

“This is your house”: Audience engagement approaches in (Finnish) Immersive Theatre.

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| <p>Abstract</p> <p>A current participatory turn in consumer behaviour and cultural policy-making is exemplified by the rising popularity of “immersive” theatre, a genre in which the audience are cast as the protagonists of open-world spaces to construct their own narrative arc of a production.</p> <p>This thesis uses qualitative case study to deconstruct the audience engagement approach of an award-winning Finnish immersive theatre production, <i>Book of Rooms (Huoneiden Kirja)</i> in order to offer insight into the facilitation of immersive audience experience. The data gathered includes pre- and post-production interviews with the Artistic Director and Head of Audience Experience of the production, triangulated with data from interviews with other Finnish immersive theatre makers, contextualised with the author’s own phenomenological experience of <i>Book of Rooms</i> as an audience member.</p> <p>The research suggests that it is through non-hierarchical leadership processes combining artistic and logistical thinking with value-driven decision-making that agency-driven audience engagement arcs can be created. The holistic nature of this approach means that these findings may be relevant to wider discussions of cultural participation, impact and inclusion.</p> | |
| <p>Keywords</p> <p>Immersive theatre, arts management, participation, engagement, audience, inclusion</p> | |
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1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, a trend has been emerging in multisensory and exploratory theatrical events; productions that snub the traditional proscenium arch, demolish the metaphorical fourth wall and offer audiences the opportunity to investigate elaborate worlds and curate their own journey through a story. These productions go under the umbrella term of *immersive theatre*, a form often argued to have been pioneered by the British theatre company Punchdrunk (Biggin, 2017).

Since 2000, Punchdrunk have developed a distinct aesthetic as a company; one in which audiences enter their productions as a cast of masked voyeurs who explore vast, finely detailed sets, and piece together narratives from deconstructed versions of works, such as *Macbeth*, the collected works of Edgar Allan Poe, or more recently Greek mythology, at their own pace. To many theatregoers, this aesthetic is synonymous with the term “immersive theatre”. However, the range of immersive experiences currently available to audiences around the world in fact varies vastly in form and scale, existing in both the mainstream and fringe, reaching audiences from one to thousands, with many theatre companies and artists keen to adopt the term to describe any production that involves some degree of interactivity (Biggin, 2017; Frieze, 2016).

Although there are many different approaches to creating immersive theatre, there are several mutual practices, for example working in interdisciplinary and site-specific settings and offering audiences the agency to explore multisensory artistic objects that blur the boundaries between performance and personal space (Machon, 2013). This thesis will argue that working with these practices compels theatre-makers to facilitate audience experience with more inclusive and dialogic strategies than in more conventional live performance formats, and that examining these approaches may offer new insights into audience engagement.

“Audience engagement” is a term with many different interpretations. Ben Walmsley (2019) argues that the core terminology used to describe audiences’ relationship to performance, including the term “audience engagement” (alongside other similarly used terms such as “audience development” and “enrichment”), is vague and at times

problematic (p.8). In this thesis, the term “audience engagement” will be used to refer to methods used across the arts and culture field to build relationships with audiences and lower barriers to participation. These methods unite a broad range of forms of cultural work, including artistic work and programming, communications or marketing, educational activities and other forms of community building.

Belfiore and Bennett (2007) argue that gaining an understanding of audience engagement mechanisms may increase understanding of aesthetic experience. This research attempts to capture the audience engagement mechanisms of a case study, award-winning 2021 Finnish immersive theatre production *Book of Rooms* (in Finnish, *Huoneiden Kirja*), by exploring production values and processes through semi-structured interviews with the production’s Artistic Director, Alma Rajala, and Head of Audience Experience, Venla Luoma, triangulated with data collected from interviews with other Finnish immersive theatre makers and contextualised in the context of my own phenomenological experience of the case study production.

The thesis will then present a hypothesis that (Finnish) immersive theatre practice is an example of value-driven, non-hierarchical experience design processes, in which inclusive decision-making approaches facilitate agency-driven and community-focused experiences. The thesis will conclude by proposing two models that can be used as design tools for developing audience experiences: “The Immersive Feedback Loop”, a decision-making process that shapes interactions with participants on micro and macro levels, and the “Immersive Arc of Engagement”, inspired by Brown and Ratzin’s (2011) “Arc of Engagement”.

1.1 Background of the study

In Finland, the immersive theatre scene consists of a small but active community of several dedicated immersive theatre companies who are broadly multidisciplinary and represent a diverse range of artforms, for example contemporary dance, circus, visual art, performance art and theatre. These companies include: The Center for Everything (founded 2015 but with a history dating longer under other names), Recover Laboratory (founded 2014) and 00100ENSEMBLE (founded 2018). As well as other artists and companies that work with

immersive practices within their scope but do not do so exclusively, for example Raekallio. Corp and the Finnish National Opera's Opera Beyond project.

One immersive theatre production, *Book of Rooms*, forms the basis of the case study for this thesis. The production took place between 13 - 29 August 2021 as part of the city of Turku's European Capital of Culture 10th anniversary programme and was co-produced by three independent companies: Aura of Puppets, the AB Dance Company and TEHDAS theatre.

Aura of Puppets is an artist-led network and Finland's largest network for puppetry professionals. They represent independent artists nationally and promote Finnish puppetry both locally and internationally by producing festivals, performances, events and mediating puppeteers for other events and venues. AB Dance Company (or Aurinkobaletti) is a contemporary dance group and dance theatre that works in cross-disciplinary artistic settings and has a strong focus on audience engagement. Finally, TEHDAS theatre is Turku's leading independent theatre. All three of these companies are based in the Manilla Culture Factory, a multi-purpose arts and culture venue located in an old factory built in the 1860s on the eastern riverside of Turku, a city located in the southwest coastal area of Finland and the country's third largest urban area after Greater Helsinki and Tampere.

The *Book of Rooms* production was envisaged by Artistic Director Alma Rajala, a puppetry director, puppeteer and writer, and an active member of Aura of Puppets. Rajala assembled a core working group of 11 cultural professionals from different backgrounds and disciplines, who collectively coordinated a team of 130 local artists involved in the production; with the creative team representing a broad range of disciplines, including theatre, puppetry, dance, music and visual art, and showcasing the collective talents of the entire local independent art field.

The inspiration behind the production was a prose-poetry book of the same name, *Huoneiden Kirja*, written by Saira Susiluoto and first published in 2003. Susiluoto's *Huoneiden Kirja* contains 64 poems in the Finnish language, with each poem revealing a room within a windswept house as it is explored by a girl. A prologue depicts the girl's arrival to the house, where she finds an old chart, and employs an *I Ching* inspired coin toss system in order to interpret the chart and navigate her journey through the house,

asking questions that the rooms answer in their own ways. Readers are thus encouraged to explore the poems using the same coin toss system (Susiluoto, 2003).

The Book of Rooms production brought these poems to life in Turun Kivipaino, a former printing factory of over 2500 square metres built in 1910 in central Turku. Inside the factory, Susiluoto's windswept house of 64 rooms was recreated through installations and performances of varying scale spread across multiple floors and spaces within the site. Not all of the rooms were distinct or walled spaces, for example some installations or "rooms" shared large spaces. Other metaphorical rooms were artworks that might be experienced inside of cupboards or other small spaces situated within an actual room. Each of these literal and metaphorical rooms represented a poem from Susiluoto's prose poetry book. The corresponding poem could be found next to the door when entering a room, or on the wall nearby to the artwork in larger spaces, and the number of the room was indicated by a lightbox. The poems were explored through the mediums of theatre, puppetry, music, dance, sound and visual arts. In some of the artworks, for example if performed through sound-art or voice, the words of the poem were included in the interpretation of it; however, many of the rooms were a non-verbal artistic expression of the associated poem.

Rajala's production was critically acclaimed and nominated for several awards: The core working group was awarded Finland's 2021 State Prize for Performing Arts, which is arguably Finland's highest accolade in the Performing Arts field and is annually awarded by the Arts Promotion Centre Finland's (Taika) national arts councils in recognition of work of exceptionally high artistic merit. The National Council stated that the grounds for awarding the prize were for the "collective creative power and collaborative abilities" of the independent performing arts sector in Turku, and that the core working group ensured that the production "retained its ideological and artistic focus throughout the space." (Arts Promotion Centre Finland, 2021).

Artistic Director, Alma Rajala, was shortlisted for the City of Turku's person of the year (Vuoden Turkulainen) award, an annual prize awarded to an individual for their contribution to the city and its image. Fellow nominees included local celebrities, sporting figures and authors. Rajala's presence on this list therefore suggests that the production made an impact on the local community as well as the artistic community.

Rajala was also awarded the 2021 Critic's Weight prize (Kritiikin punnukset) by the Turku division of the Finnish Critics' Association alongside *Book of Rooms*' scenographer Johanna Latvala. The pair were awarded the prize for their work on the production and the impact it made on Finnish immersive theatre. The Critics' Association described the work as "opening beautifully towards the audience" ("Suomalaisen teatterin merkkipaalu avautuu kauniisti kohti yleisöä." Finnish Critics' Association, 2021).

1.2 Problem formulation

This research investigates the intersecting areas of immersive theatre, cultural participation and audience engagement. Walmsley (2019) argues that immersive theatre's focus on the "viscerality" of the audience experience, for example through haptic, sensory and physical encounters may "qualify them as something fundamentally different from many other performance experiences" (p. 33). If, as Walmsley (2019) argues, immersive audience experiences are indeed fundamentally different to other audience experiences, analysis of the approaches and structures that facilitate these experiences may provide insights relevant to participation and engagement across cultural fields, particularly when considering current consumer behaviour and cultural policy-making trends that focus on participation.

A significant body of research in immersive theatre has grown over the last ten years, with much of the existing literature written by theatre scholars focusing on the experiential and political participatory concepts and aesthetics arising from the perspective of the audience participant, for example: Alston, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Biggin, 2017; Heddon et al., 2012; Machon, 2016; and Wozniak, 2015. Some of the existing literature is also written from the perspective of the theatre maker, for example Bucknall (2023), Cunningham (2021), Ramos and Marvala (2016) Ramos et al (2020) Warren (2017), and Webb (2022), offering insight into the dramaturgical processes and ideologies of immersive theatre making.

Some literature combines a balance of voices from both sides of the creator/audience relationship, for example Josephine Machon's (2013) influential work *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* and her later work *The Punchdrunk Encyclopaedia* (2018) both utilise Machon's own theories regarding the logistics and aesthetics of immersive experience contextualised with detailed conversations

between the author and leading immersive practitioners. Similarly, Rose Biggin's (2017) research was undertaken as an embedded CDA researcher over 4 years with Punchdrunk (p.2) offering extensive detail into their practice, and finally James Frieze's (2016) edited collection *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The politics and pragmatics of Participatory Performance* offers a broad range of perspectives and case studies from authors representing both sides of the creator/audience relationship.

However, the majority of the aforementioned literature is concentrated around British or American immersive experiences and a significant amount of the literature more specifically focuses on the work of the British theatre company Punchdrunk, including their long running U.S. production *Sleep No More* in New York City. Therefore, a research gap can be identified with immersive productions outside of the leading immersive theatre locations. Locations in which immersive experiences may not yet be considered mainstream and may therefore incite different responses and behaviours from audiences and thus necessitate different processes to facilitate their engagement.

Participation and engagement is therefore also central to the research framework. Ben Walmsley's (2019) work in the New Directions in Cultural Policy Research series *Audience Engagement in the Performing Arts: A Critical Analysis* documents a recent surge of interest in immersive theatre research and suggests that it may hold the potential to offer unique insights into audience experience (pp. 32-33). Within the existing immersive theatre literature that focuses on participation, "extended audiencing" is a popular topic, for example Ritter's (2016) work argues that the postmodernist approaches of Punchdrunk choreographer Maxine Doyle may facilitate the four stages of insider dynamics: complicity, porosity, contagion and inclusion, to promote extended audiencing and meaning-making (p.47). Furthermore, Biggin (2017) and Flaherty (2014) both explore participation outside of the immersive event through contributions to fan forums and fan fiction that extend engagement beyond the production. Finally, the impact of participation specifically aimed at young immersive audiences has been explored by Colvert et al. (2018) and Cremin et al. (2016) whose works examine Punchdrunk Enrichment activities with school groups.

This thesis will focus in particular on the facilitation of immersive participation and how the facilitation processes may impact engagement. Gareth White is an influential voice in

this field. In his book, *Audience Participation in Theatre, aesthetics of the invitation* (2013), White presents a theory of the facilitation of audience participation that includes, but is not limited to, immersive theatre in which explicit and implicit invitations to participate are made to audiences on behalf of the theatre maker. When invited by a performer to participate in any participatory element of a production, White argues that the audience's ability to engage, for example, in moments of role-play or to work towards a goal, relies on "resource continuity" (Goffman, 1986, as cited in White, 2013) or personal access to the shared assumptions, cultural contexts or stories required to fully understand the terms of engagement. Thus, an audience member who has a previous understanding of the context will have greater opportunity to participate than one who does not. (White, 2013, p.47). White's theory on the aesthetics of invitation, and his development of Murray's (1999) model of interactive narrative building, "procedural authorship", thus emphasises the relevance of immersive practice to current cultural participation and engagement trends and will be used as a central source in this thesis.

1.3 Aim of the study

The introduction has identified immersive theatre as a current trend in cultural participation and argues that there is limited literature offering examples of best working practices in the facilitation of immersive audience engagement, particularly outside of the U.K. and U.S. This thesis aims to contribute to the research gap by identifying values, concepts and mechanisms that facilitate immersive audience engagement in the context of Finnish immersive theatre, an emerging audience when compared with U.S. or U.K. audiences. Furthermore, the thesis proposes that immersive audience engagement approaches and techniques can be utilised in a broad range of both immersive and non-immersive engagement design processes and thus be relevant to a wider audience of readers interested in cultural participation and audience engagement.

The research questions have therefore been developed with the aim of identifying working practices, values and mechanisms:

Primary research question:

"How do (Finnish) immersive theatre makers approach audience engagement?"

Sub-questions:

- What values drive decision-making in (Finnish) immersive audience engagement?
- Whose responsibility is it to ensure participatory spaces are physically and psychologically safe and engaging environments?
- What modes of participation and experiential concepts arise from these approaches?
- What learnings from immersive theatre practice can be applied to other audience experiences in the art and culture field?

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into four chapters, the first of which being an introduction that has offered contextual information regarding the background of the study and outlined the aims and research questions. The thesis will now continue with the second chapter, the theoretical framework, which defines what is meant by “immersive” theatre and identifies the various tools and formats of immersive productions. In this research, a participation and engagement theoretical lens will be used to evaluate the case study, therefore the concepts of cultural participation and audience engagement are also defined and connections made with immersive audience engagement practice.

The third chapter outlines the research methodology of the study. The research methods of Spectator-Participation-as-Research and traditional qualitative case study are outlined followed by information about how the data has been collected and analysed, concluding with critical reflections on the research process.

This is followed by the largest chapter of the thesis, the analysis and results. This chapter is divided into three parts: data analysis that enables a Finnish immersive engagement approach to be identified, an examination of audience experience of the case study developed from interview material and my own phenomenological experience as an audience member and finally a section using Brown and Ratzkin’s (2011) Arc of Audience Engagement as a model through which to track audience experience.

The final chapter of the thesis is the conclusion, which summarises the analysis into four main points defining the (Finnish) audience engagement approach. In the conclusion, visualisations of the Immersive Feedback Loop and the Immersive Arc of Engagement are presented followed by suggestions for further research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Immersive Theatre

The first section of the theoretical framework will establish what is meant by the term “immersive theatre” in the context of this research and outline some of the formats and tools used to facilitate engagement with immersive productions.

2.1.1 What does “immersive” theatre mean?

Immersive theatre is a term used to describe a broad range of, predominantly site-specific or site-responsive, performances that remove the audience from seats and engage them as active participants in the production or, as Machon (2016) states, in which they become a “living part of the aesthetic” (p.30). Biggin (2017) states that immersive theatre is presented as a “whole world” or “all-encompassing scenography” in which the audience can temporarily “author” their experience (p.66) and Alston (2016) acknowledges the ambiguity of the genre by describing immersive theatre as “a mode of encounter, rather than a particular theatre practice or spatial configuration” (p.11).

Brigante and Elder (2020) identify immersive theatre as a sub-industry of the immersive entertainment industry; a group of experience-focused creative industries that are united by experiential design methodologies and are blurring the boundaries between the worlds of art and entertainment. According to Brigante and Elder, other examples within the immersive entertainment industry include: interactive art museums, theme parks, escape rooms and live-action role playing (LARP). These industries exist on a broad spectrum between small-scale independent productions to large-scale commercial entertainment; but despite some obvious differences in content between the groups working under the umbrella of the ‘immersive entertainment industry’, there are many shared production formats and tools employed in the creation of immersive experiences, which will be defined later in the theoretical framework.

Thus, contemporary discourse suggests that “immersive theatre” is still an ambiguous term to both makers and audiences. Brigante and Elder (2020) concur, arguing that whilst traditional theatre productions tend to conform to a sequence of steps that offer some level

of consistency to the audience (a ticket is bought, a seat is taken, a performance will take place on a stage in front of them), immersive theatre experiences vary widely enough that it is difficult for audiences to recognise them as a familiar format (p.63). Machon (2013) breaks down this sequence of steps and presents them in a comparative table between “Traditional theatre vs Immersive Theatre” (pp.54-55). Some of the key differences illustrated by Machon include:

Secrecy and/or mystery: Whilst some immersive productions may be marketed through traditional channels, such as a venue’s programming, others may evoke a sense of secrecy or mystery through the use of cryptic online campaigns or word of mouth in order to increase anticipation. This secrecy might also extend to information about how to prepare for or arrive at the event, for example by withholding some of these details, such as address, dress code or theme, until nearer to the event (Machon, 2013, p.54).

Behaviour and rituals: Conventional theatre experiences tend to adhere to formats that elicit certain behaviours. Machon (2013) outlines a traditional experience as one in which after being shown to their seat, if an audience member is attending with a family member or friend they might engage in light conversation whilst waiting for the performance to start. This will continue until the lights dim, indicating that the performance is beginning, at which point the conversation will stop. The audience may be reminded to turn their phones off. At the end of the performance the audience will applaud, during which time the performers will take a bow (p.54-55).

In contrast, an immersive experience may separate the audience from their companions as part of the rules of the event, it may be unclear where the everyday world ends and the performance (and performance space) begins and ends so there may not be a formal moment for applause during the production. Audiences might be asked not to use their phone during the performance (or to seal their phone in a bag given to them for this purpose), alternatively, using their phone might be an integral part of the participatory experience. (Machon, 2013, pp. 54-55).

