

DRAFT

ATTENDING TO PROCEDURAL AUTHORSHIP IN PARTICIPATORY ART PRACTICE

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Abstract: Although many participatory artworks emphasize values like equality, empowerment, and co-authorship, the realization of these agendas in the context of performance is notoriously difficult to achieve. In this paper, the ontology of participatory art is explored as an agential artform, placing emphasis on its procedures as aesthetic components that strategically structure participant agency. Lkening this to digital game design, discourse from Performance Studies, Game Studies, and Psychology on procedural authorship is unpacked, and several definitions and strategies for realizing distinct intersubjective agential modes are introduced. Lastly, I explore the benefits of developing an ‘aesthetics of procedure’ within the field of artistic research, reflecting on the societal value of participatory art as a form that explores agential modes through processes and suggests transferrable truths through an elaboration of methods of *being together*.

Keywords: participation, participatory design, procedural authorship, interdisciplinary research, agency, aesthetics

1. Introduction

Although the vast majority of participatory art tends to emphasize the importance of values like equality, empowerment, or community, the coherent realization of these agendas in performance is notoriously difficult to achieve. This research derives from a pivot in my artistic practice in 2019 from classical music performance to participatory art. My desire to use performance to bring my community together around issues like child refugees, local hunger, and veteran care led me to realize that the music was simply acting as a frame while the conversations and stories being related by concert-goers, both during and after the show, were making visible the unseen elements of these issues in personal and profound ways. I wanted to more powerfully bring that into the context of the performance, to give these exchanges the attention and space they needed to cultivate real community dialogue; and so, without yet knowing the term for it, I began to create participatory art.

Subsequently, I discovered how difficult creating these works can be, and began to reflect on some of the thorny issues artists face when they invite the public to co-create with them. Indeed, participatory art seems to persistently struggle with issues of public embarrassment, confusion, and uninformed or pressured consent that belie the values from which they derive. Most of these issues stem from the genre’s reliance on the creative contributions, and therefore actions, of participants in order to function. Indeed, at the heart of participatory art, lies an unpredictability that inevitably results from co-authorship with the public; a feature that is also celebrated as an exciting result of non-hierarchical exchange.

It is not the case, however, that participatory artists have no desire for creative control over the aesthetic results of their works. Kwastek points out that although from the genre’s inception ‘artistic strategies were designed to leave room for chance and individual creativity, [artists] still needed a structured scheme to channel the processes that would emerge’ (2013, 19). I contend that many of the more generic criticisms levelled at participatory art might be addressed by developing a relevant *aesthetics of procedure*. This would entail taking a closer look at the role of the participatory artist, not as a creator of aesthetic artefacts, but instead as a procedural author.

In attending to procedural authorship, it is important to recognize participatory art as belonging to a separate ontology from other artistic practices; one which inhabits intersubjective social procedures and relies on a

temporary, willing, and strategic restriction of participant agency. Taking this into account, I assert that participatory art occupies an ontological space closer to that of video games, in that both genres can be considered agential artforms and therefore locate their aesthetics in the procedures that guide participant actions. Although distinct, particularly in their relationship with goal-orientation, abstraction, and emotional resolution, examining strategies of procedural authorship in the context of digital game design may unearth valuable insights for participatory art practitioners.

In this paper, I will explore the role of procedure and procedural authorship in participatory art through the lens of the Performance Studies, Game Studies, and Psychology literature. In section 1, I will explore definitions of procedure, outline its effects on both the agency and subjectivity of participants, and discuss how procedures in art notably differ from those in video games. In section 2, I will open up procedural authorship, discussing differing definitions and strategies while exploring the role of values in the design process, the importance of iterative design cycles, and the potential impact of external/institutional procedures on the reception and activation of participatory art. Lastly, I will discuss the ramifications of developing an ‘aesthetics of procedure’ in artistic research, proposing how this might illuminate the use of participation as a tool for social issues in addition to increasing criticality around intersubjective procedures both in- and outside of the artworld.

II. Interpretive performance in the magic circle

While *participation* as a concept holds no intrinsic values, Bishop notes that most participatory art is motivated by three agendas; 1) empowering an active subject who may then determine their own social reality, 2) ceding authorship in an egalitarian way to the participant, and 3) inspiring a collective sense of community and responsibility. Ideally, this promotes ‘a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning’ (2006, 12). This desire to activate participants through an aesthetic encounter requires the strategic use of processes.

