

Performing 'Posthuman' Spectatorship

Digital proximity and variable agencies

WILLIAM LEWIS

In the following article, I analyse the 2012 Punchdrunk/Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab collaboration on the immersive performance *Sleep No More* and the 2015 game/performance *Adventure One* by Coney. Using these examples, I consider the ways that technology interrupts and augments contemporary spectators' proximity and positionality with(in) three architectures of spectatorship: immersion, participation and play. These architectures serve as framing structures for performance experiences, as well as operating as modes of interactive spectatorship allowing varying forms of agency. Although each architecture has distinct experiential qualities, overlaps and parallels exist that when analysed alongside one another form a baseline for posthuman spectatorship. I argue that immersion allows the immersed spectator the feeling of agency, which I describe as affective. In participation, the participant-spectator gains tangible agency through an ability to make significant changes to narrative and event. The playing spectator deploys critical agency in game-based performance events by matrixing both the affective and the tangible within play. My explanation of gameplay combines the affective and tangible registers of experience in the other two modes with the possibility of a meta-agency of critically reflexive choice with respect to a structural understanding of the game-world. The term 'immersivity' often eclipses and collapses other modes of interactivity and proximity, making it a culturally hegemonic notion. One purpose of my analysis is to develop new ways of thinking about interactive spectatorship in the twenty-first century

that push against the term immersive as a unifying structure.

According to Gareth White, '[A]udience participatory performance has among its building blocks – its media – the agency of the participant and their point of view within the work' (2013:26). The focus of this article is on the media(s) of technological interfaces in interactive site-informed performance practices. The interface between media(s), in conjunction with the spectator's embodied gaze and physical proximity with(in) performance events, dictates new modes of perceiving and meaning-making that could be considered as qualitatively different from previous modes of spectating developed in non-technological paradigms. My argument here is that, when mediation and digital augmentation are part of site-based performances, the relationship between narratives and location/space becomes particularly meaningful to what, I refer to as, the posthuman spectator.

Resisting dominant discourses of immersivity, I analyse each performance object through the lens of critical posthumanism, using the term 'technogenesis'. Technogenesis is the 'idea that humans and technics coevolve together' (Hayles 2012: 10). Contemporary spectatorship affected by this coevolution allows multiple ways of seeing and experiencing connections to various forms of interactive digital technologies. The two examples I analyse here use technologies, such as virtual telematics and locative media, to augment the perceptive apparatus of spectators, modifying positionality based on proximity, interconnection and reciprocity. Posthuman spectatorship is therefore a multi-directional mind-body technic that dictates and is dictated

by the various framings and exchanges with(in) performance. The terminology of exchange here denotes the dynamic inputs/outputs between spectator and performance.

Immersive forms of exchange offer the opportunity for the spectator to be thrown into and held in a fictive frame, giving the feeling of being a member of that world by allowing heightened levels of perceived agency based on the being-ness with(in) that frame. I argue that this perception of agency is a crucial element to the architecture and experience of immersion. White explains, 'Agency changes the quality of all action taken' (2013:64). Within participatory forms of exchange, the spectator may interact with(in) an event in a manner that allows alteration of the event as opposed to an impression of agency based on consumptive choice in the event. Although alterations of final outcomes are not required, participants can interact in a manner that activates moments of rupture in the narrative-telling or world-structuring. In gameplay, the spectator's exchange function is based on becoming a critically activated member of the world they experience due to an established set of rules. These rules ask the player to impact outcomes of either the narrative or the overall experience. I argue that it is in gameplay that the posthuman spectator has the most potential for consequential agency and self-determination with(in) and beyond the performance event creating, what posthumanist theorist Stefan Herbrechter describes as, new 'possibilities of interactivity, self-representation, communication and "identity work"', producing 'new forms of subjectivity ... dissociated from material forms of embodiment' (2013:25). Considering that each of these modes of 'spectating' has some basis in an embodied phenomenological subjectivity, it is useful to think of the posthuman spectator as what Robin Nelson defines as an 'experiencer' (Nelson 2010:45). Ralf Ramshardt expands on the development of the spectator into experiencer as 'perhaps what will push immersive technology out of the mode of a separate and solitary novelty-driven experience and

shape a new communal posthuman sense of performance experience' (Ramshardt 2010:138). The emphasis on perception, bodily affectivity and interconnectedness between multiple senses, critical faculties and technological objects – accessed by the immersant, participant and player – calls forth the necessity for an understanding of how architectures of exchange and experiential interfaces with(in) performance operate.