Despite these mechanisms often being employed to indicate to the audience that a performance will be immersive, Ramos and Maravala (2016) argue that overuse of the term “immersive” has become a marketing strategy to sell experiences and no longer offers

the nuance required to describe the meaningful interactive and participatory artworks that many immersive theatre makers are devising. Brigante and Elger (2020) suggest that this can lead to confusion and disappointment at expectations not being met (p.73). At the time of writing, even the widely accepted immersive theatre pioneers Punchdrunk have removed the term immersive from their website, instead describing themselves as having “pioneered a form of theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds” (Punchdrunk, *n.d*). Furthermore the use of the word immersive is often associated with immersive technologies such as VR, gaming and other digital experiences, leading to further confusion about what modes of participation can be expected at an immersive theatre performance.

Machon (2013) reinforces this point by citing examples of theatre productions that self-identified as immersive due to being of a site-specific nature and employing in-character encounters as a strategy to welcome audience members into the space without meeting other criteria for audiences to identify the production as immersive, therefore not meeting audience expectations. Machon states that whilst this kind of approach can “add texture to the aesthetic”, “immersive theatre” is one in which audiences can expect a greater degree of agency within the event than the more traditional roles of spectator and performer, an opportunity to explore the production physically in an embodied sense through different sensory mediums, and engage with the material in other ways that are explicitly or implicitly conveyed to the participating audience (Machon, 2013, p.101).

If ambiguity and overuse of the term makes reaching a unifying definition of immersive theatre elusive, what can audiences expect to encounter? Chapter 2.1.2 will outline common formats used in immersive theatre productions.

2.1.2 Immersive theatre formats

Perhaps the most ubiquitous format of immersive theatre production is “open world” or “sandbox”. These terms are often used interchangeably and can be defined as events that lay out an “open world” for the audience to individually explore at will. In an open world production, branching narratives may be present or multiple spaces to explore, inviting the audience to investigate the world and its characters, if there are any, at their own pace. This

results in a highly individualised audience experience. Open world and sandbox are both terms that are borrowed from the gaming industry, which can be reflected in their similarity in participatory style to free-roaming video games (Brigante & Elder, 2020).

In an open world or sandbox production, performers may sometimes perform their narrative arc on a loop, enabling the audience to follow different threads of a story over the course of one performance and offering more than one opportunity per performance to view a scene. The case study explored in this thesis can be described as an open world or sandbox production style. The production was spread over a 2,500 square metre space divided into 64 “rooms” or artistic works which the participants were free to explore at their own pace after being guided to enter the building through one of four doors. Some of the rooms were installation based works whilst other included live performers, some of whom performed their work on loop over the course of the evening.



Image 2. A one-to-one experience in Book of Rooms. Photo credit: Jesper Dolgov

Alternatively, the “one-to-one” format is an intimate experience for one single audience member at one time. This is both a production format, i.e. that the entire performance is experienced alone as a “collaborating performer spectator” (Heddon et al, 2012), such as in

the work of the late Adrian Howells (Heddon et al, 2012, Machon, 2013) or the work of immersive collaborators Lundahl and Seidl (Alston, 2013, Machon 2013), alternatively the one-to-one format can be also be used as a technique used within larger scale productions, where one audience member is separated from the wider audience body and offered the exclusive opportunity of a private encounter at some point during the performance. The case study, *Book of Rooms*, used the one-to-one format for all audience members as an opening encounter to the production before they entered the house. Later in the production, participants might experience other one-to-one encounters, for example by volunteering to take part in a ritual with an orange while other participants spectate the encounter (see image 2, page 13), or by engaging in percussive improvising on a crown of horseshoes whilst a performer dances in response to their improvisation (see image 5, page 60, and image 6, page 63).

2.1.3 Immersive tools

One of the key features distinguishing immersive theatre from other forms of theatre that may also involve a mobile audience (for example, promenade theatre) is the use of haptic perception. Haptic perception is a term used to refer to the sense of touch and in immersive theatre it is employed through physical engagement with scenography, space, objects and sometimes through consenting interaction with performers (Machon, 2016, p.34). Creating a tactile and sensory environment is a key foundation of immersive theatre practice and can facilitate the sense of immersion for participating audiences.

In order to create haptic environments, immersive theatre makers may use some or all of the following tools:

Scenography: Immersive theatre environments function as both a large scale set and an interactive, multisensory installation (Alston, 2016). Therefore, one function of scenography is to envelop the audience member into the theatrical world and thus increase their immersion into the story. According to Cunningham (2021), the role of the scenographer is to evoke the story through space rather than to actually tell the story, and to treat the audience as an inhabitant of the space by considering the ways in which they will interact with it (p.113).

Furthermore, interacting with scenographic items may be an important part of a narrative experience, through which an audience member may gain deeper insight about the production; for example, by rummaging through characters' belongings, or reading letters or documents that might enrich their backstory. Warren (2017) describes this as exploration theatre. These interactions offer opportunities to engage in actions that fulfil the conditions of immersion through activity in combination with sensory immersion (Biggin, 2017), and therefore could be considered as one reason why immersive theatre may be experientially different to other audience encounters in which touch and exploration are not prerequisites to participation.

Immersive technologies: Immersive technologies include Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Mixed Reality and projection technology such as projection mapping. The use of these technologies in immersive theatre varies across a broad spectrum; some performances may occur entirely on a virtual platform, while others may utilise a hybrid of forms and others may use none of these technologies at all. This juxtaposition of immersive theatre as a genre containing ideas and concepts related to technology against a presence or lack of technology that varies widely between productions could be considered one reason why reaching a definition of "immersive theatre" is difficult. However, it also opens up possibilities for artists to experiment with form and connect audiences to marginalised or experimental artforms they might not have discovered otherwise.

One example of this experimentation is Punchdrunk's research and development project in collaboration with Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dixon et al. (2012) describe this collaboration as linking one live audience member experiencing Punchdrunk's long-running production *Sleep No More* to a remote audience member experiencing the performance online via the live audience participant's mask. The two participants were connected with one another through text adventure, physical objects and specially choreographed one-to-one encounters, challenging the ways in which remote audiences can experience participation in immersive experiences and reversely how technology can alter participation for live audiences.

Book of Rooms also offered some opportunities for exploration with immersive technologies. As a large-scale collaboration between 130 artists, *Book of Rooms* contained

64 different artworks or collaborations devised by a broad range of artists across disciplines, therefore each “room” had its own relationship to technology. Some of the rooms had video installations and room number 26, the children’s room (Lastenhuone), was enhanced by Augmented Reality created by CTRL Reality Oy. However, the majority of the spaces were technology-free and the extensive use of puppetry in the production emphasised how movement and interaction can also be triggered mechanically without a need for technology.

Sound design: Immersive sound design can be facilitated through binaural or spatial sound, headphone experiences, audio walks, live performed or recorded music or a traditionally composed musical score. Furthermore, productions can use a combination of these techniques with different tools being used in different spaces or times within a performance. In *Book of Rooms*, a combination of these techniques were used in different rooms or spaces of the building, for example, the event included live vocal performances, a live harpist, several different headphone experiences, sound art, sound design, and composed music in different spaces throughout the building.

2.2 Participation and engagement

Chapter 2.1 established that immersive theatre uses a range of formats and tools in order to offer audiences opportunities to participate and engage with an artwork. Chapter 2.2 will therefore define what is meant by participation and engagement through an arts management theoretical lens.

2.2.1 Cultural participation

Cultural participation is a human right and is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) under Article 27: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”

Participation in cultural life can be broadly interpreted as inclusive of all forms of the arts, culture and heritage. The Council of Europe adopts UNESCO’s definition of cultural

participation for their report on cultural participation and inclusive societies (List et al., 2016): “participation in any activity that, for individuals, represents a way of increasing their own cultural and informational capacity and capital, which helps define their identity, and/or allows for personal expression” (p10). This definition is therefore able to accommodate a wide range of activities including both traditional and contemporary forms of creative expression, as well as spectating, visiting or attending cultural performances or sites, consuming art and culture, and volunteering in an arts or culture related capacity (pp.10-11).

Cultural participation is influenced by many factors, including economic, consumer, and cultural policy trends. For example, Pine and Gilmore (1998) have identified that we have entered a post-service economy that they classify as the “experience economy”. According to Pine and Gilmore, consumer trends indicate that customers currently attach more value to personalised experiences; and the impact of these experiences depends on successfully staging the conditions for a memorable and personal connection to be made. In these customer-centred transactions, the consumer is cast as the protagonist.

Cultural policy scholars have similarly documented the influence of the rise of the protagonist in cultural policy-making, for example Bonet and Negrier (2018) discuss the participatory turn to cultural policy that has arisen in response to Western technological, societal and political trends that are reshaping cultural behaviour towards individualism. According to Bonet and Negrier, contemporary cultural policy-making involves a coexistence and overlap of the historical cultural policy paradigms: cultural excellence, cultural democratisation, cultural democracy and creative economy and that each of these paradigms engenders different modes of participation. This accumulation of paradigms has also been documented in Finnish cultural policy making (Virolainen, 2016).

In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture’s Strategy for Cultural Policy 2025 acknowledges a change towards individualism in cultural consumption, arguing that “service expectations are becoming more individualised”. This consumption change is also happening in the context of Finland becoming more demographically diverse, with the population of Helsinki expected to reach 20% of immigrant background by 2025. The Ministry argues that the impact on the cultural field will see a rise in individualism and strengthening in community spirit running in parallel (2017, p.24). As a result, the

Ministry's strategic target areas in terms of inclusion and participation in culture emphasise increased civil society engagement with cultural activity and cultural democracy, cultural rights and audience-centred access to culture services and activities at both regional and local levels (Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2017. p.37).

Crawford et al (2014) argue that in the U.K., the participatory turn has been used as a tool to maximise efficiency in the face of budget cuts, by utilising networks to increase audience size and engagement. Alston (2016) explores this impact on cultural funding policy in the context of immersive theatre, warning that the use of volunteers in Punchdrunk's immersive works to bridge funding gaps being idealised as vision and ambition can risk further justifying public funding reduction (p.119).

Alston (2012) also discusses the connection of the participatory turn and immersive theatre to Arts Council England's emphasis on prioritising mixed funding streams from public and private sources, by questioning the ethics in immersive theatre of utilising the audience as co-marketer through product placement and collaboration with alcohol companies in Punchdrunk's 2012 collaboration with Stella Artois, *The Black Diamond*, at a time when Punchdrunk had been awarded Arts Council National Portfolio status, an increase of 141% to their funding (p.3). Alston returns to the topic again in 2016, adding further examples of corporate partnerships with Louis Vuitton and Sony PlayStation, arguing that these partnerships co-opt the participatory capacities of audiences to become free "brand evangelists" through word-of-mouth by sharing about the immersive experience online (pp.126-128).

2.2.2 Immersive theatre participation: Productivity, immersion, and flow

The rising trends in immersive theatre participation therefore reflect the wider participatory turn in cultural policy-making and cultural consumption, as the audience are liberated from their seats and cast as protagonists in a self-curated journey through the theatrical event.

Alston (2016) proposes that the modes of participation in immersive theatre can be divided into practical roles such as role-playing, searching or interacting, and multi-sensory stimulation as well as spectating, shifting into different roles throughout the course of the event. According to Alston, these activities utilise the psychological and physiological

capacities of the audience as a resource within the creation of an immersive aesthetic. Alston's work (2012, 2013, 2016a, 2016b) discusses this use of productivity as an aesthetic extensively, drawing comparisons between immersive theatre modes of participation and a valorisation of neoliberal risk and reward systems that promote entrepreneurial activity and individualism. For some participants, participation will also take place in the form of volunteering, further complicating the roles of the participant and the ethics of participation.

Rose Biggin (2017) also argues that immersive theatre is dependent on the productivity of the participants, stating that immersion is experienced as a graded sense of being rather than as a felt or not-felt binary and that participants experience this graded sense of immersion through engaging in activity. Biggin specifies that immersion varies in intensity throughout the course of a performance depending on the challenges the audience member overcomes and the barriers they meet over the course of an event (p.72). To Biggin, an optimal immersive experience is to achieve a state of "flow" (p.31), the term coined by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1996 to describe "peak experience" or "optimal performance". In contrast to Alston's politicalized discussion of the relationship between audience labour, productivity and aesthetic creation, Biggin's use of flow theory explores how productivity can also be an opportunity to experience peak experience through participation motivated by the pleasure of engaging in an activity, also known as autotelic activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, as cited in Biggin, 2017, p.29).

Influential art historian Claire Bishop's historical overview of participatory and socially engaged art, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), offers another perspective in the discussion of audience labour as a form of pleasure over exploitation in regards to delegated performance:

"The perverse pleasures underlying these artistic gestures offer an alternative form of knowledge about capitalism's commodification of the individual, especially when both participants and viewers appear to enjoy the transgression of subordination to a work of art. If one is not to fall into the trap of merely condemning these works as reiterations of capitalist exploitation, it becomes essential to view art not as part of a seamless continuum with contemporary labour, but as offering a specific space of

experience where those norms are suspended and put to pleasure in perverse ways”. (Bishop, 2012, p.238)

Thus, according to Biggin and Bishop, participatory artworks, such as immersive theatre, can be an opportunity to investigate, explore and subvert the individual’s relationship to productivity. However, this productivity is taking place in the wider context of a collective audience body experiencing a shared site of engagement, so it is necessary to also consider the social element to immersive experience.

Ramos et al (2020) state that “post-immersive participation emerges when the individual becomes a part of a temporary community” (p.1), emphasising the social aspect of immersive practice. It is clear that immersive theatre has evolved at least in part from community focused, socially and politically engaged participatory art practices, such as the happenings of the 60s, relational arts and the community arts movements of the 1970s (Machon, 2013; Alston, 2016). I will refer again to Claire Bishop:

“This desire to activate the audience in participatory art is at the same time a drive to emancipate it from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order – be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship. Beginning from this premise, participatory art aims to restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement” (Bishop, 2012, p.275).

The issue of productivity thus becomes a nuanced lens through which to evaluate immersive theatre participation. At one end of the spectrum is the neoliberal productivity ethos discussed by Alston (2012 & 2016) and Harvie (2013), in which audiences are forced to compete for limited opportunities, such as private one-to-one experiences. In this model of productivity, audience members who employ an entrepreneurial mindset towards risk are rewarded with the most opportunities. These productions, perhaps at times unwittingly, celebrate the neoliberal fetishisation of productivity and reinforce inequality. At the other end of the spectrum is the “flow” model of productivity, in which audiences are offered opportunities to engage productively for the pleasure of undertaking in the activity itself in shared spaces of social engagement to create utopian communities emancipated

temporarily from dominant ideological order in which participants are in control of their level of productivity and their relationship to it.

Whilst I have presented immersive theatre productivity here as a spectrum it is also possible that individual audience members engage with different productions with different capacities, some participants perhaps chasing an exclusive opportunity of a one-to-one encounter while others preferring to engage with the haptic and exploratory items in a production in an attempt to reach a sense of immersion. In many productions, this range of productivity can co-exist depending on the different ways available to engage with the work available to audiences. The productivity spectrum is further complicated if we also consider the influence of gaming in immersive theatre, from a gaming perspective immersive productivity can also be seen as an act of play (Hunter, 2016). Immersive theatre therefore offers diverse modes of engagement to participating audiences and the following chapter will elaborate what is meant by engagement in this context.

2.2.3 Audience Engagement

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d), the verb “participate” means to take part, or to have a part, in something. However, the verb “engage” means to hold the attention of (i.e the act of being engrossed in something) or to induce participation. Therefore, audience engagement could be understood as inciting and enriching participation and thus the concept of engagement is of key importance in this theoretical framework.

Walmsley (2019) constructs a definition of audience engagement from a broad literature base, concluding that engagement is a reciprocal and psychological concept, existing at once as a strategic management process through which “meaningful” and “enduring” relationships with arts organisation are mediated through the means of “interactive, immersive and hermeneutic experiences” and a source of sociocultural benefit, emancipation and empowerment for audience participants. Walmsley expounds the case for audience engagement and audience research, citing mounting evidence that engagement is the leading motivator for performing arts audiences (pp. 9-13).

Brown and Ratzkin (2011) describe audience engagement as a philosophy that centres on maximising impact in the development and delivery of arts experiences through the unification of marketing, education and artistic programming. They argue that impact is maximised primarily through the delivery of enrichment and education activities in order to contextualise the artwork and thus enable a deeper understanding of it. This contextualisation can occur during a “moment of curatorial insight” for the participant, a transformative moment during which they come to understand the overall concept behind a performance or exhibition. In their opinion, it is this understanding that facilitates greater opportunity for meaning-making after the event.

Audience engagement is therefore a concept that is intrinsically linked with impact. Matarasso (1997) argues that the arts bring social benefits to both individuals and communities, dividing the respective social impacts of the arts into: personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment, placemaking, and health and wellbeing. Belfiore and Bennett (2007) argue that these impacts are multidimensional and subjective, suggesting an elusive nature to the understanding of them through a historical overview of the psychological and philosophical interpretations of aesthetic experience. Belfiore and Bennett conclude that the impacts of engagement are affected by factors inherent to the individual experiencing them, the artwork being experienced, and the unique extrinsic or environmental factors in which the experience takes place.

According to Carnwath and Brown (2014), the individual impacts of cultural participation can be realised in a three stage progression: 1. **concurrent** impacts that occur during the experience , 2. **experienced** short-term impacts that can occur before, during, or after the experience but are observed after the event , and finally, 3. **extended** and **cumulative** long-term impacts or ones that are accumulated through repeated participation (see Figure 1, below).

| Concurrent impacts | Experienced impacts | Extended and cumulative impacts |
|--|---|---|
| Unconscious psychophysical responses that occur during the experience. | Short-term impacts observed hours or days after the experience. | Delayed impact and memory that accrues over lifetime repeated engagement with cultural activity |

| | | |
|--|--|--------------------------------|
| Evidence of physiological arousal, such as increased heart rate or skin conductance. | Emotional or spiritual affect | Memory |
| Arousal or precognitive response. | Meaning making | Sense of social belonging |
| Capativation through a sense of flow, awe, absorption or concentration. | Learning and critical reflection | Increased cultural capacity |
| Energy and tension | Social connectedness | Increased capacity for empathy |
| | Aesthetic enrichment and creative activation | Expanded worldview |
| | | Health and well-being benefits |

Table 1: Stages of individual impact, adapted from “Understanding the Value and Impacts of Cultural Experiences”, Arts Council England, by Carnwath, J.D. and Brown, A.S. (2014).

