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Abstract:
In this paper I demonstrate the ways in which certain immersive and micro-performance practices employ ludic strategies and tropes within their dramaturgies and explicate the implications of those dramaturgical devices for the nature and role of the audience, through an analysis of my current PaR micro-performance project, Wish Box. I locate those claims within a phenomenological, materialist approach rather than a purely speculative one. I argue that ludic strategies are a central and dominant trope of immersive and micro-performance dramaturgies; they are responsible for the construction of the performance environment, the performer’s presence and activity within that environment and the nature of the audience’s role within that performative frame. I suggest that various play strategies constitute the performance environment and are what extend a liminoid invitation. I demonstrate the ways in which these ludic dramaturgies construct and present a liminoid invitation, that is ultimately an offer for participation and play to the audience and the ways in which that this ultimately results in liminoid acts.


Over the course of the paper I will demonstrate the ways in which certain immersive and micro-performance practices employ ludic strategies and tropes within their dramaturgies as a central device. I will suggest that the ludic strategies, such as games, rules and tasks are a dominant trope of immersive and micro-performance and that they are responsible for the construction of the performance environment,
the performer’s presence and activity within that environment and the nature of the audience’s role within that performative frame. I want to suggest that games, rules and tasks are the strategies that constitute the performance environment and the performer’s role within that can be understood as a liminoid invitation. I will demonstrate the ways in which these ludic dramaturgies construct and present a liminoid invitation, that is ultimately an offer for participation and play to the audience. The liminoid invitations that ludic dramaturgies present generate the potential for their audiences to engage in liminoid acts. I will unpack these assertions by employing a close analysis of my current PaR micro-performance project called Wish Box [include note 1].

I will begin by offering some provisional distinctions that articulate the three dominant realms of immersive practices that are becoming increasingly prevalent in the landscape of experimental performance within the UK, USA and Australia [include note 2]. Immersive theatre, immersive performance and micro-performance each present strategies that are concerned with inclusion and participation through the strategy of immersion in one way or another. There are many of forms of immersive practice that are emerging which demand that the discussion of immersion be broadened beyond the borders of just theatre. I want to suggest that they represent differing dramaturgies that approach immersion from peculiar perspectives and specific strategies that have grown out of subtly different genealogies and contexts. However, I want to suggest that the use of liminal space and the offer of a liminoid invitation are central features of all three fields of immersive practice with varying intentions and implications.

Liminal & Liminoid Distinctions

Liminal space and liminoid invitations are tropes that can be identified across all three dramaturgies of immersion and so I want to first clarify the distinction between liminal and liminoid that is so central to my argument. The liminal space sits ‘betwixt and between’ recognisable social space and the potential of new social space through the form and structure of the particular performance. In this way, it is a transitional space; referring to the familiar but also promising the possibility of the new. Liminality is a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point, and as such it is a temporary state that ends when the initiate is reincorporated into the social structure. The liminal is a ‘marginalized space which holds the possibility of potential forms, structures, conjectures and desires’ (Broadhurst, 1999: 12). Turner suggests that: ‘[l]iminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural “cosmos.”’, (Turner, 1982: 41). Broadhurst asserts that the liminal is the space in between and describes forms of performance that pushes at the edges of what is possible. The potential of this space is therefore what it means when she discusses it in terms of radical or charged space. Turner suggests that the term liminoid refers to experiences that happen within liminal space but instead of being phenomena connected to social or religious ritual, it happens within the circumstances of play. The liminoid is forged out of ‘play’ scenarios that sit outside of societal rituals or practices and are therefore entered into as ‘optional’. In the case of micro-performance it re-sites the everyday, as the liminal space. The liminoid invitations of immersive theatre, performance and micro-performance are an invitation to enter
into play of one kind or another. I will suggest that a liminoid invitation engages the audience in ‘shallow play’; Turner suggests that play is a:

Liminoid mode, essentially interstitial, betwixt-and-between all standard taxonomic nodes, [...] Play is neither ritual action or meditation, nor is it merely vegetative, nor is it just “having fun”; it also has a good deal of ergotropic and agonistic aggressivity in its odd-jobbing, bricolage style.

(Turner, 1986: 31)

Turner suggests, ‘shallow play’ is inherently liminoid rather than liminal.

