PARCIVAL GOES DIGITAL: NEW MEDIA AS PART OF A GESAMTKUNSTWERK

Gesa Friederichs-Buttner & Johanna Dangel

We describe the results of an evaluation concerning the spectator's reception of and experience with digital media within the interdisciplinary performance *Parcival XX–XI* of the dance Company urbanReflects and the University of Bremen. According to the qualitative interviews conducted, the audience experienced participation as 'disruption'. Four reasons can be registered: language, rhythm, limited exploration and shift of the spectator role.

Parcival XX-XI. © urbanReflects

Once upon a time...

there was an Arthurian hero called Parcival who was searching for something called the 'Holy Grail'. But what has this story of an old cup to do with us? The Company urbanReflects in cooperation with the University of Bremen associatively bases the new transdisciplinary dance performance *Parcival XX–XI* (2011) on the medieval legend of the search for a better world by showing quests for the redeeming Grail in the 20th century and by portraying their own version(s) of utopia.

Striving towards a new means of dramatic narration, *Parcival XX–XI* incorporates contemporary dance and digital media into a non-linear narrative with social implications. Not to bear up against but to converge with more traditional media such as dance, digital media shall be altered to an equal protagonist within the frame of theater. Designing digital media as an interactive experience allows not only the dancers to cooperate in the creation of *Parcival XX–XI* but also the audience. This paper describes results

of an evaluation concerning the spectator's reception of and experience with digital media. One major finding of the evaluation is that the audience experienced participation as 'disruption.' We have analysed the following four reasons for it: language, rhythm, limited exploration and shift of the spectator role.

Parcival XX-XI

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

The narrative of Wolfram von Eschenbachs Parcival provides the frame for our interactive search for a better world. Analogous to the knight Parcival, we are on a quest for what is called utopia. Over time, humankind has discarded many ideas formerly held to promise a new world – the egalitarian ones of communism as well as the elitist ones of fascism. Interpreting capitalism as yet another 'wrong grail', the production tries to delineate current visions of utopia. It becomes a hatchery of ideas for a 21st century quest for a better world by questioning the concept of the Grail. The performance is built as a non-linear collage of atmospheric tableaus and structured into three acts: the first act 'celebrates' the breakdown of capitalism, the second act is a retrospective on totalitarian systems, and the third act envisions our very personal utopias.

WHY THE AUDIENCE SHALL PLAY ALONG?

Central to the production's interactive quest for a better future is the use of digital media. Talking about political systems and our personal visions of new human communities, audience participation is of principal interest in *Parcival XX-XI.* Parallel to our main subject, the individual in society, we thus design interactive experiences, in which the audience can witness the limits and rules of a system in a very basic way.

Digital media carries out a double role in *Parcival XX–XI*: On the one hand it is incorporated dramaturgically and aesthetically in form of interactive and / or live video sequences and on the other hand it is used as a 'tool' to allow interaction. In the latter case, Nintendo Wiimote controllers were used for various reasons. (cf. [1]) With the help of this tool, passive spectators are invited to merge into active performers to collaborate in designing the experience of the play for themselves and the other spectators. As technology-based interfaces always come with certain restrictions, also do the Nintendo Wiimote controllers. In this paper, however, the focus is not set on discussing these practical boundaries but rather on its major dramaturgical impact to *Parcival XX-XI*.

Designing Interaction

While designing *Parcival XX–XI* and its participatory moments, the two following questions were our constant tutor: First, how to design such opportunities in order to make the audience's action and its effect for *Parcival XX–XI* understandable for all 'players', and second, how to communicate the fact that the audience shall participate in the play and when. Talking about the first, a differentiation into three major tendencies of understanding can be summarized: understanding on a technical level, where one learns how to command via Nintendo Wiimote controllers, on a consequential level, where one understands the causal relations between command and consequential performance, and on a dramaturgical

level. Thus, designing participation appears to be a rather complex task which comes with various demands. (cf. [1]) As for making the use of the 'tool' understandable to the audience, we designed a preperformance which is described in the next paragraph.