With a broad range of activity and experience falling within the scope of audience engagement, it is perhaps necessary to clarify what engagement is considered to be in the context of this case study. Brown and Ratzkin (2011) have identified four categories of audience engagement programmes typically adopted by arts institutions in the U.S.A. These are: 1. The use of technology to promote interaction and build community. 2. The use of partnerships to explore multidisciplinary collaboration, pool resources between groups, reach new audiences and highlight mutual issues. 3. To explore new sites and venues, or experiment with the uses of existing ones, to reframe and elongate the engagement period. And finally, 4. To deliver interactive activities or projects that deepen engagement through participation (2011, pp.11-12).

Book of Rooms combined all of the four categories of Brown and Ratzkin’s audience engagement programmes into the production: it was a large scale partnership between 3 co-producing companies and 130 independent artists, therefore was a multidisciplinary collaboration on a vast scale that enabled the collaborators to pool resources, reach new audiences, and highlight mutual issues whilst also strengthening the network and community of the local independent cultural field. It experimented with site and space at the Turku Old Printing Factory to reframe and elongate the engagement period. Interactive activities formed a central part of the live audience experience as part of immersive theatre practice, and question-asking as a mode of participation was encouraged before, during and after the production, extending the engagement time. Engagement also potentially

involved the use of technology, as participants were encouraged to share their unique experience online through social media and blogs as part of immersive theatre’s engagement practice of extended audiencing. Ancillary projects and activities also offered further opportunities for engagement; for example, a reading group of Susiluoto’s *Huoneiden Kirja*, the source material of the production, was arranged at Turku City Library and there were opportunities to volunteer as a Butler during the course of the production run. Finally, the *Book of Rooms* flea market concluded the project, where the local community could support the production and promote sustainability by bidding on items from *Book of Rooms* after it closed.

2.2.4 Brown and Ratzkin’s “Arc of Engagement”

Brown and Ratzkin developed a visualisation of the audience engagement process, which they have named the “Arc of Engagement” (2011. p7). This arc dissects a participant’s journey into a five step process starting from the moment they decide to attend an event and lasting for as long as the event leaves an impact on them. In this thesis, Brown and Ratzkin’s Arc of Engagement will be used as a framework through which to critically evaluate the audience engagement process of the case study production.

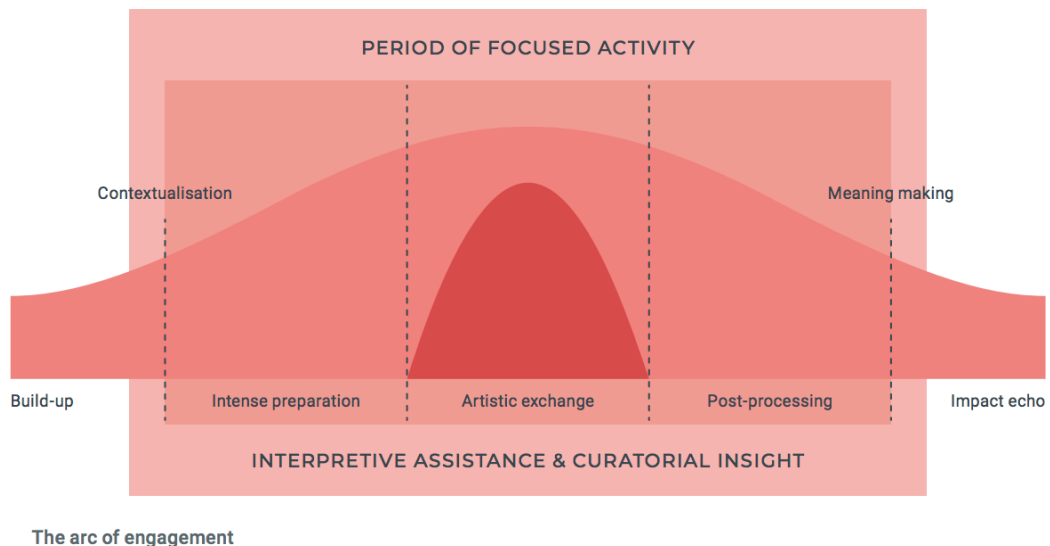


Figure 1: Brown and Ratzkin’s Arc of Engagement. Reprinted from “*The Immersive Audience Journey report*” Digital Catapult & UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) by Jarvinen, A. (2020) p.49.

The five stages of the audience engagement process, as identified by Brown and Ratzkin are: build-up, intense preparation, artistic exchange, post-processing and impact echo. (see figure 1, page 24, and table 2, page 25).

The “build-up” begins from the moment an audience member decides to participate in the event/buy a ticket. At this point in the journey, the participant’s only knowledge about the event is likely to have come from marketing messaging. Therefore, Brown and Ratzkin argue that the role of arts marketing in audience engagement is to “calibrate expectations and contextualise the art” (p.15). Opportunities to create further “contextualisation” of the artistic content already begin during the build-up phase of the engagement process. Figure 3 on the next page is a table representation of types of activities that Brown and Ratzkin suggest could be used to enhance understanding at each stage of the audience engagement process.

| Build-up and contextualisation | Intense preparation | Artistic exchange | Post-processing and meaning making |
|---|--|---|---|
| Website content Artist videos Blogs Advance synopses Open rehearsals Preview of set-design model | Pre-performance talks Information in lobby Programme notes Podcasts | On stage introduction Visual enhancements Interactive activities Real-time interpretative assistance via digital devices | Post-performance discussion events Encouraging critical feedback (e.g surveys) Online forums and facebook Encouraging conversation outside venue |

Table 2: Audience engagement activities for each stage of the audience engagement arc. Adapted from “*Making sense of audience engagement. Volume 1*”. The San Francisco Foundation by Brown, A.S. & Ratzkin, R. (2011)

The “intense preparation” phase is the brief period of time in which the audience intensifies their preparations for the event. This period of time will vary depending on each person’s unique preferences: some audience members may choose to rigorously prepare for the event, familiarising themselves with the content well in advance, planning their trip in detail and perhaps attending a pre-performance event; whereas other audience members may not consider their experience at all until they arrive at the venue and for them the intense preparation phase may simply be browsing the programme notes on arrival (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011, p.17).

The centre of the engagement arc is the “Artistic Exchange”. Brown and Ratzkin (2011) state that the majority of audiences only take part in this stage of the process (p.7). The authors argue that the impact of this phase can be heightened through the contextualisation process and through interpretative assistance during the event. However, analysis of Figure 3 illustrates that a significant amount of audience engagement activity occurs outside of the artistic exchange itself, suggesting that participation in activities at other stages of the engagement process could increase the likelihood of experiencing the individual impacts of cultural participation that have been identified by Carnwath and Brown (2014) shown in figure 1.

After the artistic exchange, the audience enters a period of sensemaking and critical reflection that Brown and Ratzkin identify as the “post-processing and meaning-making” phase (p.19). At this point in the process, they argue that audience engagement activities can heighten the impact of the freshly experienced artistic exchange. This can be facilitated through programmed activities after the event (see figure 3), however Brown and Ratzkin emphasise the greater importance of informal conversation outside the venue in this stage (p.20).

The Arc of Engagement suggests that there is a hierarchisation of the artistic exchange in engagement practices. As Brown and Ratzkin argue “Historically, efforts to assist audiences in contextualising and making meaning from the art have been ancillary to the program itself — a sort of educational afterthought” (2011, p10). Furthermore, their observation that the majority of audiences only take part in the artistic exchange stage of the engagement arc implies that not all audience members feel the need to participate in engagement activities. Reinforcing the roles of insiders and outsiders, inequalities that are

already perpetuated by arts institutions through, for example, tiered ticket prices and performance rituals.

Traditional audience engagement practices in cultural institutions therefore run the risk of undermining their desired impact through failure to consider wider power structures and other barriers to accessibility in cultural participation. White (2013) argues that Ranciere's notion of the emancipation of the audience rests on an assumption that any theory or policy that addresses inequality by requiring those in power and in possession of knowledge to share that will recreate and reproduce systems of inequality (p.205). Indeed, Gross and Pitt's (2016) research on audiences of contemporary arts offers data that supports Ranciere's argument by proving the value of democratic knowledge exchange to audiences. Gross and Pitt conclude that creating conditions for post-performance peer-to-peer reflective conversation, in which a shared understanding is reached together by non-professionals, was of higher value to study participants than participating in conversation facilitated by experts (2016, p.13). These results should encourage the arts to question what the role of the institution or artist is in the facilitation of meaningful engagement activities.

This thesis will argue that best practice in immersive theatre engagement approaches are not ancillary or even necessarily educational, although in some immersive theatre productions education may be a key strategy, for example Colvert et al (2018) and Cremin et al (2016), but an exercise in embodied meaning-making individually, socially and in constructed temporal communities sharing a liminal space. The thesis aims to demonstrate how immersive theatre therefore disrupts the "arc of engagement" model in ways that make cultural participation more inclusive and offer democratic forms of meaning-making.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Methodological Approach of the Study

This thesis is a qualitative single-case study examining the audience engagement process in the case of the 2021 Finnish immersive theatre production *Book of Rooms* (or in Finnish: *Huoneiden Kirja*). The interdisciplinary research approach is a fusion of traditional qualitative case study and use of Spectator-Participation-as-Research (SPaR), a research method commonly practised in immersive theatre research.

As this research aims to answer the question of *how* Finnish immersive theatre makers approach audience engagement, the methodological approach has been chosen to collect data connecting the themes identified in interviews with theatre makers to the audience experience itself. The data therefore includes: pre- and post-production semi-structured interviews, phenomenological account of my first-hand experience as a participating audience member, a pre-production site visit, and analysis of the online response to the production. The interviews and site visit were undertaken in June and July 2021, the production took place in August 2021 and the post-production interview took place in November 2021.

3.1.2 Qualitative Case Study

According to Yin (2009), a case study is defined by in-depth, in-context investigation into a contemporary phenomenon. The phenomenon in this case study is immersive theatre audience engagement practice and the primary unit of analysis is the working processes of Finnish immersive theatre makers, investigated in the context of the 2021 production *Book of Rooms*.

The research began as a comparative-case study, interviewing different Finnish theatre makers to identify what immersive tools they worked with, how audiences are accommodated in their production design process, and what structures they put in place to care for the audience's experience and safety (see appendix.1). The first 3 interviews took place with Samee Haapa, artistic director of The Centre for Everything, Sofi Häkkinen, Visual artist and co-artistic director of Recover Laboratory, Inna Huttunen, experience

designer of Recover Laboratory, and finally Alma Rajala and Venla Luoma, artistic director and head of audience experience of *Book of Rooms* respectively. Häkkinen and Huttunen were interviewed together, and Rajala and Luoma were also interviewed together, to promote dialogue about the collaborative nature of their processes. At that stage in the process, the aim was for these initial interviews to help identify other Finnish immersive theatre makers to interview in order to continue the interview process with a larger pool of theatre makers to collect data from.

However, during the interview with Rajala and Luoma it was clear that the upcoming production run of *Book of Rooms* would be able to provide data of greater depth and context of the case phenomenon. The production was also taking place walking distance from my home, enabling SPaR data collection to take place while participating as a member of the local community; a perspective I considered would enhance my understanding of the participatory experience in this context. Finally, Rajala and Luoma's philosophy towards audience engagement echoed many of the same values, approaches and challenges that had been spoken about by Haapa, Häkkinen and Huttunen in the previous interviews and thus shared keywords and concepts were already arising. The research was therefore redesigned as a single-case study and the initial interviews were used to triangulate data.

3.1.2 Spectator-Participation-as-Research

Spectator-Participation-as-Research (SPaR) is a research approach based upon the more commonly used Practice-as-Research (PaR) method. A PaR approach is one employed in arts research when artistic practice is used as a form of evidence; and therefore the knowledge can be described as being conceived in the *doing* of the practice (Nelson, 2013). In a large body of existing immersive theatre research, knowledge has been conceived in the practice of the researcher immersing themselves as a participating audience member (Alston 2013; Alston 2016; Biggin 2017; Machon 2016) so it is therefore perhaps unsurprising that methodological connections have been made with the PaR approach.

Heddon, Iball and Zerihan (2012) first developed the term “Spectator-Participation-as-Research” to describe their collaborative inquiry into one-to-one immersive theatre encounters from the audience-participant’s (rather than performer’s) perspective. They acknowledged that there is a participatory and performative element of the audience’s role in these encounters, however, in the authors’ opinions, the SPaR approach is grounded in the experience of *receiving* rather than doing; which therefore distinguishes it from the PaR method. Since the initial use of the term in Heddon, Iball and Zerihan’s 2012 research, Spectator-Participation-as-Research has been adopted extensively by immersive theatre researchers (for example: Alston 2016; Biggin 2017; Jordan 2016; Wozniak 2015) and has been described by Aragay and Monforte (2016) as “a rapidly developing field” (p.7).

The Spectator-Participation-as-Research approach has been chosen for this thesis in part because of its methodological roots in immersive theatre research and its suitability for this case study, and in part because my previous degrees are in music performance, so practice based research methods are most appropriate to my research skills and background.

3.2 Data Collection

According to Yin (2009), propositions enable the researcher to demarcate relevant information to be collected during the course of case study research. In the research question “How do (Finnish) immersive theatre makers approach audience engagement?”, we can identify a proposition that theatre makers have an approach through which they aim to facilitate audience engagement or experience. In this proposition, “approach” can be understood as the collective artistic and production design decisions and methods made to enhance the ways in which the audience may participate in and engage with the production.

Thus, in order to answer the research question, the information gathered in the data collection phase of this research must identify: the artistic and production design decisions and methods that may constitute the approach, any tools for engagement used to communicate these decisions and values, and the different modes of participation available for audiences in response to the approach.

This data was collected through pre- and post-production semi-structured interviews with two members of the case study's core working group: Alma Rajala and Venla Luoma. Our first interview took place in July, one month before *Book of Rooms* opened, over the space of two hours and included a tour of the production site, where I witnessed members of the core working group and several artists building their rooms. Our second interview took place in early November, just over two months after the production closed and shortly after the working group and artists had met for their final evaluations. The duration of this interview was 1 hour and 35 minutes. The data from these interviews was triangulated with interviews with representatives from The Centre for Everything and Recover Laboratory in order to identify common themes and practices within the Finnish immersive field. These interviews took place over Zoom in June 2021 and lasted one hour each. All the interview participants were asked for their consent to use their names and companies in the thesis and to record the interviews for analysis.

SPaR data was collected through my experience attending *Book of Rooms* as an audience member on 22 August 2021. Through the SPaR method, knowledge has been collected through the practice of reception as a participating audience member and the knowledge becomes data through the construction of a phenomenological account which becomes part of the written analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe the role of a phenomenological account as to “depict the essence or basic structure of experience” (p.26).

This phenomenological account was triangulated with other audience experiences shared online to identify the modes of participation available to audiences in the production and identify topics for discussion in the post-production interview. This data was collected from seven blogs written about the production and following social media posts made with the hashtag #huoneidenkirja. Instagram records over 500 posts made with this hashtag during the course of the research.

3.3 Data Analysis

During the first stage of the research process, interviewing 5 immersive theatre makers representing 3 different companies/projects made identifying an audience engagement approach, the primary unit of analysis, possible through analysing the mutual themes,

challenges and keywords across the transcripts. These themes were then connected to topics identified in the literature review visually in Miro. The main themes were: agency, participation, inclusion and consent.

Keywords representing the values and direction of the engagement approaches were also identified through analysis. These keywords were words that were repeated several times during the course of an interview or shared by different theatre makers. The keywords identified were: clarity, delicate/subtle, feedback, invitation and connection. These keywords have also helped to linguistically reshape the research question. At first I considered use of the word “strategies” to audience engagement rather than “approach”, however, the keywords identified during the analysis suggest that the interviewees adopted an ongoing and flexible reflection and development process rather than the controlled and goal-oriented processes suggested by the word “strategy”.

Analysis of my experience as a participant was undertaken by taking notes of my experience after the performance which were subsequently analysed for modes of participation and significant moments experienced during the course of the event. This analysis was then compared to accounts published in blogs and public social media posts to analyse similarity of reception. This analysis enabled the construction of a model for the immersive arc of engagement and determined which elements of the production and which of the 64 rooms would be used to illustrate the research themes.

3.4 Critical Reflections on the Research Process

Walmsley (2019) laments a general lack of performing arts audience research, and criticises the existing research as making generalisations about, and speaking on the behalf of, audiences, and simplifying their responses (p.5). This is an easy trap to fall into when using the SPaR method, as documenting one’s own experience can easily extend into making assumptions about the wider audience body’s experience. This is especially the case when researching immersive theatre, as each audience-participant is not just experiencing differences in internal sense-making of a shared experience, they also may have witnessed a completely different set of spaces, performers and journey during their experience.

During the course of my research, I was faced with the dilemma of attending the performance simultaneously as a researcher and an audience member. Therefore, I needed to consider how much critical distance to approach my participation with, versus how much I should surrender to the sensuous experience. Frieze (2016) argues that the sensory immersion of participatory audience experience “tends to be equated with a collapsing of (the) distance” required to maintain critical reflection (p.4). In this sense, I agree with Frieze, as to experience an authentic engagement with immersive theatre, one would need to minimise the impact of the research approach in order to set the conditions for immersion. I therefore decided to err more towards surrendering to the experience as an embodied participant than approaching it as a researcher, in order to experience the production in a way that I felt was more authentic. This approach affected the research process in the following ways:

1. I did not make notes during the performance. If, as Biggin (2017) argues, the experience of immersive theatre relies on the participant constantly moving through varying degrees of immersion caused by their activity, stopping to take notes during the performance would disrupt the sense of flow in and out of these states; which would be inauthentic compared to the general audience experience. My reflections on my own audience experience were therefore recorded after the event and due to the vast scale of the piece, it is likely that some details have been missed during the journaling stage.
2. I did not take photographs of any of the installations. This would have supported my phenomenological documentation, however taking photographs was both discouraged in the audience rules of the production and I also viewed it to be detrimental to the experience of immersion as argued in the previous paragraph. The production was later archived extensively including photographs, videos and audio of the rooms, which I had access to during the writing phase. However these documents differ from having access to images taken from one’s own perspective.
3. My pre-performance interviews and site-visit afforded me privileged access to information that other audience members did not access before the event. This may have impacted my engagement compared to a non-research audience participant. However, I decided that touring the site while it was being built and witnessing the

artists working in their spaces as well as the community between the collaborators, was more important to answering the research question about the team's approach than an authentic audience experience would be. Therefore, critical distance entered my audience experience as I was able to witness the transformation of the construction site into the sensory *Book of Rooms* world.

