Staging live events: converging experience design and live art

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Abstract

Every design approach is a process of setting the context for experiences to occur. Experience design, in particular, embraces a holistic approach on the content and context wherein human experiences and events emerge. Live art share common ground with experience design in studying and staging live events, on the borderline between artistic and everyday experience, performance stage and experiential space, spectator and creator, looking and participating, participant and artwork. Essentially, experience design projects and live art events induce and embrace audience engagement and participation in live embodied encounters, combining scenario-based patterns with action that unfolds on the fly. In this paper, the common ground between experience design and live art in organizing live events is analyzed by studying the common features of experience design projects and live art events, and applying performance perspective and methods in the design thought and practice. As live events as organic structure is never stable but always evolving, moulded out of people's presence and, design strategies surpass old approaches to include points of engagement and strings of participation among people and (physical and mixed-reality, social and cultural, public and scenic) environment. Designers and scholars have discerned the advantages of applying performance aspects in the design process to enrich designers' imagination and creativity due to their interactive and experiential character, to help them empathise with people their work is addressed to, and finally to assist designers communicate their ideas with colleagues and potential clients/users/audiences as well.

Keywords: design, experience, live art, performance, events, mise-en-scene.

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1. Introduction

Experience design and live art both concentrate at human experience, participation and interactivity within physical and MR environments. In case of live participatory events, these fields involve more than site-specific and time-related happenings; they encompass holistic perspectives on the relationships developed among people participating and the surrounding environment. Live participatory events, designed and performed, are organic wholes, which similar to living organisms comprise much more than the actual composition of their constituent parts; organic synthesis of props and people, materiality and interactivity, physical and probably digital aspects. Live events are organic wholes: 1) consisted essentially of space and time, 2) with dynamic stability, and 3) all their components are self-responsive, and interact as a single unit while retaining their identity. Nevertheless, nor designers or directors can predetermine the final result in live participatory events, as things constantly evolve on the fly. They can be prepared though and organize the general context for meaningful and qualitative experiences to emerge, i.e. they create the frame for potential social encounters to be actualized in space and time, by the audience response and collaboration.

2. Common ground of experience design and live art

Live art shares common ground with experience design in studying and staging live participatory experiences. Both fields concern four basic elements: *time*, *place*, *performer(s)* and/or *practitioner(s)*, and *audience*, and aspire to turn spectators into active participants redefining the role of viewers and creators in live participatory events. Essentially, interactivity is the keystone of experience design projects and live art events, embracing human behaviour, live enactment and participation, as well as moment-by-moment embodied encounter, beyond the limits of theatrical space and time. Principally, live art events and experience design events are addressed to common people, and embrace individuals' active participation. Designers and performers aspire to engage individuals in physical, emotional and cognitive level and even incite them at occasions to interfere in the course of the event. The conception of a passive audience who mainly absorbs audiovisual incentives is surpassed in the overlapping fields of art and design. People are considered participants and are incited to become personally engaged and collaborate during live events. According to contemporary design strategies, a participatory perspective is embraced involving design *with* the people *for* the people. Respectively, experience design individuals are involved in various phases of the creative process to share their opinion and contribute to the design development. Specifically, people are invited to share their thoughts and feelings not only by experiencing and valuing the final outcome, but during the creative process to assure the design objectives meet in fact people's criteria and not only the designers' conceptions of them. Common people are an essential component of live events, not only by, but also during the conceptualization and development of the design process.

Although live events, performed and designed ones, include material elements (physical, virtual and mixed-reality props), the lack of materiality in the essence of the work-event – to borrow Deleuze's term[1] (object-event) – condemns it to evanescence. Live events are doomed to vanish in time; they come to existence every time performed and experienced by artists/practitioners and individuals. In both cases of performance plays and experience design projects, work-events are interwoven out of sequence(s) of events. Hence, by nature the overall formation is never stable, always evolving, changing, moulded out of people's behaviour. Performing, experiencing and designing evolve within the *in between* space of interactivity and change. Schechner accounts all phenomena and human interactivity as performances and considers them "provisional, in-process, existing and changing over time, in rehearsal"[2]. Accordingly, both live art and experience design live events are fleeting and ever-changing; they come into existence every time performed; and they need to be staged to be experienced and witnessed. Live events are ephemeral and iterative but different every time performed for a wide spectrum of imponderable factors: spatiotemporal and socio-cultural conditions, the personal way each member of the audience engages, responds and experiences the work, affecting in this way the overall experience, and other.

