

Experience Design and Play within the Complexity of Participatory Art Forms

"If life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant sense of magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force." – Antonin Artaud

ABSTRACT

In the last forty to fifty years, art movements such as Fluxus, Happenings and net.art have attempted to bring the audience back into the creation of culture. These art forms open up the participatory landscape for their viewers and allow them to discover their own creative endowments.

I will be examining experience design and play based on my research of participatory art forms and a completed project called *Serious Culture*.

Serious Culture is a multifaceted interactive installation that produced significant insight into all levels of interactivity required to produce a sense of immersion by the audience. The parameters within this installation and other interactive art forms are precise and the effect of changing a single one changes the participation significantly.

This presentation will be based on three aspects about *Serious Culture* that outline the political considerations, the interaction/usability considerations and artistic/aesthetics considerations of this form of experience design within an inter-disciplinary practice.

1. POLITICAL REFLEXION

The 1960's Situationist Movement was dissatisfied with the exploitation of man by industrialization. "Pseudo-games of non-participation"¹ is a term used in the Situationist Manifesto that refers to innate activities performed by a populous who has been oppressed into believing in a moral structure created by work ethics. These pseudo-games could be pastimes² such as watching TV, betting on sport, and shopping. It could be argued that these activates do not cultivate quizzical inquiry, natural play³ and above all dissent. Today, despite automation and computation people are still occupied by sterile work, docile grade school education⁴ and dreams of a better existence. These occupations only give motivation to forms of escape that are

¹ Situationist Manifesto – <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/en/display/9> "Under the existing dominant society, which produces the miserable pseudo-games of non-participation, a true artistic activity is necessarily classed as criminality."

² Definition -- (1) pastime, interest, pursuit -- (a diversion that occupies one's time and thoughts (usually pleasantly); "sailing is her favorite pastime"; "his main pastime is gambling"; "he counts reading among his interests"; "they criticized the boy for his limited pursuits") Courtesy: Word Net by [Cognitive Science Laboratory](#) at [Princeton University](#)

³ Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1938, pgs. 1-27.

⁴ Taylor Gatto, John, *Against School: How public education cripples our kids, and why*. Harpers Magazine, September 2004

advertised to us and supports a perpetual system of earn to spend. The corporations that sell these pseudo-games do so without investigating their impact on social detachment.

Media production (TV, magazines, news, advertising, software games, the Internet, photography, etc.) is an especially efficient purveyor of pseudo-games in our society. From a corporate perspective, the media is owned by fewer corporations⁵ making much of what is viewed or read homogenous. Further to this, our current western society is slowly losing its ability to create cultural ceremonies and artifacts. Culture is bought and not created by the average citizen. Exemplifying this are current campaigns by advertisers who offer culture as an item to be consumed. A prominent campaign by the Starbucks Corporation in the winter of 2004 boasts its cultural ties through their *Starbucks "Connects You with Culture" Sweepstakes*. A company's ability to suggest directions toward cultural value is perceived as more beneficial than a community's ability to realize its own potential to create or make decisions.

In the 1990s a small movement began.⁶ A new publicly available Internet and affordable digital video cameras made it possible for small groups and individuals to publish content with minimal financial and skill requirements. The investigation into interactivity was reawakened.

Forms of digital interactivity are very new. However, strategies of interactivity and audience participation are not. Multiple interpretations have been present in theatre and film for the last two centuries. The Fluxus movement of the 1960s began a participatory form of theatre called "Happenings". Practiced across the world by various groups, Happenings were performances that involved the audience in a non-structured series of events. Often these events were chaotic enough to bring the audience into a position where they could become part of the action. Craig Saper states in his article *Fluxus as a Laboratory*, "The breaking of the normal frame of reference can actually induce involvement."⁷ Breaking the normal frame of reference in this context was largely dependent on the removal of a traditional stage, the absence of formal plot structure and the introduction of chance. No two performances were alike. As suggested by Allan Kaprow in his article "*Happenings*" in *the New York Scene*, "The few performances given of each work differ considerably from one another, and the work is over before habits begin to set in."⁸ In later writings, Kaprow also discusses an important aspect of chance and failure in participatory theatre:

⁵ Media ownership analysis Columbia Journalism Review -- <http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners>

⁶ Examples -- Guerrilla News Network (<http://www.guerrillanews.com>), Indymedia (<http://www.indymedia.org/or/index.shtml>)

⁷ Saper, Craig, *Fluxus as a Laboratory*, Ken Friedman, ed, *Fluxus Reader*, Academy Editions a division of John Wiley & Sons, Baffin Lane, Chichester, West Sussex, 1998, pg 141.