4. As with all participating audience members, I brought to the experience my own advantages and barriers to participation. In particular, as an S2 Finnish user (Finnish as a second language) by attending a production in which the source material was poetry in Finnish language, my language level was a barrier to my participation. However, as overcoming barriers to engagement has been identified as of importance to audience engagement approach, it could be argued that navigating my own experience with barriers to engagement has been advantageous to the research.

In conclusion, evaluating participation requires a series of decisions that either “collapse” the critical distance required of a researcher, or enforce that distance and thus jeopardise the authentic experience as a participant. During my research of this case study, I chose to adopt several approaches to minimise disruption to the authentic experience as I believe that reducing the critical distance was essential to effectively evaluate it, due to the nature of the psychological experiences of immersion and flow. In the instances where I made the decision to increase the critical distance, most notably by familiarising myself with the site in advance and obtaining privileged access to the production process through pre-production interviews with Alma Rajala and Venla Luoma, I hope that my awareness of how this may impact my experience helps to counterbalance the impact it had.

In order to have improved this research process, I would like to have been deeper involved as an embedded researcher in the project (for example, Biggin's (2017) work with Punchdrunk) which would have afforded me more in-depth access to the production approach across a wider cross-section of the large team of collaborators. I would also have liked to be able to volunteer in the role of Butler. The Butlers' position as Front of House staff dispersed across the site who ensured the safety of participants and assisted them if they were lost or needed help, enabled them to undertake participant observation and offered a different lens of participation as a volunteer position. However, as Rajala and

Luoma both spent extensive time in this role I therefore benefitted from the data of their own participant-observations, which was discussed at length in the post-production interview.

4 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Towards a Finnish immersive audience engagement approach

The first section of this analysis outlines the values and working processes of Finnish immersive theatre using data gathered from the initial interviews to construct the model of an immersive audience engagement feedback loop; a decision-making process that shapes interactions with participants on micro and macro levels. The second section of the analysis deconstructs the opening Old Chart interaction of the production through in-depth analysis of the modes of participation and their procedural authorship in the context of data collected as a participant, triangulated with data from the post-production interview and analysis of online accounts of the production in order to demonstrate how the engagement approach set the conditions for participants to enter a liminal state of “*communitas*”, an enhanced awareness of the self and others that supports the audience in assuming a shared ownership for collective experience, and finally the third section of analysis brings the previous data together to propose a model of the Immersive Arc of Engagement, inspired by Brown and Ratzin’s (2011) Arc of Engagement.

4.1.1 Establishing production values

From the interview data, four areas central to the Finnish audience engagement approach can be identified: agency, consent, participation, and inclusion. These areas were emphasised in the interviews as values that drove experience design with each company/working group prioritising creating inclusive experiences in which participants have opportunities to engage with art in ways that centred feelings of agency and consent. During our semi-structured interviews, interviewees elaborated the processes through which they hoped to realise these values, which will form the central focus of this analysis.

Keywords that articulate their approaches and were shared between the different theatre-makers are: clarity, delicate/subtle, feedback, invitation and connection. A Finnish immersive audience engagement approach could therefore be described as one in which the care and agency of audiences is prioritised through democratic and feedback-driven

decision-making that aims to bring the art closer to audiences through the co-creation of participatory invitations.

Samee Haapa was the first Finnish theatre maker to be interviewed for this research. Haapa is Artistic Director of the Centre for Everything and a leading figure of immersive practice in Finland; teaching workshops, courses and facilitating discussions on the topic, as well as having a broad range of experience in facilitating immersive work. They studied acting, dance and anthropology and are currently a doctoral student in immersive and game performance at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki. Haapa's work aims to offer the audience as much agency in as many ways as possible and states that accessibility and inclusion feature strongly in their work.

According to Murray (2016), agency can be defined as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (p.123). In Haapa's opinion, facilitating the agency of audiences is connected to the politics of participation and involves offering audiences alternative ways to participate. However, Haapa cites Claire Bishop to emphasise that agency must also be connected to the art itself, acknowledging that democracy and agency alone does not constitute good participatory art. In Haapa's experience, facilitating agency-centred experiences involves finding a balance between clarity and openness: If the rules are too specific it limits the agency, if they are too open then the agency is again limited as the audience do not know what opportunities might be available to them.

One of Haapa's strategies to navigate this balance is to offer audiences three choices, with the first two choices being clear instructions and the third choice free for the participant to devise themselves. Another strategy is to stagger the information, trying not to bombard participants in the beginning whilst ensuring they have enough information to feel comfortable. Haapa is influenced by sex positive and queer communities in their work in order to create safe spaces with negotiation of consent. Teaching participants clear signs to indicate that they want to stop the performance and signals to show other audience members respect of one another's personal space are examples of how they communicate contracts of consent with audiences. In Haapa's opinion consent is a key focus of the Finnish immersive theatre field overall.

The importance of consent in Finnish immersive theatre was also an opinion shared by Sofi Häkkinen and Inna Huttunen from Helsinki based contemporary circus and visual art company, Recover Laboratory. Like Haapa, they have an approach of staggering information and communicating tools for expressing consent, including an instruction for participants to stop and raise their hand if they have a problem or want to leave the space. Members of the production team are always hidden around the space in their productions, ready to respond to these requests from both audience and artists, constantly communicating to one another what is happening within the production, counting participants and knowing where they are within the space.

Häkkinen and Huttunen shared that having been in situations as immersive audience members where they felt unsure or unsafe influenced their own approach with audiences. To Recover Laboratory, having the audience trust the production is essential to the experience and describe consent as being the fine details written into the safety planning and dramaturgy to facilitate this trust. Uncomfortable immersive experiences had also influenced Alma Rajala and Venla Luoma's own approaches to audience engagement in *Book of Rooms*, stating that clarity was one of their core values, so that audiences would not be confused or uncertain about what they could, or should, be doing in the production. Like the other interviewees, they considered this should be both part of the dramaturgy and disseminated in the event information, also adopting a staggered and holistic communications approach.

Language (both verbal and non-verbal) was therefore identified overall as a key tool in facilitating clarity and agency by communicating the options and roles available to the audience and empowering them to participate, establish boundaries and reflect on the experience in their own words. In *Book of Rooms*, participants were given the name "Wanderer" (in Finnish: "Kulkija"). Naming the participant's role within the production is one example of how language can be used to suggest how audiences might behave in the space, in this example perhaps as someone who is exploring the space freely and open-mindedly; certainly the word has connotations of moving without hurry, which I also observed when attending the production myself.

Another example of clarifying roles through language is the use of "Butlers" (in Finnish: "Hovimestarit") in *Book of Rooms*. These were costumed volunteer roles to provide safety

and assistance around the house from which participants could ask for help or advice. Around 15 butlers were present in the production each night. Using the term Butler for this role rather than, for example, front of house staff or security, suggests to the audience more about the type of assistance you can ask from them and also implies that these people in the space are there to serve the audience rather than being there to enforce rules and obedience. Luoma described her vision of a butler as being “someone always available to help you and who understands the house back-to-front” (14 July, 2021). Luoma and Rajala wanted the Butlers to represent the kinds of people audiences might encounter in their own houses, therefore Butlers were encouraged to join the team from a wide age range and backgrounds. This approach was part of an overall strategy to create a space/house layered with many kinds of personal histories that could reflect the histories of a diverse audience and thus make them feel welcomed, which will be explored in more depth later in this analysis.

Language can also be used as a tool in promoting inclusion. White (2013) argues that using language to find connections and facilitate the relationship between the audience and event through utilising shared vocabularies can lower barriers to participation: “At best this might produce the Freirian ideal of validating people’s understanding of the world, allowing them to speak for themselves using the words and actions they use every day” (p.55). In *Book of Rooms*, the audience were invited to interact with and interpret the production from their own perspective and in their own language by bringing a question to the house:

“What would you wish to ask from the Book of Rooms? Have a personal question in mind when entering the piece. You do not have to reveal this question to anyone. In the beginning of the exploration you will flip a coin that defines a room, which will – in its unique way – answer your question. Flipping the coin gives you a direction but you can advance through the building at your own pace and follow your intuition and the invitations of the house. You can exit the piece whenever you feel ready. You have until 10 p.m. to explore, to rest between rooms or to have a cup of coffee (there is a cafeteria in the building). The route through the building is unique to you. Use the opportunity to stroll around unaccompanied.

Step inside the house. You are a wanderer.” (<https://huoneidenkirja.fi/info-in-english>)

In the post-production interview, Rajala emphasised how making personal associations and listening to oneself is part of reading poetry: “How is it speaking to me personally and how can I be with it and struggle with those meanings?”. Rajala hoped to create a “poem-like” atmosphere or situation in *Book of Rooms*, inspired by Susiluoto’s poetry book that acted as the source text: “There are associative things together and you put them in the order that talks to you” (Rajala, 14 July, 2021). Inviting the Wanderers to ask a personal question to the house and make their own associations therefore encouraged the audience to approach and interpret both the poems and the artists’ responses to them in their own language and in ways that reflect their own understanding of the world, facilitating participants’ own agency to connect to the themes, poems or contemporary art forms that might have been new or challenging to them.

Recover Laboratory also incorporate activities into their work that invite the audience to use their own words as part of the engagement process. During our conversation they used the example of their 2021 production *Nightwalk (Yökävely)* to illustrate examples of their working practices. In this production, participants were first asked to write a letter at home, which served to “challenge them and get them to dive into the mood and themes of the performance” (Häkkinen, June 11, 2021) and then during the event itself, participants were invited to send a text or voicemail of “something they have left unsaid” to contribute to the artwork. These texts and voicemails were then used to create a soundscape that the audience experienced together, hearing one another’s anonymous unspoken declarations as a collage of recorded statements. This could be perceived as a challenging activity, as participation requires both the willingness to be vulnerable and share an intimate detail about oneself and then the willingness to sit in the uncomfortable feeling that accompanies hearing one’s own voice played back publicly, albeit anonymously.

Häkkinen acknowledges their awareness at how intimidating this activity could be, stating that they wanted to challenge audiences without causing harm to them. Participants were first warned about the activity on the website and then prepared in different ways during the experience to create a safe environment in which people felt like they could open up and be vulnerable. Häkkinen described it as a “soft journey”, and stated that the impact of engagement relies on striking a fine balance between inviting audiences to engage in activities that feel both intimidating and safe at the same time. Participants in Recover

Laboratory's work are always given freedom of choice, so sharing a text or voicemail was not compulsory and in order to comply with the values of the company, voicemails were moderated during the creation of the soundscape to remove any identifying details, such as names and addresses, or hate speech. However, the company had been surprised to see how many participants engaged with the activities and how deep and vulnerable the statements they shared were.

In chapter 2.2.3 of the theoretical framework, it was established that audience engagement activities can often be regarded as an “educational afterthought” or optional activity to support contextualisation of an artwork that many of the audience consider as not being necessary to the hierarchised experience of the artistic exchange itself (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011). However, immersive theatre contextualisation activities, such as letter-writing, question-asking and voicemail-sharing as discussed in the examples above, demonstrate how these activities can be embedded into the performance for all participants in ways that enhances their pre-performance preparations, encourage curiosity and offer the participants critical reflection tools to employ during the event that may offer greater opportunities for meaning-making later.

Facilitating inclusive and inviting environments in which participants feel comfortable to engage with these activities is therefore a core value of Finnish immersive theatre practice and involves careful consideration of the language and timing of information disseminated in collaboration with the event's marketing, pre-production participatory activities, artists/performers who might also have in role in disseminating participatory instructions, and through the dramaturgy, designed with creating the optimal conditions for audiences to feel comfortable to participate, in their own words and prioritising their agency.

The next chapter of the analysis will go deeper into this holistic and collaborative design process, predominantly by using Gareth White's 2013 work regarding the “aesthetics of invitation” to provide a framework through which to describe the scope of considerations when constructing invitations for participants to engage with immersive theatre.

4.1.2 Constructing participatory invitations: Procedural authorship.

Invitation was a word that Alma Rajala and Venla Luoma used extensively when speaking about their audience engagement approach for *Book of Rooms*. According to Gareth White (2013), invitations are explicitly and implicitly offered opportunities in a performance that can be constructed through “procedural authorship”; a term borrowed from Janet Murray’s (1999) work in computational narratives to describe the process in which rules of participation are considered as part of virtual narrative creation:

“Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the text themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor’s involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant’s actions. It means establishing the properties of the objects and potential objects in the virtual world and the formulas for how they will relate to one another. The procedural author creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities” (Murray, 1999. p. 152, as cited in White, 2013, p. 31).

White’s interpretation of procedural authorship widens Murray’s definition to incorporate participatory theatre by describing how artists and producers also conceive rules and possibilities of engagement when accommodating the different ways in which a participating audience member might perceive the range of options available to them and respond to them or, as White describes, from the “horizons of participation” a participant might envision, and how the performers and objects in the space might respond in return to the audience (2013).

Immersive theatre procedural authorship could therefore include actions such as: creating the conditions for the range of possible dialogue and actions between performers and potential audiences, establishing the properties of physical objects and scenography in the space and how these objects can withstand the interactions of large audiences within a production, and other production design elements that a participant might have the agency to impact or interact with during a performance, such as the sound design.

Objects and their properties were a central part of the audience engagement approach of *Book of Rooms*. As previously established, *Book of Rooms*’ Artistic Director, Alma Rajala,

is a puppetry director, puppeteer and writer, and an active member of Aura of Puppets, one of the co-producing companies of the production. Rajala describes puppetry as particularly suitable for immersive theatre because of puppetry artists' specialism in "detailed work with objects and materials and the composition of objects that help to create immersiveness". She also goes on to elaborate that "many puppet artists have worked with care practices and somatic work that fits well with immersive practices" (14 July, 2021). According to Rajala, a number of puppetry artists were involved in the creation of *Book of Rooms* to develop this "puppetry thinking" in the house.

Rajala's description of puppetry thinking therefore situates puppetry within the scope of procedural authorship as a practice through which to make connections between artistic ideas, objects and audiences. Rajala and Head of audience experience, Venla Luoma, also emphasised the importance of *Book of Rooms'* award-winning scenographer, Johanna Latvala, in this work. Latvala's role was to construct a space that realised the production's artistic vision of creating a site that communicated to the audience "this is your house" and to create a cohesive space through "delicate" and "unseen" design elements that connected the 64 different rooms (Luoma, 5 November, 2021).

Latvala approached this by connecting the site and the audience through the use of subtle scenographic elements that reinforced familiarity, for example Latvala sourced different doors, windows, tiles and wallpaper from buildings in the local area to build the space, in order for the performance site to hold many layers of possible homes in which audiences might connect to and recognise elements of their own homes or homes from their childhoods.

This approach to create a diverse interpretation of "your house" could be viewed as using scenography to realise the production's value of inclusion. Immersive scenographer and researcher Meg Cunningham (2021) describes this kind of approach as "place-making through scenography" and compares it to architectural practices of connecting the site and user experience to enhance meaning (p.123). Indeed Belfiore and Bennett (2007) state the importance of considering architecture as one of the environmental factors influencing the impact of cultural participation, citing 2005 and 2006 studies by Reason that concluded the formality of the theatre building itself resulted in a self-consciousness and sense of lack of

belonging for the young people participating in the study that they described as detracting from the theatre experience itself.

Thus Latvala's scenographic approach, that invites the audience to see the house as their own, utilises procedural authorship to build layers of ways in which the different participants can reencounter themselves in the production in order to intensify the connection and meaning-making of the space to a wider audience. In our post-production conversation, Rajala and Luoma emphasised the subtlety of this approach, suggesting that the level of detail may have gone unnoticed by some of the audience. However, existing literature suggests that the impact of scenographic and object-based participatory invitations may be understood more on an embodied than intellectual level.

Machon (2013) describes immersive theatre as a "(syn)aesthetic practice"; a multidisciplinary approach to simultaneously activating different layers of intellectual, emotional, sensory and somatic understanding or sense-making. Similarly to the way in which Biggin (2017) describes immersive experience as shifting between graded states of being immersed, Machon describes (syn)aesthetic experience as a shifting between the sensual and intellectual states of understanding that activate our human instincts and intuition through "corporeal memory and embodied knowledge" (Machon, 2013, p.105). Machon uses this theory to argue for a wider understanding of the breadth of human capacity for perception in theatre.

White (2013) also emphasises the role of embodied knowledge in his theory of invitation aesthetics, citing the influence of the "enactive" approach to cognition that acknowledges the connection between mind and body in the context of its social, cultural, physical and historical context in his work (p.163). Thus the procedural author is not only creating a narrative but a complete experience that is understood to audiences on emotional, intellectual and physical levels. Rajala's "puppetry thinking" and Latvala's place-making scenography are two approaches to procedural authorship that play with these ideas of conscious and unconscious embodied understanding to create inclusive spaces for audiences to participate in.

Inclusion has been established throughout this analysis so far as one of the core values of Finnish immersive theatre practice. However, if immersive audience experience relies on a

sense-making that transcends intellectual understanding alone, and yet if, as White (2013) describes, procedural authorship relies to some extent on intellectually predicting the range of reactions an individual might have in response to a participatory invitation, then including diverse perspectives in the design work is necessary to create an inclusive immersive world, as each decision-maker is limited by their own individual “horizon of participation” they imagine how other participants might respond to and engage with their work (p.55-62).

The next chapter of the analysis will explore the role of diversity in the procedural authorship process in the context of *Book of Rooms* and introduce a model of the immersive feedback loop as a decision-making approach.

4.1.3 The immersive feedback loop

Book of Rooms was a large-scale production involving 130 artists, therefore multiple voices were naturally included in the co-creation of the piece; necessitating intentional and considered inclusive decision-making in order to facilitate the logistics of this scale of collaboration. A core working group of 11 artists and culture professionals were each given the responsibility for overseeing one area of the production, enabling ease of coordination and reporting, however the artists themselves were given freedom in the creation of their rooms.

Head of Audience Experience, Venla Luoma, described how working in dialogue with the artists and core working group supported the artists in developing their own individual engagement approaches within the overall engagement approach of the production. The artists were encouraged to think about how the audience were invited into their room, how they might understand the rules of the room and how the room communicates to them. This process enabled each artist to find their own way to facilitate participation through their own artistic practice and in response to the content of their room. Artistic Director, Alma Rajala, described facilitating this as a delicate and subtle process:

“Some things can be touched and some can't. How can you enjoy them without having ‘do not touch’ signs everywhere? If the piece is best experienced 50 metres away then we have to work out how to invite people there. We try to create

invitations that are intuitively understood when (you) come to a room, how to participate in that room. If it's not happening intuitively then there will be instructions, but we try to avoid that. We try to make it that visibility guides you, leads you and invites you as a non-verbal tool" (14 July, 2021).