In this paper, the words *process* and *procedure* are used interchangeably. In the literature, Performance Studies tends to use *process* as a descriptor of aesthetic experiences including political engagement, conversation, and creative actions while Games Studies tends to speak more technically about *procedure* as a ‘set of constraints that creates possibility spaces’ and structures behavior (Bogost 2010, 122). Broadly speaking, procedures in participatory art occupy the following categories:

- ***Facilitation***, in which the participant is invited into the piece and/or asked for consent. This may also include setting the aesthetic tone, communicating and enforcing the rules, explaining the interface, safety information, and risk, and answering any questions.
- ***Rules***, which govern participant conduct, method of engagement, and any system of scoring, penalty, or orientation towards an objective.
- ***Mechanics***, which define the actions, movements, system of interaction, and interface available to participants during the experience. This may also include technologies, algorithms, or objects that serve as interlocutors.
- ***Environment***, which encompasses both the terrain and the aesthetics of the immersive space, and may further contain or guide participants in both physical and psychological ways by either helping or creating obstacles.

- *Narrative*, which includes all aesthetic elements that serve to place the participant in a particular social situation, conflict, perspective, subjectivity, etc...

A ‘magic circle’ denotes a space of play wherein special procedures, dedicated to the sharing of a specific experience, set participants apart from everyday life. Within this circle, which could as easily be a court of justice as it could a card table, ‘absolute and peculiar order reigns’ (Huizinga 1949, 10). Procedures outline magic circles, and allow participants to have experiences that would otherwise not be available. In order to facilitate this, procedures in participatory art address three layers: external, mediating, and internal. The external component is the societal context that drives the real-world urgency of the piece. Upon accepting the artist’s invitation, participants enter a new context where facilitation occurs. If there are mediating objects or technologies necessary for participation, they are encountered and explained in this layer. After learning what is expected during the performance and consenting to the rules, participants experience a third level, in which they have truly entered the magic circle. Here, a particular mode of agency is established by the artist, who has created a world in which participants are encouraged to make choices that shape their own outcomes and experiences (figure 1).