The posthuman spectator operates with(in) interactive networks constructed by proximity and exchange integral to contemporary experiential performance due to the constant interplay between the spectator and the performance object. For my purposes, the term 'interactivity' requires a relational mode of spectatorship connected to the prepositions *with* and *in*. These terms modify the spectator's subject position in relation to the event, allowing multiple forms of interaction and agency. An interactant's mode of engagement with(in) a network of agency and/or affect is dependent on their subject position as part of the narrative event's network, as well as the subject technologies that interrupt and augment proximity and positionality. The posthuman paradigm calls into question the ontological basis of subjectivity and position and, by questioning what it means to be a subject in our technologically mediated world, we must also question what it means to engage with(in) that world. For Andy Lavender, engagement with a performance object/event suggests 'a mode of involvement on the part of individual spectators', where the spectator is defined as 'being of the world and *in* the world' (2016:26). While this being-ness is not necessarily overtly political, it can mark new forms of cultural politics via aesthetic closeness, proximity, and meaning-making through interaction.

IMMERSION (AFFECTIVE AGENCY) →
PARTICIPATION (TANGIBLE AGENCY)

In May of 2012, the MIT Media Lab conducted a trial experiment with the production of *Sleep No More* in coordination with Punchdrunk. They

created an extended experience by tethering an on-site immersant wearing digital sensors to an off-site participant interacting with both the immersive environment and the immersant via a computer monitor and keyboard. The experiment tested a digitally accessed version of immersion to create a unique experience where 'online participants partner with live audience members to explore the interactive, immersive show together' (Torpey *et al.* 2016); *The New York Times*' reviewer David Itzkoff was told that he 'was bound together' with an unknown Other by accepting the challenge to help 'a troubled ghost' after communicating via Ouija board with the virtual participant (2012). According to Punchdrunk's director of enrichment, Peter Higgin, the challenge presented was 'to recreate the infinite possibilities for journeys and experiences happening simultaneously across a Punchdrunk production' (2012). By analysing this tandem experience's operation, I intend to show how differing modes of agency change the immersant's and participant's sense of being a part of the event.

The Media Lab mediated and mediatized the immersive experience to test the range of possibilities in augmenting live performance using the digital tools of virtuality, telematics and haptic feedback. The goal was to understand further the ways that immersive experiences can be transplanted via virtual systems into an at-home experience, allowing its experienter the ability to negotiate real-world physical space via a live avatar in the online delivered frame. Unlike the traditional *Sleep No More* experience, both spectators' narrative exploration was closely monitored and tailored for prescribed modes of interaction. A customized mask with haptic transducers and environmental radio-frequency identification (RFID) trigger sensors that controlled physical elements in the space modified the immersant's experience. The virtual participant followed the immersant via the web interface, using text-based commands while having video and audio streamed over digital equipment, inducing the sense of immersion at home. Discussing technological manipulation in immersive

projects, Josephine Machon explains that 'such exploration in immersive practice go some way to enabling us to acknowledge and understand further the "human" in our everyday interaction in these technocultural times' (2013: 36).

The MIT project used the digital augmentation to foreground interaction between its users, giving them modes of experiencing both the environment and agency. For the virtual participant, the mediation activates the perception of digitally augmented embodiment lived daily in the twenty-first century with the expectation that 'the more intimately manipulated the technology the more embodied the experience is perceived to be' (*ibid.*). Perception and its relationship to embodied experience through digitally matrixed interaction lies at the heart of the posthuman condition of contemporary spectatorship. Digital interfaces simultaneously allow broader and deeper connections with(in) performance by expanding the ontology of location/space, while at the same time narrowing what it means to be in proximity to people, places and things.

Where the immersive framing of the conventional ambulatory experience in *Sleep No More* allows proximity between the immersed spectator and physical locations through the choice of leisurely navigation, the MIT mediation bonds the immersant to the virtual participant, creating a sense of tension in the immersive experience of agency. The virtual participant accesses proximity to the event and space digitally giving them the ability to guide and alter the experience for the immersant through interactive tools. For example, the sensors in the mask worn by the immersant create a proprioceptive link between the immersant and its doppelganger, and the inclusion of remotely operated typewriters allows the participant to communicate to the immersant like a spectral guide. Similar to playing a video game, the virtual participant gains a level of co-authorship by manipulating the immersant's journey through the digital feedback. The participant attains measurable agency through the manipulation of the immersant in the physical space. The variety of

sensors attached to the immersant also delivers multiple forms of biofeedback for the MIT researchers. The operators used this feedback to quantify the subjective experience of the immersant. The question I present here is: what mode of agency did these posthuman spectators encounter: affective or tangible?

