

HUNTING THE IMPOSSIBLE

THE SCIENCE OF MAGIC AND THE EXPERIENCE OF IMMERSION IN ANALOGUE AND VR THEATRE

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MAIN CLAIMS

1/ Immersion is a sense of being bodily present in an impossible world or situation brought on by the impression of a liminal transportation. These worlds or the situations are “impossible” in the sense that they are experienced as unreal, while, paradoxically, the experiencer feels to be present in them, in somatic, sensory, social and agentive levels.

2/ The experience of magic (that is, experiencing the performance of stage magicians and pseudo-spiritualist mediums) can be interpreted as an immersive experience. There are parallels between the experience of magic and contemporary immersive experiences, and there are also similarities in their socio-technological background, in terms of how these phenomena relate to the new technologies of their time and to society’s fascination with these technologies.

3/ Immersive theatrical productions can be described through eight characteristics and these characteristics are there not as a matter of mere contingency: these are the features that are conducive to bringing about a psychological state of immersion as defined above. These characteristics are

- a 360-degree physical environment;
- involvement of as many senses as possible;
- having no meta-reference;
- integration of coincidental events into the storyworld;
- character-based improvisatory and interactive performance;
- a (false) sense of agency on the side of the participants;
- abandonment of everyday social rules; and
- intimacy.

4/ VR creators should reach out to theatre makers and magicians as they can offer design guidelines that can be adapted for VR productions. This way, not only the first time VR users but also the “veteran” ones can find surprising elements in the productions. It is also important to include human performers or orchestrators in the VR productions whenever possible in order to raise the intensity of the immersion.

5/ A key element of immersive VR theatrical performances is their offering an illusory agency to their audience members and also enabling the audience members to explore various formats of misbehavior. These misbehaviours are related to technical limitations of the productions and to the audience’s embodied participation.

6/ The immersive productions that aim to offer a sense of wonder should offer as many possibilities as possible for the participants to experiment with the system, while successfully answering each challenge, in a way similar to how stage magicians offer possibilities to the audience members for entertaining various explanations while systematically countering them one-by-one, which deepens and sustains the feeling of wonder and impossibility.