



Liveness Through Audience Participation in Digital Theatre: Map to Utopia As a Playground in Digital

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of liveness in digital theatre practice by analyzing the case of *Map to Utopia*, a digital theatre production that utilizes technological devices such as computers and mobile phones to facilitate audience participation. The article provides an overview of the theoretical framework surrounding digital theatre and presents a discussion on the concept of liveness and its relation to audience participation. The article argues that *Map to Utopia* creates a sense of presentness and liveness through the active participation of the audience, turning the digital space into a playground. Furthermore, the article examines the use of digital media in *Map to Utopia* and highlights how it enhances audience participation, discussing technology, theatre and audience interaction.

Keywords: Liveness, audience participation, digital theatre, playfulness, Map to Utopia



Introduction

In digital theatre practice, the audience's involvement is paramount, ranging from their role as co-writers of the production to their contribution to the performance's liveness. However, some critics within the theatre and performance field contend that theatre, founded on the principle of the "here and now," is difficult to achieve through mediated, recorded, or manipulated visuals, sounds, or images associated with digital technologies.¹ The broad opinion is that using digital tools manipulates and eliminates the essence of theatre: Liveness. Live performance is considered the real one, as it hinges on being present and in the moment. In contrast, mediated performance appears to be an artificial and secondary reproduction of the action, suggesting a recorded or manipulated image of reality.² This rigid and unyielding perspective on theatre maintains that the theatre possesses a unique magic, which includes a formal gathering through the presence of its participants. Therefore, it excludes new media and technology. The performer and artist Eric Bogosian reinforces this ontological contradiction by claiming that "*theatre clears [his] head because it takes the subtextual brainwashing of the media madness... Instead of being bombarded by a cathode ray tube, we are speaking to ourselves. Human language, not electronic noise.*"³ As previously mentioned, mediated images or sounds do not pertain to the real and live human world. However, by examining this approach, this paper argues that new media technologies, such as computers, cell phones, and digital spaces like the Internet, present a new avenue for communication and formal gathering through the virtual presence of theatre participants. In other words, as communication media has evolved, mediated tools, digital technologies, and the Internet do not impede the live relationship between theatre participants, including the audience, actors, and writers. Instead, they offer a new type of relationship and space to create communication and a sense of being present and in the moment by creating a playground for the audience.

Thus, in this paper, I want to examine the liveness issue in digital theatre and how it can be achieved through audience participation in the production, *Map to Utopia*. I argue that the advent of mediatization, digitalization, and role-playing systems presents a distinctive prospect to involve the audience and engender a feeling of liveness in digital theatre. Through the inclusion of gamification, a game-like structure can be fused into the performance, altering its atmosphere and leading to various dramaturgical techniques that incorporate active participation from the audience. Furthermore, I assert that due to this active participation of the audience, the liveness in digital theatre practice combines with the idea of presentness and playfulness. The theory emphasizing the relation between performance and play will be a guide line to support the digital theatre's opportunity for a playground, in which the audience should be

1 See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge 1993), 148. Martin Harries, "Theatre and Media before "New" Media: Beckett's Film and Play," *Theatre* 42, no.2 (May 2012): 8.

2 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance In A Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge 2008), 3.

3 Auslander, *Liveness*, 4.

present and active. I will focus on the *Map to Utopia* production, a digital theatre production that emerged in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴

In order to facilitate an in-depth analysis of digital theatre and the ongoing discourse surrounding its liveness, it is important to first establish a clear understanding of the terms “digital” and “digital theatre.” Several scholars have conducted extensive research in this field, including Steve Dixon, Nadja Masura, and Fahrudin Salihbegović, who have proposed descriptive definitions for digital theatre. Their terminology includes “digital performance”, “digital theatre”, and “cyber-theatre”, all of which point towards significant transformations in theatrical structure and practice, providing the audience with an interaction with digital technology and with other agents of the theatre. They argue that the digital theatre practice could create a change in an audience’s understanding of theatre utilizing digital computer technology.^{5 6 7} In order to discuss the liveness problem in digital theatre, it is worth mentioning the key points about the definitions and practice. I argue that a digital theatre production;

1. should use computer technology not as a delivery or a supportive agent but as a central conductor of production,
2. Each participant in theatre practice should interact with this technology, which creates a new space for engagement.
3. This interaction should present the liveness of the communication among theatre agents.

