

Research of Immersive Theatre from Audience Perspective

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Abstract. Immersive theatre redefines traditional theatre audience engagement by transforming spectators into active participants within highly dynamic and multi-sensory performance environments. This paper targeting audiences' experience and perception, explores the relationship between audiences and immersive theatrical productions, by drawing on Gordon Calleja's Player Involvement Model (PIM) and Josephine Machon's conceptualization of immersion, focusing on the mechanisms through which immersive theatre achieves heightened levels of spatial, narrative, sensory, shared, ludic, and affective involvement. This study examines the interplay of physical design, storytelling, and audience agency in productions such as *Sleep No More*, *The Burnt City*, and *Viola's Room*. The findings showed audience's experience plays a crucial role in immersive theatre, which can define the success of immersive theatre from many perspectives. Moreover, immersive theatre has the potential to further redefine storytelling and artistic expression, creating profound and individualised audience engagements in the future.

Keywords: Immersive Theatre, Punchdrunk, Audience Research, Art Management.

1. Introduction

The origins of immersive theatre can be traced back to the site-specific performances of the 1960s and Richard Schechner's concept of Environmental Theatre introduced in 1968 [1]. Emerging prominently in the early 21st century, immersive theatre revolutionized the theatrical experience. Pioneering immersive theatre productions by companies like punchdrunk have opened up a game-changing theatre experience. [2]

While there isn't a universal definition for immersive theatre and its range remains contested, and it contains several forms, including Site-Specific Performance, Narrative Spaces and shell games. Nevertheless, it is commonly characterized by performances that employ installations and expansive environments, involve mobile audiences, and encourage active audience participation [3]. Additionally, these productions always allow physical engagement and holistic immersion for audiences [4]. Immersive theatre consistently removes audiences from the "usual" rules and conventions expected in traditional performances, transforming them from passive recipients of uniform information to active participants in a personalized and engaging narrative. This shift emphasizes audience experience as a critical area of study within immersive theatre.

The hallmark of immersive theatre lies in its ability to break down the boundaries between performers and audiences, creating environments where participants are not merely observers but integral to the unfolding narrative. According to Josephine Machon, Immersive theatre reconstructs the "performance/spectator relationship, creating an active, embodied, haptic experience" (2013, p. 151). Through this interaction, the audience becomes a co-creator, deepening their engagement and enhancing the immersive quality of the experience.

This sense of immersion is produced on multiple levels, including systems, spatial, social/empathic, and narrative/sequential [5]. By studying how immersive theatre reshapes the relationship between audiences and theatrical works, this paper aims to explore the mechanisms through which such performances achieve heightened immersion. Additionally, it will examine the implications of these methods on the evolution of audience experience and predict potential future directions for the development of immersive theatre. This paper will discuss ways in which immersive theater productions change the relationship between the audience and the theatre productions and make the audience more "immersive", and highlight the potential of development and innovations for future immersive theater.

2. Methodology

This essay employs a qualitative analytical approach to investigate the mechanisms of audience immersion in immersive theatre, focusing on how these productions engage audiences on cognitive, emotional, and physical levels. The study is grounded in Gordon Calleja's Player Involvement Model (PIM), originally developed to analyze engagement in digital gaming. The PIM identifies six interrelated dimensions of involvement—spatial, narrative, kinaesthetic, shared, ludic, and affective—that interact dynamically throughout a performance, making the framework particularly suitable for the multifaceted nature of immersive theatre. Noticeably, Kinaesthetic involvement, defined as “all modes of control over an avatar or game component in a game environment,” is not directly applicable to immersive theater, as its essence is primarily centered on observation rather than interactive manipulation. Instead, sensory engagement becomes a pivotal form of involvement, invoking the audience's senses to deepen immersion. Therefore, I propose Audiences Involvement Model for immersive theatre audience research, shown as figure 1. The six dimensions--spatial, narrative, sensory, shared, ludic, and affective — are not experienced in isolation; instead, they blend and influence one another, providing a holistic understanding of audience immersion (Calleja, 2011).

Additionally, this essay adapts Josephine Machon's (2013) conceptualization of immersion, which identifies three layers: absorption, transportation, and total immersion. Absorption focuses on the audience's sensory and observational engagement with the environment, emphasizing the physical and imaginative elements of the performance. Transportation highlights the audience's sense of entering an alternate realm, where imagination and physicality combine to create a blurred boundary between reality and fiction. Total immersion refers to the active participation of the audience in shaping their journey, crafting personalized narratives with deeply emotional and existential significance. While these layers have distinct focal points, they often overlap and engage the six dimensions of the PIM framework in varying degrees during a performance.

