

A Delinquent System Aesthetic

Punchdrunk's immersive theatre as
distributed space-making

punchdrunk



Selection of works

- The Firebird Ball
- Faust
- The Crash of the Elysium
- The Duchess of Malfi
- The Masque of the Red Death
- Sleep No More
- The Drowned Man
- Kaberoi



PICTURES

The Drowned Man: A Hollywood fable

- 2013/2014
- Old Sorting Offices, Paddington (London)
- 170 installation rooms (fully realised)
- 14,000 m²
- <https://youtu.be/DZKNNMombV8>



Structure

- 12 performance zones
- 12 time periods @ 5 minutes
- 3 cycles @ 1 hr (first one begins 15 mins in)
- 35 actors (TDM) – rotating cast
- c. 50 'Black Masks'
- 600 audience members/night (in the dark)
- The build involved nearly 500 people from beginning to end, with 90 people required for the running of the show *each day*

Difference and Repetition

“Because of course, it’s theatre, like any theatre, and you want to create this illusion of repeating universe, this closed universe that repeats itself. But also the audience is excited by the fact that it’s live. The audience is excited by the fact that it’s happening now, and it’s that tension, one of many forms of tensions, that is interesting, and exciting for the audience. The fact that it is different each time, each scene is different each time, even if you are aiming for it not to be. Because it’s theatre, and it’s live, and it’s messy and the audience is unpredictable, so you kind of can’t help it that it’s different on the third loop from the first loop, it’s a different kind of energy. [...] You know, the show wouldn’t happen, or it wouldn’t be as good as it was, if it weren’t for people creating in performance, and making these discoveries with each other. It wouldn’t have any of that fantastic position, because we wouldn’t have had that many details. Most of the details would come from experience of performing the show, and then they become decisions that are set, but at the same time it’s not an improvisation of the show.”

(COM-M-15092014)

Replicable formulae

- High initial investment of time and effort
- Scalability through repetition, with the investment of agency and experience by each participant building experience potential
- Fundamentally different to the 'generality' approach to scalability (following Deleuze), which by definition is reductive
- Automation is not in and of itself reductive, but:
- *We need to think about how we model participation/participants in interactive systems – AGENT vs. AGENCY*

Participation

Modelling AGENCY rather than AGENTS?



Algorithmic participation

“I definitely felt like most of the decisions, like the control was kind of in somebody else’s hands, and I had a diminished control [...] Like being a spectator and an actor all at once [...] the stuff you do have to decide on is completely personal, but where your body isn’t [...] I wanted to be in the machine, in the software, I wanted to work with the algorithm, however you want to put it. I wanted to function, I didn’t want to be the glitch that was in the bar, I wanted to function along with the rest of the machine that was going on, that was also a narrative.”

(AUD-F-03072014)

Black Masks

- Hidden within the set – acting as extensions of the set; the *edges* of the designed experience (quasi-objects/subjects)
- Methodologies designed to maintain – even extend – the narrative, and not disrupt immersion
- Designing for edge cases, not only for the norm; incorporating crises within our design schema
- Critical for distributed systems that mesh with the connective tissues of our shared world

Example of Black Mask technique

“It’s very calm; almost like someone’s about to brush past you. And then you can... what we normally do, is going up behind them, hands on their shoulders and grip, and just gently pull back, and you get them to move. [...] And there was another thing where if you wanted to walk with someone, you could sort of run... so, put your arm down, just put your arm down by your side. You would do that and just lead them, keep that elbow contact, so all your forearm is touching, rather than leading them like kids in primary school. You’re keeping them quite close to you, and you would be able to steer them as well, with that forearm contact.”

(COM-M-27092014)

Postdigital dimensions

- While the effects of Black Mask intervention is profound, the function itself can be defined within relatively narrow parameters in each locality or node of the interactive system
- How do we model AI within interactive systems? Is the Cartesian concept any more useful for AI than it is for ourselves? What can we learn from the Black Mask function?
- AI for edge case design narratives – and in narrative design



Experiential space in detail

"[...] you can't take in that picture in any one gaze. The audience has to look this way and look that way, but without Wendy's presence there: seeing the orgy through her eyes, because her looking at it, and actually my character looking at her looking at it; that's where the meaning of the situation is. [...] you can tailor the pitch of your performance to their decisions so that if they come very close, even if you're still playing the game of invisibility with them, or you know, you're keeping up this pretence that you can't see them [...], so you might, if you have the leeway, you have the liberty, you might decide to bring the pitch of your performance down to a very subtle, close up kind of level, so that you're giving them something that they know is just for them. It's a gift, you know, a small gift, you might improvise something that's very... in response to their closeness."

(COM-M-15092014)

Detail supports immersion

- All interviewed audience members mentioned, unprompted, that the attention to detail supported their ability to yield to immersion (the immersive state)
- Interactions between audiences and the set, the actors, and the Black Masks are designed with extreme attention to detail – which carries the illusion

Effectiveness vs. efficiency

“This machinic vitality is not so much about determinism, inbuilt purpose or finality, but rather about becoming and transformation. This introduces a process that Deleuze and Guattari call ‘becoming-machine’, inspired by the Surrealists’ ‘bachelor machines’, meaning a playful and pleasure-prone relationship to technology that is not based on functionalism. For Deleuze this is linked to the project of releasing human embodiment from its indexation on socialised productivity to become ‘bodies without organs’, that is to say without organised efficiency.”

(Braidotti, 2013: 91-92)

HE TO KEEP TRACK OF WHEN CHANGES HAVE BEEN MADE WHICH CAN THEREFORE ALLOW ME TO ALTER ALL DOCUMENTS RELATING TO THE SCENE

THANK YOU!

