

Detailed PROJECT DESCRIPTION.

SSHRC grant “Sustaining Liveness in Participatory Experiences” (2019-2023)

Contemporary culture is the site of significant tensions between the digital and physical. We know, for instance, that a generational divide in the habits of cultural consumption threatens the economic sustainability of live theatre. Audiences for traditional live theatre are greying as a younger public looks for cultural forms that resonate with their connections to digital formats and networks. The relentless drive towards digital and digitized culture has both economic and social implications, as older cultural forms are threatened and concerns increase over the negative effects of our preoccupation with digital media. These implications include issues of addiction, obesity, cognitive development and the potential weakening of social bonds and meaningful communication due individual isolation produced by the dominance of tablets and cellphone use (Turkle, 2015).

It is worth noting that these more specific debates refer back to a much larger historical and theoretical landscape. In “How We Became Post Human : Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics” (1999, University of Chicago Press) N. Katherine Hayles paints a detailed picture of how, during the early development of cybernetics, information was constructed as neutral and non-material, as pattern rather than meaning or content (Hayles, 1999, p 50). She suggests that “the emphasis on information technologies foregrounds pattern/randomness and pushes presence/absence into the background” meaning that “the implications extend beyond narrative into many cultural arenas...one of the most serious of these implications is the *systematic devaluation of materiality and embodiment.*” (Hayles p.48, italics in original).

The notion that information is somehow not dependent on a material substrate is deeply embedded in popular culture. (It no longer seems outrageous to talk about potentially downloading our brains into computers so that we can “live” forever -as if this is somehow obviously desirable and possible.) The resulting apprehension of the world has insidious corollaries that include, for example, an underestimation of the importance of the physical environment and climate change. The importance of relinking the digital and the physical through experience should therefore be seen, at this fundamental level, as an ongoing effort that we need to continually undertake and renew. Hayles proposes we should entertain “The possibility that pattern and presence are mutually enhancing and supportive” (Hayles, 1999, p.48). Indeed, the digital and the physical have never been in opposition, and this makes the challenge of producing culture that does not reinforce this false dichotomy all the more pressing. Rather than simply tracing a shift from physical to digital in modes of cultural production, we need to understand our situation as more nuanced: pushing and pulling in multiple directions. This research project suggests we look to experiments, adaptations and mutations in the cultural practices of live theatre and games (two forms that are often seen as in tension rather than in relation) for a more nuanced consideration of the relation between physical **liveness**, and the digital. We need to move towards a healthier, more dynamic, balance between “liveness” or physicality, and technological mediation or virtuality. Liveness or co-presence, with its corollary of mutual and contextual awareness, is what pure theatre or performance values the most. Liveness represents the possibility of improvisation, unpredictability and error as well as responsiveness, tolerance and reciprocity: in short, the human, or, the limits of artificial intelligence. These are social values we can look to live theatre to explore, but not at the expense

of the digital. The question, instead, is how can digital technology help enhance, adapt or navigate the liveness of participatory theatre?

Digital culture does not condemn traditional theatre and liveness to disappearance: theatre practitioners increasingly recognize the importance of understanding and working with rapidly changing contemporary cultural forms that change our ways of relating to one another. In particular, audiences are now used to actively, rather than passively, engaging in culture, which has led to the growth of immersive and participatory theatre forms.¹ Immersive theatre pieces, like many works by Third Rail (Portland, OR) or the UK company Punch Drunk's, *Sleep No More*, (2011) have proved very popular. These productions allow the audience to walk into the theatre work taking place around them -usually as they move through a space. In some cases, this immersive voyage through the production is relatively linear and, in others, the sequences of the play may be experienced in a different order depending on the audience's choices (a kind of light hyperlinking). In either case, the audience's participation is relatively limited and, for example, the text of the play is not spoken, interrupted or changed by audience participation.