Fields of Immersion

Immersive theatre is a term that has been popularised in recent years to identify a mode of practice that invites ambulating audiences into a fictive world of performance in such a way that their participation becomes a material part of the dramaturgy itself. White acknowledges this as central to the form; ‘that it will transform the individual audience member’s experience of theatre, without reference to the re-ordering of relationships and experiences outside of it’ (White 2012:222). Typically in the work of leading immersive companies such as Third Rail Projects & Punchdrunk, the dramaturgy is constructed out of expansive, multi-sensory environments, that the audience are invited to explore on their own under certain conditions. White further suggests that ‘Immersion implies access to the inside of the performance in some way’ (White, 2012: 221) and that it ‘often surrounds audience members, makes use of cleverly structured interiors and ingenious invitations for them to explore, addresses their bodily presence in the environment and its effect on sense-making, and teases them with the suggestion of further depths just possibly within reach’ (White, 2012: 233). According to Machon immersive theatre ‘addresses itself to these bodies in an unambiguous way by locating them within the performance space, in proximity to performers, and inviting them to move and interact’, (White, 2012: 229). In light of White and Machon’s, (2009) assertions it would seem that immersive theatre invites its audiences to enter into the usually sealed off liminal space of the fictive world of the ‘play’ with an explicit invitation to become a material part of the fictive world ‘play’. The liminal space of the fictive world becomes the strategy that marshals the invitation to play and it is the site that enables and activates the game structures of immersive theatre.

I now want to consider the turn towards immersion and participation within certain non-theatrical, cultural practices in order to articulate a mode of immersion that is distinct from theatre that I will refer to as immersive performance. If immersive theatre is an invitation to come and ‘play’ inside the fictive world of the play, then immersive performance is an invitation to come and ‘play’ with possible fictive worlds. Immersive performance is generated out of games, rules, tasks or scenarios that are only activated as performance once the audience take up the liminoid invitation to engage in play. The fictive liminal spaces of Punchdrunk’s work, for example, already exist and are not reliant upon the audience’s acceptance of the liminoid invitation to generate the performance. Whereas the pregnant scenario of immersive performance requires the audience to bring it into being through the act of play; it does not and cannot exist without the committing of liminoid acts. The ‘rules
of engagement’ form the structure of the work but, these only become manifest as acts through the undertaking of the various games and tasks and are what constitute the form. It is the ensuing acts that generate the actual performance itself. Immersive performance employs play to generate the performance itself. Companies such as CoLab, Speakeasy Dollhouse and Silvia Mercuriali employ the direct action of the audience participants to generate the performance through their response to various tasks, games and rules. Immersive performance is the convergence of a variety of cultural practices such as gaming and social rituals like dinning out, into an interdisciplinary mode of cultural practice. This approach to performance brings immersion to bear on these cultural practices in order to transform them from their originating cultural context and into immersive performance. The approaches are polyphonic and drawn from disparate disciplines but the central trope is that immersion is employed in order for both instigator and participant to work together to generate a new liminal space in which an alternative reality is engaged. Essentially immersive performance is an invitation to play; it provides a liminal space in which to create, imagine and try out. The liminal space that immersive performance creates provides a safe environment to indulge in the act of ‘shallow play’, free from the usual constraints that society and culture presents in life praxis and thereby free from weighty consequences or implications.

Micro-performance is a term that I have coined, (2013), in order to make distinct work that has grown out of the live art one-on-one performance trend of the last ten years, I want to suggest that micro-performance can be seen as a slippage that sits between the site-sympathetic, experience-centric dramaturgy of immersive theatre and the reframing of the everyday of live art one-on-one encounters [include note 3]. Companies such as Uninvited Guests, Reckless Sleepers and Cross Collaborations work in a space between theatre and live art where small audiences are engaged in various social activities/rituals that re-frame the everyday through a distinctly theatrical lens. Unlike the pregnant scenarios of immersive performance, micro-performance re-frames the everyday or social rituals in order to make the offer of a liminoid invitation rather than using the every-day and games to generate a new fictive scenario. As Kershaw asserts ‘performance beyond theatre’ has the ‘potential to create various kinds of freedom that are not only resistant to dominant ideologies, but that also are sometimes transgressive, even transcendent of ideology itself’, (Kershaw, 1999:18). Micro-performance is the blending of social and performative ritual to create hybrid form that is constituted out of a radicalised ‘playing with social and cultural schema’. Immersive Theatre offers you access to the interior of the ‘play’ as a mode of shallow play that locates the audience within a (syn)aesthetic role. Immersive performance gives its audience the agency to generate ‘play’ through playing out games, tasks and rules. It offers the audience the role of participant. Micro-performance reframes the everyday through engaging its audience in shallow play with the hope of generating new primary experience for its audience that is radicalised.