I conceive *affective agency* as an embodied feeling of response to 'real' action, while I propose *tangible agency* as an ability to make change beyond the moment of personal response. These two agencies differ in the way that they impact the creative process of meaning-making. I conceive of *affective agency* as a personal response to the dramatic situation that takes the form of an embodied feeling, resulting in choices of interpretation and position within the 'immersive' environment, but that does not result in changes within the dramatic narrative or environment. In difference, I propose *tangible agency* as an ability to make change beyond the moment of personal response, impacting the total possibilities of the dramatic situation. The immersant shapes the experience in their mind and body as a form of what Keren Zaiontz and Adam Alston consider narcissistic spectatorship (Zaiontz 2014; Alston 2016). In immersive productions like *Sleep No More*, agency emerges primarily through the way that narrative is consumed and/or interpreted through an individual affective response with(in) the situation. This immersive model, while embracing a posthuman extension of being in the world, is a form of spectatorship that I am critical of due to its limiting notion of agency as little more than individuated choices based on a personal affective relationship with the performance event. The mode of exchange that arises hardly differs from conventional forms of theatrical spectatorship.

Punchdrunk and MIT ended the collaboration after a five-day testing process. Whether it was deemed successful or not, the experiment allowed the differing modes of agency among the two subject positions to appear. As an immersant who could explore *inside* the space, a sense of individualistic affective agency occurred through an experience of navigation

based on personal desire. Via virtual mediation, the immersant became a corporeal avatar, whose experience was controlled by the virtual participant. When digitally tethered, a new level of authorship was grafted on to the experience of the immersant, delimiting choice and taking away their perceived agency to create an individuated narrative. The experience for the virtual participant may have been heightened, however, due to their ability to control the immersant with technology, exuding tangible agency through their interaction via the corporeal immersant *within* the scenic/narrative environment.

The mode of exchange that posthuman spectators engage in has partially to do with a phenomenological determination based on the agency that the interface allows. In the MIT test, the virtual participant had the ability to tangibly impact the experience of the event in ways that moved beyond personalized meaning-making. The technology allowed agency that was both affective and tangible, affecting not only the participant's experiential feeling of the event, but also the event itself. The virtual participant's input created a feedback loop that effected and affected the immersant while also changing the ludic exploration of the narrative for both. Perhaps the agency gained through the technological interface was too much for Punchdrunk's designers as it limited their offer of open-ended meaning-making for the corporeal immersant. As Higgin explains, one of the difficulties with the project was how they 'were treading a fine line between game and experience, in an already delicately balanced performance' (2012).

→ PLAY (CRITICAL AGENCY)

The next example is an ongoing locative-media-based game/performance created by Coney. *Adventure One* uses digital augmentation and user interaction to draw a playing spectator into a semi-personal narrative requiring *critical agency* formed out of the interaction between the affective and the tangible. This interaction allows the player increased ethical

introspection and reflexivity. In *Adventure One*, the player develops critical agency by using a mobile device interface and this interaction enables new possibilities and understandings of proximity between place (local/symbolic) and space (actual/virtual).

Mobile device interaction changes relationships with(in) physical spaces by altering the proximal connection between the user and location (Farman 2012: 17). Contemporary smartphone technologies operate as apparatuses figuratively grafted on to the bodies of their users and into users' sense of self. Jason Farman refers to this augmentation as the 'sensory inscribed body'. This recently evolved body develops a way of being-in-the-world that renegotiates how location, time and space are perceived. Farman explains, '[W]e are living in a time in which realms of the realized and the realizing (or the actual and the virtual) do not signify themselves as exclusive spaces; instead, the interaction between these spaces continues to become mutually constructive' (46). Proximal connection to the virtual, via a mobile device, fundamentally alters the ontology of space by interrupting the way in which it is interacted with, interpreted and understood.

