DIGITAL THEATER SYMPOSIUM ARS ELECTRONICA 2018
The World is Your Engine

7.9.2018

Philipp J. Ehmann
pje.me
pje@gmx.at

During this talk I want to discuss game based storytelling in immersive theatre through three projects of mine. The first project ist called **Stahlstadt** (2018/19). It is my current alternate reality game (also now sometimes social media performance) which will take place in one year. It is a durational performance which lasts one week. In this type of immersive theatre the story is told through several characters and through several different media and your interaction with this alternate world that is created. You can meet characters in real life, but also write them on Facebook, or receive phone calls from them and it is through these interactions, that the story unfolds. This used to be called an alternate reality game, recently, especially by the Schauspielhaus Wien, it's also been called a social media performance. I would call it an alternate reality game still, since I think the element of social media integration into the way we tell the story, follows a game based dramaturgy. Namely one that is based on the player's non-linear interaction with different story elements. Here *story worlds* are created, rather than linear narratives and much of the way the story is perceived, comes from a players own decisions within that story world. But of course it is a performance also: we have actors, they rehearse scenes, and so forth. Social media offers a way to engage with the story on a personalized level for each audience member, therefore creating individual dramaturgies for each person who takes part, as well as collective dramaturgies for the whole audience. The performance moves between realities and fictions and is situated pervasively in the real world. That means that for people who accidentally stumble upon the performance (both in the real world and online), it will take a short while to realize that they are, in fact, looking at, or interacting with a performance. This 'this is not a game' dynamic or 'seamless integration with everyday life' can be both problematic and extremely exciting. The durational and multi-platform aspects allow us to tell a story from many different sides, one thing I feel is missing in many more traditional theatre settings, but that is being used in video games more and more frequently. Additionally it allows the audience to choose their own path through the story to a certain extent.

We use short episodic narrative structures that together form a longer dramaturgy, taking elements from tv shows, Youtube, but also episodic video games such as Life is Strange. Furthermore we use choice based storytelling: we react to player/audience choices and improvise story elements on the go through live interaction. These are what Jaakko Stenros would call distributed narratives. They allow for first person stories and collective stories to emerge and form the main way storytelling happens within the performance. (Montola et al 2009, p150-151).

Conventional narrative structures in theatre often fall short in showing us the complexity of our societies. These newer dramaturgies have the potential to introduce the voices of underrepresented entities within our world. Jeoffrey Kim even suggests that alternate reality games form social communities that can overcome obstacles collectively as a team (Kim, 2009), a rather political idea for the 21st century.

The second project I want to discuss is Play:Vienna's **Snapchat Escape Room** (2016). As far as I am aware this was the first ever social media escape room. It was commissioned by Red Bull as part of their Mind Gamers series. We created two escape rooms on Snapchat, in which the audience/players helped an actress escape from an underground lab facility. It was a live performance that was watched by around 150,000 people, and which was split into two escape rooms on two separate days, with one week in-between them. Each lasted for about 2 hours and were filmed live, with a couple of minutes between each snap and about 100 snaps per escape room. On Snapchat you can post short videos and photos (both less than 10 seconds long). You can annotate them with emoticons and text. They are grouped together in what's called a "story" and in fact this term is quite fitting. The fact that both Instagram and Facebook are now including "stories" in their newsfeeds too, clearly exemplifies the storytelling mechanisms in social media. To keep people on their sites, social media companies need to include personal journeys, otherwise their users get bored. Personal journeys and "the hero's journey" have always been at the very center of theatre dramaturgies and storytelling.
Through social media and the marketing power of Red Bull, we were able to reach an amount of people that is unheard of in traditional theatre. Moreover we tapped into audiences that would never go to see a theatre show. Still, the limitations of Snapchat had an impact on the project. How do you make riddles and tell a story in less than 10 second intervals? Can game mechanics convey enough story to be interesting for the viewer? What happens if storytelling happens mainly through visual cues, or environmental storytelling? And what does this have to do with theatre?
I would argue that each audience member, when playing an interactive theatrical experience, will create their own dramaturgy, their own journey. The focus moves away from our fictional protagonists and towards our real individual audience members as protagonists.

This is very much the case in my last example: **The Adventure Automat** (2014 - now), a series of live telephone performances as urban adventures, where you follow an actor through a phone call and discover the city anew on your own personalized adventure. Each performance only has one audience member and up to ten actors framing their experience. The experience starts with a vending machine, that promises the adventure of your lifetime. You press a button and receive an envelope. In it you find a mobile phone. It rings. You pick up. That's when your adventure starts. In theory there is a planned out route the audience members take through a prepared story. However, the concept is open enough to allow for emergent gameplay: gameplay that is decided on by the player, rather than the gamemaster, which will allow for creative responses to situations and agency of the player. At all points the control over their adventure lies with the player, not with the artist. Placing the audience as an integral part of the dramaturgy of the piece acknowledges not only their existence, but allows for acts of co-creation. The ethics of who is in control at what point in the performance is one of the most important questions the artist must discuss. Jeffrey Kim and Elan Lee suggest "that storytelling cannot be only the passive, top–down experience [...]." but that "Audiences demand a stage and a voice of their own." (Kim 2009). So much of the way we tell stories in our daily lives, especially on social media, involves us at the

center of the dramaturgy, not a surrogate hero through whom the story is told. If we can make our audiences heroes, what does that mean for the future of our societies?

Bibliography:
Kim, J., Lee, E., Thomas, T., Dombrowski, C. (2009) Storytellling in New Media, *First Monday*, Volume 14, Number 6, 1 June 2009.

Montola, M., Jaakko Stenros, Annika Waern (2009) *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*, London: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.

Performances mentioned:
Ehmann, P. (2019) *Stahlstadt*, Instagram & Ars Electronica Festival, Linz.
Play:Vienna (2016) *Snapchat Escape,* Snapchat, Vienna.
Play:Vienna (2014) *The Personal Adventure Automat*, Streetlife Festival Vienna, Vienna.