Wish Box: Liminoid Invitations & Liminoid Acts

Wish Box is a micro-performance rather than a piece of immersive theatre or immersive performance. The task-based dramaturgy was developed in order to employ a re-framing of particular Western cultural practices strategy of immersion
and play. *Wish Box* relies upon a ‘ludic’ structure to generate the conditions for ‘shallow play’, it does this by employing games, tasks and rules; it is a blending of social and performative ritual to create a hybrid form that I have already suggested might be identified as micro-performance. [see http://verticalexchange.wix.com/wishbox#!home/mainPage for further information and documentation of the PaR project]. *Wish Box*’s central dramaturgical trope is the re-framing of recognisable cultural practices through game structures and through this strategy it is able to extend its particular liminoid invitation [include note 4].

The liminal space of *Wish Box* is produced by a blending of the socially recognisable construct of a traditional Western ‘white wedding’ reception and the performative conventions of a theatre venue.

**Figure One:** Liminal Performance Space View One. This image taken during the six hour performance in May 2015.

It is the convergence of these two distinctive but recognisable sites of cultural practice blending that produces the liminality of this particular micro-performance. The site of *Wish Box* is manifest as neither wedding reception nor the everyday nor theatrical performance but instead it sits between the three through the slippage of performance creating a liminal site that problematise all three realms of recognisable social praxis.

**Figure Two:** Liminal Performance Space View Two. This image taken during the six hour performance in May 2015.
The wedding reception, the everyday and the theatre are subjugated to the critical frame of performance and through this lens the site of Wish Box is transformed into a hybrid space that is radically charged. The construction of the performances hybrid spaces relies on the audience’s cognitive architecture, in the form of shared schema to recognise the explicit and implicit facets of the spaces; the use of familiar codes and conventions, albeit fragmented and provisional, relies on the ways, in which the mind/brain receives and processes information; in order to draw attention to that process (and to disrupt it). The new social hybrid space is reliant upon the process of schema for the audience to recognise the disparate elements that constitute the space, it is familiar enough to be recognised and create a sense of comfort but disrupted enough by the context of performance to create a liminal space that sits between the two associated architectures at play in the construction of the space. It
is this hybrid liminality that enables the possibility of extending a liminoid invitation because it provides a relatively consequence free environment for shallow play and ultimately transformative liminoid acts.

The liminal space of Wish Box is charged with radical potential but it is the gaming structures of its dramaturgy that are responsible for activating that radical potential. It is the games, tasks and rules that marshal the manifestation of the performance itself and are responsible for the persistent radicalisation of the liminal space. The hybrid site of the performance provides the context through which the constitutive social schemas are made strange but it is the activation of that liminal space through game structures that generates the event itself and the liminoid acts. It is the peculiar strategy of the gaming structures within the liminal space that provide the liminoid invitation; so that the liminal invitation is reliant upon the conditions of the liminal space. All activity within the performance of Wish Box is enabled by the liminality but activated through its complex web of gaming structures. The performers and audience’s presence are produced by and through those game structures which in turn serves to constitute the performance event. Wish Box presents its participants, with a liminiod invitation that generates the opportunity by and through performance to commit liminiod acts in collaboration with the performers and of course each other; the invitation is to play but once accepted has the potential to become a liminoid act. There are numerous strategies that make up the gaming structures of Wish Box but I would like to explicate the ways in which the central task that marshals the wishes operates in order to further illustrate my assertions. Without wishes, there is no Wish Box; one of the performer’s main objectives during the six hour event is to read aloud and peg the wishes that the participants are generating.

Figure Three: Joanna & Lee reading wishes
Figure Four: Joanna & Lee pegging Wishes
However, without the audience generating wishes the performers cannot engage in their task-driven act of reading them aloud and pegging them to the house frame. The invitation for the audience to share their wishes is made both explicit and implicit during the course of the performance event. As the audience enter into the liminal space of the performance, they are encouraged by the performers operating outside of the house frame to share their wishes but a direct explanation is not offered. The participants have to negotiate the material space, marshalled only by their own personal experience and understanding of that space at any given moment. The spaces of micro-performance are familiar enough for the elements to be recognisable and for some understanding to be reached through schema but the form and structure of the performance and the hybridisation of the space between life praxis and performative codes, re-configure the spaces in a constant flux, in such a way as to render a complete comprehension through schema problematic at best:

‘To understand the world, a person attempts to “match” what he [or she] is experiencing to past incidents stored in memory; in other words, he [or she] searches until he [she] has found a schema that summon as or categorises one or more similar stimulus configurations in the past. This “matching” process requires analogical reasoning, since every stimulus configuration has unique features’.

(Larson, 1985: 52)
The construction of the space provides a variety of ways in which the audience can take up this task with the use of wish boxes and cards that indicate ways to take up the task via social media. There are blank wish cards and pens throughout the performance space that provide the audience with the means to engage in the task that they are given upon entering the space.

