

Video Games, Flow, and Immersive Theatre: Participatory Arts in the Ultraliberal Era

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Abstract *The 'flow state', in video games, designates an optimal, immersive, and pleasant experience, based on stimulating challenges (Chen 2006). Extended to immersive theatre, it highlights, in line with Adam Alston's analysis (2013, 2016), the ideological shift of participatory processes. While they could originally lead to emancipation, distancing, and liberation, they are now mainly diverted in favour of exciting, sensational, and gamified experiences, which seems to convey values in line with the ultraliberal ideology.*

Introduction

Technological innovations change our relations to the world and to society; virtual reality, augmented reality, robotics, artificial intelligence, cryptocurrency, and the metaverse are currently shaping our daily lives and outlining a future characterised by velocity, performance, flexibility, and fluidity. Industrially produced video games mirror these values: Designers aim to create worlds that are more and more fluid, open, immersive, and exciting. Flow, a concept theorised by Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi in the field of positive psychology and then applied to video game design by Jenova Chen in 2006, fulfils this ambition. It is widely used in the video game industry as a recipe to optimally engage players and avoid boredom or frustration in a gaming experience. However, the 'flow state' can also be used to analyse contemporary 'immersive theatre', specifically plays of the kind that companies such as Punchdrunk (2000) produce, which attempt to create interactive, playful, and stimulating settings. This approach is in line with that of Josephine Machon, who refers to game studies to understand the 'total immersion' specific to immersive theatre (Machon 2013, 59–63).

Contemporary immersive theatre can be considered to focus on creating an '*expérience à vivre* [experience to be lived]' (Freydefont 2010) which viscerally involves the participants. Audience participation is not approached here from an emancipatory, distancing, and critical perspective, as it could be in the participative and political

theatre of the 1960s and 70s. Rather, immersive theatre values challenge, excitement, stimulation, or entertainment, in other words, a ‘flow state’. The use of flow to engage and immerse the audience in a playful drama is not a coincidence. The ideological values behind this concept are today aligned with the domination of ultraliberal ideology, which consciously or unconsciously irrigates a set of artistic and cultural productions. In this paper, ultraliberal ideology is considered the culmination of the mutations of the ‘new economy’, driven by Silicon Valley and the technological innovations of the 1960s, as criticized by Fred Turner (2006). This economic, philosophical, and political ideology, in the tradition of theorists such as Milton Friedman, shows an ideological shift from valuing participation, independence, freedom, and autonomy as emancipatory values to stressing the skills required of employees in a flexible and deregulated labour market.

1. The flow state: Toward an optimal, total, and visceral experience

The multiplication of theatrical works that claim to be – or are designated as – ‘immersive’ reflects the contemporary quest for exciting, disorienting, and sensorial experiences. From *Stranger Things: The Experience*¹ to The Banksy Museum,² via Onyo’s *bulles de déconnexion* [disconnection bubbles],³ immersion is now a valuable commodity, whether in theatre, entertainment, museography, tourism, cinema, or even at work. If the boundaries of immersive theatre are difficult to define precisely (Freydefont 2010, Machon 2013), Punchdrunk can be considered as a key example. The group’s aesthetic is playful, drawing on and revitalising the techniques of first-person adventure video games. Punchdrunk’s plays place the audience at the heart of the action, immersing them viscerally in the scenography. While spectators wear masks, maintaining an invisible fourth wall (Pearce 2021) between actors and audience, they can freely wander among the actors, in a physical scenography that

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- 1 *Stranger Things: The Experience* is an immersive and interactive experience based on the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. It is available in several major cities: Toronto, London, New York, Paris. <https://strangerthings-experience.com/paris/>
 - 2 The Banksy Museum in Paris is hosting the permanent exhibition “The World of Banksy” dedicated to the work of the street artist. The scenography is designed to immerse the spectators in an urban atmosphere, recreating the different cities and periods through which the artist passed. <https://museumbanksy.fr/>
 - 3 Onyo is a company that offers individuals and professionals immersive and sound experiences available in several forms: online (*‘Je suis DRH, et j’offre une pause aux salariés de mon entreprise’* [I am a HRD, and I offer a break to the employees of my company]), or in the form of installations intended to take place in shopping malls, train stations, trade fairs, but also in companies, within workshops (*‘Je suis en charge du séminaire sur la transformation de mon entreprise.’* [I am in charge of the seminar on the transformation of my company.]) <https://www.wedogood.co/onyo/>

spreads over several rooms. The narration is arborescent and environmental (Jenkins 2004). The audience members can access the story in a fragmented way by walking through the different rooms, exploring the set, deciding to follow one actor or another. Felix Barrett, the artistic director of the company, claims to be inspired by video games, comparing Punchdrunk's play *The Drowned Man* to the gaming experience of *Skyrim*. In an article in *The Guardian*, the journalist and writer Thomas McMullan, who has also written for theatre companies, says:

There are two ways of watching *The Drowned Man*. Either you can follow one character and treat it as a completely linear show, or you can follow your instincts, treat it as free-form exploration and let the beats of architectural detail lead you. [...] It's similar to how in *Skyrim* you can follow a character and go on a mission, or you can explore the landscape, find moments of other stories and achieve a sense of an over-arching environment (McMullan 2014).

This level design⁴ approach allows artists to combine the spectators' free exploration with a coherent and meaningful narration. Steve Gaynor, the co-founder of the Fullbright video game studio, which developed the adventure game *Gone Home* (2013), goes so far as to qualify Punchdrunk's scenography as level design: 'I mean, this entire experience is level design. Lighting directs you to stuff that's important, there are main thoroughfares, etc. This is a video game level, period.' (Jakob-Hoff 2014, Biggin 2017, 173).

Flow, in its original definition, identifies a set of conditions that help an individual to devote themselves fully and without disturbance to a task. The task must have clear goals, be adjusted to the skills of the person performing the task, and provide immediate feedback. When all these conditions are fulfilled and the person is focused on the activity, the flow state occurs and everyday life frustrations disappear; self-consciousness; and the perception of time, place, and everything outside the activity fade away. This state provides a feeling of control, and, moreover, a deep sense of pleasure, accomplishment, and plenitude (Csikszentmihályi 2004, 79–80). In level design, the flow state is the moment when the player is completely absorbed by the game. This absorption is due to a perfect balance between the challenges encountered and the skills deployed. The game should not be too complex or too easy. If it is too complex, players may experience anxiety and frustration; but if it is too easy, they may become bored and lose interest. As a result, games are designed so that their difficulties and challenges evolve in line with the progression curve of the player.

4 In video games, level design refers to the conception of levels, the building of stages and spaces traversed by players.

The flow's ability to initiate a pleasant and comfortable state in which the perception of time and place is disrupted, and which provides a sense of control and agentivity seems to fit well with the ideals of immersive theatre. It could offer a way to put the audience at the heart of the work, inviting them to act and be hyperfocused on the fiction being played around them. In this form of theatre, the immersants' (Machon 2013) mental and emotional engagement seems to be enhanced when their actions or movements lead to an immediate and satisfying result, and when they are fully involved in the storytelling. Immersive theatre offers the participants an active place in the aesthetic experience. The purpose is to achieve the dream of a fluid, cathartic, and enjoyable interactive narrative, in line with the pioneering publication *Computers as Theatre* (Laurel 1991) on the relation between human-machine interaction and theatre: a narrative that adapts dynamically and coherently to the player's actions, providing a feeling of control and freedom, similar to flow. Furthermore, the live dimension of immersive theatre allows actors to improvise and react to the audience's actions to guarantee fictional coherence, in contrast to computer-based non-player characters. This aspect matches perfectly with the aspiration of some designers and players for ever freer and more open worlds, and, above all, enjoyable and exciting ones. In these virtual worlds, the notions of time, daily worries, and frustrations that would break the game's fantasy disappear. Beyond the specific mental and cognitive engagement of a flow experience, immersive theatre also brings a visceral experience of 'physical *praesence*, the participant's physical body responding within an imaginative, sensual environment' (Machon 2013, 61). This physical dimension creates a direct and organic relationship between the audience and the events surrounding them and amplifies their emotional and sensory engagement in the fiction.

Rose Biggin, in *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk*, highlights the multiplicity of engagement and immersion modalities of this type of theatre. Beyond immersion based on the flow state, which leads to the idea of 'experience as "skill"' (Biggin 2017, 29), immersive theatre achieves an 'overwhelming, visceral sensation of sublime experience' through an encompassing and multisensory scenography (Biggin 2017, 32). Yet the pursuit of a flow state seems to create some contradictions in immersive theatre:

The idea that there is no 'wrong way' to experience a production becomes problematic if there is also an implicit need to work towards experiencing aesthetic 'flow' by being able to match a challenge or work towards a clearly defined goal. An immersive production's (unspoken or implied) rules might become hypervisible for audience members who sense these rules need to be discovered and followed to have the better experience [...] What these rules are taken to be in turn suggests what is being *valued* in a piece of immersive theatre (Biggin 2017, 29–30).