LEARNING TO SWIM

In reference to J. Murray who in [2] describes that "in a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible", this paragraph explains how the audience of *Parcival XX–XI* was taught a lesson.

With the help of the pre–performance, everyone was given the chance to learn how to handle the provided interface, in our case Nintendo Wiimote controllers. These events included a 'Wii fairy', a jingle, a dancer on a diagonal wall, projections, and the audience. Every five minutes, the audience would be requested by a jingle, saying "it's time for intervention!" Miming, the Wii fairy would now show the audience how to use the controllers and sort out difficulties. Ultimately, the audience was taught two ways to use their Nintendo Wiimote controllers during the performance of *Parcival XX–XI*.

The first gesture (mote being moved down) would introduce a new clothing item to the diagonal wall. The performer would then adjust her body accordingly. The second gesture (mote steadily in front of the body) would remove all items formerly applied. Repeatedly practiced in the pre-performance, these two gestures would reappear in the main performance, only with different implications. The two scenarios of *Parcival XX–XI*, in which the audience is asked for intervention, are described in the next paragraph. Further discussions about to what extent the audience reached not only the technical but also the consequential and dramaturgical level of understanding follow in chapter 'Qualitative Research'.

TO SWIM

The first scenario includes four audience members, each charged with dressing one dancer and (therefore) undressing another. The catch: Only three clothing items are available for the four dancers – always leaving one dancer naked. Participants can use their Nintendo Wiimote controllers to either steal an item or securing their own item, sometimes resulting in inactivity of one or the other participant. The second scenario includes three audience members charged with controlling an avatar. These avatars fight against the dancers. Participants can use their Nintendo Wiimote controllers to either let their avatar attack or defend themselves. Whilst no text is used during *Parcival XX–XI*, the audience interaction operates with words. It is introduced by the jingle "it's time for intervention!" and the starting point of the interaction is marked by the projection of "3, 2, 1, go!". During the participatory scenarios, the words "Steal/Keep/You are already dressed!" (1st scenario), and "Defend/Attack" (2nd scenario) come along with the projections to deepen the understanding of the interaction.

Substantial to the dramaturgical aim of the participatory scenarios is the aspect of interaction within a closed and prescribed system. As we deal with social systems in *Parcival XX–XI*, such as communism or fascism, we wanted to design an experience for the audience, which makes them feel as a social subject. Our scenarios are thus created as an analogy to society – both constitute a closed system in which citizens are allowed only a limited amount of freedom of action, since they are given only a limited amount of options for action: 'dress/undress' and 'attack/defend'.

30 short guided interviews have been conducted with ten females and 20 males between 24 and 63 years old. Most interviews were held in German and are here translated by the authors. Interviewees were chosen by chance. For statistic purposes, name, sex, age and occupation were also collected. Each interview took between five and 20 minutes and implied the same three short questions:

1. Which aspects especially caught your eye?
2. How did you perceive the use of digital media?
3. How would you rate the use of Nintendo Wiimote controllers?

TO SINK

Evaluating these first 30 interviews, one decisive term recurs again and again: disruption. Regardless of their professional background, many recipients describe that they experienced the two participatory scenarios not as part of the performance but as disruption in form of a "a break-entertainment" (interviewee 1: int 1). According to the audience, these two sequences do not seem serious, more like an "audition" (int 2), or like „physical education" (int 3) – "a gimmick." [3] One woman even stated that – contrary to what the jingle presupposes – she does not experience the interaction as a real intervention but as "being degraded to a robot" (int 4). It thus seems, according to Benford et al., that the "performance's continuity is at risk," [4] during the participatory moments for several reasons. As paper length is constrained, we cast only a short glance on the following four: language, rhythm, limited exploration and shift of the spectator–role. Contrary, there are a few interviews of which we assume that disrupting the flow of a performance can also be seen as a promising design strategy, as here: "It was different to the rest, with the jingle, text etc., and this is exactly why I remember those moments best" (int 5). However, in this paper we will not provide an in–depth discussion about it but indicate that this topic leaves space for future work.

