative Behaviour within Content-Rich Digital Live Art," *Digital Creativity* 24, no. 2 (June 2013): 112, https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.808962.

while recounting the habits specific to their culture, especially habits around preparing food. "The quilt presents a snapshot of the farm at a point in time and engages different communities, including hard to reach groups such as a local Somali community, as well as youth and elderly people."[13]. In the final artifact, through technologies integrated in the fabric, several fabric areas were created that could be activated through a technology integrated into a glove, so that a visitor could turn into participant and could activate the recordings.

Next to the exhibited artwork, a context was created to access this performative experience, by including a narration recorded and played on the basis of certain rules of interaction with the object. Viewing such a work surpasses the framework circumscribed by viewing an artwork exhibited in a certain space, because the work itself is more than the object itself.

Figure 2. Sara Heitlinger – The Talking Quilt (2011). [14]

13. Heitlinger and Bryan-Kinns, 113.
14. Source: video capture http://www.saraheitlinger.net/quilt.html, accessed September 2015.

The performative dimension – portrayed by the recordings made in the context that was built, staged toward a certain ending – is available to the visitor only as much as he/she exercises his/her right to involvement through picking up the glove. This interface, which reminds of a household item, used in the kitchen, enables the exploration of the surface of the quilt, that is also an object pertaining to the household space and pertains to the notion of recycling, reinventing, remediation.

Third Angel and The Epic Journeyin a Stationary Minibus

The third category of performative experiences described by Spence et al. refers to **digitally augumented autobiographical performance** (or digital autobiographical performance). This represents the relationship between the individual, experimental performative behavior and the interactive systems in the context of autobiographical performance and digital media sharing. Simply put, this is the performance in which the story integrates performative aspects – in Goffman's terms, representing the self in daily life – built through personal photographs and other interventions in social media which are freely shared in cyberspace.

Spence illustrates the concept of digital autobiographical performance with the performance proposed by Third Angel company, entitled *Cape Wrath – An Epic Journey in a Stationary Minibus.* Directed by Rachel Walton, the performer (Alexander Kelly) choses to build the story of his grandfather's journey toward the most Northern point of Scotland by using the personal memories he has, as well as his mother's memories, and the memories he has of a similar road he had made two decades ago.

This journey was documented by images, videos and posts on his personal page of the social network. "*The performer reaches through his memories to create for himself and for his audience a visceral and empathetic link to a series of past moments he cannot fully know or precisely re-experience, creating a personal identity that he claims for the duration of the performance.*"[15] Third Angel is

15. Spence, Andrews, and Frohlich, "Now, Where Was I? Negotiating Time in Digitally Augmented Autobiographical Performance," 270.

presenting the story of this experience that includes "whisky and chocolate" to an audience of just 14, fellow travelers to Cape Wrath, on a journey "to the edge of the world".

Figure 3. Third Angel – Cape Wrath. An Epic Journey in a Stationary Minibus.[16]

We identified in Romania a similar theme in the show *"My Friend"*, produced by the PunctArt Company, in partnership with Labirint Theater Company. The work was promoted as an "experimental performative installation".

16. Source: photo capture http://i.embed.ly/1/display/resize?key=1e6a1a1efdb011df84894040444cdc60&url=%2F%2Ffarm4.static.flickr.com%2F3708%2F13581018005_fa62329822_z.jpg&width=810, accessed September, 2015

Figure 4. PunctArt and Labirint Theatre – *My Friend. (2015).*[17]

17. Source: photo capture http://artactmagazine.ro/my-friend-instalatie-performativa-experimentala-4-reprezentatii-live-reactor-2324-octombrie-2015/, and https://www.facebook.com/1495684200753672/photos/a.1509069826081776.1073741831.1495684200753672/1509069866081772/?type=3&theater, accessed September, 2015

> „My Friend" is more than a show, is a mechanism through which viewers are invited to actively participate through their own Facebook account.
> „My Friend" starts from a story of search and recapture, with and about those who asked themselves at least once who they are and where they want to go, of those who want to discover new perspectives, those who believe that one person out of seven billion can make a difference, those who are ready to start a journey-experiment toward new horizons.[18]

Using personal Facebook accounts during the show introduces the digital autobiographical dimension and allows for the construction of a type of interaction mediated by the digital *persona* in social media, an identity controlled by the individual and ready to be performed in the media context built by that performance.

Photographic techniques developed a lot in the latest decades, leading to an almost complete transition from analogous to digital. The emergence of social media that allow for the sharing of photos and digital recordings from one's personal archives determined the development and the spreading in the online environment in a record time of this type of autobiographical performance. The interest for the sharing of photos shown by the field of human-machine interaction is the more relevant as social media offers a relevant platform of sharing, through something that can today be conceptualized as a mass phenomenon.

> Digitally augmented autobiographical performance gives participants (performers and spectators) a live experience of dwelling with their memories and with others in the unique constellation of time, space and social dynamics provided by each performance. The live performative encounter can unearth hidden stories, details, tangents and contexts that were never mediatized and are, for the most part, not represented in digital form.[19]

18. "MY FRIEND – Instalație Performativ Experimentală," Teatru Fix, n.d., http://teatrufix.ro/my-friend-instalatie-performativ-experimentala.
19. Spence, Frohlich, and Andrews, "Performative Experience Design: Where Autobiographical Performance and Human–Computer Interaction Meet," 102.

