
Can Spectatorship be Captured in Digital Settings? A Case Study on Live Performances

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Abstract

Many digital realisations of live performances fail to capture the affects of spectators. In this paper, we intend to identify how such performances involve their audience to see if and how this same approach can be transferred to any digital settings in order to achieve a similar audience engagement. This will be done on the basis of a case study where we compare a live performance and its digital transposition into an online game. The case study is relative to one of the latest live performances by Marina Abramović, a Serbian artist known for her direct and heavy involvement of the audience in her performances.

Author Keywords

Live performances; capturing spectatorship.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: User Interfaces; J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: Performing arts (e.g., dance, music).

General Terms

Human Factors; Design; Measurement.

Introduction

In recent years, several attempts have been made at

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“translating” live performances into their digital equivalent [1, 2, 4, 10, 15]. These attempts have however all failed to translate such performances into something else, something digital, mainly online, while maintaining the same audience involvement of the original live performances. The goal of this paper is precisely to investigate how engagement applies to live performances, and how this can be used to design digital performances that are as engaging. By “digital performances” we refer here to performances where technology becomes “the facilitator and perhaps even crafter of aesthetic events” [14].

Previous work [11, 12, 13] has already investigated how to involve the audience in Digital Live Art (DLA) and proposed a framework based on performance to engage the audience and foster their transformation from unwitting to witting participation [8, 9, 11]. This has particularly been demonstrated in the context of the design of tangible interfaces [12, 13]. In this paper, however, we intend to propose a mainly theoretical discussion on how to capture spectatorship in digital settings focusing on the notion of engagement as it emerges from live performances, so while still preserving the spectators’ participatory experience, as immersed in the performance. As a case study, we will use one recent performance by the Serbian artist Marina Abramović [1].

The Artist is Present: A Case Study

In 2010, Abramović presented the performance “The artist is present” at the MOMA in New York [1]. The performance staged the artist sitting at a table with an empty chair facing her. On that chair, the audience was invited to sit. Each spectator could sit there as long as

they wished and could do anything they liked apart from touching her and talking to the artist. Most were looking at her. At times, she was staring back; at times, she was closing her eyes. The audience consisted in fact of two groups: those who wanted to take part in this performance, and who were queuing, waiting for their turn to sit in front of her, and those who were simply attending the performance, the “real” spectators in a way, and who were sparsely displaced around this setting.

In 2011, a Danish game designer, Pippin Barr [2], developed the video game of Abramović’s performance as a browser game (Fig. 1). What the game reproduces of the live performance is in fact its notion of “waiting” of the audience in an attempt to become witting participants [11]. However, the game fails to reproduce several other characterizing elements of that performance. First, that element of performing perception discussed in [5] is totally missing as the player is playing alone, as well as it is missing in the gameplay itself: the character is alone in waiting for the moment to sit in front of Marina and no other spectator, no audience is present to attend the performance. There is of course the queue of the other participants, but there is no interaction among them. Moreover, if the live performance was investigating the possibility of focused interaction [7] between two strangers sitting in front of each other and looking at each other, this is something that the game has totally not been able to replicate.

So, if the pure re-enactment shows the impossibility to translate live performances into something digital, can we still attempt to capture spectatorship in digital settings?

Discussion

In the example discussed in this paper, the engagement that is produced relies on the social component that the live performance has put in place, with the artist starting a process that depends on her bodily presence, which is what sets the dialogue with the audience. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, what characterizes a performance is indeed "its physicality, its presentness and its eventness" [6]. This seems to suggest that whether the audience decides to engage or not depends on this "presence" which also determines the type of engagement that is enacted by the performance and the consequent reaction modalities portrayed by the spectators. This bodily presence was clearly not so prominent in the online game: in fact, it was not "felt" at all. What we need to do is therefore to translate this presence into interface elements that correspond to such engagement types and modalities as those in the live performance in order to trigger this same engagement into a digital setting, so as to use technology to facilitate and craft this experience as mentioned above [14].

Bryan-Kinns et al. [3] have already succeeded in identifying, in the specific field of music, the characteristics that an interface should present in order to support participants' mutual engagement. Building on their work, which focuses on the participants' characteristics (e.g., shared awareness mechanisms, participants' loci of attention, identity, etc. [3]) and on Sheridan and Bryan-Kinns's guidelines for design, which instead focus on tangible interfaces [12], so on the technology as a facilitator [14], we intend to build a framework that, by focusing on the performer and on

their presence, complements the above mentioned works. In this way we hope to build a design framework where the three elements involved in a digital performance, namely performer, spectators and technology, are all accounted for to design a performative interaction that captures spectatorship.

Conclusion

The comparison between a live performance and its game-like equivalent presented in this paper has highlighted the difficulty to reproduce embodiment strategies in tangible experiences, something which may question the appropriateness of this methodological choice. One may indeed wonder if it makes sense to compare a live performance and a game, and if the discrepancy between the two that has become apparent in the present analysis is due to the intrinsic irreproducibility mentioned earlier or rather to just bad design decisions for the specific game in question. To clarify this doubt, additional case studies would need to be investigated and only then we could conclude whether this comparison method is informative or not and if the resulting design framework effective to the purpose of capturing spectatorship in digital settings based on live performances.

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Figure 1. Screenshot from “The artist is present” by Pippin Barr [2].

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