Understanding Liveness in Immersive Theatre, LARP and Games

Liveness, as a concept, was a hot topic in theatre studies in the 1990s, before it coalesced into a relatively stable term that addresses the temporality of performances. Our research project brings together an international team of researchers and designers from different areas – digital games, participatory theatre, dance and live action role-playing. We want to make sense of liveness today, after everything has gone digital, and co-presence and mutuality are being commodified.

Despite the broad degree of variation between modes of design and experience across larp, games,theatre and dance, our research is grounded in our common interest in what we are calling *shared liveness.* It is primarily focused on live, consciously designed experiences that are inhabited by a minimum of three participants, players, or agents because triads (and beyond) are structurally more complex than private or personal experiences, and require more deliberate design strategies.

Our starting point, as we attempt to grapple with liveness, is to look at it more as a spatial and relational process than as a temporal one. We propose that the core of *liveness* is an experience of mutuality and reciprocity, of shared responsibility, of care for one another and for the terms of the experience. We feel (a)live when we are part of something bigger than ourselves, and when we can have an impact on what is unfolding around us. There must be some level of brittleness and fragility in liveness. We need to feel our effect on the experience we are part of and, since reciprocity is key, this means that the proceedings should also be able to impact us. It is worth noting, however, that while co-presence can be a powerful source of shared liveness, it does not seem to be a necessary condition for a situation of shared care. We can imagine remote experiences which structure and maintain reciprocity.

Our collaborative study considers a wide range of playable modes, from those that emphasize emergent role-play to those with tightly designed instructions for participants. We are interested in both co-located and remote experiences of liveness.

The question that then follows is this: How do we design for shared liveness? How do we structure an experience so that it can hold, is likely to produce or promote, liveness? One of the overarching conditions is that the most live-ly experiences are situated between the poles of overly shaped or directed experiences and radically loose or emergent ones: Between an experience that is too controlled and one that is barely, or not at all, controlled. Between traditional art or theatre and (at the very far end) real life. We are looking for a zone of improvisation that vibrates. A zone that activates some real uncertainty. ("Improvisation" that is too predictable and familiar will not fill the bill.)

How do we then deal with this space of uncertainty, the area in the spaces between and around the structure, story, or rules that constitute the shape of a particular work? The designed experience begins, crucially, before the runtime of the core experience starts. How will the participants understand what they are about to experience, if the work does not neatly fit in an existing genre? Another question is how to ensure that participants feel that they are part of the experience, that it is not just something happening to them. In participatory theatre, for example, there is always the potential for disruption: the possibility that participants will behave badly and ruin the experience for everyone else. We need to ask why some people act out in these cases. It seems likely that a lack of clarity about the nature and goals of the experience on the part of the designers/authors contributes to disruptive behaviour. Some participants may feel apprehensive about what could happen, especially where informed consent is not given or is too vague or general. They fear losing control in one way or another and disruption is a way of reasserting that control. Some of the conventions and community building traditions around larp suggest ways to prevent or mitigate this problem. In larp, the practice of onboarding the participants through pre-larp workshops, combined with foreknowledge of the main story arc, and shared conventions for opting out of situations or scenes without embarrassment, allow participants to risk taking risks. They do not have to fear being confronted with risks imposed from the outside.

One of the other problems that dogs participatory experience design is the cost(s) of such productions. They can drain designer-producers and their teams both financially and physically. In particular, the financial, physical and organizational costs of using actors or trained mediators to moderate participatory experiences is often unsustainable. We will look at the way game structures, especially, but not exclusively, digital games, could be used to alleviate these costs -- without sacrificing liveness! The other possible approach to sustainable design of participatory experiences would be one that learns from larping how to build and activate community so that participants take the place of professional mediators or actors.

The full paper will offer a contextual account of the term 'liveness', review the challenges relating to liveness in games, theatre, larp, and dance, and then analyze two to four case examples that offer potential design solutions to these challenges. We will conclude the paper by teasing out the wider theoretical implications of the practical cases.

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