

Performative game or theatre gamification? What a gameformance is and why interactive theatre should be interested in it

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

The following reflection aims to explore the concept of gameformance and some of its definitions based on the analysis by the researcher and designer Sebastien Deterding (game studies) on the scope of gamification in contemporary theatre creation. Beyond undertaking an exercise in taxonomy, it is interesting to look at some elements taken from the construction of game theory that have been applied in different ways to the creation of co-creation theatre devices by several creators and artistic collectives. The identification of certain concepts, applicable in practical terms, can eventually enable the task of those creators who embark on the construction of a theatre that seeks to be “playable”.

Keywords: performance, game, gamification, interactivity, device

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*What 's in a name?
That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.
Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet
(1595-1597)*

In Search of the Imprint of Interactive/Relational/Participatory Theatre

In recent decades we have witnessed a notable boom in theatre creations – in which the audience takes on an active role and even get involved in creation –, which have been updated and strengthened with endless possibilities as a result of media hybridisation. Technology and postmodernism have enabled audience participation and intervention again, overcoming the supposed passivity that characterises what is expected from theatre. This has enabled more artistic productions, in which creators have experimented with interactive performance at different levels and with different motivations and outcomes.

A great deal of theatre creation developed from the 1970s, which explores and takes risks in new forms of relation with the audience – and which we could frame within the broad category of participatory or interactive theatre – is, according to the theoretician Roberto Fratini, no more than a nostalgic attempt to revive a series of concepts that, since the early 20th century, we artists have stubbornly related to “the return to everything understood as barbaric and ritual” (Fratini, 2020). Such attempts to rename and revive co-ludic practices in the performing arts have entailed a notable proliferation of rare formats, devices, artefacts and apparatuses that flirt on the borders of varied disciplines. Their ultimate goal is the challenge to *activate* and *involve* audiences of different kinds, more or less programmed, and prone to more innovative ways of relating with the creations.

Beyond the theoretical and practical uses (and abuses) of “participation” — concerning the field of theatre studies —, more than one decade ago Fischer-Lichte highlighted the end of the creator as an independent and autonomous entity. This conception meant that receivers were prevented from modifying the materiality of the creations. For her, this mentality “has ceased to be operational, although in the consciousness of the general public it is not the case” (Fischer-Lichte, 2004: 325). As she predicted, in recent years we have increasingly seen a larger number of examples of interactive theatre practices and design of experiences that regard the audience as a fundamental element. And all this has been in the context of different attempts to give them power to change the internal logics and strategies of the pieces to which they expose themselves, with greater or lesser success.

Everywhere Game Mechanics

Broadly speaking, gamification is a phenomenon that exports elements and mechanics taken from game theory to other cultural and social spheres for diverse purposes: educational, commercial, technological, experiential or artistic, among others.

According to game studies researchers Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (2015), the concept of gamification emerged approximately one decade ago to overcome the notion of serious games spread by game theory studies to refer to any ludic construction or complete game designed and developed for non-recreational purposes (Caillois, [1967] 1986).

Before the term appeared, the French writer and sociologist Roger Caillois had already identified a whole sphere of ludic practices closer to the contemporary definition of the concept that use elements and resources taken from games but that are applied to the construction of artefacts, products or experiences distanced from the original context (Caillois, [1967] 1986).

This concept, which was first limited to very specific niches — such as game design or arts festivals and the academic community itself — in recent years has gradually reached everyday life. What is more, it has had an exponential growth insofar as it has become a tool full of strategies in the hands of diverse industries to capture consumers, players and users (Zichermann and Linder, 2013).

The term has created several controversies among experts as it has been indiscriminately applied for different uses, many of them contradictory. Academics, artists, entrepreneurs or scientists have borrowed from games elements for their own ends and purposes. Broadly speaking, at present the generalised consensus on gamification understood as a discipline concerns the use of game design strategies, elements and techniques applied in contexts that are not games. Based on this, endless examples can be found in which there is an “interpenetration between games and everyday life” (Deterding and Walz, 2015: 6) in which practices, patterns, languages and concepts of game theory reach all areas of our daily life.