LANGUAGE

"(...) out of the sudden there is text and the jingle. It is confusing. It appears to be more separated from the rest of the performance than it was planned, right?" (int 6)

Various interviewees remark that first, the jingle „it's time for intervention!" and second, the written text of "3, 2, 1, go!", "Steal/Keep/You are already dressed!" and "Defend/Attack!" has set the participatory scenarios aesthetically apart from the rest of the performance. According to the audience, by using language, an emphasis is produced which does not find its analogy on the content side. Using text elements in our piece without language was an attempt to make the interaction clear, quick, and easily understandable for the audience.

RHYTHM

"These participatory moments are interesting, too, but not as smoothly integrated into the rest of the performance as it could be." (int 7)

Many people judged the participatory scenarios negatively as not fitting into the rhythm of the performance. The interviewees thus communicate an important element of contemporary dance: timing. From a dramaturgical point of view, the first participatory scenario is scheduled to an appropriate point in time. Before talking about the totalitarian system in the second act of *Parcival XX–XI*, we offer the following experience to the audience: The political system we live in does not happen to us but is chosen by either confirmation or non-rebellion. But choreographically, the first participatory scenario is scheduled to an inappropriate moment in time as it follows after a quite long scene without music and projections, focusing on the materiality of the styrofoam cuboids. At this point, the audience expects something very dynamic and energetic to follow. Instead, the jingle as an introduction for the first participatory scenario intensifies the stagnation to a break. Further, members of the audience have to step on stage, take their Nintendo Wiimote controllers and get in position. This all takes a while in which we often 'lost the audience'. To overcome this problem, we are considering rearranging the participatory scenarios in order to find an appropriate timing for *Parcival XX–XI*.

LIMITED EXPLORATION

"I was disappointed about the fact that only two gestures would cause any action!" (int 8)

The two gestures are often described as too simple, not opening any kind of freedom of action. Interestingly, nobody reflected upon the fact that we wanted to produce exactly this feeling of restricted action in a set system to further encourage individual solutions. In none of the performances of *Parcival XX–XI*, a spectator sought for solutions beyond the prescribed system to overcome the constraints: For example, for the second scenario one could have denied to fight, as a test person did in the general rehearsal or as interviewee 9 says, "we all could have acted more impulsively by e.g. falling down to the floor, as the dancers did". But they didn't. As the participants follow our rules, there is no other solution than 'playing' against each other.

Interviewee 8 and many others seem to not come across the technical and consequential level of understanding: Even though participating in the play, they can not produce further meaning for the context of *Parcival XX–XI*. They appear to be frustrated and disappointed about the limited freedom of exploration offered by the controller itself. In order to release the audience from this rather sidetracking technical aspect of how to handle the controller, we are considering changing the technology from Nintendo Wii-controllers toward a more self–explanatory option (such as camera–based tracking solutions, motion capture suits or Microsoft Kinect). However, all suggested options come with various other challenges which are, in fact, of a rather practical nature. (cf. [1])

SHIFT OF THE SPECTATOR-ROLE

"It is very boring to watch people in their winter coats, doing the same action over and over again!" (int 10)

Although the declared aim of the authors of *Parcival XX–XI* was to not create a traditional audience situation of 'leaning back in the seats', the audience described the participatory scenarios as a disturbance to the (seemingly!) previously established traditional way of watching. According to the spectators, on the one hand, they were pulled out of their coziness by the possibility to go on stage and 'play' with the Nintendo Wiimote controllers, and on the other hand, they were supposed to watch other spectators

(non–professionals) to act on stage which resulted in different reaction such as e.g. schadenfreude [cf. 5] or boredom (int 10). Similarly, Benford et al. [4] suggest that "beginnings must be designed to introduce the narrative, brief participants (…). It should be designed to be an integrated part of the experience." For *Parcival XX–XI*, we might have failed in taking the chance of the pre–performance to not only brief the audience how to handle the controllers etc. but also to introduce the main subjects of the play. We only teach the mechanism of the interaction as such and do not communicate relevant hints to the audience by means of dramaturgical impact for the experience of the play itself.