⁸ Kaprow, Allan, *Happenings In the New York Scene*, ed "Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life", University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1993, pg 25.

Traditional art has always tried to make it good every time, believing that this was a truer truth than life. Artists directly utilize failure, the “failure” of being less artistic and more life like.

Participatory art forms bring the performers and the audience closer together by removing the barriers of tradition. The removal of these obstacles creates a playful aesthetic where the participants become the actors. To a certain extent the participatory act has added a contextualization to their old or habitual way of thinking. The participant is drawn out of who they think they are and into a new experience of creation, destruction and varying degrees of success and failure.

Today, interactivity is a familiar word used in association with computers and digital technologies. An example of kinetic/digital sculptor is Camille Utterback's *Text Rain*, where the audience is encouraged to dance with falling text which forms poetry. An online example is *Learning To Love You More*, where visitors to the site are given simple creative assignments “like take a photography of the sun” or “recreate your pet in the form of paper mache”. These pieces require the audience to offer a portion of their participation in order to understand the full nuances intended by the artist. While in the presence of these art works it is obvious to the *spectator* that they might be missing the meaning. In some cases, participatory art work can cause anxiety and distrust in the consuming critic.

The key difference between looking at art and interacting with art is the act of affecting the art forms structure. In traditional linear art it is the creator who writes the majority of the meaning associated with the work. The piece is delivered to the viewer and he/she creates their own conclusions by adding their own symbols of interpretation to the artist's symbols. Participatory art works have a component of pre-calculated meaning but it also includes an aspect of change and choice which is an artifact of the action of manipulating the piece. This decision making process allows the participant to bring themselves into the piece. In essence, they are giving back to the artwork and in doing so they are reaching beyond themselves to form a kind of intimacy.

The research I intend to present is based largely on my last sculpture called “Serious Culture”, a tri-panned, back-projection video instillation/room where the participants are invited to collaboratively draw on sheets of paper placed on the video projection screens. It is within this space that they can control the images being projected using gesture while at the same time affecting reverb acoustic sound produced by contact micro phones mimicking their drawing motions.



Figure 1 – “Serious Culture” demonstrative uses.

Serious Culture creates a ritual ceremony outside the confines of any theology and makes the participant the creative artist. The title *Serious Culture*⁹ is being used as a paradoxical reference to the often moralistic judgement of what is formally considered culture. The *serious* definition of *culture* today is mainly derived by governments, corporations, sociologists and established arts organizations. Within the context of culture is the artist. A protagonist in a hypothetical drama, the artist is often set on a pedestal along side the athlete and the curator. It is a common misnomer to think that only specific people can be cultural creators.

2. AESTHETICS OF PLAY & PARTICIPATION

The expressions of play are rarely studied due to its association to children and sport. Play is messy, clumsy and disjointed. Rarely does play produce any specific results or outcomes. Essentially, it is considered fruitless for adults. Studied by child psychologists and Johan Huizinga, play is considered a building block toward better understanding of our environment and social relations. Play begets ceremony, ceremony begets traditions and traditions beget fundamentalism. The levels of participation in each one of these areas are lessened as the act becomes more formalized. The last becomes less open to amateurs than the first. In primitive societies traditions are formed to produce well being for its members. The Ten Commandments produced a social structure that protected its members. Fundamentalism arises when outside forces threaten to change a society as in the case of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the US Patriot Act of 2001¹⁰. In both these cases, these over protective institutions can restrict the people they are trying to protect. Traditions are upheld to the highest standard allowing less room for experimentation and haphazard dialogue. Participation and decision making is restricted to a few who know and establish the traditions and ceremonies well.

⁹ Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture*, Aporia Press and Unpopular Books, London, 1988, pg 54

¹⁰ Patriot Act, Public Law 107—56—Oct. 26, 2001 - http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ056.107.pdf

A similar standard of thinking can be applied to commerce where decisions about making money within an organization are made by only a top few. Repetitive processes are completed by the majority and straying from a pattern is often portrayed as rebellious. In this case, the company is being protected by the traditions (standards) and fundamentalism (basic rules). Within this structure play is considered chaotic and participatory decision making is not generally standard.