Punchdrunk is considered one of the most prominent companies and a pioneer in the field, consistently pushing the boundaries of what immersive theatre can achieve (Klich, 2016).). To explore these dynamics, this essay integrates the PIM framework and Machon's definitions with case studies from Punchdrunk's productions, including *Sleep No More*, *The Burnt City*, and *Viola's Room*. By analyzing how each dimension contributes to the immersive experience, this essay aims to uncover the transformative impact of immersive theatre on its audiences, shedding light on its potential for emotional, cognitive, and participatory engagement.

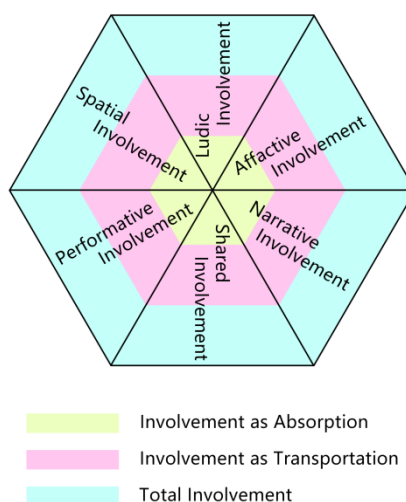


Figure 1. Audiences Involvement Model

3. Spatial involvement

Spatial involvement is central to immersive theatre for all three dimensions of immersion (immersion as absorption, immersion as transportation and total immersion), as it enable audiences

to engage with qualities of environments and transform it into imaginative worlds that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. This dimension is achieved through intentional design elements, such as the use of darkness, evocative settings, and transitional actions like “opening a door”, which internalise theatre site to engage audiences into a deeply immersive experience.

3.1. Creation of Imaginary Worlds

The formation of imaginary worlds is a hallmark of immersive theatre, achieved through detailed settings that are vague yet stylized and era-specific. Productions like *Sleep No More* transport audiences to a 1930s-era hotel, *The Burnt City* reimagines the mythological landscapes of Troy and Greece, and *Viola’s Room* immerses audiences in a teenage girl’s dream world. These richly textured settings provide direction and inspire imagination, but they require audiences to accept the world through convincingly designed spaces. A common thread across these productions is the use of darkness, which deepens the sensory experience and allows audiences to project their imagination onto the space. When audiences are forced to feel their way through darkened places both real and imagined, “these explorations of theatrical darkness blur physical and fictional domains” (Biggin, 2017, p. 198). Similarly, the naming of spaces reinforces the authenticity of these fictional worlds, as seen in the *McKittrick Hotel* in New York or the *McKinnon Hotel* in Shanghai, which anchor *Sleep No More* within its environment and emphasize the role of the site itself as part of the narrative (Biggin, 2017, p. 195).

3.2. Transformational Spaces

The action of “opening a door” serves as a metaphorical and physical transition into immersive worlds. This simple act becomes a narrative event, symbolizing exploration and discovery. In *Viola’s Room*, for instance, audiences initially enter a brightly lit, realistic space, only to later transition into a dark, abstract, and fantastical world. This progression involves crawling through structures that evoke fortresses, enhancing the sense of spatial transformation. As audiences leave the literal behind, their other senses—guided by distinct audio cues, visual design, and their own imagination—become heightened. Biggin (2017) highlights how such transitions create new scenographic stimuli, encouraging participants to actively engage with their environment and immerse themselves further (p. 198).

By utilizing imaginative settings, strategic use of darkness, and transitional actions, immersive theatre productions heighten spatial involvement, inviting audiences to inhabit fictional worlds while enhancing their sensory engagement. This interplay between physical and imaginative spaces solidifies spatial design as a fundamental element of immersive theatre.

4. Narrative involvement

Narrative involvement in immersive theatre is a dynamic dimension that shapes how audiences engage with and interpret stories. Immersive productions can adopt open, non-linear narratives, as seen in *Sleep No More*, or linear, guided storytelling, as in *Viola’s Room*. Each format provides distinct experiences, balancing audience agency, interaction, and interpretive freedom in different ways, demonstrate the intricate interplay between storytelling, audience roles, and interaction in shaping the immersive experience, leaving room for reflection on how to optimize narrative involvement for diverse audiences.

4.1. Open Narratives: Freedom and Individuality

Open narratives in productions like *Sleep No More* allow participants to explore the performance space freely, making decisions about which characters or storylines to follow. These narratives integrate pre-scripted elements with emergent storytelling, where audience pathways and random encounters create unique and highly individualized experiences. For instance, rare one-on-one interactions provide certain participants with exclusive narrative moments, enhancing the perception

of co-creation and non-replicable engagement. However, this openness has limitations. The fragmented nature of open narratives can lead to interpretive confusion, with some participants failing to grasp the overarching story. Biggin (2017) highlights that while such formats encourage “interpretive plurality,” they often lack int

4.2. Guided Narratives: Structure and Collectivity

Convers Viola’s Room, are linear and predetermined, often led by audio. Audiences follow a fixed path as a group, creating a collective journey within the performance space. While this structure diminishes individual agency, it fosters interaction between participants, enhancing the sense of a shared narrative. Interaction within the group and the world becomes central, but the immersion’s success is highly dependent on group dynamics and cooperation. As Gareth White (2013) observes, participatory theatre must balance individual and collective engagement to maintain meaningful immersion.