In *Adventure One*, posthuman spectators perform as players/users whose connection to a narrative proxy, via smartphone, alters their subjective interpretation of their position in the performance event. A programmed character either named Josh or Fiona act as this proxy by delivering text keywords and/or audio playback. These technological co-players create a connective tissue between the player and the narrative from the moment that the player purchases tickets. The interactive connectivity allows a deeper form of agency and involvement in the event based on the player's direct input, creating a feedback loop of meaning-making via technologically augmented embodied space. *Adventure One* operates as a semi-immersive locative game in conjunction with the mobile device in which the physical spaces are 'layered with other worlds and the full sensory-inscribed experience of these spaces depends on successfully navigating the permeable

delineation between them' (78). The program and the device augment not only the narrative and the environments where the narrative occurs but also the player's subjective position with(in) the event.

The player receives an email after ordering a ticket in which they are instructed to await a call. On the other end of this call is a recorded and programmed operator (Josh) who asks if the player is willing to take responsibility for their actions in the upcoming performance. Answering no terminates the interaction. Answering yes leads to another series of questions gauging the player's political and ethical expectations and understandings of the global financial system (Stevens 2015). The connection to the device implicates the player as an integral part of the upcoming narrative based on their agency to take part and the willingness to communicate with(in) the structure. According to Stevens, the smartphone also becomes a 'prop that enables them (the player) to blend in' during their covert mission (2017).

By sending text messages, answering phone calls, reading digital maps and listening to recorded audio, the smart device replicates not only the embedded nature of posthuman sociality, but also acts as a user-initiated locative tool in the real-world game setting. As a locative medium, the smartphone is used in the performance narrative to 'generate new potentialities for facilitating the forms of social appropriation, citizenship and (experimental) sociability' (Wilken and Goggin 2015: 5). Engagement with the digital proxy creates a proprioceptive link, allowing the player to discover new information about the site-specific location where the event takes place: London's financial district.

Look at the buildings about you. The architecture is trying to tell you that this is the heart of the city. But it's a façade, a collection of fronts and hidden levels ... Who owns these buildings, do you reckon? What secrets lie behind their doors? What secret levels beneath your feet? The markets these days live in a secret location ... The market is a computer server, a data centre, somewhere a mile from here in a top-secret location. And most of the traders are algorithms. (Coney *et al.* 2015)

The player's proximity to the physical site calls attention to the political implications of playing the game. The mediated interaction with the program helps develop a sense of relational proximity by allowing the player to connect with a supposed real person, pushing them on to success. The player's task is to test different levels and modes of agency through the technologically guided interaction. For example, at one point the player is asked whether they would like to embody the actions of the antagonist of the story, by re-enacting one of his daily activities: lighting candles in a local chapel. This moment of reflexive agency allows the player to embody a foe, forcing the player to critically evaluate the ethics of doing this act in a real-world environment. The player must balance the liminal space between the fictive world created and the actual world framing the fiction.

The player correlates the locations interacted with(in) against the maps given via email. By listening to pre-recorded audio tracks downloaded to the mobile device and sending/receiving text messages with the digital proxy, the player must fill in the gaps between information present in the real-world setting and the game's construct. Digital assistance is necessary to advance through the narrative, with each step in the adventure unfolding as a live-action video game coaxed on by the virtual guide. Even with this assistance, the player is given 'permission to temporarily suspend the rules' of the game at any time (Stevens 2017). Stevens believes that this ability to pause the game and the fictional reality while still attending to the device allows the player heightened levels of agency (2017). Because the player is in constant interaction with the smartphone, they replicate the daily grind of a typical twenty-first-century city-dweller and can, therefore, maintain their covert status while taking a breather.

The performance uses the player's location in the physical environment as a way of critically affecting the perception of the entire financial system. The smartphone becomes a translator and lens, focusing the player's critical eye and

helping to decode the messages inscribed in the existing architecture. The digital connection allows for a complex multiplicity to arise in the way the narrative unfolds via modified notions of proximity with(in) the performance framework, by making the player more than just another piece of the *mise en scène*. Smartphone interaction allows the player to traverse liminal spaces, engaging in a mode of ludic criticality. This mode mirrors daily experience where 'the process of inhabiting multiple spaces simultaneously has moved into the sphere of the quotidian and often goes unnoticed' (Farman 2012:87). The saturation of information and communication technologies in contemporary society allows a hybrid subjectivity where the spectator habitually negotiates the in-between spaces created at the intersection of the virtual and the actual through a process of bonding. When bonding occurs, each agent involved develops an inseparable connection allowing bi-directional fluidity between the two. The bonding of the virtual and the actual we experience daily creates a sense of techno-alienation replicated in the experience of the player. Navigating meaning-making in real-world locative media games such as *Adventure One* replicates this bi-directional fluidity and harnesses its potential.