In the pre-production interview, Rajala and Luoma described how the development of the production required all parties to test and give feedback on the audience experience during the design process. In this shared process, procedural authorship becomes a feedback loop where the artists can gather data about the effectiveness of participatory invitations from one another, from test audiences and from real audiences during the production run itself in order to make adjustments to the invitations and widen the “horizons of participation” that they envision their role or room to facilitate. The decisions made in response to the feedback loop can be made on a micro or macro level: Micro decision-making impacts interactions with individual audience members but does not impact the overall arc of a production and macro decision-making impacts the experience of all participants.

In micro decision-making situations, artists act flexibly, improvise and create a range of responses within a situation. For example, Rajala and Luoma shared that eye-contact was one of the features of Book of Rooms audience engagement, therefore performers might use micro decision-making to devise the next step of an interaction: if a participant makes eye-contact it might indicate they are interested in continuing the interaction, if a participant avoids eye-contact it might indicate that participant is intimidated by the interaction and leads the performer to choose to end that interaction or attempt to make the participant feel comfortable in another way.

Micro-decision making can also be employed by other members of the production team, for example a Butler in the house might notice a participant looking lost or confused in the space and make the decision to approach that participant and ask if they need help. Alternatively the Butler might decide that although the participant looks confused, they are working out their own way to engage with the house and leave them to do that independently, waiting for the participant to approach them directly if needed.

Micro-decision making can also be impacted by uncontrollable external factors, for example Rajala and Luoma reported that at times it was difficult for participants to

concentrate or hear the Old Charts speaking during the one-to-one opening of the production that occurred in a semi-enclosed space, especially on evenings with heavy rain, so the performers needed to decide whether to lean closer to their participant or to raise their voice in each interaction. Rajala and Luoma also shared how these Old Chart one-to-one encounters generated a huge range of responses and situations: some participants disrupted the Old Charts' monologue and tried to converse with them, and others immediately started to toss the coin before the instructions. Luoma stated that during these moments, it was the Old Chart's responsibility to find their own route through the situation with the participant, therefore the procedural authorship process for an Old Chart performer involves each individual artist deciding how the encounter responds to the participant's actions and needs, despite all Old Chart performers otherwise working to the same script.

Micro decision-making therefore involves reading the unique moment and responding accordingly. Each new set of circumstances a procedural author experiences, whether as a performer or as a Butler or Old Chart, produces new data in the feedback loop about the options and challenges available to both the author and the participants for future encounters, in order to broaden their horizons of participation and create more meaningful interactions for their audiences. In micro-decision making, this data is gathered from diverse perspectives but the decision itself is made by an individual taking action in the interaction. On the other hand, macro decision-making is a collective decision-making process and impacts the production for all participants. Macro decision-making acknowledges diversity as a strength in decision-making, as data from different perspectives can offer new insights that might not have been previously considered about any element of the production's overall content, safety, accessibility or inclusivity.

Macro-decision making can also involve decisions that involve the artistic interpretation: Rajala and Luoma shared one example of an installation in the house that involved pens and children's drawings on the wall. During the production run, participants started to take the pens from the installation and add their own drawings and notes to the wall. At first the artist enjoyed this surprising response to their work but later in the run, when participants started to graffiti more messages across the wall that were not in response to the installation itself, the team decided that the direction the response had taken lost connection to the artwork and removed the pens. This example demonstrates how the

immersive feedback loop continues indefinitely throughout a production run, as participants become bolder and start taking more risks, perhaps due to information gathered about the production online, through word-of-mouth, or repeat visits, and the ranges of responses to invitations may become more extreme, necessitating new safety or artistic decisions.

4.1.4 Diversity in decision-making

Diversity within decision-making was also discussed with the other interviewees, who all emphasised that including a diverse range of voices in the feedback and development stages as necessary to the process. Haapa stated that diversity and inclusion is central to the Centre for Everything's philosophy; starting with the power structures within the company and promoting inclusion through who has a say within the company. Haapa hopes that rather than being reactive, the company aims to approach diversity, inclusion and accessibility as an endless negotiation and discussion in order to create new ways to engage with the topics. Häkkinen and Huttunen also shared that Recover Laboratory's strength was in having multiple voices develop the audience experience. They have a "Recover family" of artists and people that work with them to ensure there are many playtests and feedback sessions to shape their productions. In fact, *Nightwalk* had more playtests than actual performances.

Data in the immersive feedback loop can be collected in different ways. Aside from reading and responding to situations that arise during the production in the moment, structures to build skills for micro decision-making can be facilitated as part of the production process: For example, during *Book of Rooms*, the Old Chart performers held discussions after each performance to share experiences and learn from one another's interactions. The Butlers also held group meetings after performances and had their own Whatsapp group. Part of *Book of Rooms'* Volunteer coordinator Maiju Tainio's responsibilities was to care for the Butlers, providing a picnic basket each night so that volunteers could take breaks and make more informal connections with other Butlers in the courtyard during the performance. Both the formal meetings and informal conversations enabled the team to gain knowledge about situations they may not have encountered personally during the run, in order to widen the collective knowledge about the range of

possible responses to an interaction and build skills for performers and Butlers to respond in future encounters.

The feedback shared within these departments of the production was not siloed to their individual groups but shared widely, particularly due to Rajala and Luoma rotating themselves each night into one of the Old Chart or Butler roles. In traditional performance settings, it is unlikely to find artistic directors putting themselves into these kinds of non-artistic and group roles, for example in the Front-of-House staff or in the ensemble, in order to gain a richer understanding of the inner workings of a production. In this way immersive theatre practice is non-hierarchical, utilising the strength in diverse perspectives and experiences and valuing the input from all levels of the production, not just those with the most power, in order to create a more inclusive and rewarding experience for both audiences and collaborators.

Rajala argued that a production of this scale would not work if it was hierarchical, noting however that she understood she held responsibility as the Artistic Director to facilitate that all collaborators “feel that they are part of the house and necessary to the whole thing”. It could be argued that Rajala’s approach to rotate herself into the roles of Old Chart and Butler during the production run was central to achieving this aim by emphasising to everyone involved in the production the importance and input of their roles. Rajala found that working in this way created a collective “inspiration, pride, and joy in the work” and described it as a shared ownership (Rajala, 5 November, 2021).

Rajala and Luoma stated that the audience should also feel that they are part of the shared ownership, and that whilst they hoped the audience would feel a sense of awe in the house, they also hoped for the audience to feel that “this is their house. They fulfil the meaning of the house and they fill it with their own meaning”. This was inspired by Susiluoto’s book, in which the prologue states that the house sighs with the protagonist’s steps, Rajala and Luoma wanted participants to feel too that “the house reacts to me” (14 July, 2021).

Creating environments in which audiences also feel a shared ownership or responsibility towards the production is an important consideration of immersive theatre, as audience participants may find themselves in intimate situations that are unique to immersive performances, for example, if an immersive performer is performing in a small room or

tight space surrounded by a spectating audience, the audience bodies may need to work together in a non-choreographed dialogue to accommodate the space and performance; such as, side-stepping to avoid collision with flailing limbs or passing performers, or to make room for other participants to join the throng of audience members spectating the encounter (Ritter, 2016).

The next section of the analysis will go into greater detail of the audience's relationship to the procedural authorship process by dissecting one of the key moments in the production, the Old Chart encounter, and placing it into the context of overall audience experience. This encounter was a one-to-one interaction and the only part of the production that would have been experienced by all participants without fail, as each audience member was required to engage with an Old Chart in a coin toss before they entered the house.

It will be discussed how the Old Chart encounter demonstrated to participants that their experience was being treated with care from the outset, which could help to negate some of the challenges that risk perception poses to immersion and meaningful engagement in immersive theatre, and set the conditions for the audience to enter a liminal state of "communitas", an enhanced awareness of the self and others that aids the audience in assuming the shared responsibility for collective experience.

4.2 Audience experience

4.2.1 One-to-one encounter: Risk perception and audience care

The Old Chart interaction at the beginning of *Book of Rooms* "bookends" the performance to ensure the audience feels cared for:

"Bookending the performance with a greeting and a goodbye acts as a straightforward but effective means of acknowledging the participant's presence and making them feel as though their experience is being facilitated with care and attention" (Ramos et al, 2020, p.11).

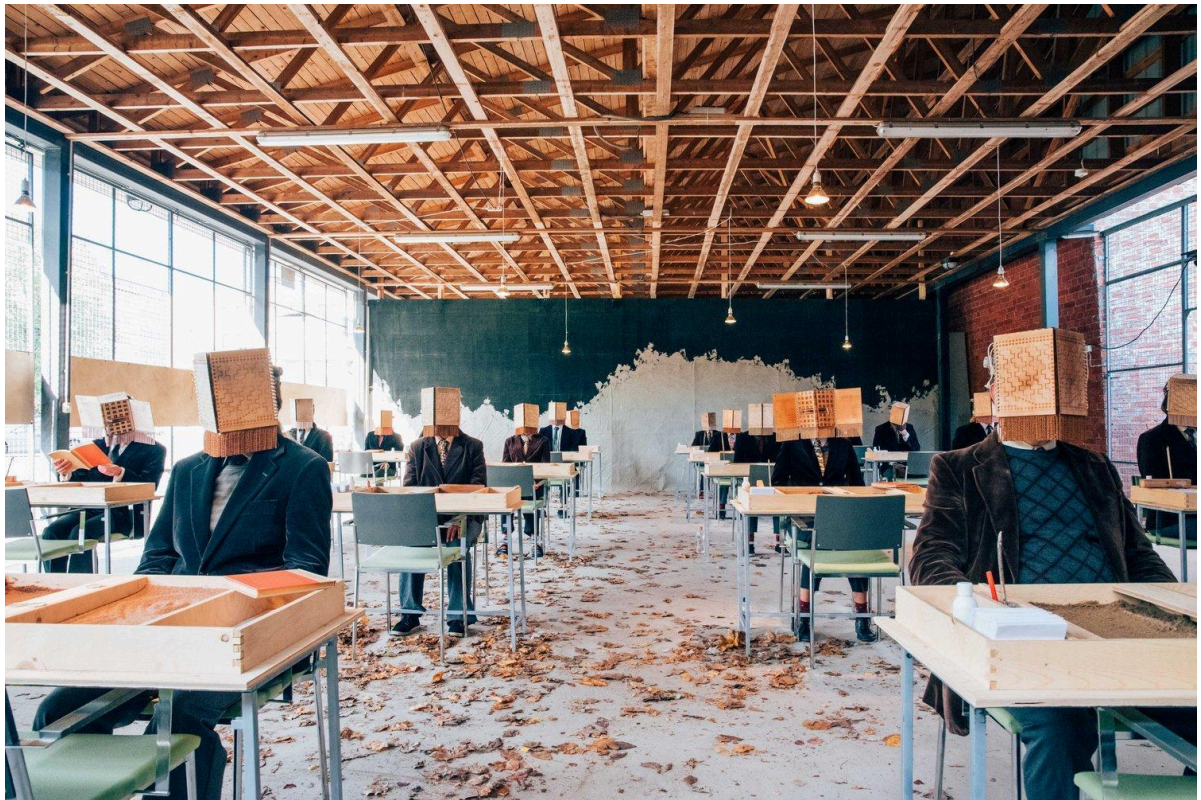


Image 3: “Old Charts” seated and awaiting audience participants. Photo credit: Jesper Dolgov

To an audience participant, especially one who has not experienced immersive theatre before, a one-to-one encounter with a performer might feel intimidating, therefore the facilitation of this opening experience sets the tone for how the audience will engage with the rest of the production and will be unique to each participant. Alston (2016) discusses how bringing our affective memory to an encounter influences our response in a situation, either leading us towards or away from the experience. White (2013) argues that this response lies in an understanding of risk perception, when considering risk in terms of embarrassing or undermining the public self, for example by displaying incompetence, distress or neediness, or inappropriate enthusiasm or emotions (p.76). Thus, accepting an invitation to participate also means accepting a social role in which there is risk of reacting unconsciously in ways that could cause damage to social esteem (p.159).

White’s use of the theory of risk perception offers a frame of understanding as to why audiences might express a wide variety of responses to an invitation to participate extended to them in an immersive theatre performance, stating that the individual’s assessment of

risk is based on their own perception of risk which in turn depends on the individual's unique lived experiences (White, 2013, p.77).

Alston (2016) emphasises the complexity of these individual experiences and their contribution to risk perception, arguing that risk perception is both autobiographical and social, influenced for example by one's childhood fears, family and friend relationships, and information received from government policy, the media and hearsay, and impacts the "individual's capacity to act" in a situation (pp.89-91). Therefore participants with lived experience of oppression, prejudice, discrimination, racism or ableism may enter the space with different perceptions of the potential risks of participating in the event than those without these experiences. This intricacy to risk perception reinforces the previously made hypothesis that creating spaces that feel safe, inclusive and inviting to all participants through the procedural authorship requires diverse inputs in order to increase the range of perspectives and horizons of participation in the design and decision-making processes.

White (2013) suggests that one way of lowering risk aversion could be through lowering barriers to participation, stating that simple interactions may offer participants the possibility to build confidence in the scenario and gain experience and language with which to participate later (p.47). *Book of Rooms'* Old Chart encounter could be described as a simple interaction; one which required a low barrier to participation and was structured in several ways that reinforced the participants were safe and in-control and offered them tools with which to engage with the house later.

The activity in the Old Chart encounter was a coin toss, a simple action that is likely to be familiar to all and thus reinforced by affective memory. The art of constructing a meaningful encounter through procedural authorship therefore lies in balancing the simplicity of the coin toss task whilst offering enough challenge for the participant to experience a sense of achievement or catharsis from the interaction without finding themselves overwhelmed or intimidated at the beginning of their audience experience. The procedural authorship process of the Old Chart encounter achieved this balance by inviting participants to take small risks that were juxtaposed with dramaturgy that reinforced their ongoing safety and care:

1. The audience were separated from their companions in order to experience a one-to-one encounter. However, the encounter occurred simultaneously in the same space, emphasising that the individuals were not alone and remained part of a community. White states that activities undertaken in a group setting help to create positive associations as we witness others also participating in the same task, thus influencing our own perception of risk (2013, p.81).

2. The audience were invited to choose their own Old Chart rather than having a performer assigned to them, reinforcing their agency in this encounter. In the post-production interview, Luoma described this as an approach to give “responsibility” and “power” to the Wanderer (5 November, 2021).

3. The costume and dramaturgy of the interaction juxtaposed intimacy with distance in ways that held space for any hesitancy towards the encounter. A one-to-one encounter with a stranger, albeit a performer whose job is to facilitate the encounter, may feel uncomfortably intimate to some participants, however the masks designed by Riikka Mäntymaa when opened revealed only the performer's eyes. This encouraged eye contact during the encounter, which is itself an intimate experience, whilst the mask obscured the rest of the performer's face, creating some degree of anonymity, and a desk was placed between performer and participant to create a physical barrier between them; a reminder that although this intimacy may feel intense, personal space was protected. Having that boundary respected may have encouraged feelings of psychological safety for any audience member who approached the experience tentatively. In our interviews, Rajala and Luoma described the use of eye contact in *Book of Rooms* as part of an overall strategy for interactions in performance to be delicate and subtle.

4. During the encounter, the participant's personal question to the house remained private and did not need to be shared with others, the participants could therefore decide the parameters of their participation: would they search for the answer to an existential question or something more lighthearted? Would they share their question with their companions when reunited after the event or keep it to themselves? Risk is low in this mode of participation because freedom of privacy means there are no conditions for embarrassment or failure. Once inside the house there were more sandboxes for the Wanderers to try new coin tosses and ask new questions, further lowering conditions for

failure and increasing opportunities for participants to reach a state of flow through activity.



Image 4: “Old Charts” open and delivering coin toss instructions and monologue to participants.

Photo credit: Jesper Dolgov

5. At the end of the Old Chart interaction, participants were given a tool-belt with them to carry in the house. Thus the Old Chart encounter equipped the participants with both literal tools (map, notes, objects) and metaphorical tools (rules, language, and question-asking for critical reflection and meaning-making) to engage with the production. These tools were objects that can, as White (2013) argues, be used to focus and motivate action (p.50).

The modes of engagement in the Old Chart encounter were therefore: 1. agency: choosing a performer for a one-to-one encounter; 2. Low-threshold interaction: coin toss activity; 3. critical reflection: question asking; and 4. action: receiving a tool belt to explore with and entering the house. Thus the encounter prepared participants for the different modes of engagement inside the house and challenged them in a safe environment, establishing a sense of psychological safety that may facilitate risk taking later on in the house.

In our post-production interview, Rajala and Luoma shared an observation that they often witnessed audience members crying during this initial Old Chart one-to-one encounter. Some participants admitted they experienced this cathartic reaction because it felt touching to have one performer for them alone, particularly after having experienced so much isolation since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I too felt surprisingly moved by my own experience with the Old Chart. It did indeed feel poignant that after a year-and-a-half post the emergence of COVID-19 it was again possible to attend live performances of this scale and be a part of audiences again, so to begin *Book of Rooms* with such an intimate, well-crafted and cared for interaction was powerful and I recognise that the pandemic is one factor that heightened this experience. However, as Ramos et al (2020) argue, immersive theatre can also utilise simple interactions in ways that can create meaning for the post-internet audience:

“As a temporary replacement for ever shrinking public spaces and chance encounters with strangers, rituals, places and objects can be activated to bring diverse audiences to behave in more thoughtful, intimate and unexpected ways”
Ramos et al (2020, p12).

4.2.2 One-to-one encounter: rite of passage and liminality

Ramos et al (2020)’s post-immersive manifesto, cited above, calls for public spaces to be reclaimed for creating temporary communities in which theatre can take place and that post-immersive participation emerges when an individual becomes part of this temporary community. In our interview, Häkkinen similarly described Recover Laboratory’s approach as dramaturgy to include ways where “people come together in different ways” and of “being alone together” (11 June, 2021).

The significance of the individual transitioning into a temporal intercorporeal community has been previously explored in anthropology for example, by Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) in theories of “liminality” and “communitas”. Turner proposed that the transformative liminal qualities achieved by ritual acts in societies could manifest in artistic activities in the form of “liminoidality” (Sajewska, 2021). This section of the analysis of the Old Chart one-to-one encounter will discuss how the use of ritual-like qualities, rites of passage, place and objects were used to create liminoid space and

communitas in *Book of Rooms* in order to achieve Rajala's aim of creating a shared ownership of the house.