Working and attending educational institutions within these structures for more hours in a week than the general public see their friends and family members makes play and basic problem solving an unpracticed endeavor. Few people who cannot find these basic elements in their work turn to community efforts, creative outlets and hobbies like volunteerism, blogging, and photo book construction. The majority move toward pseudo-games. Within this paradigm few people learn how to create their own culture and instead buy it as it is offered.

Regarding play forms and ceremonies as irrelevant in daily life leaves out basic components of decision making and discovery necessary for understanding ourselves and those around us. This fundamental lack of knowledge threatens our personal defense systems and makes communities weaker. Action followed by discovery is both delightful and uncomfortable because systems of knowledge are broken down. Participatory art forms such as interactive art, theater sports and dance open a path toward play. It is within this art form that exercises toward play and participation creates pedagogy for self knowledge and communication.

Art pieces like *Serious Culture* attempt to manifest such qualities in its audience. Within the confines of a projected illuminated space the viewer was turned into participant through their gestures and movement. Control of the video being projected was directly determined by those present. Fast movements caused rapid transitions between still shots of graffiti filled walls. If their movement stopped the present image controlled by a video sensor and MAX/Jitter¹¹ remained constant. On the most basic level participants controlled the images that they saw. On a more complex level they could choose to draw on the back projected screens using primary coloured markers present in the space. This drawing action produced a sound that was amplified using contact microphones, a 1960's reverb guitar pedal and a guitar amplifier speaker. The participants could manipulate the space through gesture, image and sound. Their choice was based on what medium suited their aptitudes best. Many participants switched between their controls and were observed moving through them depending on their style. This piece allowed them to manipulate the art work while creating collaborative drawings based on illustrative artifacts left from the last participant or by communicating with collaborators within the space.

¹¹ MAX is an established proprietary software which uses another component called Jitter to manipulate video footage and video signals. <http://www.cycling74.com/products/jitter.html>

Serious Culture was designed to allow choice and decision making without building an overwhelming sense of uneasiness. It created a sense of immersion while asking the participant for input. Essentially, I wanted to pull the typical viewer out of her/his regular frame of reference while allowing them to practice basic artistic expression.

3. USABILITY, EXPERIENCE DESIGN AND INTERACTIVITY

Experience design contains an essential element of immersion. Within this assumption a full assessment of the audience is necessary to accommodate inter-disciplinary art works. Because of *Serious Culture*'s gallery setting it was assumed that the audience would consist of mostly art enthusiasts and practicing artists. During usability testing a variety of people were chosen who were practicing and non-practicing artists. The difference being that the latter was assumed to be more uneasy with the participatory experience. Ages ranged from 12 to 54 using equal numbers of men and women.

Within these test cases a large degree of immersion was experienced. Most participants felt that they had forgotten their daily details and became involved with the piece. More apprehensive audience members required more time to adapt to the space and didn't always fully discover the potential. In one instance, a participant regarded the piece as too much work and preferred to watch others use it from the outside. She commented, "I'd rather look at art then become part of it."

In another case, a participant didn't know that they could draw on the screens because the papers on the projection walls were empty when they entered the space. Others felt that if they drew too wildly they would ruin the previously established drawings. In another instance, the pens were not easily viewable. This confused the participant until she was prompted to use the pens.

Sound became an important part of the piece. Produced using old fashioned instrumentation, it mimicked the drawing motions on the screen by repeating and distorting the original sound projected from the contact microphones placed on each projection wall. Some participants spent the majority of the time manipulating these sounds and went as far as jumping up and down in the space to create reverberation through the floor. Many people were fascinated by the noise and regarded the old fashioned sound as refreshing compared to current established computer generated sounds.

As mentioned above, the images used were taken from current graffiti established on the walls of Montreal. The choice of imagery was intended to allow the participants to also create their own graffiti. Established political statements were mixed in with blank walls. A total of 29 images could

be chosen from. Many of the final drawings contained words that added to the graffiti in the images. Some writing was original. A strange and inconclusive phenomenon occurred when several participants mirror wrote¹² their words so they could be read from outside the space. A definite sense of inside/outside was established.