Thus, it can be argued that digital theatre assumes an ontological status as a live performance due to its reliance on the active participation and engagement of both the audience and digital medium. Moreover, the very nature of the digital, as a concept, impels digital theatre practice into a realm of liveness, necessitating real-time communication and interaction between performers, spectators, and technological elements: Charlie Gere presented that the concept of digital includes instant communication, content that can be accessed at any time, and a universal connection.⁸ These characteristics of the digital, namely its organic connection with computer

4 For an article written in Turkish that deals with the liveness concept and its ontological roots in relation to audience interaction through the *Map to Utopia* case, see Melike Saba Akım’s article “Canlılık ve Karşılıklı Etkileşim: Tiyatronun Dijitalleşmesi ve Seyir Rejimi Üzerine Ontolojik-Tarihselci Bir Soruşturma.” In her elaborative article she discusses two Turkey based digital theatre productions, *Map to Utopia* and *Read Subtitles Aloud*, within the frame of liveness, presence and audience interaction. For further reading see Melike Saba Akım, “Canlılık ve Karşılıklı Etkileşim: Tiyatronun Dijitalleşmesi ve Seyir Rejimi Üzerine Ontolojik-Tarihselci Bir Soruşturma,” *Sanat Yazıları* 44, (2021): 31-47.

5 Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (London: MIT Press 2007), 3.

6 Fahrudin Salihbegović, *Directing Cybertheatre* (Belgrade: Academica - Akademska grupa 2013), 15.

7 Nadja Masura, *Digital Theatre: The Making and Meaning of Live Mediated Performance, US & UK 1990–2020* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), 8.

8 Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture* (Wiltshire: Reaktion Books 2002 2008), 15.

technologies and the fact that it paves the way for a change in the form of communication, stand at a crucial point in the practice of digital theatre. The liveness and presentness is based on the instant response that the audience gives. That is to say, the definitions clearly suggest there is a total sense of liveness in digital theatre practice. In her book, *Virtual Theatre* Gabriella Giannachi suggests that cyberart forms, including digital theatre practice, “*all share the characteristic of being open works in which the viewer is variously participating to the work of art from within it.*”⁹ The audience’s participation, which results in an instant response, creates the sense of being here and now in the receiver and performer. The collective creation of production creates a sense of community of the audience, actors, and other agents, establishing digital theatre’s liveness.

This paper delves into the theoretical aspects of digital theatre in the upcoming sections, with a particular focus on the use of mainly digital mediums and how this approach affects the liveness of a performance. To address this issue, I explored the potential solution of audience interaction and participation, as digital practices that incorporate audience involvement tend to establish a sense of playfulness and enhance the production’s liveness. To illustrate this concept, I used *Map to Utopia* as a comprehensive example of digital theatre and explained how the audience’s role in this particular performance, which I had the opportunity to participate in 2022, highlights the theory.

Map to Utopia: An International Playground

Map To Utopia is an interactive performance developed by Ceren Ercan, Frank Heuel, Mark Levitas, Annika Ley, Fehime Seven in collaboration with Fringe Ensemble and Platform Theatre. There exist three distinct versions of the play: the physical performance, which was presented during the initial formation of the play in 2019; the online version, which was produced during the quarantine period of the Covid-19 pandemic; and the hybrid version, which was produced subsequent to the quarantine period in 2022. The physical performance was presented in Yeldeğirmeni in 2019, where the audience was required to physically be present in the neighborhood, wandering around, using cell phones and maps to collect clues found on the streets, and participate in discussions at the final stage, which included performances by actors. In 2020, the online version of the play was conducted using the *Zoom* platform, with forty viewers connected remotely, working together to solve the problems of the represented neighborhoods through the use of assigned colors of red, blue, yellow, and green. At the end of 2021, the play was presented in a hybrid format with twenty individuals physically gathering on stage, while the remaining twenty connected remotely through *Zoom*. The final version, which I had the chance to attend, and is the focus of this paper, merged with an international audience.

9 Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction* (London: Routledge 2004), 4.

The performance, which contains a role-playing experience, presents a simple but vital story: There is a city constructed with four districts, namely red, blue, yellow, and green neighborhoods. Each district has inhabitants who try to solve a problem in their neighborhood. The audience is physically and virtually present: Some join in the performance on the stage, which is full of screens and computers. Others are connected to this space via the online communication platform *Zoom*. The audience takes the role of neighborhood inhabitants; they download an application called “MapToUtopia” on their mobile phone and learn their character through the profile submitted to them. Names, professions, family life, and hobbies... are all written in the application. In the application, there is also a gallery with photographs and characters’ memories. The audience has the chance to know their characters by reading their notes and their memories. There are various characters which have different backgrounds: some are rich, some are poor and some homeless. Some are young and some are old. The information in the application thus becomes the character, and it is this application that presents the characters to the audience.