Behind the desire to offer total freedom and free exploration to the audience, the search for a flow state and a dynamic system leads the designers to set up challenges and rewards, or at least to establish a set of rules to be followed. Following these rules facilitates engagement with the fiction and provides access to narrative rewards and a full experience. As an implicit contract established between the work and the audience, these rules contribute directly to the aesthetic, artistic and cultural meaning of the work, just as procedural rhetoric helps to express values, ideas, and messages in video games (Bogost 2007). Like the narrative, the scenography, or the performance of the actors, they convey a certain point of view towards society. In the context of an ultraliberal society, where the notions of participation, reward, risk-taking, or initiative are largely valued, this observation leads us to question the ideological impact of these processes.

2. Injunction to happiness and participation in the ultraliberal era

Several authors have criticised the prescriptive aspect of flow, particularly in its reappropriation by Jenova Chen (Serdane 2014). The concept turns the pursuit of an optimal, balanced, and fun experience into an injunction and seems to eclipse any other form of engagement. Through the flow, experience must provide immediate pleasure in the completion of a task or an action. It condemns any exit from the game, any 'reflexive hindsight in the course of action' (Caïra 2018)⁵, promoting an individual experience 'that largely overlooks the collective' (Caïra 2018)⁶. This observation matches Adam Alston's research on immersive theatre: He analyses 'how immersive theatre shares particular values with neoliberalism, such as entrepreneurialism, as well as the valorisation of risk, agency and responsibility' (Alston 2013). He identifies the main concern of the immersive theatre as the pursuit of hedonism, with no other end in itself: Participation provides a sensational, exciting, and enjoyable experience, rather than perspective-taking, collective debate, or critical thinking. This analysis reflects the autotelic nature of the flow state, in which commitment comes from immediate feedback. When performing a task in a flow state, a feeling of pleasure and control occurs in the simple act of being engaged in the activity. This search for happiness as the only goal is a feature of the positive psychology and ideology of personal development that prevails today, especially in managerial methods. The emergence of new professions such as happiness managers or *funsultants*, whose role is to keep employees happy at work, is a symptom of this phenomenon, which eludes any political criticism of a managerial organisation. It fits the contemporary happiness injunction, where responsibility

5 'recul réflexif en cours d'action', translated by the author of this article.

6 'qui fait largement l'impasse sur le collectif', translated by the author of this article.

for achieving happiness lies solely with the individual, not on a collective and political dimension: 'the experience is all about you, the participant' (Alston 2013). This criticism goes hand in hand with Olivier Caïra's critique of flow: The experience focuses only on the players' 'G-spot' (Caïra 2018).

In this context, Alston defines the audience participation in immersive theatre as an 'entrepreneurial participation', 'a kind of participation based on self-made opportunity' (Alston 2013). As Rose Biggin has also pointed out, Punchdrunk's theatre does not offer the audience free roaming within the fiction; it establishes a set of implicit rules, which, if understood and followed, influence the aesthetic experience. Participation here is not free, like an aimless walk through the scenography, but necessary at all costs. Adam Alston uses the example of the *one-on-ones* to support his point: these are specific scenes in Punchdrunk's theatre, where a spectator can share a special moment with an actor. It gives this person the feeling for a few minutes that the whole production is about them. These moments sound like rewards for the most curious spectators: Showing initiative and holding the attention of the actors are highly valued actions. They are part of a logic that is specific to the concept of flow as seen through the prism of level design, and, more broadly, to the gamification mechanisms that are today colonising all of our activities and all of society (Siegel 2015). Some audience members, as soon as they enter the play, work towards the goal of having a one-on-one. They go so far as to consult online guides – analogous to video game guides – that describe the best way to experience the work and access all of its secrets. The ideal spectator of immersive theatre becomes 'the entrepreneur: the self-starter, the independent, autonomous, motivated subject who is capable, self-reliant and conscientious' (Alston 2016, 130). As the entrepreneur fantasised by neoliberalism, he takes risks, overcomes challenges and obstacles, and, in a meritocratic way, reaches happiness and its objectives thanks to his motivation and efforts.