This interlinkage would have many antecedents and influences based on different manifestations, such as, for instance, the early explorations of

the situationist movement, which, already in the 1950s, advocated game as a central concept of its creations; war games, understood as “ludic” formats used in military training camps; the origins of Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics approach; serious games or immersive games, and the origins of the interactive design between humans and computers, full of elements taken from game culture. This process, understood by some as “gamification or ludification of culture”, has been studied by diverse theoreticians concerned with game studies, such as Zimmerman, Walz, McGonigal and Montola, who over time have approached it from diverse perspectives.

Gamification in the Performing Arts

The relationship between theatre and game is a widely discussed and studied issue: in the performing arts, colloquially, we have become accustomed – whether as spectators or professionals of the medium – to enjoy theatre as if it were a double-edged sword: for practical purposes, it can be useful for acting coaches to use the analogy of game to initiate their actors but socially it has contributed, in many communities, to the performing artistic practices being seen by the establishment as hobbies, thereby justifying their “unproductive” and hence not very lucrative character.

The latter is quite open to debate if we consider that at present the game industry is among those that shift large amounts of money at a world level. A step beyond the academic discussion or the subjective impressions on the definitions, it is interesting to note that, in specific terms, the theory that addresses this game/theatre relationship concerning the practical application of resources and tools taken from game theory to be used for processes of theatre creation in depth is not so extensive.

Most studies and discussions focus on the ideological implications and consequences – in Foucaultian terms – of the exercise of power, which is implicit after the creation of a theatre interaction device that gives instructions to the audience in order to activate their interaction. Generally, they get caught in pointless arguments about how real (or not) the participation of people in these types of productions is; or rather, they are limited to the mere belief that, just because a theatre device involves rules and the audience can “play it”, we would thus be in the terrain of what is clearly ludic. They cease to consider that the concept of participation has endless nuances depending on each one – is “participatory” or “immersive” theatre, for example, an escape room? –, and ignore aspects such as the spectacular character that a theatre piece presumably should have or the concepts of staging or presentation of a theatre experience.

Understanding how dull it may be to try to classify things and, even more, to claim to know what is (and what it is not) theatre, or what is (and what is not) the audience’s participation, for practical purposes in this article we will broadly define the concept of interactive theatre or participatory theatre with the concept of “ludic co-creation¹ theatre”. This would encompass all

1. The concept of “co-creative audience” is suggested by the researcher and game designer Lara Sánchez Coterón (2014) to provide a framework for her own definition of gameformance.

theatre productions that require the participation of the spectator so that the device or dramaturgical programming of the experience is successful for its own purposes of creation regardless of the platforms or the material resources used. In short, those pieces in which the spectators can alter, with their decisions, the dramaturgical programming of the experience and in which the audience is endowed with a protagonist mission in the etymological sense of the term. In other words, where their intervention is essential to mobilise the experience created.

Pervasive Games, Mixed Reality Performances and other Artefacts

Within these parameters, today we find a series of possibilities, which emerge based on theatre hybridisation with digitalisation, technology, augmented reality, VR prototyping and many other older manifestations. We find examples such as LARP (live action role playing games), theme parks and escape rooms. In order to further delimit the range of variants, several studies on the gamification of the performing arts identify certain basic elements, such as game mechanics, the pursuit of objectives or the use of rules, taken from benchmark theories on the subject by Johan Huizinga ([1938] 1949) and Roger Caillois ([1967] 1986). These elements are cross-cutting examples involved in game design and can be applied to the construction of ludic co-creation theatre devices.