The online audience is divided into meeting rooms based on the colors of their respective districts, while those on stage gather around a screen that enables them to communicate with the online audience. The participants use headphones to hear one another. Once introduced, members of the online audience are led to meet with each other, including couples who may have a major disagreement. These meetings are not limited to inhabitants of the same district; audience members from different neighborhoods can also connect and discuss how they have solved or could solve problems in their areas.

Spirits from the neighborhoods accompany the audience during the performance. Those creatures which are neither from the past or future, introduce the neighborhood to the audience. The class structure of the district, its aura, its dynamism are told by the districts’ spirits. All four spirits share the same trouble: will the inhabitants be able to overcome their differences and affect each other? Will they be able to comprehend and see each other? Besides the spirits, there is a moderator who leads the audience while describing the subtext of the performance with some analogies. To sum up, *Map to Utopia* is a playground, timeless in the virtual and physical realm in which the audience engages in role-playing to solve a problem about their neighborhoods.

Presentness in Virtual Space: The Digital Technology in *Map to Utopia* and Liveness

To begin with, it is important to highlight the significance of the usage of digital technology in *Map to Utopia* in order to comprehend the way it utilizes this technology. This performance utilizes digital technology in two important ways. Firstly, the participants connect with each other via the digital communication platform, *Zoom*. Since the performance is intended to be

an international one, participants from all around the world are able to join the performance on their computers. Considering the historical and social function of the *Zoom* platform and its increased usage during the Covid-19 pandemic quarantine period, it is noteworthy that the platform was able to connect individuals from diverse geographic locations. The audience convenes on the *Zoom* platform, connecting with one another and actively participating in the performance. The *Zoom* platform thus functions as a space for the audience to convene, discuss, and collectively create the narrative of the performance. *Map to Utopia* employs the *Zoom* platform as a novel and alternative stage to foster connections among individuals from diverse geographic locations in virtual space.

This phenomenon highlights the emergence of a new virtual meeting space, which has enabled a range of business activities, from education to commerce, to continue uninterrupted during the quarantine period. Furthermore, the digitalization and virtualization of the stage have led to the development of the *Zoom* platform as a public space that facilitates artistic production and communal interaction as *Map to Utopia* suggests. This could be seen as a parallel version of the physical interactions that occur in a theatrical performance. Conversely, there exist several compelling arguments suggesting that a performance cannot be effectively digitalized or conducted on a digital platform, as the fundamental ontology of performance relies on the presence of both the audience and the performer in a shared physical space.

The researcher Peggy Phelan argues performances that rely heavily on computer technologies cannot be classified as traditional performance. This is because the use of such technologies diminishes the power of the performance, which is practiced through the bodies of performers. Phelan bases her argument on the notion that performance art involves a live and present reality. In her view, computer technologies disrupt the immediacy and visceral nature of the performance, and as a result, cannot be considered within the same context as traditional performance art.¹⁰

Nevertheless, building upon Philip Auslander's ideas, I argue that the *Zoom* platform and its utilization in *Map to Utopia* engenders a sense of liveness mainly through the presence of the audience and performers in the virtual space. Auslander, in his article "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective" mentions that the discussion of "liveness" has gone to different dimensions with technological developments. First of all, he defines what "liveness" is in a live performance. Auslander defines live performance as "*the spatial and temporal co-presence of performers and audience.*"¹¹ With the accelerated development of the Internet, definitions have been put forward in which these associations, hence "liveness", can be experienced differently in different environments. Auslander referred to Nick Couldry and mentions that he defined two new types of "liveness": "online liveness" and "group liveness":

10 Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 148.