Heiter xxx

CE ESTEE	LILA	STUDIO BOSS
DUDE & ALICE OFFICE TALKY OFFER to Boss Complex	MEET MIGUEL	PORTRAIT SHRINE
	FACTORY	STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX
	SNOOPING	FAKE AUDITION TELEPHONE LILA PROD. OFFICE
	STREET	WATCHING ALL CINEMA
	SECURITY I.D.	INITIATION PREP
LILA, GIVES SCRIPT	MEET ALICE, GET SCRIPT	SBC
PRODUCERS OFFICE	PRODUCERS OFFICE	
DUET WITH LIGHT	DUET WITH LIGHT	
SUBURBIA WOODLAND	SUBURBIA WOODLAND	
ON WITH TEEN BOY TRAILER SHOP	FREEMSON INITIATION production S.B. COMPLEX	
SOUNDTRACK REAG SITE SOLO AS FOLEY	INITIATION ONE ON ONE MAING ROMOLA	
	STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX	
ER	MADISON POISONING	
STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX	STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX	
PRIVATE PARTY UNDERCOVER	PRIVATE PARTY UNDERCOVER	
STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX	STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX	
DISCOVER DIRECTOR	LILA'S DISCOVERY	
STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX	STUDIO BOSS COMPLEX	
ONE ON ONE AND LEAVES		
ARRIVAL		

DUST WITCH/THE WIDOW SEENA LILA NO BUNNY CEREMONY	COWBOY BARMAN HARRY CROONER TAVERN	BADLANDS JACK MOTEL	DRUGSTORE GIRL DRUGSTORE	ROMOLA CAR
1:1 SHACK SHACK	TRANNY CABERET TAVERN	GRIS-GRIS DRUGSTORE	DRUGSTORE	1:1 Trailer
MIGUEL PREP	SCIENTOL AFFAIR TAVERN	EVICTON WITH ROMOLA TRAILER PARK & FOREST	MEETING ANDY STREET/ARCADE	EVICTON WITH BADLANDS TRAILER PARK AND FOREST
MIGUEL TRANSFORMATION	TAVERN COWBOY SHOP	PARCEL + MIGUEL STRAW FIELDS	LOP OPENING LOP STAGE	TOWN + WALK TO GATE
one on one	ANDY & WILL WORKING TAVERN COWBOY SHOP	TRAILER PARK & FOREST	HOME MOTEL	Arvika Security
SHACK	TAVERN COWBOY SHOP	TRAILER PARK & FOREST	HOME MOTEL	SECRETARY OFFICE
1:1	TAVERN COWBOY SHOP	TRAILER PARK & FOREST	HOME MOTEL	
1:1	PARTY STARTING TO ARIEL TAVERN COWBOY SHOP	TRAILER PARK & FOREST	TRAILER PARK & FOREST	PARCEL IN SNUG
GAME/CHILDHOOD	LINEDANCE TAVERN	SECURITY GATES WITH SECURITY OFFICER TAVERN	TAVERN LINEDANCE	WITH DRESSER NEXUS
POSSESSION	FIGHT TAVERN	MOTEL	DRUGSTORE	COPELIA ACT + ROOM FAIRGROUND
FINDING DWAYNE	BROWN NUMBER? TAVERN	FLIP BOOK DRUGSTORE TRAILER PARK	DRUGSTORE	1:1 WITH DRESSER EST
BAPTISM	TAVERN	MIGUEL	DRUGSTORE	1:1 motel
TABERNABLE	TAVERN		DRUGSTORE	CAR RESET RESET
	TAVERN			

GATEKEEPER / SECURITY	DOCT
GATE	25 DR. F
GATE	ADICE LETTER BA
GATE	LILA ARIEL A
LILA	HE BASE ONE
GATE	MESSE
GATE	
GATE	MARSHALL ESCAPE WILLI
GATE	MEDI
GATE	DIVA MEDI
GATE	
GATE	
GATE	
GATE	

Postdigital efficiency?

- Moving beyond Cartesian rationality constructs
- Embracing edge case design – and ‘inefficient’ detail – to expand experience potential
- Scalability through replicable formulae, rather than through reductive generality

"I know it's for entertainment, but it needed to exist. And it felt like this culmination of like so many different talents, and they must've been influenced by so many other different talents over the course of their careers, who were, you know again, going back. So it was like, it felt like, my tiny little pinpoint experience of it, it felt like it was such, I don't know, I just felt at the same time so miniscule, my little eyes looking at this thing, but so infinite at the same time. And then kind of, quite thankful? But also, it was probably just kind of like, joyful immersion, as well – like forced immersion. [...]if people can make you fall off the cliff face of consciousness, then you drop into this pool of like, eternal oneness. [...] I'm not a new-age hippie person, I wouldn't even know what that would be. But like, I believe in the language of these things, you kind of drop into this pool of infinite oneness, and that's where we came from before we existed, and that's where we're going back to. And I feel like, when you fall off into this like, excitement, it's warmer and less scary. And I feel like when the world stops, like generally when you fall in love or when you experience real art, it feels just like time stops – there's no outside. There's no yesterday, there's no tomorrow, and you're just kind of floating through space. And it's like "aaah, it's ok" [laugh]"

(AUD-M-11072014)

Future developments

- Scripting interaction with exquisite attention to detail to extend experiential space
- Re-thinking the modelling of both AI and human agents/agency in interaction design
- Designing for the postdigital sublime

Thank you!

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