White (2013) discusses how warm-up activities can act as a rite of passage by separating the activity from daily life. He cites Hahlo and Reynolds (2000) who describe the process as an "air lock", one in which the participant moves away from the high pressure environment of daily concerns and into a less or differently pressured zone in which they can focus on the activity itself (p.95). The Old Chart encounter could be considered a warm-up to engaging with the house by creating this airlock effect. The audience waited outside a mysterious gated area, where instructions were read to them by a "Butler", before they were ushered briefly into the gated area where they participated in an interaction that required engagement and focus with a performer who welcomed them to the event, established rules of participation and equipped them with language and tools to engage with the performance, after which they were released from the area to enter the multisensory world of *Book of Rooms*.

Rite of passage can also be facilitated by ritualised acts. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the noun "ritual" can be described as "a ceremonial act or action" or "an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner" (*n.d*), thus in *Book of Rooms* the ceremony of the coin toss and drawing of lines in the sand represents the ritualised preparatory act.

If this first ritualised act of the Old Chart encounter can be considered as a rite of passage, then the use of temporary site-specific production sites as the site of the rite of passage (in this case the Turku old printing factory) reinforces the connection to the local community in creating a sense of liminal space through site. Turner (1979) discusses how public rites of passage make use of everyday or "quotidian" spaces and make them "hallow for a limited time" (p.467). Additionally, in *Book of Rooms*, Latvala's place-making approach to use familiar household objects and spaces in the scenography also plays with ideas of a friction between hallowed and quotidian spaces. Liminoidality thus suggests that temporary and public sites of performance can create opportunities for everyday sites to be imbued with significance to audiences within their own communities, as also argued by Ramos et al's (2020) post-immersive manifesto, cited at the end of the previous chapter.

In *Book of Rooms*, the connection to the local community was also established before the event: The production was co-produced by 3 local companies and involved the work of 130 local independent artists, therefore it was a showcase of collaborative local talent on a scale that audiences would rarely have access to. This will have already heightened the sense of occasion about the production. Marketing around the event also worked to heighten anticipation. Due to the timing of the production with the City of Turku's European Capital of Culture 10th anniversary programme¹, the production may have benefited from increased marketing visibility. The most notable example of marketing was a video promoting the production advertised on the wall of Turku City Theatre, an important cultural hub of the city and an area that passers-by frequent often, particularly to walk across the Theatre bridge. To both loyal and new audiences of the co-producing companies, this increased exposure in the location will have emphasised the sense of occasion before attending.

When arriving at *Book of Rooms*, the parameters of the liminal/liminoid space were set by the temporary ownership of an object, the coin used in the coin toss. At the end of the Old Chart encounter, the coin was given to the Wanderer to be carried throughout the house in a pocket of the tool belt. When the Wanderers left the house, they had to post the coin into a box held by a Butler and return their tool belt. Often the Butler to whom the participants would be returning their coin was in fact Rajala or Luoma, who then anonymously engaged in informal conversation with participants without divulging their true identity as Artistic Director and Head of Audience Experience respectively. This enabled them to gather honest feedback throughout the production's run and also demonstrated to the production team their non-hierarchical leadership approach.

When it was my own turn to leave *Book of Rooms* as an audience member, releasing the coin into the box felt symbolic, an ending of the Book of Rooms world; similar to the cathartic moment one might experience at the end of a traditional theatrical performance when collective silence transitions into an eruption of applause. In an immersive production, this collective moment is often withheld from the audience, as they are

¹ The significance of the European Capital of Culture 10th anniversary is only briefly mentioned in this thesis as *Book of Rooms* had been rescheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was not originally due to be produced in 2021, therefore would not otherwise have been part of the programme.

generally free to leave the performance on their own terms or, as Machon (2013) described, it might not be clear where the real world and the performance begins and ends, necessitating immersive theatre makers to use procedural authorship to design encounters in which participants might experience this catharsis together in more intimate ways.

4.2.3 Value driven experiences: creating “communitas”

Victor Turner developed the theory of “communitas” in 1969, which can be described as a deindividuation in which individuals become grouped together through ritualised ways that make them feel “outside of society” or encourage different ways of behaving and engender a feeling of closeness with one another (White, 2013, p.140). Sajewska (2021) defines communitas as a liminal collectivity or, as taken from Esposito (1998), a “(co)existence where that which is common is at the same time that which isn’t owned, as everything is the property of the collective, not the individual”. She proposes theatrical communitas as an “egalitarian form of togetherness” (2021, p.19) and cites Turner (1982) to emphasise the use of imagination in this:

“the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles and being acutely conscious of membership of some corporate group as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation, etc., of affiliation with some pervasive social category as a class, caste, sex or age-division.” Turner (1982) as cited in Sajewska (2021) p.19.

Machon (2013) emphasises the importance of using ritualised preparatory acts in immersive theatre to activate and heighten “an individual's relationship to space (and) to others in that space” (p.84). Creating environments in which participants consider their own relationship to the space and others in it is an important consideration of immersive theatre because, as previously mentioned, the safety and success of productions rely on participants giving space to one another, to performers and objects.

Therefore, it could be argued that the dramaturgy of Old Chart one-to-one encounters, in which the audience comes together in an individual yet shared rite of passage in connection with the building of anticipation through question-asking and establishing the

parameters of liminoid space, creates the conditions for the audience to reach an “egalitarian form of togetherness” proposed by Sajewska (2021) as “theatrical communitas”. Alternatively, Machon (2013) describes this as a sense awareness of space and others, experienced as a liminal state throughout the course of the event while the audience transitions between the different rooms and states of immersion during interactions with performers, objects and other audience members in the space.

In *Book of Rooms*, this sense of awareness is also reinforced through production design inside the house that communicates the respect of boundaries and manifests in the audience experience as participants accept invitations to engage in encounters and with objects whilst simultaneously giving space to the performers and other participants to engage in encounters and explore objects. The awareness fluctuates from being created through the procedural authorship processes of the *Book of Rooms* production team to being understood intuitively by participants.

An example of procedural authorship being used as a tool to facilitate awareness and consent is the instruction for participants to take their shoes off and leave them outside the door of a room that should be experienced privately. This instruction communicates to participants that inside these rooms they are alone, safe and will not be disturbed, as well as indicating to other participants that they can look for an open opportunity to step inside the room, rather than forming queues or disturbing participants inside the room to check if it is in use. For example, Room 25: The shoe cabinet in the cobbler’s rented room. In which a participant could sit on a cushion alone in a dark cupboard enveloped by a curtain and listen to a piece of sound art by Hilla Väyrynen over headphones.

An example of intuitive awareness can be seen in Room 20 The Horse’s Room. (See image 5, page 60). In the centre of this room hung a large installation, a chandelier of horseshoes, envisaged by Maria Laitila. Underneath the chandelier was a patch of grass and sand in which percussion mallets were placed like planted flowers, an implicit invitation for participants to choose a mallet and perform the installation as a percussion instrument of differently pitched metal horseshoes. When the chandelier remained unplayed, a performer embodying the character of a horse paced silently around the room, making shy and fleeting eye-contact with passing audiences. However, whenever a participant dared to play the instrument, the horse performer sprung to life, moving in response to the

participant's real time improvisations in a duet between professional performer and audience participant.



Image 5: Room 20. The Horse's Room (Hevosen Huone). Photo credit: Jesper Dolgov.

The Horse's Room was compelling to both experience connecting with the dancer personally, and also to witness other participants discovering their own capacity to improvise with the performer. Luoma stated that the longest time they observed an audience member "dancing" with the horse was 30 minutes, which suggests that by remaining in this room for so long, the participant had reached a state of flow through activity, considering there were still 63 other rooms available to explore over the space of one evening. In the Horse's Room, audiences used their own intuition and awareness to choose whether to observe or participate, whether to step back and wait while watching another participant improvise alone or whether to pick up one of the other mallets and expand the interaction.

As cited above, Sajewska (2021) states that participants experiencing a sense of *communitas* understand the property of the collective, not individual. This exemplifies the delicacy of interactions in the liminal/liminoid space. Hypothetically, if you were in the

Horse's Room when the participant who improvised for 30 minutes was there, how would you decide to approach the situation? It is likely that the participant who played the percussive chandelier for 30 minutes had reached Biggin's (2017) ideal goal of immersion, a sense of psychological flow. Would it feel uncomfortable to disrupt their flow or would boldly stepping into the situation alongside them to expand the musical dialogue offer a moment to intimately connect with a stranger through improvisation and co-creation? How would it feel to take that risk? On the other hand, waiting for the other participant to finish their open-ended improvisation might leave little time to explore the rest of the house. Whose role is it to negotiate this moment? Is it the performer's role to invite the new participant to join the interaction or to bring the previous participant's improvisation to a conclusion at some point? The skillset of immersive artists therefore requires an understanding of how to facilitate these encounters through procedural authorship by utilising the sense of awareness of space and others and deciding how to accommodate any of the array of responses that might be given to an invitation to participate in the work.

In conclusion, whilst the modes of engagement in *Book of Rooms*, and immersive theatre in general, emphasise individual activity, the sense of awareness created through the use of ritualised acts, liminoid space, site-specificity and procedural authorship set the conditions for the audience to reach a sense of togetherness through creating a sense of *communitas*. This same sense of heightened awareness of the space and others could also be reached in other Finnish immersive works, for example, in Recover Laboratory's work as audiences come together in order to listen to the private/public soundscape of one another's voicemails, or in Samee Haapa's work with the Centre for Everything's *Blindfold Jams* where audiences become differently aware of one another's bodies in the space through the use of blindfolds.

Collectivism versus individualism is a topic of friction in immersive theatre that has been extensively written about by Adam Alston. Alston (2016) argues that one-to-one experience in immersive theatre is often used as a technique to reward productive participation and risk-taking, bestowing one participant with an optimal experience. Alston sees this as an extension of neoliberal individualism and the valorisation of an entrepreneurial mindset towards risk. This could be seen as problematizing collectivity, by setting participants in competition with one another for limited rewards and encouraging narcissistic participation. This could also become a barrier to immersion, if we agree with

Biggin's (2017) theory that the concept of "flow" is a prerequisite to immersion through activity, because rewarding only certain behaviours could disrupt flow by introducing the concern of failure and interrupting autotelic activity, or activity performed for its own sake.

However, *Book of Rooms*' Old Chart encounter challenges the immersive entertainment industry's fetishisation of productivity by democratising the one-to-one encounter and reinforcing accepting spaces for productivity, or lack thereof, by not relying on neoliberal risk and reward systems to motivate action in the house. After all participants take part in the one-to-one encounter together, they enter the house and face 64 different rooms in which they might feel compelled to explore, witness, spectate, create, co-create and improvise in different scenarios. Equally, *Book of Rooms* was a space in which none of these modes of participation was compulsory. Rajala stressed the agency and inclusivity of the audience experience in *Book of Rooms* stating that: "it has to be accessible for audiences who want to say no to engaging with participatory and multisensory things, that (*Book of Rooms*) can be like an exhibition for them" (14 July, 2021). This approach thus continues to promote the 4 values of (Finnish) immersive theatre: agency, consent, participation, and inclusion.

The final section of the analysis will explore the impact of *Book of Rooms*' agency driven participatory encounters on Brown and Ratzkin's arc of engagement by breaking down each stage of the audience journey using the example of *Book of Rooms* as a case study. This data will be used to develop a new model of the immersive arc of engagement.

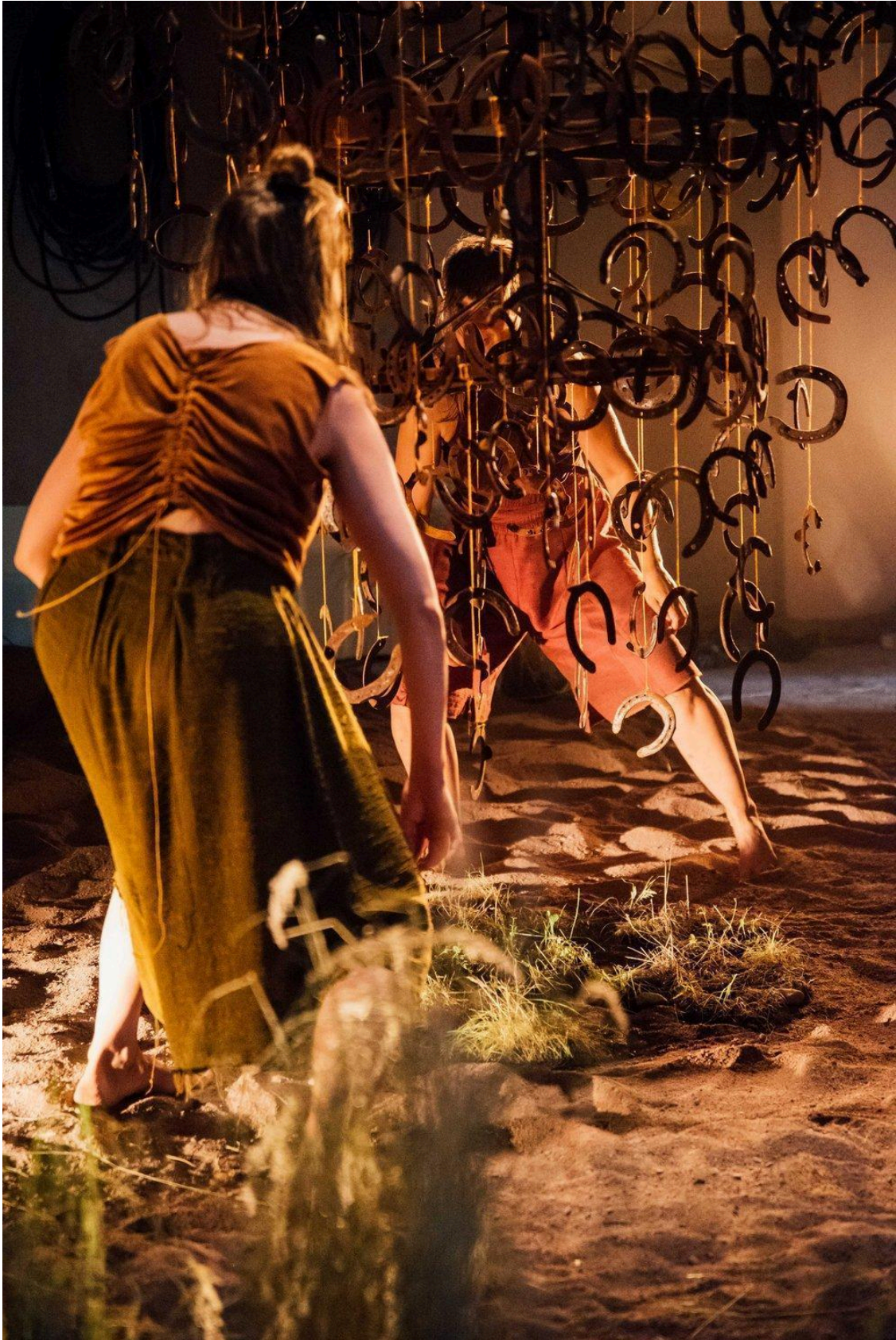


Image 6: Room 20. Making eye contact through the horseshoe chandelier. Photo credit: Jesper Dolgov.

4.3 The Immersive Arc of Engagement

As discussed in chapter 2.2.3 of the theoretical framework, the Arc of Engagement is a five part process that shows the audience’s journey through an event beginning from the moment they decide to attend an event until a period of post-processing and meaning-making after the event that can continue indefinitely in a participant’s life depending on the level of impact their engagement made.

Analysis of relevant literature about immersive theatre audience experience, experiential data gathered as a participating audience member and data analysis of audience documentation in blogs and social media of the case study suggests that immersive theatre may challenge the arc of engagement by disrupting the timeline and offering audiences the agency to curate their own, blurring the boundary between the preparatory stages and the artistic exchange, increasing opportunities for engagement outside of the artistic exchange that may also extend the impact echo. The immersive approach could therefore be argued as a holistic approach to audience engagement, where instead of scaffolding the artistic exchange with educational and contextualisation activities, meaning- and sense-making becomes an audience and peer-to-peer driven process supported by interpretative tools embedded into all stages of the audience journey.

Table 3 (below) lists the modes of participation for each stage of the arc in *Book of Rooms*. The table further demonstrates the holistic nature of the engagement process as the artistic exchange, marketing, front of house encounters, props (such as the tool belt, map and coin for each participant) and “place-making scenography” approach exist alongside more traditional supplementary audience engagement activities (such as the reading group and post-performance discussions) to create diverse engagement opportunities. In *Book of Rooms* the “question asking” task links the entire engagement process from “Build-up” to “Post-processing”.

| Build-up and contextualisation | Intense preparation | Artistic exchange | Post-processing and meaning making |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Question asking</i> | <i>Question asking</i> | <i>Question asking</i> | <i>Question asking</i> |
| Website content | Old Chart one-to-one | Interactive activities | Encouraging |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| Artist videos | encounter facilitating “air lock” conditions to promote immersivity and liminality. | Multisensory exploration | conversation outside the venue, both informally between audience members and with the production team via Butlers receiving the coins. |
| Marketing | | Reinforcement of inclusion and invitation through scenography | |
| Location/site | Receiving a tool belt | | |
| Turku City library reading group | Establishing rules of participation through clear instructions | Poem + artistic response = range of approaches to the text. | Online forums and social media |
| Old Chart one-to-one encounter test phase at Olohuone festival | | Encouraging feedback through guestbooks = begins critical reflection during the event and not just in the post-processing stage. Butlers to provide assistance if needed | <i>Book of Rooms</i> flea market Post-performance discussion events: One hosted by TEHDAS theatre (one of the co-producers of <i>Book of Rooms</i>) and another by Centre for Everything, a leading proponent of Finnish immersive theatre. |

Table 3: *Book of Rooms*’ audience engagement arc, based on the phases of Brown and Ratzkin’s (2011) “arc of audience engagement”.

4.3.1 Build-up and contextualisation

According to Brown and Ratzkin (2011) the first stage of the audience engagement arc is the build-up in which audiences contextualise the upcoming event through messaging received from marketing and by engaging with content and activities created to build anticipation and offer a deeper understanding of the artwork. Brown and Ratzkin (2011) argue that participating in contextualisation activities facilitate a “moment of curatorial insight” for the participant during the subsequent artistic exchange period that will offer greater opportunity for meaning making later.

In the build-up phase of *Book of Rooms*, audiences were able to familiarise themselves with information about the event on the event website, may have seen marketing around the city of Turku and may have viewed social media content from some of the collaborating artists or companies. Some prospective audience members may have also

participated in the test performances of the Old Chart one-to-one encounter at Olohuone Festival. These activities are all within the range of standard activities that Brown and Ratzkin (2011) identified audiences might expect to find when preparing to attend any cultural activity (see table 2, page 25). However, Machon (2013) suggests that in addition to conventional build-up activities immersive theatre companies may also use this phase to evoke anticipation through mystery or secrecy about the production, for example by withholding the address of the venue or inviting the audience to immediately engage in participatory activity.