In the analysis of autobiographical performance, Spence et al. offer certain research directions based on the human-machine interaction. These directions are essential in the context of the latest technological developments and bring aspects specific to the field of drama and performance.

The first direction has to do with *the roles* an individual plays while engaged in a performative experience. Generically named "user", an individual can fulfill more than one role. Sometimes an individual can take the role of the one who enacts a certain event, yet at other times he becomes the one who takes an active role in the performative experience, or he can be a mere spectator. The fact that a user can change multiple roles and can become a performer, a spectator of even a subject, is specific to this genre of performance, and the individual will be reflected in the images that will be shared.

The second research direction has to do with play. The existence of multiple roles involves the existence of multiple rules that will govern the ways in which individuals interact, similar to the rules of games, that allow a member of the audience to negotiate the transition to the status of becoming a performer. This performative perspective of the play is pursued in depth in Schechner and Goldberg's studies; they reinforce the aspects that have to do with play in the context of performance. The existence of interaction rules, as part of the design of performative experiences, allows for what can be perceived as a show/performance from one perspective to be viewed as a game of mixed reality from a different perspective. This is the explanation for the multiple awards won by companies such as The Blast Theory, which are considered to be games. We need to keep in mind that not only the necessity of having rules determined the structure of the interaction between the entities involved, but also the game itself. "In terms more relevant to technologists, play is strongly allied to performance in that both are enjoyed for their own sake, in stark contrast to the goal or task orientation of much of the foundational work in HCI."[20] In this sense, the analysis of the interaction between the individual and the technology is often done through systems built only for playful engagement, which is a form of playful exploration, having no precise rules or points to be won.

20. Spence, Frohlich, and Andrews, 104.

Thirdly, Spence emphasizes that autobiographical performance is an event taking place in time, not an object, which brings into discussion both the temporality and the research, as essential elements. Just as devised theater, this type of performance does not follow a predetermined script, and the identity of the character/user is built in the context of the autobiographical performance. This type of research will have an essential role in articulating the identity at a certain point, and the following views will create their own moments of interpretation.

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Performative arts and theatrical theories are considered to occupy an increasingly important role in the design of human-machine/technology interaction, as well as in the research of this field, although definitely not covering all aspects involved in the design of digital technology.

Beyond the functional approaches which dominated the beginning stages of developing digital technologies and the design of the interaction of the individual and the technology, the cultural approach emphasized the role of esthetics in elaborating strategies and principles which govern the design of interfaces, but also the users recognizing the machines as cultural artefacts, as well as seeing them as identity objects. In this approach, the technical-futuristic approaches are giving technology philosophical significance while the experiential approach promotes the esthetic interaction that generates pleasure, enjoyment and stimulation, sometimes to the expense of the functionality criterion.

In other words, if the first wave of attention was focused on the functionality of technology, a second wave was directed towards the professional context, productive, in which technology is going to be used, while the third wave approaches the technologies that are non-productive and non-rational, which dominate the development directions lately.

In the context of the second, but mostly the third wave of human-machine interaction, certain research emerged on different theories pertaining to performative arts, and also certain practices which can contribute to the development of digital products and superior performative experiences.

Among the types of performative experiences discussed here, we presented mixed reality performance (theater/performance which combines several types of media which bring together virtual reality and the real world), live digital art (a hybrid form of art which combines several types of media built in the context of certain performative experiences contextualized and coordinated) and autobiographical augmented digital performance (a performative experience augmented through digital images and social media interaction).

These types of performance provide the context for the development of research directions in man-machine interaction, that are claimed by the field of performing arts. The analysis of the roles taken by the user in performative experiences, as well as the alternance of these roles, benefits from theories specific to spectatorship studies in performing arts, as well as from the principles of digital games design, which recognize the value of certain approaches of the 'game'. These approaches are supported by theorists from the field of performative studies, as well as well-known practitioners, such as Schechner or RosaLee Goldberg. Also, in the context of the studies of the esthetics of human-computer interaction, it is appreciated that we can no longer ignore theories pertaining to aspects of the body, temporality or presence, aspects which are specific to the domain of performing arts.

In conclusion, we believe that - in the context of the development of digital technologies and their omni-presence through mobile technologies in all areas of social life, including art – the field of performing arts and the respective performance theories are of interest not only to the artistic cultural context or to certain subjects in the social sciences but also for certain areas of technical sciences.

Particularly the field which studies the human-computer interaction is in a stage of development when it is looking towards theories specific to the arts and performative studies, in an attempt to understand the individual's behavior while interacting with the digital systems, as well as the way in which the informational society adopts, uses and assimilates artefacts which incorporate digital technologies. In the same way, performing arts can no longer be studied without taking into account aspects pertaining to the integration of digital technologies, the nature of human-technology interaction, as well as the way in which cultural artefacts realized in the context of new media are integrated and assimilated by the public of the digital age.

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