Participatory theatre forms, on the other hand, attempt to integrate the audience in more structural or constitutive ways. These productions especially appeal to younger audiences who have grown up with interactivity but, beyond simple appeal, participatory modes simulate situations and stimulate civic and social inter-actions in particularly engaging and fruitful ways. London (UK) is arguably the international centre for experimentation in this area because of the concentration of mature, high profile companies working there. These include Blast Theory, Coney and ZU-UK, to name just three with international reputations. Examples of participatory theatre works by these companies include: Coney's *A Small Town Anywhere* (2008) in which around 30 participating audience members become citizens of a small town whose story unfolds in response to the choices they make, individually and collectively; or Blast Theory's *Operation Black Antler* (2016) in which the audience is prompted to question state sanctioned spying in an undercover mission that takes place in a real-life pub, seeded with some actors, to identify right wing activists and report back to the government spying agency.

ZU-UK theatre initially became internationally known for the participatory work *Hotel Medea* which is represented on the cover of *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (Lavender, 2016). In *Hotel Medea*, audience and actors meet at midnight and the piece takes place in various venues around London, ending at dawn with a public, open-air breakfast for everyone. The audience is "trained" as part of the process and becomes the chorus in the play: protagonist, antagonist, and audience at different points. *Hotel Medea* was a critical and popular success but, like most participatory theatre pieces, it was also unsustainable, both in terms of the production costs and the actors' physical well-being. This was one of the factors that prompted ZU-UK to contact research-creators at the Technoculture, Art and Games (TAG) research centre at Concordia (<https://tag.hexagram.ca/>) about the possibility of a collaboration focused on intersections between digital games and participatory theatre. Could we, together, create hybrids between digital games and participatory theatre that injected liveness into the game side and contributed to sustainability for participatory theatre?

¹ Not surprisingly, there is lively debate about the use of these terms. See, for example, the extended discussion in *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (Lavender, Andy, Routledge, 2016.) We have chosen to make the distinction between immersive and participatory as described above because we think it identifies important differences in practice.

CONTEXT: At TAG, a focus has developed on digital games with significant material/physical components. An example of this would be *Propinquity* (Hughes and Simon, 2009-11): a digital-physical game that sets out to eschew the screen, shifting the focus towards the bodies and intersubjectivity of the players, as well as the social situation produced by the audience. The development, at TAG, of games like this has attracted a significant cohort of talented graduate students who seek to theorize and produce in this area (see Team). They are undertaking hybrid research-creation theses that address the importance of remarrying the physical / live and the digital. They want to steer games, and by implication the future of interactive culture, away from single player experiences in front of a screen towards radically contemporary, mixed experiences where the digital reinforces the centrality of the material world, especially the body and our relations with each other.

As these students proceed, it has become obvious that what we lack to fully address these questions is a better understanding of types of liveness and ways of structuring it for the players and the audience. For the proposed project, we articulate liveness in terms of three related problematics that inform both theatre making and digital design.

Inter-immersion is a term used by theoreticians of Live Action Role Playing (Larp) games. Inter-immersion is the inter-subjective co-production of the believability of the performance. It is the process whereby actors and audiences mutually reinforce each other's subjective apprehension of a fictional time and place. Inter-immersion is a fundamental condition of liveness since it implicates all participants in the production of successful performance. For the design of video games (as well as social media and AI) understanding inter-immersion provides important clues for implementing more satisfying interactivity.

Conditions for participation entails the management and facilitation of safe and accessible entry into the performance for participants. In both theatre and digital media, we can always interrogate who has access and who is invited to have access. High budget elite theatre is no more accessible in this sense than the latest hi-tech digital gear (Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR)) whereas a concern with liveness directs us to look at issues of accessibility, inclusion, diversity of audiences and the mobility and portability of performances.

The production of agency and collective performance. Participatory theatre asks something of its participants. It presupposes a kind of collective action in which they will make some decisions about what is going on and act in accordance with those decisions. More than any other cultural form, participatory theatre demands actions from its audiences: passivity, distractedness and a consumer subjectivity will lead to unsuccessful performance. There is, in its liveness, an assumption that participants will reach some mutual understanding of the situation, and collective action based on this is required to move the performance forward.