11 Philip Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012): 5.

[O]nline liveness: social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Web sites, all made possible by the Internet as an underlying infrastructure. . . . [G]roup liveness[:]. . . the “liveness” of a mobile group of friends who are in continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting.¹²

Map to Utopia facilitates a form of online liveness as well as group liveness in a virtual space. As the definitions imply, the crucial aspect of liveness in a virtual space is the communication and the sense of being connected with others. Dixon claimed that being online meant being present in a certain place and time, stating that presence means different things to different people and that it is also possible to speak of a presence which “*is about interest and command of attention, not space or liveness.*”¹³ Consequently, the notion of liveness in traditional theatre practice contrasts with that of digital theatre. However, this difference does not detract from the fundamental elements of theatrical art. Rather, by introducing *Zoom* as a means of communication and interaction between performers and the audience, *Map to Utopia* generates a third environment that transcends the physical realm, in which new relations can be built.¹⁴ The audience, who are both remotely and physically connected, meet temporally and spatially on *Zoom*. The platform “*divide[s] presents [into] a more concrete border for the third world*” in which the audience has the chance to communicate with each other.¹⁵ Thus, the audience has the sense of being together in the same virtual space.

The platform provides “private rooms” for focused meetings between individuals or small groups who may have difficulty reaching a consensus. The agreements or disagreements that arise within these “private rooms” are subsequently conveyed to the larger public space, where all neighborhood residents can participate. This creates an online liveness, which Auslander asserted in his article, as it brings together an international group of participants using the infrastructure of the internet in an online platform, where they can exchange ideas and solutions about a problem. Since the audience is able to communicate with each other from their home and with those on stage, they feel connected to one another and are encouraged to discuss the issues presented. *Zoom* provides instant connectivity, enabling the audience to actively engage in the performance and address the problems at hand. As a result, an online presence is created in a digitalized platform within the constructed world of *Map to Utopia*.

The *Zoom* platform also offers the possibility to change the visual background on the screen, which may seem insignificant at first, but I argue that it fosters a sense of participation and artificial yet collective gathering among the audience of *Map to Utopia*. Specifically, in the performance, the audience members from the same districts are prompted to change

12 Auslander, “Digital Liveness,” 6.

13 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 132.

14 Bree Hadley, *Theatre, Social Media and Meaning Making* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 171.

15 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 159.

their visual backgrounds to those of their districts, creating a shared sense of community. For example, residents of the red district would have the same visual background on their *Zoom* screens, thereby bringing them together as a community, despite being different individuals and being in different spaces. This common background unites them in the virtual world of *Map to Utopia*. The digital platform utilized in *Map to Utopia* offers a unique opportunity to establish an online presentness and liveness, particularly through the manipulation of visual backgrounds. Despite the physical separation of audience members, the act of sharing the same background creates a sense of communal immersion within the digital realm. Such a phenomenon not only highlights the potential of digital technology to bridge physical distance, but also underscores the significance of visual stimuli in cultivating a sense of shared space and collective experience, in contrast to Walter Benjamin's arguments on artificiality of image and photography.¹⁶

While the *Zoom* platform contributes to the creation of liveness and presentness in *Map to Utopia*, there is no particular rationale for its selection in this performance. That is to say, the *Zoom* platform in *Map to Utopia* is not dominant but rather an infrastructural part of the hybrid format of the performance. While it is unclear why this particular application was chosen, the fact that alternative platforms could have been utilized suggests that the performance does not comment directly on *Zoom*. Instead, the *Zoom* platform is used as an infrastructure to connect audiences from different regions to each other and to the physical performance space. Thus, the *Zoom* platform in this context is merely a medium for people and different voices to come together, establishing a connection between the physical and virtual spaces. However, the use of *Zoom* is only indirectly related to the main discussion of the play, which is centered on the concept of utopia, where different sounds come together.

On the other hand, the usage of mobile phones not only creates the liveness and presentness in *Map to Utopia* but also discusses the meaning of being present in a virtual space. The audience downloads an application called "MaptoUtopia" before the performance. As mentioned above the mobile phone plays a vital role for the performance as the audience gets to know their characters through the application. The application facilitates the delivery of instant messages, providing audiences with codes to access their character's information. Using the application, they can enter their character's mobile phone, view images in galleries, read messages, and note appointments, all of which contribute to the background of their respective characters. In this way, the mobile phone functions not only as a communication tool but also as an ID and space for the character's memory and being, thereby adding an extra layer of presentness of the audience and liveness. It also suggests an approach to the way of daily utilization of the mobile phone: It stores all information for people, and it has turned into a new venue for communication and memory.

16 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 18.