Sebastian Deterding (2015) — a researcher and designer working in the field of user experiences, the design of ludic systems, persuasive technologies and videogames — carries out a chronological review of the evolution of new forms of games (and of playing), which emerged from 2000, analysing the influence of the ludification of culture and mixed reality performance. Usually called pervasive games,² they are ludic objects or systems that have “one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play” (Montola, Sternos and Waern, 2009: 12) towards other spatial, temporal or social spheres. The concept of magic circle was coined by Huizinga, who argued that play creates an experience outside everyday life provided the “field of play” where it occurs is more or less defined (Huizinga, [1938] 1949: 10). Later, the term would be updated by different game study theoreticians, who noted that it would be a physical or virtual space, outside real life, where the point would consist of exploring the reality of the game itself in a repetitive and safe manner (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004).

Deterding suggests, as examples of pervasive games, the types of games that take possession of specific public spaces: virtual reality games that use digital devices and are developed in collective spaces; or persistent games (Deterding and Walz, 2015: 29), defined as those in which time limits are maximised and can be transformed into actions of continuous repetition in resistance.³

2. This word in its original context related to games comes from the Latin *pervadere*, which means something “tending to pervade or spread throughout.” Source consulted: <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pervasive>>.

3. An example of persistent game might be the mobile phone game “pokemon go pro”, which mixes augmented reality with the use of a mobile device and GPS localisation.

Alongside the development of these terminologies, Deterding locates the emergence of artistic collectives such as Blast Theory, PunchDrunk and Rimini Protokoll in the late 1990s. He considers them pioneers in experimentation with a performative creation that links the mass media, situationism and games (Deterding and Walz, 2015). He argues that, over time, they will stand as the first reference in the European scene.

In his analysis of the ambiguities of games and their multiple definitions and uses, Deterding creates a comparative diagram that is useful to understand the rhetorics of the games applicable to performance studies. His approach consists of understanding the phenomenon of performative ludification in two blocks related to its nature: communal or immersive. He places theatre (understood traditionally), theme parks and other types of theatre interpretative fictions within the category of performance rhetoric of the immersive game. Moreover, he defines RPG (role-playing games), augmented reality games and story games and video games based on stories as genres of reference for these types of theatre creations (Deterding and Walz, 2015).

One of the cornerstones of the creation of ludic systems is the inclusion of a third party (the player) in a participatory role, in pursuit of the co-creation of a joint experience. Just like Umberto Eco (1981) discovers the reader looking at interstices – empty spaces – left by the author, the player is expected to do likewise. In the language of games, participation is directly related to the concept of playability: this term is understood in the sense of a player's participation in a game (Anyó, 2016) and in his or her levels of relation, be it with the game itself, when it deals with individual participation, or multiple, when it deals with a group of participants.

From the point of view of game studies, the concept of participation can be considered appropriate to try to delimit these types of theatre expressions. In fact, in a game, the threshold of participation is reduced, enabling the transformation of the spectators into active participants, as the creative involvement of all the players is necessary (Aarseth, 2001). This process of transformation from the role of expectation to the playing action is analogous to the one required in a ludic co-creation theatre piece, in which since the genesis of the project the audience is considered as a part of the creative process of the experience – and not only as a set of mere users. The difference is applied between those theatre co-creation devices in which at the start of the process it was considered that the audience had an active role within the configuration of the piece and those in which their level of intervention is completely ornamental.

In the same vein, the researcher, theatre practitioner and game designer Elena Pérez⁴ (2016) explores in her thesis a more open definition of game, which enables her to include several types of playful expressions to study co-ludic theatre devices, regardless of the technology used. Pérez underpins her theoretical work on the suitability of the concept proposed by Jane

4. Elena Pérez has a PhD in Drama from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) from 2016. She is currently the artistic director at Trondheim Art Society. Her research focuses on the field of art and technology.

McGonigal, who argues that “all games share four defining traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation” (McGonigal, 2011: 21).