Players' roles in games have been theorized in various ways (Consalvo 2017; Mayra 2009; Simon 2007) but there is a lack of understanding of the continuum from player participation through game-based role-playing, like Larps (see below), to games that integrate trained actors. In games like *Propinquity* no prior training or expertise is required. In Larps, a community of players build up amateur role-playing experience often over many years of playing the "same" game together. Our question remains, how does understanding the different ways liveness operates, and can be structured, help us to build different types of digital, physical and social experiences? How, for example, can we integrate trained actors as nodes in games, which would otherwise involve only untrained participants and/or amateur role players?

From the point of view of theatre, our collaborators also want to test this continuum to see how the combination of amateur role playing with digital elements and rule structures might supplement and complement professional actors in ways that re-invigorate theatre for contemporary audiences, contributing to the sustainability of participatory theatre practices. To this end, the digital technology we will focus on will include familiar consumer tech such as cell phones and phone cameras. Many applications that can now be delivered by phones (such as locative, Augmented or Mixed Reality experiences) as well as slightly newer consumer tech, like digital assistants, sit on the tension between the digital and the physical. These technologies have the advantage of being familiar and accessible to many people. Using personal and consumer tech also allows us to design experiences that might start before the main “show” and last past it. Similarly, we will be looking at the use of non-traditional venues as a way of democratizing works and attracting people who might not otherwise be comfortable in high culture venues. Here too, perhaps the experience will resonate beyond the actual performance time, and leak back into life when people revisit the same restaurant or neighbourhood.

A closely related research question will be: “How does liveness build a bond with audiences?”. Understanding how to build a bond with the audience is, of course, the secret to success and longevity. We know that digital game companies are very aware of this and struggle to find ways to build durable relationships with players. Even large game studios have moved from being modelled on blockbuster movie studios to a more service-based model, focused on cultivating ongoing relationships and communicating with players as communities. The games too are changing as they try to incorporate more elements of liveness. For example, community managers have begun to facilitate in-game experiences, and there is an increasing reliance on player generated action and story rather than authored storylines and cinematics. It turns out that liveness is a value in the most digital of cultural forms and perhaps nothing is a better indicator of this than the rise of live e-sports competitions.

Clearly, then, one of the most effective ways to build and sustain interest is by provoking and nourishing participation and community. It does not seem surprising that liveness, participation and community are connected. This is the key to the phenomenon of Larping, or Live Action Role Playing games, which seems to have appeared spontaneously in many parts of the world, starting in the early 1980’s. Indeed, role-playing games are generally a sibling of digital games, both having been productized in the 1970s after a long prehistory. In Larps, groups of players, from small groups to thousands of people, pursue quests and goals as characters in (normally non-digital) fictional stories that are generated and acted out in the real world. There is an astonishing variety of types: some are very rule based, and therefore close to conventional games, others are much closer to theatre. Pervasive Larps especially, run for days, months or even years and develop strong communities -even to the extent of becoming identifiable sub-cultures. Studying Larps allow us to ask “How do we find a delicate, charged balance between the digital and the live, or between the couple and the crowd?”.

Nordic countries are a centre for Larping. A specific tradition hailing from the region, referred to as Nordic Larp, focuses on developing immersion via realism (body types, costumes, location...) and on an ethics of community and collaboration. They often also have artistic or activist goals. Many websites like *nordiclarp.org* testify to the astonishing richness of this subculture and its increasing intersections with scholarly culture. Larps provide a model for theatre/games hybrids that suggest ways in which the two forms can come together; where they

overlap and what values exist at the intersection. They collapse audience and community and provide compelling examples of elaborated and structured participation as a way of developing and retaining audiences. At the same time, because they are completely based on live action, Larps do not solve the problem of sustainability.

In *Scaling Liveness in Participatory Experiences* Hughes and Bart Simon, founding researchers at the TAG research centre at Concordia, and their students will come together with ZU-UK theatre from London and the Larp specialists at Tampere University. TAG will provide expertise on games, and digital-physical games in particular. *ZU-UK* contributes expertise on participatory theatre and Tampere on live-action role playing games. Together we will develop ideas about the intersections of liveness, game structures and rules, and the digital. We will propose ways to develop new audiences and promote sustainable production models through the use of digital and rule-based participation, as well as ways to provoke and maintain communities through the combination of liveness and participation.