In addition to providing insight into the characteristics of their characters, the “MaptoUtopia” application facilitates the flow of action for the audience. This is accomplished through the delivery of instantaneous messages, which inform them of scheduled meetings with fellow participants from their districts. Within these messages, neighbors express their needs and demands, affording the audience ample preparation time for these meetings. As previously noted, such meetings are set between individuals who are often difficult to reconcile. As such, these messages play a dual role in creating a sense of presentness and liveness within the performance. Firstly, they establish instant communication and a sense of connectedness to other audience members, a quality that is intrinsically inhabited in the art of theatre. Secondly, the appointments set through the messages create a sense of liveness and presentness, as the actions unfold during the limited time of the performance. This, in turn, contributes to a sense of co-presentness and liveness, whereby the audience is able to readily grasp the cause-and-effect of the unfolding drama.

Therefore, the integration of digital technology contributes to the creation of a third space, which provides a sense of presentness to the performance. As Dixon proposes, the intentional engagement of the audience through gathering on an online communication platform is vital for establishing liveness and presentness in the performance. The active involvement of the audience through digital technology enhances their participation, creating a gamified experience that drives the performance. In the following section, I analyze how *Map to Utopia* employs these audience participation and gamification approaches with computer technology in digital theatre.

Presentness Through Interaction: Participation and Playfulness in *Map to Utopia*

Dixon examined the models and details of an audience interaction, clarifying how the audience controls the story, how it is positioned in both the practice of writing and watching. Perhaps it even contained the answer to a crucial question in the history of theatre: How does the audience go beyond the mere spectator?

According to Dixon, the audience can develop and change the work of art by directing the story, intervening or contributing to the play, almost like a game.¹⁷ He analyzes these interaction dimensions and types under four main headings: 1) Navigation 2) Participation 3) Conversation 4) Collaboration.¹⁸ These interaction models are directly related to how much space they create for the audience/participants in the production and meaning-making stages of the performance. Dixon’s emphasis at this point is critical: it is not necessarily the case that the artwork that gives more space to the participant/audience is of higher quality. While some performances may be more suitable for interaction, others have more limited space for it¹⁹.

17 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 561.

18 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 563.

19 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 563.

Dixon emphasized that digital theatre practices centered on participant/audience interaction cannot be rigidly separated according to these four categories. To put it another way, these four categories can coexist and intertwine in digital theatre practices. However, he proposed a method on how this interaction can be achieved: If the audience can see the result of the action they take, thanks to the system that allows them to react at that moment, interaction is established. Taking meaningful actions and seeing the results of the audience's choices at that moment, in real time, creates the state of being active in the interaction, thus the liveness and presentness.²⁰ This circumstance is encompassed within the purview of digital components. The term digital also connotes an attribute that has the capacity to elicit a responsive effect in real-time as Gere suggested.

As previously mentioned, this game-like interactive theatre practice is derived from the theories on game. In an interactive digital theatre practice, the author or the creative team sets the rules, gives the introduction and secretly creates various endings to the action of the play. The audience and participants generate the rest, which triggers a sense of curiosity. As such, Dixon concluded the section on interaction theories by emphasizing gamification and its effects. According to Dixon, works that involve interactivity reveal a childlike playfulness and the pleasure it brings because it amuses people to see that even the slightest reaction creates a domino effect:

*Interactivity in digital arts and performance is at its best a marvel of discovery, rekindling childhood feelings of intimate connection to a vast, inexplicable, and beautiful world.*²¹

Nevertheless, I posit that the correlation between the two, and the resulting universe fashioned thereby, is not as incomprehensible and romantic as proposed by Dixon. Although the game is associated as a child activity, Johan Huizinga pointed out that play and playfulness are fundamental to the social life of living beings.²² In each of the interaction models proposed by Dixon, the audience takes an active role and makes choices using their own point of view, just like a game. In this context, it can be considered irrational to exclude cultural values that should actually involve the seriousness from play because these values are actually based on play. However, game theory discussions also base the game on reason. Martin J. Osborne, in his book on game theory, stated that games are based on mathematical logic. The odds are drawn, and it is left to the player to decide which choice to make under the circumstances. As a matter of fact, these choices are shaped by one's perspective on life.²³

Beyond making choices the play is also set on rules, which can be considered similar to the set of rules in a digital theatre. In a game, there is also a problem to be solved, a target

20 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 565.

21 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 598.

22 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge 1980), 1.