Following Coney's goal of making the world a lovelier place, the player is affected in a manner that asks them to consider action against the proposed negative forces of capitalism that the financial district metonymically represents. No longer is the space a common arrangement of buildings and commercial enterprises; it becomes a network of loaded signifiers pointing to systems of capital. The climax of this perspective-altering of space and the actions taking place in these charged locations is a theft – relevant due to the recent near collapse of the global economy. The player, who has been led through various tasks to level-up their ability of critical reflection, is asked to steal something precious from the antagonist. This act happens in broad daylight outside the confines of a contained scenography. Submitting to this task could very well lead

to others in the environment taking negative action against the player. A critical function of the success of this moment is the realization that there is reflexive proximity between the real-world pedestrians and the fictive-world players. Farman explains, 'to be active in this emerging environment one must seemingly participate by simultaneously being a watcher and allowing others to watch. Reciprocity is vital' (2012: 70). The request to become a thief reinforces the bonding of the virtual and actual, bringing the player closer to the narrative's designed impact.

As exciting as this is, it is not the critical moment of the performance. After the successful theft, multiple players are assembled in a local pub to decide what they will do with the stolen object. This question is framed inside the narrative but has symbolic weight in the real world. This final 'scene' acts as a debriefing session with a lasting moment of critical reflection that is crucial to the agency transmitted in and through the performance. In this instance, the player's experience is not merely affective but consequential. Through the debrief, the players disconnect from the narrative, throwing off the ludic veil to critically engage with the material as non-players, activating continued political and social agency beyond the event.

The unique connection created by the tethering to digital proxies and locative media in Coney's *Adventure One* is different from the MIT experiment because the mediation exists to critically augment the perceptive gaze of the player in the real-world, site-informed immersive event. The virtual spectator in the MIT/Punchdrunk collaboration has the tangible agency to change the process of meaning-making for the immersant in the actual space but does not have the ability to engage in meaningful exchange with the narrative. The mode of exchange allowed by an event's framing is crucial to the posthuman spectator's agential experience of meaning-making. In the conventional *Sleep No More* frame (immersion/immersant) sensual-affective exchange occurs, in the MIT mediation (participation/participant)

the exchange becomes communicative and in *Adventure One* (game-play/player) exchange develops out of the two previous forms to allow ludic-criticality.

Immersion, participation and play are three modes of spectatorship gaining significance in the early twenty-first century due to increased connection and proximity to digital technologies. These interconnected modes are introduced to begin a discussion about the emergence of posthuman spectatorship. An imperative of this discussion is to question the ways in which pervasive connections to digital technologies are changing the notion of the self in the twenty-first century. If, as N. Katherine Hayles has asserted, we have already become posthuman (1999), what are the repercussions of posthuman ways of being on spectatorship?

Each architecture of exchange discussed roughly correlates with evolving ways of being in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first. In this period, differing modes of perceiving and being have partially developed based on evolving digital technologies. As Lavender notes, '[W]e experience culture differently because we do so with our minds and expectations adjusted to the speeds and shapes, flows and frames of the expressive apparatus with which we live' (2016: 19). The difference in the shapes and proximities of changing technological interfaces influences how individual subjects encounter cultural formations and impacts the expectations that they come to have when interacting with performance and narrative.

A question to consider is, how do we continue to relate to successive generations of spectators when media and technological exposure exponentially grows more interactive and determinate to the point where it becomes fully invisible and integrative with(in) the self? This question correlates with Hayles' theorization of the cognitive nonconscious, where she argues that networked 'thinking' machines are beginning to erode the human animal's ability to act as an agent of its own accord based on the delimiting of meaning-making in favour of instinctual response. She argues that the

pervasive effect/affect of intelligent machines is propelling a cultural shift in the modalities of being and perception. The power and threat of these ‘thinking’ machines are their ability to make decisions for us without considering the implications of decision making (Hayles 2014, 2016). Cognitive machines operate without the filter we call consciousness and therefore lack the ability to form aesthetic meaning. If our inextricable connections to these machines delimits the inherently human necessity for making meaning, the relationship between performance practices and the spectator will surely change. If the posthuman spectator has already begun to emerge, performance-makers must ask themselves how to remain relevant in an era of increasing techno-affect and what this may mean for the performed narratives that have historically been the mirror held up to humanity.

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