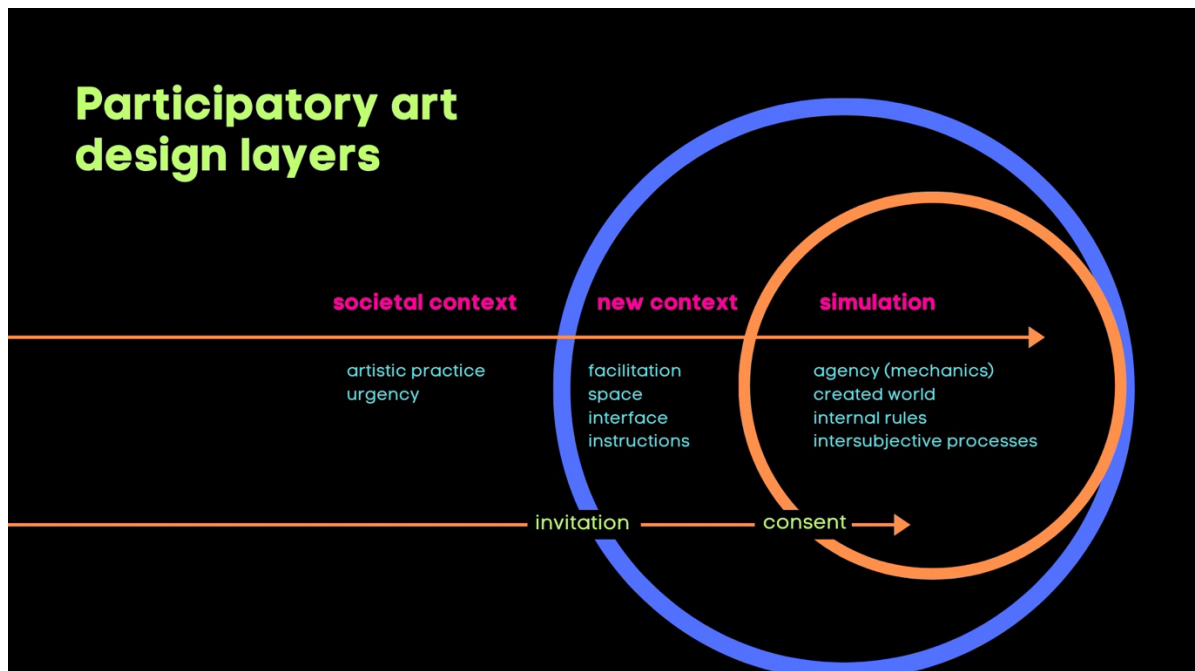


Figure 1. Layers of procedure in participatory art

One way that participatory art differs from video games (with significant exceptions) is its reliance on intersubjective processes to build social environments. Psychologist Eugene Matusov refers to intersubjectivity as the ‘coordination of individual participation in joint socio-cultural activity rather than as a relationship or correspondence of individuals’ actions to each other’ (1996, 26). Intersubjectivity, he argues, includes receiving common background knowledge, common grounds for engagement, and a common understanding of the outcome. He notably excludes, however, the need for participants to perform identical tasks or even agree with each other during the experience. Gareth White asserts that while intersubjective processes are integral to participation, they are not sufficient to challenge dominant social paradigms. He concludes they should also incorporate a reflective element wherein the participant can develop ‘an altered relationship with one’s agency’, and that this becomes the meaning of the piece (2013, 138).

Reflecting on intersubjective processes empowers participants to observe themselves in a new social situation. It is unclear, however, which *self* participants are using during these encounters. Pearce notes that in a video game, the process of deciding how one appears and acts in the game world is a performative gesture that plays with identity in an intersubjective environment (2009, 60). Tavinor (2017) adds that players, rather than reacting to the narrative content, often act in ways that explore the interactive potential of a game. They test agential boundaries in order to understand a game's meaning, and then give an 'interpretive performance' by acting in a way that reflects that meaning.

Sicart maintains that players simultaneously inhabit multiple subjectivities:

Becoming a player is the act of creating balance between fidelity to the game situation and the fact that the player as subject is only a subset of a cultural and moral being who voluntarily plays, bringing to the game a presence of culture and values that also affects the experience. (2011b, 63)

Rancière echoes this, writing of the multiple subjectivities evident in participatory work. He references *apart-togetherness*, highlighting the importance of relating artistic content to personal experience. Participants 'are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered them' (2014, 13).

This interplay of interpretive performances, guided by the choices made available to participants and informed by lived experiences, seems to indicate the site of a participatory performance as a temporarily assumed mode of agency. It is neither the aesthetic context nor the participants themselves, but rather the *trying-on* of agential modes that comprises the aesthetic experience. In *Games: Agency as art*, Nguyen posits 'games let us codify, transmit, and store highly crystallized modes of agency. They are a library of agencies' (2020, 98). Participatory art also occupies this ontology, though perhaps with less emphasis on *ludos* and more on the experience of embodying socially complex and collective situations (figure 2). In both cases, agency is prescribed through a series of procedures that leave space for participants to co-author their experiences. In the next section, I will provide an overview of some different strategies of procedural authorship, explore how it can be approached in the creative process to express values, and account for external influences.



Figure 2, Players negotiate while maneuvering an avatar jointly on screen. Jessica Renfro, *We Called It Earth*, May 2021, Digital/Live Performance, ArtEZ University of the Arts, Netherlands. Photo by Fenia Kotsopoulou

III. Building a stage for action

There is a broad array of definitions of procedural authorship due to its evolution from a descriptor of the digital procedures inscribed into computer code into an artistic design process that also considers aesthetic effects. Broadly, it is authorship over a set of rules and possibilities with which the participant interacts. Conversely, it can be viewed from the perspective of what is left unauthored; a structure within which ‘gaps’ appear, and participants ‘fill the gaps in different ways in each fresh iteration of the work’ (White 2013, 30). Murray writes, ‘The procedural author creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities’ (2016, 143), arguing that participants are not co-authors, but rather ‘interactors’ experiencing the thrill of agency in a narrative environment that has been cleverly cued for them by the designer. Mukherjee asserts that procedural authorship in digital games is an ‘ongoing process of interaction’ (2015, 150) which results in an entanglement of designer, technology, and participants. From this entanglement, authorship emerges as participants experience an ‘illusion of agency’.