23 Martin Osborne, *An Introduction to Game Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

to be reached, or at least a role to be played; which are carried out through the rules. It takes place in a different realm, which is not away from real life: “*Play does not have a predictable course or outcome and is based on inner infinitude. It is based on rules, and it resides in an artificial realm.*”²⁴

Apart from the rules there are three other dimensions that both a game and theatre share: “*a goal, a feedback system, and voluntary participation.*”²⁵ The audience’s participation in guiding the play towards its goal through the set rules creates a playful co-creative experience that contributes to the liveliness of the performance.²⁶ The emergence of mediatization, digitalization, and role-playing systems offers a unique opportunity to engage the audience and create a sense of liveness in digital theatre. By incorporating gamification, a game-like system that can be integrated into the performance, transforming its aura and unlocking a multitude of possibilities for developing new dramaturgical approaches that involve active audience participation, which totally bases itself on the eagerness to create meaning by participation.²⁷

In relation to Dixon’s categories, I contend that audience interaction in *Map to Utopia* is primarily achieved through participation, conversation, and collaboration. The audience in *Map to Utopia* plays an active role and is tasked with completing specific assignments. For instance, the audience must collaborate with others to devise solutions to issues in their communities by drawing on their own experiences and communicating with fellow audience members. Hence, the participation-based audience interaction evident in *Map to Utopia* aligns with Dixon’s framework.

The form of audience participation in *Map to Utopia* fosters a conversation with other participants and performers. Assigned a character to represent, the audience communicates through their character with others in the play. While the sentences, attitudes, and thoughts expressed by each audience member reflect their own backgrounds and values, they must also consider the character’s background and characteristics. The audience thus place themselves in the character’s situation and adjusts their approach and actions accordingly. This can lead to partial criticality or complete identification. However, based on my own experience, I argue that this approach promotes a more critical viewpoint.

Map to Utopia also provides the audience with a collaborative space where they become co-authors and co-creators, deciding how to solve problems in their neighborhoods according

24 Katja Kwastek, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (London: MIT Press, 2013), 74.

25 Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 21.

26 Constanza Blanco Jessen, “Performative game or theatre gamification? What a gameformance is and why interactive theatre should be interested in it,” *Estudis Escènics* 46 (2021): 5.

27 Christopher Lindinger, Martina Mara, Klaus Obermaier, Roland Aigner, Roland Haring and Veronika Pauser, “The (St)Age of Participation: audience involvement in interactive performances,” *Digital Creativity* 24, no.2 (2013): 121.

to their own values and orientations. The creative team sets the story and problems of the neighborhood, with the neighborhood spirits providing a history of the area through written texts. The audience is given fictionalized character stories and are free to interpret and fill in the details, shaping their actions and discourse accordingly. The audience is guided not only by the spirits' reminder of the importance of understanding each other but also by their character's traits. In this sense, the audience becomes the co-creator of the play with pre-set rules, where the outcome depends entirely on their actions.

The role of co-creator of audience facilitates the ludic world created in *Map to Utopia*, which plays a significant role in generating the sense of liveness and presentness. The utilization of gamification and digitalization in tandem cooperatively supports the notion of liveness in this digital theatre production. It is imperative to scrutinize how the playful element was integrated into *Map to Utopia*. During the performance, the audience is tasked with the objective of solving problems in accordance with their characters' traits. This requires them to navigate ways of presenting their interests while also striving to understand the perspectives and demands of others. Additionally, as posited by Jane McGonigal, *Map to Utopia* provides a space for discussions where participants can reflect on the outcomes of their actions. The appeal of this game-like interactive theatre practice is evidenced by the enthusiasm of the audience to be a part of this engaging experience.

To illustrate this point, it may be useful to detail my personal experience. As an affluent inhabitant of the yellow district, my character was a man with connections to the district's ministry and ownership of multiple apartments in the neighborhood, thus conveying an air of wealth and power. In addition, my character's notes contained an anecdote about how his father had assisted one of their employees' sons, which highlighted my character's reluctance to interact with individuals of a lower social status. Prior to the meeting, I utilized this information to devise a solution in which I would offer the individual a job in exchange for leaving the building. During the meeting, the person expressed her needs and sentiments towards individuals like me in a candid manner and was taken aback by my accommodating approach as it went against the expected "evil" character archetype of the district. Nonetheless, my decision was made in accordance with my own desires to achieve my goals. In addition to actively listening and being attentive to the other person's needs, I tried to devise solutions that would bring her happiness and satisfaction. It is noteworthy to mention that the final proposed solution was to demolish the building, but the inhabitants had to come to a mutual agreement. In my own experience my unconventional approach added an element of presentness and liveness for both the participants and the creative team, who were not anticipating such a solution. Consequently, as if in a game, I could have tried to win through my arguments. The *Zoom* platform turned into a playground in which I could *play* my cards to achieve my goals. My mobile phone transformed into my ID in the game, without which I would not have been able to express my interests and demands.