**Figure Five: Wish Box cards**

However, once the space becomes busier and the performers outside of the house frame are less able to greet everyone as they enter the space, the task becomes implicit through the actions of the performers within the house frame carrying out their own task structures. The performance leaves holes, gaps and slippages that cannot be fully understood through existing schema and thus present the opportunity for new experiences and new schema to be developed. Schema's are the cognitive process that helps the audience to perceive the sensimori stimuli of the space that they encounter and enables them to reach (albeit provisional) understanding of that space and thus intelligent action as a response to that environment [include note 5]. As the audience begin to commit the liminoid act of sharing their wishes, the task starts to generate the space and the space also implicitly generates the task. Despite the familiar aspects of the hybrid space, it presents a provisional space that is in constant flux; shifting by and through the participant's engagement with, and in, that particular space. Generating wishes, reading and pegging them becomes a game that generates the performer's presence and that of the audience participants while also performing radicalised possibilities through the actual content of the wishes.

**Figure Six: The Wish Box House Frame covered in the audiences wishes**
Wish Box is made up of a complex gaming structure with multiple rules and tasks operating simultaneously both the performers and audience participants presence is always contingent upon their response to those game structures at any given moment of the six hour performance event. The liminal site and game structures of Wish Box produce the conditions for potential and possible performances and in this way the dramaturgy can be recognised as a liminoid invitation but through that liminal invitation liminoid acts are borne as the performance out of the possible and potential of its dramaturgy. Wish Box relies on the participants and performers to produce the performance by accepting the liminal invitation through the activity of committing liminoid acts.

References


Notes

1 Wish Box is a six hour durational, micro-performance experience, which was developed in collaboration between Vertical Exchange Performance Collective and the University of Portsmouth. To date Wish Box has had three development performances over the last two years. The first development stages of the piece began in April 2014 with a workshop performance at Wiltshire Arts Building in Portsmouth on the 27th of May, 2014 and another more fully realised performance on the 29th May in The University of Portsmouth’s Faculty opening in the new Eldon building. After a year of further development there was a 7 hour durational sharing of the work on the 27th May, 2015 in the University of Portsmouth UniFest that was open to the general public.

2 I will not be including installation, site-specific, site-sensitive, walking or audio-based practices despite their relationship to immersion because they have already established themselves as distinctive realms of practice. However, much of the literature that makes up these distinctive fields is not able to fully account for the more recent developments in the use of immersion that I will be discussing in this article.

3 It is worth noting that again this practice has been popularised by work produced in the venue Battersea Arts Centre, (BAC), through two high profile one-on-one festival events including artists such as Adrian Howells. These took place in 2011 and 2013.

4 Two performers dressed as a bride and groom worked inside a 6ftx6ftx7ft wooden frame house. The other performer, dressed as a bridesmaid worked outside of the house amongst the audience. The performers in the house worked with a microphone to read out wishes on cards and peg them to the strings that ran across the house. While one performer read the other one pegged the wishes. They swapped over between these two roles by saying “stop” and then taking up the others task. During the 6 hour period the performer working outside of the house frame encouraged the audience to participate in writing wishes and sharing them by
handing them to the performers directly or posting them into boxes that were distributed around the space. The performers in the box filled in the frame of the house over the 6hr period by pegging the wishes until the house was complete and they were hidden inside. The performer outside of the box was also responsible for the other performative structures that happened during the piece. Each performer in the house had a small box of tasks and at arbitrary times the performer outside of the house frame handed one of the performers inside of the house frame a task. The performers inside the house then undertook the task given to them. There were public tasks and private task, all based around the Western rituals of a ‘white wedding’. The public tasks were things such as: having a first dance, throwing the bouquet, cutting the cake, making a toast. The audience were encouraged to participate in these rituals as if they were ‘wedding guests’. So the audience at times were asked to dance, clap or catch the bouquet. The private tasks were completed within the house frame, such as kissing or holding each other. The performer working outside of the house frame, at arbitrary points in the performance, played ‘classic wedding reception’ songs, (requests for these were collected and compiled through social media), and they encouraged the audience to dance with the performers during these songs. In addition to this, the performer outside of the framed house, encouraged the audience to document and share their experiences via social media, periscope, the performances ‘wedding’ app and the ‘guest’ book.

5 It presents certain features that are assumed to be shared and familiar cultural codes, which allow the participant to enter that space and negotiate it according to previous experience and knowledge; although this process is disrupted and problematized by and through their continuing intelligent action within that space: ‘The content of the cognitive schemas consists of rules, beliefs, and memories that mould the flow of information into cognitive products: interpretation, predictions, and images. The initial cognitive process is generally outside of awareness but the products frequently proceed into awareness’, (Salkovskis, 1996: 20-1).