Pervasive Performance

Drawing on McGonigal’s four basic elements of any game and the definition of pervasive games, Pérez (2016) proposes the concept as an emerging genre whose aim is to involve the audience in mass participation experiences, mixing resources of the games, the mass media and performance. In her thesis, she defines a pervasive performance as an event that combines playability with performance and that uses the experience itself as a potential platform of collaborative art in public spaces. These types of experiences could be understood within the framework of the classification of Mixed-reality Performance (Weijdom, 2017), which puts into practice similar theoretical elements.

Pérez delimits her idea of pervasive performance, like all those theatre interaction devices (understood as performances with an artistic sense), which have in common mass participation, the use of the public space and the “play” factor and use technological devices as a medium of interaction (GPS or mobile devices).

Accordingly, it would be possible to find references to certain pieces that share these principles in the work of several artistic collectives that recurrently appear in the contemporary scene, both in Europe and abroad.

In her research, Pérez introduces three classification categories by analysing the type of technology involved in each performative process: multimedia theatre, pervasive performance, and telematic performance. The conclusions suggest that the implementation of digital and interactive media in the field of contemporary performance have meant that “computational” aesthetics (system programming and everything related to interactivity with machines) has been replicated in the exploration of new dramatic forms (Pérez, 2016).

The latter is visible in the recent use of terms such as dramaturgical programming, architectures of experience or expanded dramaturgies, among others, and of the incipient exploration in the field of construction of theatrical structures understood as devices for relational theatre. Pérez rightly argues that, while in the 1980s and 1990s, the language of theatre infiltrated computational creations, today we are witnessing the opposite phenomenon, in which the performing arts borrow concepts taken from system programming logic, software creation, interface design, user experiences or video-ludic scripts for performative or theatrical purposes.

Gameformance: Possible Early References

Thanks to the hybridisation of performative theatre with games and the endless possibilities opened by technology for interactive exploration, from 2010, the concept of gameformance became widespread – in different places in the world and without apparent connection – to refer to certain types of theatrical construction understood as playable theatre.

The compound word gameformance seeks to provide a niche for the experiences that mix structures and game theory with the performing and performative arts. It is important to make a distinction with the concept of game performance, which comes from the lexicon used by game designers and is commonly applied to those who are directly related to digital platforms. However, this term can also be used to refer to the performance of a game. This can be expressed in reference to different concepts, from practical elements such as the playability of the piece to technology aspects such as the performance of the graphs or the progress systems within the game.

In the context of contemporary creation — and specifically in theoretical research as an object of interest of this article —, one of the early references to the concept of gameformance was intuitively coined by the game designer and theatre artist Lara Sánchez Coterón (2012), who, in her doctoral thesis, refers to the theatre piece *Homeward Journeys* as a multiplayer gameformance. Sánchez's main interest in developing it was to link game mechanics with the performing and performative arts.

Lara and her collective, YOCTOBIT, coined this word at the start of their practical playable theatre projects in 2009 with the aim of defining what they were developing more graphically. The collective is based on the concept of *sistematurgia*, proposed by Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca — on system dramaturgies —, broadening the scope of their own performative search and how to relate it to game studies.

Sánchez Coterón further explores, with her collective, the search for a name for these types of experiments that she had been developing — mixing theatre with game design. The creator defines her work as playable theatre, and researches the possibilities of understanding the players as co-creators of the game experience rather than being mere users (Sánchez Coterón, 2014).

The exercise in dramaturgical construction formulated by YOCTOBIT is a game-based dramaturgy that combines elements from the construction of ludic system construction with dramaturgical technique.

In the context of YOCTOBIT, two pieces that the collective calls playable theatre stand out: the first is *Homeward Journeys* (2010), a gameformance that combined elements from the escape room format and interactive theatre, in which the protagonist was an actress who followed instructions of the playing audience. The *mise-en-scène* was strengthened with the use of videomapping. The second project, called *Mata la Reina* (2012), was a collaborative game inspired by LARP mechanics mixed with interactive theatre. The piece was designed so that 50 people could play simultaneously, apart from the actors who activated the device.