Immersive theatre, according to Alston's analysis, fits perfectly into the zeitgeist that also irrigates the video game industry: the production of large-scale experiences, ever more realistic, immersive, and free, turning players into heroes of sensational adventures. In an economic, political, and social era in which new technologies are reshaping consumer habits, the spectator – or gamer – is akin to the 'neoliberal consumer' (Alston 2016, 16) in what B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore call the 'experience economy' (Pine II and Gilmore 1999). Pursuing a marketing strategy structured on the customer experience, productions make the audience's reception, their absorption in the fiction, and the pursuit of a flow state the work's main objective. This demonstrates the need to hold the audience's attention in an economy ruled by zapping, over-solicitation, and consumerism. Alston's conclusion is based on the observation 'that a pleasurable or challenging experience is not just a fortunate by-product of the theatre event, but is, in many respects, immersive theatre's *raison d'être*' (Alston 2013) but also focuses on Punchdrunk's various partnerships

with Belgian beer manufacturer Stella Artois, in which the advertising relies entirely on the theatre company's aesthetic processes.

A core feature of the experience economy is the 'activation' of consumers as producing consumers, either in terms of an affective engagement with a product or a brand that serves as a source of profit, or in terms of consumer participation in the production of a product (Alston 2016, 146).

All of these experiences tend to empty the participatory processes of the theatrical avant-gardes of their critical, subversive, and emancipatory potential in order to make them the tools of a dominant order. They seem 'entirely oppositional to the aware, distanced, critical and decisive mindset behind the engagement of, for example, a Theatre of the Oppressed spect-actor' (Biggin 2017, 25–26), in which audience activation is designed for political and revolutionary ends.⁷ However, this observation is not limited to certain contemporary works of immersive theatre: Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, used by Biggin as an example of emancipatory participation, seems to have difficulties nowadays resisting this ideological shift and maintaining its role as a countervailing power. In *Forum Theatre*, one of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* methods, the audience goes from spectator to spect-actor, freeing itself and assuming agency. The aim is not to favour a cathartic and sensational immersive aesthetic, but rather a critical distance inherited from Brecht. The stage becomes a space for political and critical experimentation. Although this theatre was originally intended to convey a radical political message, its various techniques are now widely misused, and show the domination of ultraliberal ideology.

While Adam Alston discusses the affinity between immersive theatre and the 'experience economy', revealing the ideological values behind these productions, Julian Boal, Augusto Boal's son, and a Forum Theatre theorist and practitioner, criticises the affiliations between Forum Theatre and human resources departments. Forum Theatre is nowadays mainly used as a management and team building strategy, to foster team cohesion and employee performance – far from Augusto Boal's revolutionary ambitions.

[...] what seems much more disturbing for us to investigate is why so many games, exercises, and forms of TO have been so easily recruited by countless human resources services worldwide. Such research would undoubtedly reveal

7 The *Theatre of the Oppressed* is a set of theatrical methods theorised and practiced by Augusto Boal in the 1960s and 70s in Brazil, in the political context of the 1964 *coup d'état*. At its origin, the practice of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* was an aspect of Boal's militant and political activity: It was developed as a political tool with a strong social dimension. Its ambition is to embody a 'weapon of liberation' and revolution. This liberation begins for Boal with a radical critique of the passive position of the Aristotelian theatre audience.

unwanted affinities between this method of critical theatre and the present state of our subjugation (Boal 2019, 609–10).

He emphasises that, beyond a conscious depoliticization of some theatrical processes, such as the use of Forum Theatre for managerial purposes, it is the relationship between the processes and the context in which they take place that must be questioned. If these processes could be a tool for social emancipation in the original political and historical context, they no longer have the same ideological meaning in times of ultraliberalism, where autonomy, action, freedom, and participation are valued by the dominant ideology.

These observations illustrate the systematic use of flow to design immersive fiction. The immersant becomes the hero of fluid, exciting, and stimulating worlds. This echoes the *uberisation* of society, which promotes deregulation, self-employment, flexibility, and individual action. The revolutionary hero promoted by Forum Theatre as the immersive theatre audience acts, takes initiative, and faces up to obstacles. This figure fits perfectly, without criticism, with the ‘micro-entrepreneur imperative’ (Boal 2019, 610), of the individual who must show autonomy and self-control in a flexible labour market.