Book of Rooms established interpretation and sense-making immediately in the build-up phase by asking the audiences to think of a question to bring to the house in advance of their visit. This can increase the possibility of captivation later as participants use the activity to develop a positive and open outlook towards the event (Walmsley, 2016, as cited in Järvinen, 2020, p.48). Question-asking thus becomes a mode of participation that audiences can engage with at all stages of the experience, establishing agency and providing a tool for interpretation that connects the anticipatory stages with the artistic exchange and later the meaning-making stages.

4.3.2 Intense preparation

Intense preparation is the second stage of the arc, in which participants each undertake their own unique preparation for the event. The kind of activities available to participants across artforms include pre-performance events or talks, podcasts and other methods of familiarising themselves with the material. Brown and Ratzkin argue that participation in this stage of the arc exists on a broad spectrum, with some audience members preparing well in advance of the event by familiarising themselves with material and planning their experience, whereas other audience members may not think about the event until they enter the building and browse the programme notes (2011, p.17).

This contrast in experience suggests not only variation in individual preferences to participation but also inequalities of accessibility. For some audience members an unfamiliarity with the venue, artform or type of participation, as well as its expected behaviours and rituals and a lack of information or contextualising activities may create

barriers to participation, for example by necessitating greater preparation in order to attend the event or induce a greater perception of risk in attending. Thus the information provided to participants and the range of activities available to them at this stage is a key opportunity to assert the inclusivity and values of an event.

When participants arrived at *Book of Rooms*, they were greeted by a Butler who showed them into a waiting area in which there was a list of instructions about how to engage with the house. All participants therefore had access to this same information before entering the space. At the designated time on their ticket, the audience were led into the Old Chart encounter space as a group of 20 participants, where they experienced a one-to-one encounter with an Old Chart performer.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the coin toss activity was first introduced to the audience in the information about the production. Prospective participants were likely to have read this information when making a decision to book a ticket to the event, so as participants reached the intense preparation stage they were likely to have considered or prepared a question in advance. However, during the encounter with the Old Chart this invitation is repeated, now in person, by the performer. Therefore participants who may not have read the information about asking a question to the house, or struggled to engage with the activity, were offered another opportunity to think of a question during the first encounter, democratising the preparation and contextualization of the event. The one-to-one encounter concluded with each participant receiving a map with which to assist the navigation of the house and a tool belt containing some items to engage with some of the rooms of the house. Inside the tool belt were different items, for example notes suggesting to visit a particular room number at a certain time, feathers that participants would later find opportunities to use and contribute to the artwork inside the house or one of the mallets to play the horseshoe crown. These items offer a participatory safety net to participants who may feel uncertain about their role in the house, that could be utilised or not, depending on how quickly and easily the participant finds themselves engaging with the production.

Machon (2013) states that immersive theatre creates an uncertainty about when the real world ends and the performance begins. The Old Chart encounter similarly blurred the boundary between the intense preparation phase and the artistic exchange as this encounter acts as a performative welcome to the event and establishes boundaries and rules of

participation whilst at the same time incorporating performance. Furthermore, the Old Chart encounter could be seen as a singular artistic exchange in itself, as evidenced by the Old Chart encounter performances at Olohuone Urban Art Festival in Turku in advance of the production run. The performances at the festival were an opportunity to test run the Old Chart encounter for the first time to audiences. These encounters concluded with participants receiving the poem in paper form, rather than having to go find the room in the house as the production was not yet open. The success of the Old Chart encounter as a stand-alone performance demonstrates that it can be viewed as an artistic exchange itself without continuing into the production. This blurring of boundaries could be articulated in the immersive engagement arc by an early peak that signifies the transition from the intense preparation into the artistic exchange.

4.3.3. Artistic exchange

In Brown & Ratzkin's model, the peak of the arc of engagement is the artistic exchange, which may be heightened depending on the participant's experience of the previous contextualisation stage. Brown and Ratzkin state that the impact of the artistic exchange can also be heightened through interpretative assistance during this phase, for example through spoken introductions, visual enhancements or real-time assistance via digital devices (2011, p.7).

Interpretative assistance is also fundamental to the immersive arc of engagement, however rather than facilitating activities that scaffold the artistic exchange in order to contextualise it for those who need further contextualisation, Cunningham (2021) argues that immersive theatre practice is a worldbuilding strategy in which the audience co-produce the exchange by accepting implicit, explicit and object invitations to participate in it. Thus, the immersive world itself is a place of interpretative assistance, as the audience engages with the different sensory stimuli, artforms and modes of participation available to them in order to construct their individual narrative and interpretation of the artistic exchange.

In *Book of Rooms*, the production interpreted 64 different poems through 64 different artistic expressions involving 130 different artists of different disciplines. Within these different artistic mediums, participants had opportunities to spectate, interact, explore,

play, co-create and improvise. Both the scenography of the space and the numerous installations in the space created haptic invitations to engage with objects through touch, smell and other sensory stimuli (including opportunities to lie on a vibrating bed and climb into a swinging boat made from ropes). The space was enhanced in different parts of the house by sound including live performed music, recorded music, and binaural sound installation via headphones. Some of the rooms had video installations and room number 26, the children's room (Lastenhuone), was enhanced by Augmented Reality created by CTRL Reality Oy.

The immersive arc of engagement therefore contains multiple peaks, as audience members curate their own journey through an open world space, reaching different moments of "curatorial insight" as they make new connections that lead them into new directions to explore, or engage in play, haptic perception or one-to-one encounters. These peaks will be unique to each participant's own experience and route through the production.

Carnwath and Brown (2014) state that the impacts of cultural participation during the event are unconscious psychophysical responses, including arousal (increased heart rate and skin conductance), energy or tension, and captivation; which can be achieved, for example, through the senses of flow, awe and concentration. It was previously established that the immersive arc of engagement increases conditions for captivation in audiences through the contextualisation stages, as according to Walmsley the greatest indicator of captivation is anticipation towards an upcoming event (Järvinen, 2021). Furthermore, during the artistic exchange these conditions are again increased as the participants engage in activities of different intensities to promote a sense of immersion through flow that facilitate these psychosocial responses (Biggin, 2017).

Importantly, in *Book of Rooms* the participants had agency over the intensity of their experience. One way in which they could do this was by taking time to rest or reflect in the cafeteria. As Biggin (2017) states, the interval in an immersive theatre production exists in space rather than in a conventional theatre setting where it is a time based break between acts (p.69). In *Book of Rooms*, the cafeteria was a space that allowed participants to stop at any point during the evening, sit, and if they chose to, buy a cup of coffee or food from Leipomo Gryn, a popular local independent bakery, further emphasising the production's commitment to the independent field and local artists. The audience could stay for as long

as they wanted in the space, whilst still maintaining a connection to the performance as the area also hosted two of the rooms: Room 37: Miniature model of the Turku archipelago, an old surveyor's glass cabinet, an installation by Maria Laitila who was also in charge of public outreach in the core working group, and Room 17: The kitchen and 6 baking ovens, a concept and composition by Roose Halme that included performers making bread. The kitchen “room” only distinguished itself from the real cafeteria metres away in the same space as the bakers were singing while they kneaded dough (image 7, page 70). The time and intensity flexibility of immersive interval space therefore accommodates participants who may need more time to physically or mentally rest from the experience, allowing them control over when they choose to return to exploring the space.

As well as blurring the boundary between event and non-event through the cafeteria space, the immersive arc of engagement again blurs the boundary between the artistic exchange and the subsequent stage of the arc, the post-processing and meaning-making stage, by encouraging critical reflection in real-time. Particularly when participants discover the room decided by their coin toss, reflect on the contents of the room and its related poem, and contemplate the answer to their question before deciding how to continue their engagement with the production.



Image 7. Room 17: The kitchen and 6 baking ovens. Photo credit: Jesper Dolgov

Furthermore, guest books were placed across the site, encouraging pause for critical reflection to write feedback that would be shared with the production team to support the ongoing development of the audience experience through the immersive feedback loop.

4.3.4 Post-processing and meaning-making

After the artistic exchange, participants engage in a period of post-processing through critical reflection and sensemaking. As established in the previous chapter, audiences of *Book of Rooms* already began this phase during the artistic exchange by encouraging participants to pause and write in guest books, and by using question asking as a tool for participation already during the artistic exchange. After the event the reflection continues, for example through conversation with friends. The importance of informal opportunities for post-processing is emphasised by Brown and Ratzkin, who state that during the post-processing stage of the audience journey, informal conversation outside of the venue should be encouraged and may have more impact than post-performance programmed activities (2011, p.20). Gross and Pitt's (2016) research on audiences of contemporary arts also concluded that creating the conditions for post-performance peer-to-peer reflective conversation, in which a shared understanding was reached together by non-professionals rather than conversation facilitated by experts, was of higher value to participants in the study.

Therefore, the post-processing phase may begin immediately after the event, when conversation is made as participants are reunited with their companions, if they arrived with others. Interpreting question answers and sharing with others could become part of the participants' "extended audiencing" (Ritter, 2016) if they chose to do so, by deconstructing their individual experiences after the event or writing about their experiences on social media, blogs or forums, a form of participation that has become popular with immersive theatre audiences (Flaherty, 2014). *Book of Rooms* offered tools and opportunities to assist this critical reflection, firstly through the previously mentioned guest books in the house and secondly by having press photos freely available for download from the *Book of Rooms* website to use for content about the production. The accessibility of these photos online enabled *Book of Rooms* participants who may wish to

write about the production later to allow themselves to become immersed during the production without disrupting their own or others' experiences by stopping to take photos during the experience itself.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In the analysis, a participation and engagement theoretical framework was used to explore the types of audience encounters that can be facilitated through immersive engagement approaches. The focus has been on *how* and by *whom* these are facilitated and what impact the approaches may have on overall experience and engagement in order to answer the research question: How do (Finnish) immersive theatre makers approach audience engagement? The research suggests that it is through non-hierarchical leadership processes that combine artistic and logistic thinking with value-driven decision-making that agency-driven and inclusive audience engagement arcs can be created.

As stated in the introduction, Walmsley (2019) has identified two elements of “viscerality” of experience and “exchange” or “co-creation” that occur in immersive theatre and may provide unique insight into audiences’ phenomenological experience and thus differentiate immersive theatre participation as “fundamentally different” to other forms of audience experience (p. 33). This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that the engagement mechanisms used to facilitate these visceral experiences may also fundamentally differ from other audience engagement approaches. The data provided responds to a research gap; that due to the emerging nature of the genre there are limited examples of immersive engagement processes, particularly outside of the leading immersive theatre markets of the U.K. and U.S.

The results will now be summarised in four conclusions that define immersive audience engagement as well as visualisations of the Immersive Feedback Loop and Immersive Audience Engagement Arc followed with some suggestions for further research areas.

5.1. Immersive Audience Engagement

5.1.1 Value-driven practice is facilitated through non-hierarchical leadership

Immersive audience engagement is a value-driven practice facilitated by non-hierarchical leadership. Analysis showed that Finnish immersive theatre-makers prioritise four values

of agency, consent, participation, and inclusion in their work. These are principles that shape how an immersive experience is constructed and suggest that Finnish immersive theatre-makers aim to facilitate audience encounters in which participants feel safe, welcome and in-control of their experience. Keywords that arose from the semi-structured interviews as methods to facilitate the aforementioned values were: clarity, delicate/subtle, feedback, invitation and connection.

These values and methods are reached together collaboratively. Immersive theatre-makers work together to consider the needs and roles of their audience throughout the creative process by connecting the production design, dramaturgy, marketing and event management in order to create more opportunities for inclusion and agency. This naturally facilitates more holistic and open working practices which in turn results in more holistic audience engagement approaches. In contrast, Brown and Ratzkin (2011) describe traditional audience engagement methods as the delivery of additional education and enrichment activities in order to contextualise an artwork. The difference between traditional audience engagement and immersive theatre engagement being that the immersive artwork is only truly realised in dialogue with participants who interact with it and contextualisation becomes embedded in the artwork rather than being viewed as an educational afterthought scaffolded to an event and facilitated by an expert or pedagogue.

Facilitating contextualisation as part of an artistic concept, rather than as an ancillary requirement necessary for only some of the audience that require interpretative assistance, is a core component of the immersive engagement approach and connects to three of the core immersive values: inclusion, participation and agency. The case study, *Book of Rooms*, demonstrates the effectiveness of this non-hierarchical approach as the core working group of 11 different artists and cultural professionals, who each oversaw a different area of the production or coordination, were collectively awarded the Finnish state prize for performing arts. Arts Promotion Centre Finland stated that the production “retained its ideological and artistic focus throughout the space” and congratulated the group on the cohesiveness of their work (Arts Promotion Centre Finland, 2021). This feedback from the jury demonstrates that the team shared values and that this was communicated not only between the 130 collaborators, but also to the audience and critics.

Key to facilitating the leadership approach were the Artistic Director, Alma Rajala, and Head of Audience Experience, Venla Luoma, who emphasised the value of all team members' inputs by rotating themselves into Old Chart and Butler roles each night rather than directing these supporting and volunteer roles from a distance. Rajala recognised her own responsibility to facilitate the working environment as Artistic Director and expressed her aim to create "shared ownership" noting that the approach motivated shared "inspiration, pride, and joy in the work" (Rajala, 5 November, 2021). Furthermore, opportunities for formal and informal discussion between artists, production staff and volunteers were facilitated in order to reach collective shared values, which gave space for all contributors to be heard and emphasised that their input was valued.

5.1.2 Decision-making requires diverse inputs

Non-hierarchical leadership of immersive theatre therefore acknowledges the need for diverse inputs. In the analysis, Gareth White's (2013) interpretation of Jan Murray's (1999) theory of "procedural authorship" was used to illustrate how the decision-making process of *Book of Rooms* communicated values and invitations to both audience and collaborators. The diversity of feedback received during procedural authorship is fundamental to the process because a wider range of inputs equals a wider range of data to shape the engagement approach. This depth of data is necessary if the approach is to be inclusive, agency-driven and participatory because risk perception creates barriers to cultural participation and engagement, and is both a conscious and unconscious embodied process influenced by many different individual factors that affect each participant's unique ability to engage with participatory invitations (Machon, 2013; White, 2013; Alston, 2016; Marvala, 2019).

Theories of risk perception in cultural participation demonstrate the importance of clarity, hospitality and care towards audiences. In other modes of cultural participation it is common to rely on an assumption that the traditional rituals and conventions of the event are collectively understood (knowing when to applaud in classical music concerts and the disdain shown towards audience members who applaud in the wrong place is an example of this). Therefore, by including diverse inputs in the decision-making for engagement

approaches, conscious and unconscious factors that might otherwise lead to risk perception creating barriers to participation can be identified. This data directly impacts how the modes or rules of participation are communicated to the audience, which is particularly relevant to immersive theatre because the nature of immersive experience requires an ongoing renegotiation of the rules of participation. This is due in part to increased demand of physical participation from audience members as well as the ambiguity of immersive theatre as a concept, as well as the connection between barriers to participation and barriers to immersion. However, these approaches could also be used in many other forms of cultural participation to reflect on failing communication strategies with the view to improving inclusivity and diversity.

In (Finnish) immersive theatre, the diverse feedback or “input” informing the engagement approach is gathered by the creative team, from one another and from “play testers”, or test audiences, to influence how the production invites participants to engage by evaluating participant responses in real time. The feedback generated from this process becomes a loop that demonstrates to theatre-makers whether their values and participatory invitations are successfully being communicated to participants or not and uncovers any barriers to engagement. The feedback loop allows the entire team to improve the ways in which they communicate participatory invitations and create inclusive spaces in a dialogic process. This data gathering approach could easily be replicated in other, less participatory, events or venues, for example by regularly inviting groups to give direct feedback on topics such as user experience, programming and accessibility, supporting staff in audience-facing roles to be able to facilitate conversations and share feedback from audiences with those in positions of power, and facilitating a variety of ways for the public to communicate any barriers facing their engagement.

Decisions made on the basis of data gathered in the feedback loop can affect individual performances, artworks or interactions (micro) or impact wider decisions that affect an overall production (macro). After the test or rehearsal phase, the feedback loop continues once ticketed audiences enter the space as artists and those in other audience-facing roles discover new ways to interact from the responses given by live audiences, enabling an ongoing evaluation and development of the audience engagement approach throughout the production process, widening the knowledge used in decision-making until the end of the production’s run.

Figure 2 on page 78 is a visualisation of the immersive feedback loop. The Micro Feedback Loop illustrates decision-making on an individual basis. Diverse inputs (represented by external arrows in the figure) influence decision-making and impact a singular artistic or logistic decision in the form of knowledge or data that informs the procedural authorship of an individual encounter, for example: whether to engage with an audience member or give them space, whether to change the pace or style of an interaction, whether to provide additional information, etc. These decisions will be based on the experience of earlier interactions, intuition, improvisation and evaluation.

The Macro Feedback Loop illustrates how wider decision-making affecting all audiences arises from the collective impact of diverse inputs motivating the working group to make collaborative changes to the production, for example: to remove a participatory element for safety or artistic reasons, redirect an encounter or direction, provide additional information available to the entire audience body, etc.

“Decision-making” as a term perhaps suggests to the reader that this work is not part of the creative process, but rather part of the strategic management side of theatre-making. However, *Book of Rooms*’ Artistic Director Alma Rajala makes a clear connection between decision-making and artistic practice in her description of “puppetry-thinking” as a practice which uses care and somatic work in combination with detailed work using objects and materials in order to invite the audience to participate in ways that are intuitive, non-verbal and subtle (14 July, 2021). It is this intersection of artistic thinking, strategic thinking and creative delivery that could be argued as defining the distinction between immersive audience engagement and traditional audience engagement approaches.