In relation to the margins of the unpredictable in the analogue performance, which can always be considered in the development of these types of creations, Sánchez Coterón and Pérez — who share study interests — worked together developing a research paper (2013), in which they look at how the experimental performance can contribute to imagining new possibilities for digital game design, emphasising the importance of the human factor and the limits of its unpredictability.

In their joint work, they identify three practical ways of including resources of the performance in game design and of improving the playability of the desired experiences: the first is to make the game designers themselves improvise the actions of the players in real time; the second would be to exploit the interactions between the game characters/actors/actants. In this case, the idea would be to replace the computer with actors who perform according to the players' instructions; and, in the third place, to recover face-to-face interaction, traditional in games, that occurs in playgrounds, and prioritise their observation on computational game environments. These strategies can be used by digital game designers to consider the factors of the unpredictable in their designs while generating social experiences around the games (Pérez and Sánchez Coterón, 2013).

The concept of gameformance was revised again by Pérez, some years later, in the context of her research on the contribution of performance to technological development — along with the philosopher and researcher Sophia Efstathiou and the philosopher and academic Tsalling Swierstra —, in which, in the framework of the SHAKE project they develop two pieces called gameformances for their theoretical analysis: *The Response-Able Walk* and *Virtuous Designs* (Pérez, Efstathiou and Swierstra, 2019).

In this work, they describe the concept as a “hybrid form that mixes the rhetoric of rules and competition found in games with the open-ended language of instructions found in performance” (Pérez, Efstathiou and Swierstra, 2019: 42). It would refer to the design of a theatrical experience understood as a work of collaborative creation in real time, which provides participants with a clear range of actions and movements (limitation of the magic circle) while its design envisages that they can explore the different possibilities that open up in the development of the experience in real time and the unpredictability of events.

The Response-Able Walk and *Virtuous Designs* are two exercises in gameformance developed in the framework of the SHAKE project for this research, which were tested in different spaces, from classrooms to performance festivals. In the former, the spectators-players follow instructions to create patterns of collective walking through audios. In the latter, the players-participants create a card game with the objective of collectively re-designing a virtuous world through the production of concepts.

The work of the aforementioned researchers focuses on problematising with technology and the margins of its interaction in real time, searching the ambiguities of instrumentalism applied to the creation of digital and theatre devices. Based on this, they draw to the conclusion that the human factor and its unpredictable character are key elements when creating ludic experiences, be they theatre devices, analogue boards or fully digital games.

Beyond the theoretical explorations of the term, the first antecedents of the concept of gameformance worldwide, which are digitalised — and belong to artistic creations that dub themselves as such —, are reduced to isolated experiments. There is an example in *Homo Ludens Project*, in Hungary, an immersive theatre collective that in 2013 — in parallel with Sánchez

Coterón's research —, was developing their piece *Vinka Gameformance* and exploring their own definition of the concept.

Another of the major references comes from the creation of performative games and the Scandinavian game industry,⁵ which, since the 1970s, have been exploring the limits between game and theatre through different artists, game designers and companies. The term gameformance was coined by the Finnish collective *inside out*, which has worked as a company since 2014. They develop interactive performances and immersive theatre, in which they mix role-playing games, technology and theatre. Their most ambitious project is *Escape Room*, inspired by the 20th Century Fox film *Murder on the Orient Express*, under the direction of the Hungarian theatre director and escapist Agnes Kaszas, and produced by the international agency TBWA, along with National Railways and Nordisk Films. The piece is a production of immersive theatre mixed with escape room and is set in a train crossing the country, while the spectators-players must solve riddles and live experiences to reach their destination. It is a thirteen-hour experience, of over one thousand kilometres by train, which involved many layers of script, actors and artists from different disciplines. The production, moreover, was streamed, and included live music by bands that formed part of the performance.

The revolution that the pandemic has entailed for the world of the performing arts has made artists reconsider their formats and platforms. To this end, from 2020, the concept of gameformance has appeared on the search engines more frequently in different places of the world, relating with different forms of understanding the format, according to each creator.