5. Sensory Engagement

Immersive theater engages the audience by creating a multi-sensory experience that bypasses traditional narrative forms, focusing instead on the visceral and emotional response evoked by the environment itself (Machon, 2013).

For instance, in *The Burnt City*, distinct olfactory cues, such as the sharp scent at a dinner scene, immerse the audience in an atmosphere of intensity and forewarning. This use of smell reflects findings by scholars who emphasize how olfactory stimuli can provoke emotional memories, strengthening audience identification with the world presented (Henshaw, 2014). Similarly, the strategic use of lighting and soundscapes plays a crucial role. The interplay of dim lighting and sudden auditory cues can create an atmosphere of suspense or disorientation, techniques often used to manipulate the audience's emotional engagement (Biggin, 2017).

Another striking example is in *Viola’s Room*, where the audience is invited into a warmly decorated room, designed to evoke a young girl’s personal space. Through auditory instructions delivered via headphones, participants are guided to lie down on an exceptionally soft bed, fostering a sense of intimacy and dream-like comfort. Such environments reflect Gieseckam’s (2007) observation that immersive theater seeks to evoke “a deeply subjective response, often using familiar, even domestic, settings as a gateway to imagined realities.”

The holistic use of sensory stimuli—ranging from tactile and olfactory to auditory and visual—creates a fully immersive journey. These elements not only stylistically distinguish each production but also facilitate personal connections, allowing individuals to construct imaginary spaces linked to their own experiences. This aligns with Machon’s (2013) assertion that immersive theater is a form of “somatic knowing,” where the body itself becomes a site of meaning-making. Ultimately, this sensory design achieves immersive transportation and total immersion, demonstrating how immersive theater uniquely enhances audience involvement.

6. Shared Involvement

Shared involvement in immersive theatre emerges when audiences interact with other agents within the immersive environment and recognize themselves as part of a social context (Calleja, 2011, p. 22). These agents can include the performers, the set, and other audience members, creating layers of interaction that shape the immersive experience.

In terms of interaction with performers and the set, immersive theatre allows audiences to come closer to the action than in traditional theatre, though clear boundaries remain. Productions like *Sleep No More* and *The Burnt City* use masks to separate audience members, while linear productions such as *Viola’s Room* rely on fixed pathways to control interaction (O’Hara, 2017, p. D484). These methods position audiences as part of the performance, fostering a sense of proximity while

maintaining their observer role. The mask, in particular, transforms the audience into voyeurs, heightening theatrical tension and engagement. As Barrett noted in a 2007 interview, “the mask allows you to function as a voyeur, as a camera because you are more aware of where you are looking, what you choose to see” (Papaioannou, 2014, p. 169). This voyeuristic role intensifies the dynamic between audience and performer, where the performer knows they are being watched, and the audience—anonymous behind their masks—claims agency through their gaze. This dual awareness disrupts traditional power dynamics of the gaze, adding passion and tension to the theatrical experience.

In interactions among audience members, shared involvement varies by production. In *Sleep No More* and *The Burnt City*, masks create a sense of anonymity and uniformity, marking all participants as part of a collective group within the performance space. This uniform identity fosters a feeling of belonging but restricts private connections, as intentional rules and the lack of visible faces prevent whispered conversations or physical contact (O’Hara, 2017, p. 484). Audience members function as quiet, separated components of a larger theatrical environment, enhancing the collective atmosphere but isolating individual experiences.

In contrast, *Viola’s Room* employs a different approach by admitting small groups of up to six into the performance space. These groups share the experience together, navigating the performance under instructions to remain silent yet developing a sense of camaraderie. This setup encourages participants to “share tension, excitement, curiosity, and fear, building a sense of bonding through the adventure” (Akbar, 2024). This collective exploration creates a stronger sense of belonging and group identity, distinguishing *Viola’s Room* from the more individualistic shared involvement seen in *Sleep No More* or *The Burnt City*.

Through these layered interactions—between audience and performers, and among audience members—shared involvement in immersive theatre fosters unique and socially dynamic experiences, reshaping traditional boundaries of theatrical participation.

7. Ludic Involvement

Ludic immersion in immersive theatre hinges on the audience’s ability to actively construct narratives and make autonomous decisions, blending their personal logic, desires, and past experiences into the performance. In productions with fragmented narratives, such as *Sleep No More*, ludic immersion tends to be more pronounced compared to linear productions like *Viola’s Room*. The open-ended structure of fragmented storytelling allows audience members to navigate the performance according to their own choices and goals, creating a highly individualized and deeply engaging experience. As Machon (2013) notes, this type of immersion “requires audiences’ own navigation according to their own rules of logic” (p. 63).