Live art and experience design concern setting the overall context for interplays and events to emerge among those participating. Live art concentrates at bringing "a variety of elements and forces into relation with one another"[3] and experience design is in tune with this objective. For Aristotle, theatrical plays are organic wholes. By extension, performances comprise much more than the actual composition of their constituent parts, similar to any living organism. In essence, interactivity among performers and participants is the constituent element in both cases, as their interwoven experiences form the final result. Change is inherent in performance art, which Parr describes as "an event that in its singularity concomitantly expresses a multiplicity of relations,

forces, affects and percepts"[4]. Respectively, experience design projects, integrated in physical or mixed-reality environments, are moulded out of the relationships developed between inanimate components (material and digital) and people participation. The magic of life, like the magic of theatre, needs this transcendence for the mystery to unfold.

Live event are synthesis of unscripted actions and scripted decisions, partly improvised and orchestrated, with or without audience participation. In live performances, artists may perform choreographed movements and expressions, but principally as present and aware within a live ongoing creative process, they also respond accordingly to the flow of the entire event. Moreover, although performance and experience design events are usually scenario-based, there is room for physical engagement and interaction in terms of the audience, which can never be prearranged, only relatively predicted. Hence, the line between scripted performance and improvised participation is indiscernible. Performers, like experience designers, set the frame for interactivities and experiences to emerge, by combining organized aspects with spontaneous participation and response.

Both types of events are open works actualized by individuals' presence and participation, literally and metaphorically beyond the walls of the theatrical space, on the borderline between artistic and everyday experience. Borrowing Schechner's conception on performance, live event is "both a social drama and a media event"[5]. Since ordinary people are involved and "social intercourse is itself put together as a scene"[6], as notions of stage and public space, spectator and performer, attendance and participation are not rigid any more, performance and everyday life are "in a continual negotiation"[7]. In live events, human presence and activity is located in a *third place*, meaning a place where designers, performers and common people enter and collaborate. In this *in-between* or *liminal* space - a term coined by Victor Turner[8] - everyday reality and artistic expression co-exist. Schechner explains: "a limen is a threshold or sill, [...] a passageway between places rather than a place in itself"[9]. A liminal space is a context of possibilities, a passageway connecting social and cultural groups; people, scholars and practitioners; everyday life with the world of the event; the stage with the public space into a 'site of action'[10], through a common goal. As Goffman aptly states "all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't, are not easy to specify"[11].

Mixed-reality technologies are integrated in art and design projects to enable the creation of imaginary worlds in order to "extend, amplify, and enrich our own capacities to think, feel and act"[12]. In essence, the term *mixed reality* has a twofold meaning: a blend of physical and digital media incorporated, juxtaposing physical and virtual spaces, as well as a fusion of artistic experience and everyday life. Performances practices and live events staged in mixed-reality environments result in diffusing the boundaries between art and daily life; a characteristic inherent to every performance act which is though exalted by the affordances of mixed reality technologies[13]. Specifically, mixed-reality technologies provide greater geographic and temporal flexibility, by enabling the exchange of stimuli beyond physical limitations, for example by connecting environments that are distant in time and space, or even reside in the realms of imagination; what Negrotti refers to a "'third' reality that lies between nature and conventional technology"[14]. Mixed-reality technologies in conjunction with performers' kinesiology and participants' collaboration compose a world that lays both in the fields of reality, imagination and memory; live and mediated, physical and virtual, here and there, now and then; whole and fragmented.

Concluding, live art and experience design live events share common ground: they are ephemeral and iterative; they generate unique results every time performed; they can happen anywhere in any venue or setting; and lastly mixed-reality technologies are potentially integrated, liberating the whole experience from physical restrictions of materiality, space and time.

3. Applied performance tools in experience design strategies

Performance practice involves acting out a condition, representing a certain situation, inner impulse, action, behaviour pattern and so on. Representation is defined in social studies as "the cultural practices and forms by which human societies interpret and portray the world around them"[15]. Performative modes of representation and simulation can help designers communicate with each other to set the design objectives, and with common people to comprehend their needs and desires, rather than loosing focus in abstract personal conceptions of a better future. The last decades, scholars have discerned the advantages of applying performance aspects in design process due to their active and experiential character[16]. Therefore, performance typology conduces to decide on and present the potentialities of the design concept, by visualizing and simulating an improved, future situation.