Final Ideas

Under these parameters of an attempt at classification, there are a series of activities that had never had any kind of interest in theatre, in spectacular or structural terms, and that also share the same types of components. This is the case of the escape rooms, theme parks, historical re-enactments, LARP and, even, certain types of flashmobs. These examples include, as a common feature, a fictional delimitation in which the spectator/user/player has to influence the development of the experience in real time. Moreover, they have commercial, therapeutic or educational purposes. As a whole, they would still be wandering in the indeterminate limbo of the attempts of academic definition from the perspective of the performing arts. Moreover, from the perspective of game studies, based on the use of resources such as mimesis, theatre has always been a fundamental part of the creative mechanics and dynamics of game experiences.

However, in relation to theatre ludic experiences — in general terms — we can place the origin of these practices within any dramatic expression that

5. In the framework of game studies, most of the progress and development focuses on the Nordic countries (Norway, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, etc.). Scandinavia is considered, within the world of game theory, one of the most advanced places in terms of research and production of materials, as well as the social value that the game has in different spheres of society, mainly educational and social. This also explains why the productions developed there have higher budgets as the study of game is part of the priorities to be financed by governments and their respective ministries of culture.

distances itself from having a merely theatrical or artistic function, in which the game takes on a key role, such as, for example, in applied theatre. Much of what we understand today as ludic performance or participatory theatre is exactly the same as the dynamics of exercises for actors and non-actors advocated by Boal in the 1970s. It is also the case with certain pieces by historic collectives such as the Living Theatre, which already involved elements of what today we call relational theatre or participatory theatre.

Seen from the viewpoint of videogame designers, in the framework of the performing arts there is a tendency to ignore the fact that, in practical terms, when we speak of “fictional interaction devices in which the audience can take control of the narrativity and it is possible to move from spectator to player or user,” we are almost literally defining the basic structure of a videogame script.

Could therefore the videogame script in interactive theatre be comparable to what a “closed” dramaturgy (Szondi, Sarrazac) would be in a “traditional” *mise-en-scène* (Pavis, 1996: 363)? If this was the case, the challenge would no longer consist of learning to write these types of dramaturgies, in terms of pre-configuring or programming everything unpredictable that may emerge in the relation between the playing audience and the piece, creating *blank spaces* necessary to enable a creative involvement by the audience, but also to learn to balance the basic components of the construction of a dramatic piece insofar as the narration or the fable to be shared is usually implicit in the form/programming of the piece rather than its thematic content or the story to be told directly. Making the audience participate in a theatre production is not a major challenge, taking into account the endless number of references and resources that can be used for these purposes but it can be so when trying to create a structure that enables the audience to truly take creative control of the piece and thus avoid their co-creative role to be only ornamental.

Beyond the fact of identifying what came first, or if the game influenced theatre or vice versa, what is truly relevant for those interested in this issue is looking at the points of contact and divergences. In this respect, the notion of participation is a crucial element that is repeated in all the manifestations previously set out by the different research in the field of game studies already mentioned and with a view to the creation of a ludic theatre piece, it becomes indispensable at least to revise the term and consider the levels and strategies of involvement desired to design the target audience. Moreover, it is significant to consider the opportunities and tools of game design and user experiences as fields of experimentation that can be shaped for the purposes of teachers in classrooms, in contexts of applied theatre or for adventurers of the performing arts.

At present, we are witnessing a dizzying advance of mutations: the influence of the transmedia narrative creation techniques, the rise of internet and mixed reality experiments, which from time to time, seemed to challenge the future of the performing arts and the onsite meeting. If we add to this the consequences and transformations caused by the pandemic in the world of the live arts, many people question whether theatre — as a form of arts

traditionally understood — has a future. In a context that might seem somewhat unfortunate, the art and technology researcher Joris Weijdom (2017) gives us a positive prediction with which to try to hopefully close this reflection. He states that theatre not only has a future but is a key piece in the development of new interaction formats and technologies. We hope he is right.



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