It then becomes a matter of paying close attention, as artist and designer, to the political impact of the processes used in a work. As Olivier Neveux says, the shift of this political dimension in the contemporary theatre must be understood ‘in light of a specific – determined – intelligence of the present’ (Neveux 2019, 17).⁸

Conclusion

Despite all this, some designers do conceive of video games in artistic, critical, and political terms and approach participation in a different way. In contrast to audience participation through immersion, the flow state, and an ‘entrepreneurial participation’, they allow us to reconnect with the emancipatory dimension of interactive systems.

For example, the *Artgame* movement, which considers video games in their counter-cultural, experimental, and expressive dimensions (Siegel 2015),⁹ calls for the restoration of the political potential of interactivity and participatory processes,

8 The original quotation in French: ‘à la lumière d’une intelligence spécifique – déterminée – du présent’, translated by the author of this article.

9 The artgame movement emerged in the 2000s at the intersection of digital art and independent video game culture, and in opposition to the industrial mainstream. It aims to establish games as expressive art media, able to convey a critical point of view with artistic and counter-cultural dimensions (Siegel, 2015).

away from their hegemonic – and meaningless – use. Artgames approach player engagement not in terms of a fluid, immersive experience, but rather as a matter of social and political commitment. This enables the creation of slow, confusing, or uncomfortable experiences that seek the distancing effect that the flow state seems to deny.

In a similar vein, several theatre companies are questioning the political and ideological meaning of playful and immersive systems in the 21st century. The GK Collective, a 'theatrical research group' founded in 2009 by Gabriella Cserhádi, uses these processes from a critical and emancipatory perspective. It aims to renew political theatre in the light of the challenges facing technological society:

Theatre shouldn't be a museum. Everything must be flexible. [...] The new illusion machine, that of the new digital reality (with its tendency to disperse attention and generalized entertainment) calls for its own theatre. Internet and the virtual are expanding immersion into everyday life. What is the role of theatre in the digital immersion era? What function can theatre still have? (Cserhádi 2017a, 10).¹⁰

Although the collective uses immersive methods to produce fully immersive pieces, it claims to be far removed from the 'Anglo-Saxon traditions' of immersive theatre, exemplified in particular by the Punchdrunk company. The central issue is not immersion in sensational sets and environments, but rather reconnection with a human dimension; a sensitive and intimate relation to reality. The GK Collective's approach stands in the tradition of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed: It reconfigures the theatrical methods of immersion for political or even revolutionary purposes. The 'THéâtre CaCHÉ', a method created by Gabriella Cserhádi in 2009, is very much like Augusto Boal's 'invisible theatre' (Boal 1996). It aims to 'give a new legitimacy to theatre, in a society overloaded with generators of illusions (the virtual, the internet, interactivity, and 3D)' by taking place directly in public space (Cserhádi 2017b, 1).¹¹

Like immersive theatre, it blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. But the ambition is not, as in a flow experience, to make people forget their self-con-

10 The original quotation in French: 'Le théâtre ne doit pas être un musée. Tout doit y être mobile. [...] La nouvelle machine à illusion, celle de la nouvelle réalité numérique, (avec sa part de dispersion de l'attention, et de divertissement généralisé) réclame son théâtre. Internet, le virtuel répand l'immersion au quotidien. Quel est le théâtre, là, au moment de l'immersion numérique ? Quelle fonction peut encore avoir le théâtre ?', translated by the author of the article.

11 The original quotation in French: 'donner une nouvelle légitimité au théâtre dans une société surchargée de générateurs d'illusions (le virtuel, internet, l'interactivité et la 3D)', translated by the author of the article.

sciousness and perception of time and place, but rather to assert and revitalize their relationship to it – and to social reality – through play. This drives us to question the game in its capacity to simulate new horizons and take a critical look at our daily lives and society.

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Biography

Olivia Levet holds a PhD in Plastic Arts and Video Games from Paul-Valéry University in Montpellier, where she also is a lecturer. Moreover, she is a game designer; her PhD research led to the creation of *Brèche*, an *artgame* that hybridizes video games and theater in an attempt to reinvest the utopian and emancipatory processes of the Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* in a critical, experimental, and political way. Her work focuses on the mutual influences of video games and theater, immersive experiences, and the ideological shift of participatory processes in the ultraliberal era.