The term *persona* is rooted from the Latin, describing the theatrical mask, as well as the Greek meaning *face* ('πρόσωπο'), describing a social role or character played by an actor. A persona is a fictional description, a hypothetical archetype, of an actual and potential user/client/participant applied to segregate people's different actions and behaviour, goals and motivations, and expectations[17]. During the design process, personas stand for a real individual or a social group, who share similar characteristics and needs to understand their desires and motivations. Personas include realistic, believable descriptions including names, photos, goals and behavioural data; often made-up personal details to make the fictional person more 'real'[18]. In User-Experience Design, personas give the development team a thorough comprehension of different people their work is addressed to, with their own characteristics, attitudes, goals, and capacities, interacting within real contexts. In this way, designers and developers empathize more with the needs and desires of common people. Personas are structured and described through compelling and memorable narratives to visualize during the design process realistic information about individuals' needs and desires; for Cooper, "the more specific we make our personas, the more effective they are as a design tool"[19]. Design decisions are first associated and adapted to persona's behaviours, contexts, and expectations, to improve and modify the overall quality in an earlier stage of the design process, and then proceed to create prototypes and final products.

Personas are created to fulfil a design need: people are so different; they do not behave or interact the same way, they have different expectations and preferences and designers need to comprehend deeply these differentiations and remove personal bias. Personas are built based on intuitions and impressions hypothesizing and conceptualizing similar patterns of behaviour data retrieved from research and data analysis (interviews, surveys, demographics, stats, etc.). When developing personas, we need to "find a common set of behaviours or motivations among the people they have researched"[20], by slicing our target audience into individual groups of people. Thence, creating personas is based on real data, along with educated speculation about their personal histories, motivations, and concerns. Nevertheless, personas are worthless outside the design process, meaning that they exist only in design scenarios to test features for appropriateness and utility. Personas set a common language among the design team, the stakeholders and potential participants, and also assists in evaluating the design's effectiveness.

In addition, *scenario* is borrowed from theatre and performance fields, as stories are easier to understand and follow than research stats and analysis. In experience design, scenario is a set of fictional stories narrating sequence(s) of interactivities and events among common people and design result, in accordance to specific design objectives. For the Usability Professional's Association, scenarios are plain stories illustrating potential modes to associate and interact with the design result[21]; an easy and effective method to imagine and test the design concepts in use. For Saffer, "scenarios are prototypes built of words"[22]. Scenarios usually involve multiple personas as protagonist(s) who respond to a particular design context in a different way. Hence the scenario is an excellent technique for studying and realizing the pros and cons of the design thought and process. Various stories represent different performances and interactivities, enable researchers and designers to study dissimilar types of needs and goals and improve their concepts respectively[23]. Scenarios give designers the opportunity to conceptualize new ideas and evaluate evolving ones, and technological advancements are used as a tool to create scenarios[24]. Furthermore, scenarios outline the socio-cultural and physical context wherein personas interact, affecting the overall design concept. The process of conceptualizing and acting out stories concerning individuals' interaction with the design result in various stages of the creative process offers the opportunity to improve the final outcome by concluding at mutually accepted strategies.

Moreover, live events are inherently based on audience participation and *improvisation*. Jones considers improvisation a strategy that "both demands and creates a whole range of skills, the most important of which is an ability to be still and open one's attention to the present moment"[25]. For trained performers, any action or situation is regarded as opportunity for new opportunities of action, evolution, coexistence and interaction to emerge. The most interesting results do not usually emerge out of conditions imposed or planned for the audience, but when participants' responses are unstrained, accepted and integrated in the overall experience. People reaction is the occasion and the incentive to co-develop better future encounters and experiences, by opening the performance to embrace audience participation.

Designing for experiences involve designing the context for behaviours and interactivities to emerge among people and their surrounding environment. Improvisation as performance technique can be inspiring when designing of live experiences to handle actions that occur spontaneously in real time by exploiting the audience dynamics and characteristics instead of trying to control their participation to avoid unpleasant outcomes. Improvisation is also described as *organized chaos* and may prove useful to conceptualize potential modes of engagement, in case of live events or any other type of design outcome, and conclude at potential sequences of interaction appropriate to the design objectives. Jones claims that "we improvise the moment we cease to know what is going to happen"[26] and further underlines the expressive dimension of acting out deliberately, by saying that "improvisation provides us with a means to excavating layers of experience, sensation, feeling that we normally rush through or suppress"[27]. The ways we manage audience unpredictable participation and change in general terms contribute at achieving flow instead of control in the overall experience, by making scenarios that enables these potentialities to emerge.