As a result, the concept of playfulness in *Map to Utopia* was engendered through fulfilling the goals and exploration of alternative offers and solutions during the performance, along with the search for alternative relations among the participants. This, in turn, resulted in multiple possible endings to the performance. Therefore, the incorporation of digital technology and the element of playfulness in *Map to Utopia* reinforces the sense of liveness and presentness. There is no concrete ending: the way that the audience *plays* and devises the arguments will simultaneously create the plot and the end. The use of instant messages to keep the audience updated on the plot, along with the active role required from them to engage their imagination, fosters a strong feeling of being “here-and-now” within the digital realm. The screen becomes the stage, resulting in the creation of a third realm that allows participants to be fully present in the performance. Hence, the performance is centered around a problem-solving scenario that presents a unique challenge to the audience. Although it is not clear what would happen to the building which was a problem in my district, the main focus drives the audience to the state of playing and discussing in a virtual democratic space.

Last but not least, the process of problem solving in *Map to Utopia* adheres to a structured set of rules, akin to those in a game, in which the audience is expected to engage in discussions that correspond to the unique features of their characters. The moderator or spirit assumes the role of a referee, ensuring that participants adhere to their character’s persona when presenting arguments. The audience must follow the guidelines provided to them through the “MaptoUtopia” application on their mobile devices. The process of problem solving requires the participants to carefully interpret the information they receive and analyze the perspectives of others in order to arrive at the most efficient solution for their character’s benefit. The experience of participating in *Map to Utopia* is akin to solving a puzzle, as the audience must play their roles according to the unique shape of their character’s personalities.

Conclusion

The mediatization and digitalization of theatrical art can be traced back to Ancient Greece, the birthplace of theatre.²⁸ While this process existed throughout history, it gained significant momentum in the early 20th century with the widespread adoption of technology and digital advancements in daily life. Consequently, the art of theatre found itself entwined with this process, necessitating an ongoing commitment to exploring the possibilities of the relationship between digital and theatrical realms in order to sustain the vitality of theatre. As noted by Bill Blake, adopting a constructive perspective in approaching this discourse could pave the way for an enriched understanding of both theatre and digital domains, and of the relation between them.²⁹ Rather than adhering to a conservative perspective that centers on the perceived loss

28 Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 40.

29 Bill Blake, *Theatre and the Digital* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 9. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2995655/theatre-and-the-digital-pdf>.

of the essence of theatre in digital theatrical practices, it is valuable to shift the focus towards examining strategies for cultivating the qualities of immediacy and presence, which are considered fundamental aspects of theatrical art.

This paper endeavors to offer a concise overview of the approach taken in these discussions, utilizing *Map to Utopia* as an illustrative example. *Map to Utopia* serves as a compelling case study for exploring the possibilities that digital theatre affords, presenting an avenue for discovering new opportunities within this realm. I assert that the playfulness inherent in digital theatre is central to its liveness and is achieved through the use of digital technology and instant communication, which fosters a sense of quest. The performance is structured around rules, characters, and active audience participation, which resembles the features of a game, creating an elaborative and engaging form of theatre that employs both traditional practices and new media tools. As mentioned, *Map to Utopia* serves as a useful example to examine this claim, as it showcases the centrality of playfulness, liveness, and communication to the performance. Digital technology plays a crucial role in connecting people and creating a third realm where they can meet virtually. While the finalization of the performance is open-ended, the democratic and polyphonic discussion on the *Zoom* platform enabled the inhabitants to communicate with each other regardless of their backgrounds. Hence, the key objective of the performance was to showcase the democratic arena that the internet and *Zoom* platform can provide, where people can come together, share their ideas, and solve problems.

In addition to the aforementioned overview, it is crucial to highlight that digital theatre provides a platform for both theatre and the digital realm to manifest their ontological existence. In other words, they both assert themselves as arenas for discourse, connectivity, and significance, all of which can be facilitated through digital theatre. Thus, this ancient but new approach to theatre fosters a reciprocal relationship between theatre and the digital domain, allowing for mutual contributions and interactions.

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