Some participants felt that the images were too harsh. These participants commented saying they preferred more natural environments. One reaction included drawings of flowers and trees. Most of the drawings remained primary and simple. Some people became fully involved with the rhythm of drawing to the sound and established very abstract renditions. On many occasions less confident drawers copied the outlines of the video images or filled in the spaces created by already established illustrations. In all, a dozen collaborative drawings were created. The type of drawings produced were directly based on the sound, the size of the personal space, number of people in the space, drawing utensils, images being projected and previously established drawings. The collaborations were not only unique to those participating but also to the multiple factors inherent to the installation. In a hypothetical alternative space where people may have been asked to sit on the ground to draw a very different style would be produced. This would also be evident in example cases if sound wasn't used or perhaps paint instead of markers.

An important parameter to the piece was the control of the images through a video sensor. Using a video camera to send a fire wire signal to MAX/Jitter on a Macintosh laptop multiple established image parameters such as contrast and luminance were used to adjust sensitivity to objects inside the space. Various adjustments were made during testing to change the speed of the rotation of the projected images. Lag time was also considered and adjusted. It was established, in the end, that the perception of control by the participants depended on rotating the images quickly when they moved within the space. In order for them to detect that they were controlling the image selection the sensitivity had to be high both when starting and stopping within the space. This need proved to interfere with their ability to keep the image still while drawing on the projection walls in the space. Because the sensitivity was set high and the images moved quickly this also meant that it was more difficult to hold an image still for a period of time. For some participants this proved frustrating. Others adapted quickly to either drawing with new images continually or by becoming more attuned to working with the sensor in order to control their environment. In the end, it became clear that the sense of immersion was not dependant wholly on this sensor control but was more determined by the creation of mimicked sound, projected images and previously drawn illustrations. *Serious Culture* could have easily been produced using a series of images rotating on a DVD player while still having the same effect set up by all the other parameters.

¹² A form of writing that can be read correctly when reflected in a mirror image.

One very interesting and spontaneous experiment conducted during testing was the use of one of the MAX/Jitter's interface screens at full projected screen size in place of the previous discussed graffiti images. This screen was a direct but distorted video image of the participant movements from a birds eye view. Many participants tried to draw utilizing this video image but found that their movements were too direct. Instead, the participants that tested with this projected screen moved within the space and enjoyed their distorted reflection being projected at them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The factors created in multi-disciplinary art works are directly connected to the perception of its meaning. Changing any one of these parameters can change the meaning dramatically. In the case where the parameters try to determine the usability of an interactive piece a clear definition of each parameter needs to be established based on audience profiles and use case scenarios.¹³ A formal process for developing projects that require interactivity and participation begin with a planning phase where goals and audience profiles are studied and documented. Following this phase concept planning must be executed. Concept planning involves assessing the goals and audience documentation while addressing bigger philosophical and political messaging important to the artist. The two must be joined together while avoiding compromise in all these areas. One observation that can be made about art influenced by technology is that the artist's meaning can be lost in the realms of technicalities. The goals, audience profiles and concept must be developed fully before attempting to choose technology in order to maintain the original meaning of the piece.

Once the concept is developed the design and prototype development process can begin. In more technical projects prototypes are essential to understanding the final production phase. If time allows, testing the prototype with key audience members can alleviate technical problems that may ensue in the final phases. Even with the most well established pieces surprises and failures will abound. It is necessary to do thorough testing before a piece is considered complete or successful. In considering traditional inter-disciplinary artworks this caution should also be heard. Regardless of the outcomes, it is fully satisfying to enjoy the feedback offered by an audience before a piece is completed. It is imperative that flexibility be available while testing technology so that adjustment can be made in real time.

¹³ The process of creating use case scenarios and audience definitions is often used in interactive planning and can also be called user-centred design. A good definition of user- centred design can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User-centered_design

In regards to political reflection, it can be said that *Serious Culture* was successful in terms of immersion. At this point in time it is difficult to know if, in the end, the participants will in fact become more creative members of society. It is however, a well established idea that change is created through learning and especially through enjoyable experiences. The use of participation and experience design is conjunctive to the creation of alternative culture whether it is networked or local.



Figure 2 – “Serious Culture” illustrations.