Experience design strategies aspire "to persuade, stimulate, inform, envision, entertain and forecast events, influencing meaning and modifying behaviour"[28]. Applying performance contributes to enhance designers' imagination and creativity, empathise with people, and finally communicate their ideas with colleagues and potential clients/users/audiences. Based on the approach that we design *for* experiences, and not experiences per se, we need to be flexible

enough and embrace change, as well as comprehend the different way people behave and interact. Using personas, scenarios, and improvisation skills in different phases of the creative process, the design team has the opportunity to imagine and perform various enactments, help them improve their ideas and work before invite common people to interact with the final result.

4. Staging audience participation

Experience design involves setting the overall context for experiences and live events to occur. Designing strings of interaction and events, necessitates a reorientation from past design approaches as inanimate (props) and human 'figures of staging'[29] are organized in space and time. In parallel, performance practice involves directing performers' action and audience participation[30] within specific spatio-temporal and cultural context. Live art can offer an insight by concentrating at organizing the general set (props and scenery, physical and virtual media) wherein performers and audience meet and interact in the course of a structured play.

Particularly, *mise-en-scène* is a French term that originates in the theatre literally meaning 'put in the scene', 'place on stage', and involves the study and practice of organizing the overall context (environment, conditions) for experiences to occur. *Mise-en-scène* can be defined as the synthesis of scenic space and interactivity that emerges within. Explicitly, the term includes the design of scenic space (scene, stage), named as scenography or set design, but exceeds it to involve the actors' activity on stage, or in front of a camera, in the context of a theatrical and filmic production. For Pearson & Shanks, *mise-en-scène* comprises "a set of material conditions"[31], but is extended beyond any sense of materiality to include points of engagement and interaction among people and the design outcome.

Similar, contemporary design thought exceeds the creation of interfaces, products and services to the direction of event including objects, places, and people. Both live art and experience design events are organic synthesis, meaning that they comprise more than the amalgamation of their components, in Jones words:

> "*The walls, the furniture, the properties, are only the facts of a setting, only the outline. The truth is in everything but these objects, in the space they enclose, in the intense vibration they create*"[32].

By extension, the notion of *mise-en-scène* can further be applied to artistic and design fields beyond the theatrical scene to describe the practice of setting the general context for interactions to occur. Indicatively, Voss & Zomerdijk propose certain innovations in the field of experiential services by regarding *service* as *performance*[33], and further associate five distinct design areas (physical environment, service employees, service delivery process, fellow customers, and back office with theatrical terms (stage, actors, a script, an audience and the back stage area) quoting Grove, Fisk, & Bitner[34]. Both experience design and performance studies focus on the moment when, along with the place interactivity, experience and eventually culture developed.

5. Conclusions

Experience design and performance share common perspectives in setting the frame for experiences to occur involving audience participation. Contemporary design theory encompasses the organization of appearance, location and behaviour of active members (performers and participants) as well as static objects (images, typefaces, three-dimensional models, sounds), combining in this way interaction design, architecture, and scenic arts among other artistic and

design fields. Both in experience design and the art of performance, audience experience cannot be designed or directed as personal and fleeting in substance, but the overall context (environmental, cultural, artistic, narrative, etc.) along with the appropriate conditions and potentialities for meaningful and qualitative experiences to emerge for those participating.

Notes

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[4] Ibid., 31.

[5] Schechner, R., *Performance Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003) 327.

[6] Goffman, E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 80.

[7] Read, A., *Theatre and Everyday Life* (London & New Yok: Routledge, 1993) 104.

[8] Turner, V., *The anthropology of performance* (New York: PAJ, 1988).

[9] Schechner, R., *Performance Studies. An introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 58-61.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Goffman, E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 64.

[12] Laurel, B., *Computers as Theater* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991) 33.

[13] Giannachi, G., 'Towards an Aesthetics of Virtual Reality', in *Theatre and Performance Design. A reader in scenography*, ed. J. Collins, and A. Nisbet (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2010) 123-127.

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[25] Jones, R., *The dramatic imagination* (New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) 46.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Jones, M., and Samalionis, F., 'From small ideas to radical service innovation', in *Design Management Review 19.1.* (2008) 20-27.

[29] Anceschi, G., 'Visibility in progress', in *The Designed World. Images, Objects, Environments*, ed. R.D. Buchanan (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2010) 238-246.

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