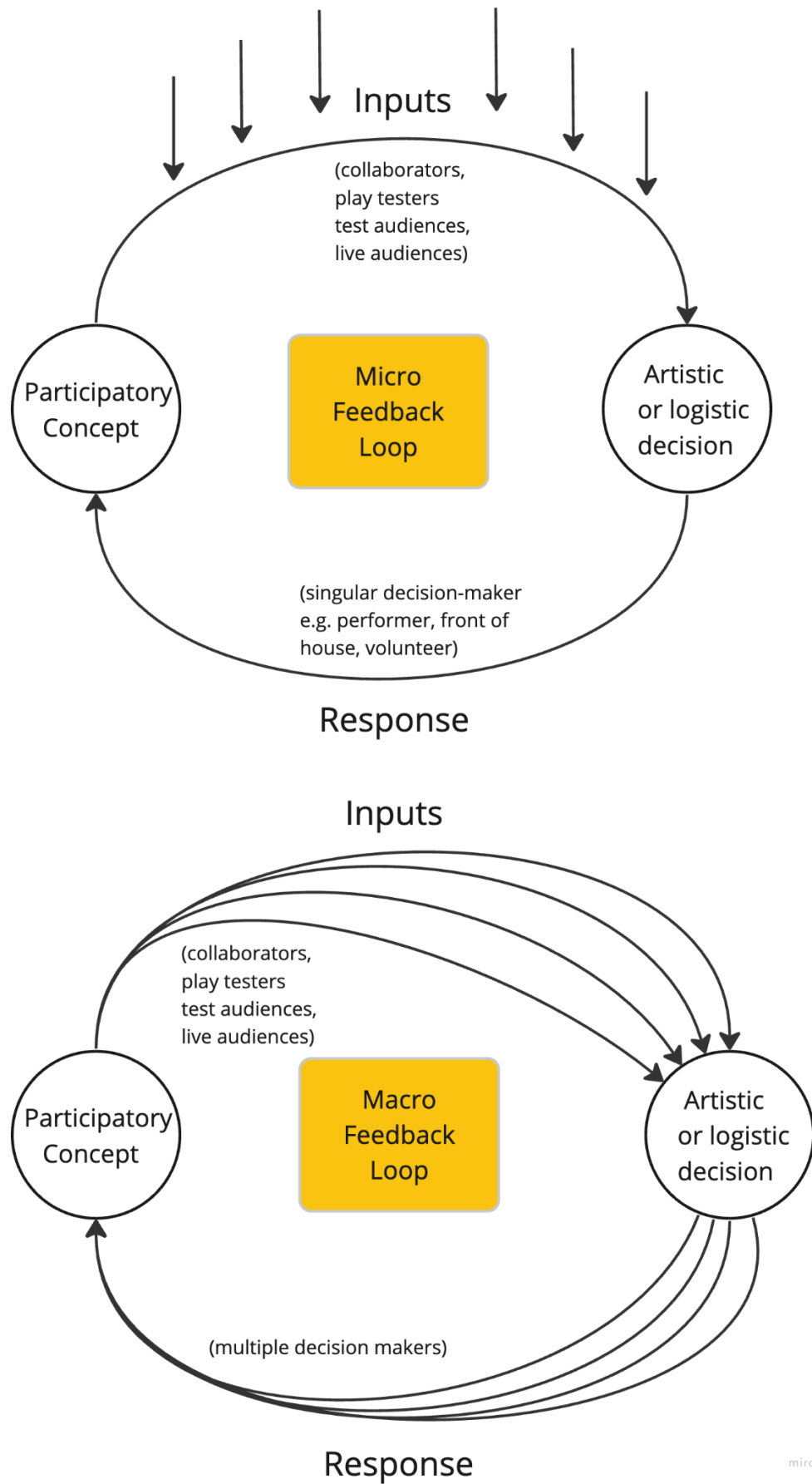


Figure 2: The Immersive Feedback Loop.

5.1.3 Audience-centric opportunities for participation.

Immersive audience engagement is therefore less focused on delivering information and education to audiences that can enable them to understand a work, but rather to create the conditions in which audiences feel comfortable and have the agency to interpret the work in their own way and at their own pace through a range of modes of engagement. Immersive audience engagement could therefore be described as facilitating audience-centric opportunities for participation. To reach this goal, the immersive artistic exchange is embedded with encounters or interactions, such as the Horse's Room in *Book of Rooms* in which the performer begins improvising once a participant enters in dialogue with them by performing the horseshoe chandelier, or Recover Laboratory's *Nightwalk*, which culminates in sound art created from the participants' own words.

A well-constructed invitation to participate in immersive theatre could be described as finding the balance between communicating of the rules and parameters of engagement with enough clarity that barriers to participation are low and the participant feels welcome and safe to participate, whilst leaving enough space for mystery, curiosity, flexibility, exploration, improvisation and playfulness so that participants can respond in their own ways and experience a sense of achievement or catharsis as they discover new information about the production and new opportunities to spectate, interact, create and co-create within it.

The construction of participatory invitations through methods such as procedural authorship, the immersive feedback loop and other artistic methods such as Rajala's "puppetry thinking" and Cunningham's (2021) theory of scenographic place-making provoke artists and producers to question what values, prejudices and power dynamics make up the relationship between theatre-maker and participant, how they are communicated to and received by a participant. Intentionally constructed invitations are inclusive and communicate to audiences that they are being cared for, that they have agency and the space to consent (or not) to the opportunities available to them.

In contrast, traditional methods of facilitating participation and engagement, such as demonstrated in Table 2 (p.25) adapted from Brown and Ratzkin (2011), are largely ancillary activities considered to support the audience's contextualisation of the artistic

content, such as open rehearsals, interpretative assistance, pre- and post- performance talks, etc. The goal of this contextualisation is to assist the audience in reaching a “moment of curatorial insight” about the artistic exchange that will support their meaning-making and processing of the event later. There is a great deal that could be said here about to which demographics audience engagement activities are predominantly aimed at versus the demographic of whose “curatorial insight” audience engagement activities are aimed to illuminate and, as White (2013) and Rancière (2009) remind us, it is therefore worth questioning what power structures in the arts that engagement activities are traditionally reinforcing rather than dismantling.

5.1.4 Verbal, non-verbal, haptic and object invitations

In audience-centric engagement approaches, tools of inclusion are therefore considered in depth. In this research, language (verbal, non-verbal and object) and vocabulary were identified as key tools in facilitating clarity and agency by communicating the options and roles available to the audience in accessible and diverse messaging and empowering them to participate and reflect on the experience in their own words. Examples of this include *Book of Rooms*' question asking task, the Old Chart one-to-one encounter, guest books, Recover Laboratory's letter writing and soundscape tasks, and Samee Haapa's approach to offer three levels of participatory instructions. Non-verbal communication was also used to instigate participation, establish boundaries and create safer spaces. Interviewees described these as “delicate” and “subtle” ways to facilitate engagement and include eye contact to open interaction, and hand signals to communicate consent and request help.

Central to the immersive engagement approach is also non-verbal communication through the use of objects and the dramaturgy surrounding them. In *Book of Rooms* this was established throughout the space in particular through Johanna Latvala's scenography. Latvala's scenographic approach was to facilitate the production's mission of communicating to the audience that “this is your house” through creating diverse layers of “your house” that audience members could recognise and connect to. Latvala used, for example, old doors, windows, wallpaper and objects from many different local sources to maximise the possibility of different audiences recognising themselves and feeling a connection to the space.

Immersive theatre also uses haptic, or sensory, engagement and objects to offer a wider range of participation modes and tools that offer agency to the audience. The influence of puppetry in *Book of Rooms* is one way that interaction and mechanics created opportunities for touch and participation; furthermore, the use of other sensory modes of participation, including scent, headphone experience in dark spaces, and different textures, such as the use of feathers in the tool belt, one performance artist who worked with ice in their room and one room that contained a vibrating bed through which to experience the space from a different angle and stimuli, all offer alternative tools and perspectives of interpretation. This approach promotes inclusivity by broadening the mediums through which the audience can engage with a production. For example, an interview with Maria Oshodi in Machon's *Punchdrunk encyclopaedia* (2018) describes how the sensory qualities of Punchdrunk's immersive work, and the ways in which these are facilitated to blind and visually impaired audiences, offer memorable sensory experience in more inclusive ways than, for example, touch-tours that may further other these communities.

Furthermore, in the analysis it was discussed how this use of space, rituals and objects as tools to encourage participation can also facilitate a sense of *communitas*; or create situations or liminal spaces in which the audience reaches a different sort of social awareness of one another to accept responsibility to co-create the environment. The objects and dramaturgy used to set boundaries of liminal space in *Book of Rooms* were the Old chart one-to-one coin toss activity, and the tool belt and coin given to the audience at the end of this encounter in combination with the scenography. Ramos et al (2020) describe this as temporal community building or post-immersive participation and Bishop (2012) describes how participation can be used "to restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement" (p.275). In Finnish immersive theatre, an additional focus on consent and vulnerability encourages an awareness of the self and others that further contributes to temporal community building in the immersive space.

The immersive engagement approach therefore poses many questions that can be considered by the cultural field, both on a case-by-case basis and more generally: What can the spaces and sites in which we invite audiences to engage with art and culture tell us

when we consider the potential range of experiences through the lens of audiences' individual personal histories? What stories does the space tell us about power, safety, control, agency, inclusion? Whose "house" is this and through what tools might we engage with it? Immersive audience engagement approaches invite us to reflect on these questions down to minute detail of every interaction an audience member may have in the space. The final section of the conclusion will explore how this individualised approach of immersive audience engagement holds potential for new engagement arcs that might better reflect how contemporary consumers engage with cultural participation.

5.2 The Immersive Arc of Engagement

Analysis of relevant literature about immersive theatre audience experience and experiential data gathered as a participating audience member in the case study of *Book of Rooms* suggests that immersive theatre engagement may challenge the arc of engagement by disrupting the timeline, blurring the boundary between the preparatory stages and the artistic exchange, increasing opportunities for engagement outside of the artistic exchange that may also extend the impact echo. The immersive approach could therefore be argued as a holistic approach to audience engagement, where instead of scaffolding the artistic exchange with educational and contextualisation activities, meaning- and sense-making is an audience and peer-to-peer driven process supported by interpretative tools, as discussed in the previous chapter, given at all stages of the audience journey.

The traditional arc of engagement (figure 1, page 24), with its single peak, is reminiscent of a narrative arc: an exposition rising to a climax and returning to a resolution. In contrast, the immersive arc of engagement (figure 3, page 83) could be argued as better reflecting the way digital consumers now experience content, reaching peaks earlier and experiencing multiple peaks as participants move through graded states of immersion as they engage in different modes of participation.

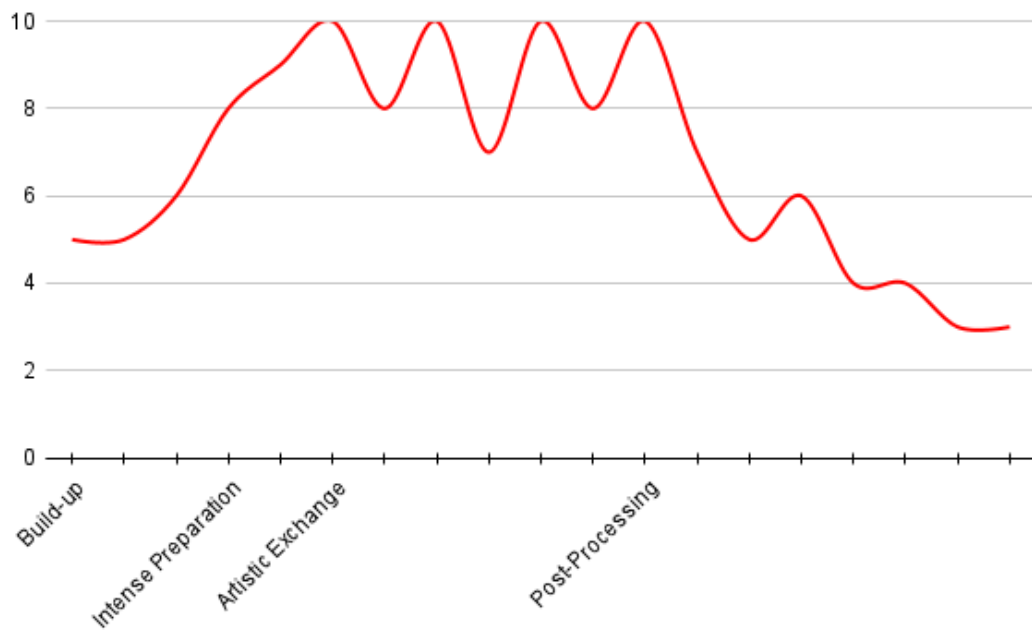


Figure 3: *The Immersive Arc of Engagement.*

Similarities can be found between the immersive engagement arc and the “emerging story arc”, a model in YouTube’s playbook for creatives that recommends opening with a peak to immediately capture the audience’s attention and thereafter form a heartbeat narrative structure through multiple peaks and unexpected shifts to retain attention (Le Port, 2022). Therefore, the multiple peak structure of the Immersive Arc of Engagement could be argued as sharing structural similarities to the ways in which audiences are used to experiencing digital content, which may create opportunities to connect with new audiences or reimagine the engagement arcs of other arts and culture events that are experiencing audience declines, which is also supported by Radbourne’s (2013) research in arts marketing that suggests “new immersive models of performance, presentation, production, and distribution are required in order to attract and retain audiences” (p. 147). The final table (page 84), breaks down the individual stages of the immersive arc of engagement into greater detail using examples from the case study to illustrate an immersive audience journey:

| Build-up | Intense preparation | Artistic exchange | Post-processing |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>The immersive arc of engagement starts higher than the conventional arc, engagement has been immediate, anticipation has been heightened through mystery or secrecy and by asking the participant to engage in preliminary or preparatory activities, such as question asking in the case study of <i>Book of Rooms</i>, or by letter writing in Recover Laboratory's example of <i>Nightwalk</i>.</p> | <p>Immersive theatre may be unclear where the real world ends and the performance begins (Machon, 2013) blurring the boundary between the intense preparation and the artistic exchange itself. This may change the peak structure of the engagement arc.</p> <p>In the case study, the intense preparation stage consisted of a one-to-one interaction with a performer that was an artistic exchange in its own right (e.g Old Chart coin toss as demonstrated at Olohuone festival) creating an additional peak in the arc.</p> | <p>Multiple peaks may occur as the participant shifts between modes of participation in different situations or experience different encounters within the event: multi-sensory exploration, one-to-one interaction, spectation, co-creation, improvisation, play.</p> <p>The interval exists as a physical location in space rather than in time (Biggin, 2017) allowing the participants agency to control the intensity of their experience and take breaks at any given time within the event.</p> | <p>The audience may participate in the "extended event", (Frieze, 2016) a moment where the participant is reunited with companions they were separated from during the event to dissect and compare experiences and interpretations.</p> <p>Participants may also engage in the extended event by writing about their experiences on social media, blogs and immersive media forums (Flaherty, 2014, O'Hara, 2017).</p> <p>The contextualisation enables an extended impact echo.</p> |

Table 4: Phases of the immersive audience engagement arc, based on the phases of Brown and Ratzkin's (2011) "arc of audience engagement".

5.3 Further Research

These new approaches to audience engagement suggest that immersive theatre holds significant potential for new research angles in connection with, for example, audience research, cultural policy discourse, social impacts of cultural participation and the identification and development of skills required for working with immersive practices.

Aside from Alston's (2012, 2016a, 2016b) research into immersive theatre and the influence of neoliberal values, cultural policy and funding, limited research has been conducted examining cultural policy's relationship with immersive theatre. This thesis identified that the non-hierarchical leadership approaches of (Finnish) immersive theatre

create opportunities to promote contemporary cultural policy aims of cultural participation and inclusion (both in working practices and audience engagement). The value of these holistic approaches has been recognised, as demonstrated by the Finnish state prize for performing arts being awarded to *Book of Rooms* yet, as Virolainen (2016) states, the majority of state-funding in Finland is awarded to a small number of institutions (p.64-65) therefore a need for research examining how cultural policy aims are being met by smaller independent companies and productions in predominantly site-specific settings through immersive theatre and how access to funding for these smaller companies and spaces can be improved in order for this work to be made would be of benefit to the field.

This thesis also identified several practices being pioneered in immersive theatre that deserve more in-depth artistic and audience research. For example, the innovative work with different artistic communication strategies to promote inclusive participation in Samee Haapa's facilitation of communicating consent and Alma Rajala's work with "puppetry thinking" or non-verbal and object communication to promote engagement, could be a rich area of potential audience research. Furthermore, this interdisciplinary nature of immersive theatre could lend itself well to interdisciplinary research, such as intersecting sociolinguistics and cultural participation.

Finally, as yet unexplored research links can also be made to cultural citizenship and other social impacts of immersive participation. Matarasso (1997) argues that the arts can strengthen participants' commitment to place, especially in urban regeneration (p.74). Therefore, what potential does temporal community building in site-specific places through immersive experience hold in promoting cultural democracy and citizenship? Further audience research could be identified in examining social impact and cultural placemaking through immersive participation.

As the behemoth of the immersive entertainment industry expands exponentially with "immersive" experiences popping up across the globe to varying degrees of success and connection to the original immersive practices, research into immersive audience engagement may offer knowledge and data that can help improve experience and impact for audiences across the immersive entertainment industry and beyond.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Initial interview questions:

Background information:

1. What is your role?
2. What art forms do you work with in your productions?
3. How long have you been creating immersive experiences?
4. What inspired you to start working in immersive theatre?
5. What immersive design techniques do you have experience working in?
 - a) Sandbox/open world- (free roaming experiences)
 - b) Tracked – (walkthrough/promenade events)
 - c) One-to-One
6. What immersive tools do you have experience working with?
 - a) Set and props
 - b) Immersive technologies
 - c) Immersive sound
7. What size audiences have you worked with?
8. Is your work scalable to larger/smaller audiences?

Production Design:

9. At what stage of the design process do you plan how to accommodate audiences?
10. At what stages of the production design process do you do user testing (if any)?
11. What is the size and role of your support/front of house team?
12. Do you provide training for your artists and production team for dealing with audience interactions?
13. Are your performances accessible?
14. What safety considerations do you need to take into account?

Audience Care:

15. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being a passive participant and 10 being an active participant, where would you say that your audiences would fall?

16. What kind of interactions can audiences expect in your productions?

17. How do you guide your audience through the experience and manage their expectations?

18. How much information about the production, and how to experience it, do you provide to audiences in advance of the production?

19. What challenges have you faced when planning for audience flow and a positive experience for all?

Concluding remarks

Appendix 2: Post-production interview topics

Key events from the production to deconstruct in conversation:

Old Chart one-to-one encounter: *Agency, accessibility, intimacy.*

Receiving the toolbelt: *objects, action, safety net*

Horses' room: *co-creation, participation, intimacy*

Whale puppet in courtyard: *communal, closing*

Production:

How were test-audiences incorporated into the process?

Did the production require any interventions during the run?

How did the channels of communications work during the run?

Were there any accessibility challenges that came up during the process?

What were the goals of the miniature cupboards?

Evaluation:

What observations did you make as Butlers and Old Charts?

What feedback have you received?

- From collaborators/artists/team
- From the audience

What is your hope for the legacy of the production?