Benford et al. [4] further define traversals between physical and virtual worlds and temporal transitions between episodes as moments in which the flow of the play is on risk. These points clearly bring us to the major issue of our participatory performance as we invite members of the audience to not only progress from spectator to active participant and finally performer, (cf. [1, 6]) but we also expect them to fall back into their seats and lean back again after "they have done what we expected them to do" (int 11). One can say, we prepared the audience for the shift from a passive spectator to an active performer in the pre–performance but we 'forgot' to design the back–shift from a performer to a spectator. [7]

By the use of participation, we cause different categories of audience at the same time: passive spectators and active performers. This results in the fact that there are various opportunities to miss parts of the performance as one is moving between the passive physical world and the active virtual world. As *Parcival XX–XI* does not provide a linear narrative but works with fragmented atmospheric tableaus which are then free for interpretation to the audience, one could think that the above mentioned aspects are of no consequences (and we partly thought so). But one major problem here is that most people expect to be served a story with a beginning and an end. And as they do not get 'the explanation', they feel baffled. All other challenges, such as 'participating', seems to be the icing on the cake.

To be continued

Summarizing, we can say, that part of the audience does not experience our interactive quest as 'real' but as 'fake' by calling it a disruption of the 'real play'. Reflecting on why they felt disrupted in the flow of the performance, they name reasons such as the use of text in a fully textless performance, the wrong timing, the limited freedom of exploration with the Nintendo Wiimote controllers, and the shift of the spectator role in an otherwise traditional piece. Still, there is a small group of people that felt encouraged to participate and got caught by exactly the disruption as it appears contrariwise to what one would expect of the 'common flow of a performance'. We might need to ask ourselves how to establish a rather smooth frame of expectation to find the right moments to break with it again. In this context, and what comes for us with surprise, our advertisement campaign seemingly promised the audience a 'proper' story and more 'real' interaction. We thus have to look into the need of helping the audience to trust themselves in their reception – to strengthen them in being an emancipated [8] and postdramatic spectator.

Acknowledgement

References and Notes:

1. Gesa Friederichs–Büttner, Johanna Dangel and Benjamin Walther–Franks, "Interaction and Participation – Digital Media and Dance in Interplay" (paper presented at the Conference on Interactive Media Arts, Copenhagen, 2011).
2. Janet H. Murray, Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998).
3. Marion Klötzer, "Interdisziplinäre Visionen Odysee," Kulturjoker, June 2011.
4. Steve Benford, Gabriella Giannachi, Boriana Koleva, and Tom Rodden, "From Interaction to Trajectories: Designing Coherent Journeys Through User Experiences" (paper presented at CHI '09, Boston, 2009).
5. Gesa Friederichs–Büttner, "Don't Duck Your Head! Notes on Audience Experience in a Participatory Performance" (paper presented at the International Symposium on Smartgraphics, Bremen, 2011).
6. Jennifer Sheridan, Alan Dix, Simon Lock and Alice Bayliss, "Understanding Interaction in Ubiquituos Guerrilla Performances in Playful Arenas" (paper presented at the BCS HCI, Leeds, 2004).
7. Stuart Reeves, Steve Benford, Claire O'Malley and Mike Fraser, "Designing the Spectator Experience" (paper presented at CHI '05, Oregon, 2005).
8. Jacques Rancière, Der emanzipierte Zuschauer (Wien: Passagen, 2009).