In the context of immersive theatre, ludic immersion transforms each visit into a distinct, self-directed journey. In immersive theatre experiences, audiences are free to control their view and direct their gaze” (Biggin, 2017, p.186). This means audiences can decide their viewing experience by their own will. What’s more, The Player Involvement Model (PIM) suggests that “the successful completion of a goal tends to create a sense of satisfaction and elation in players, especially on other players and the significance attached to the goal by the game community or immediate audience” (Calleja, 2011, p. 30). In *Punchdrunk’s* productions including *Sleep No More* and *The Burnt City*, audiences often perceive completing the experience or piecing together the story as a collective goal shared by the larger audience community. While the performances themselves do not directly respond to individual actions, the ability to choose which scenes to watch, which actors to follow, or which paths to take fosters a sense of agency. This autonomy provides emotional rewards and positive feedback, even though the outcomes of these choices remain unpredictable.

Additionally, the unique nature of each decision—shaped by the immediacy of fleeting events—enhances this immersion. The rarity of intimate one-on-one moments and the intentional incompleteness of the narrative often leave participants with a sense of curiosity and unfulfilled

satisfaction, compelling them to return to the performance. O'Hara (2017) observes that this desire to experience the performance in its totality drives audiences to revisit immersive environments repeatedly, striving for what they perceive as an "ideal spectatorship" (p. 485). By revisiting the performance, audiences continue to construct their personalized journey, highlighting the power of ludic immersion as a key driver of engagement in immersive theatre.

8. Affective Involvement

Affective involvement represents the culmination of all other forms of involvement in immersive theatre, resulting in the audience's emotional engagement and investment. Each type of involvement—spatial, narrative, kinaesthetic, shared, and ludic—evokes distinct emotional responses, contributing to a complex and layered experience. Although the specific emotions elicited are unpredictable and vary among individuals, they collectively shape the depth of the audience's connection to the performance.

Punchdrunk productions, for instance, intentionally craft a "cinematic view" by creating visually stunning, film-like environments. As Biggin (2017) notes, "the cinematic quality allows audiences to function as a camera, editing their desired scenes" (p. 199). The beauty of these visuals often leads to positive kinaesthetic engagement, drawing audiences into the environment and encouraging emotional attachment. This attachment can manifest as a sense of belonging, recognition, or even dependency on the performance space.

Additionally, rare and intimate one-on-one interactions with performers amplify emotional engagement. These moments, marked by their scarcity and personal nature, become highly significant to the audience, fostering a sense of privilege and deepening their emotional connection to the narrative and characters (O'Hara, 2017, p. 484). These interactions elevate the experience from passive observation to active, emotional participation, creating memories that resonate far beyond the performance.

Thus, affective involvement can be viewed as both the ultimate result and the measure of success in immersive theatre. It reflects the extent to which the audience is emotionally moved and immersed, offering a vital metric for evaluating the effectiveness of the immersive experience. By engaging audiences on such a profound emotional level, immersive theatre achieves its transformative potential, leaving lasting impressions that redefine traditional theatrical boundaries.

9. Conclusion

Immersive theatre transforms the traditional boundaries of audience experience by turning spectators into participants who engage with performances on spatial, narrative, sensory, shared, ludic, and affective levels. By crafting multidimensional environments and narratives that blend reality and fiction, immersive theatre challenges passive viewing and invites audiences to co-create their journeys through active exploration, decision-making, and emotional investment. Productions like *Sleep No More*, *The Burnt City*, and *Viola's Room* exemplify how carefully designed spaces, fragmented or guided storytelling, and multi-sensory engagement deepen immersion. The interplay of physicality and imagination fosters connections that go beyond the performance space, creating lasting emotional impacts and compelling audiences to return to relive and reinterpret their experiences.

Looking ahead, the potential evolution of immersive theatre lies in its ability to expand and refine these mechanisms. Integrating emerging technologies such as virtual and augmented reality can amplify sensory and spatial involvement, creating even richer, more expansive worlds. Further exploration of audience dynamics, such as fostering meaningful group interactions or enhancing the interplay between individual and collective experiences, could deepen shared involvement. Additionally, designing more interactive and responsive narratives that adapt to audience behavior might increase agency, empowering participants to influence the performance more profoundly.

As immersive theatre continues to evolve, it has the capacity to redefine not only audience engagement but also the broader scope of storytelling and performance. By placing the audience at the center of the experience, it transcends traditional boundaries, offering a profoundly personal and transformative artistic encounter that pushes the future of theater into uncharted, immersive territories.

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