I assert that procedural authorship in participatory art practice includes a large range of intersubjective experiences that can be designed by an artist. This includes everything from creating structures with multiple pre-defined possibilities, such as interactive narratives, to more collaborative, open-ended outcomes like improvised dance. Each structure encounters the agency of participants in a unique way by offering them distinct choices to act. ‘Agency is thus neither free will nor resistance, but is dynamically linked to structure’ (Eichner 2014, 219), intimating that procedural authorship also entails deciding which entangling technologies, algorithms, or objects to interpolate into the agential choices of participants. Additionally, the *feeling* of agency need not necessitate the inclusion of endless choices within a piece. Ryan and Rigby link the desire to play games to participants’ self-determinative needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and make the claim that creating a feeling of agency is as simple as offering players the freedom to act in ways that align with their desires. This means only a single pathway is necessary if it is the one participants wish travel down. (2011, 40).

The choices made available to participants, however, inevitably reflect an artist’s unique understanding of the world, and in so doing express their values (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014, 3). Values are tied to deep-seated beliefs and express themselves not so much as the accomplishment of concrete goals (e.g., weight loss) as the internal motivation to perform those goal-oriented actions in the first place (e.g., good health). In creating choices, it becomes apparent that bringing procedures into alignment with values often occurs through recognizable symbolic frames. Bogost writes that procedural systems must ‘entail symbol manipulation, the construction and interpretation of a symbolic system that governs human thought or action’ (2010, 5) in order to act as persuasive rhetoric. Harrell (2013) goes further, writing of *phantasms*; or how the combination of image and culturally encoded ideas (epistemic spaces) are capable of revealing spectators’ previously obscured subjective worldviews. When used as a reflective process, this is an empowering tool to reveal subconscious bias; however, it is possible that if used without awareness of what *phantasms* represent culturally, they have the potential to reinforce mainstream (or privileged) points of view. It is therefore important that the artist, as procedural author, deeply understand why certain choices have been offered, and what values are expressed by providing a mode of agency that explores this. This can be revealed through iterative cycles of design, implementation, and feedback.

Without external feedback, it can be very difficult for artists to recognize values they may have imprinted in their pieces unintentionally. Additionally, participant reception may alter perceived values in surprising ways. It is likely that participants coming from different social contexts will interpret some symbols quite differently or not at all, and thus find a different set of values in their interpretation. Flanagan and Nissenbaum propose iterative design cycles to address this (2014, 75). They acknowledge that values will not be interpreted identically between participants even after rigorous testing, but assert that constraints on mechanics and narrative elements can create a plausible range of interpretation. Gareth White echoes this, coining the term ‘horizon of participation’ to refer to

‘an evolving, individual understanding of the possibilities offered by an invitation’ (2013, 165). This allows latitude for individual interpretation while meeting the ‘horizon of expectation’ the artist has for the piece.

Lastly, it is important to attend to external processes capable of altering a participatory performance to the extent that its meaning becomes obscured. This can be a thorny issue to navigate because artists often rely on the hosting capacity of a venue in order for their works to be exhibited at all, and these entities are frequently attempting to fit several works together as an aesthetic expression of their own. In an interdisciplinary study of the possible applications of social practice art techniques in the Computer-Human Interaction field, Holmer et al. were surprised to discover pervasive issues with audience, intention, and expectations in the course of their ethnographic study of several participatory works (2015). They concluded that much of the problem had to do with a misalignment of expectations between artists and the institutions hosting them, and concluded that the entanglement between the two made the issue too difficult to study without inventing entirely new institutional frames.

Understanding the layout, scope, and procedural requirements of an event is one potential way to address this, but fails to account for the difficulty artists run up against in terms of experimenting with and prototyping participatory works at scale ahead of performances that advertise a final product. The perspective of participatory art as a process (or series of processes) signifies that each performance must necessarily be a step in a piece’s evolution towards the realization of an envisioned mode of agency, and recalibration and missteps are to be expected in a piece’s development because surprises are a natural and desired consequence of intersubjective work. This might require new institutional frames in order to fully investigate the potential of participatory artwork as a *library of agencies*.

To sum up, participatory art involves the temporary imposition of procedures comprised of rules, mechanics, environment and narrative, and creates a specified mode of agency voluntarily embodied by participants. These procedures are representative of a specific worldview, driven by values, represented symbolically, and respond to societal urgency. Iterative design cycles are necessary in order to understand participant desires, reflect on differences in reception, root out procedures that reinforce cultural bias, and develop a common frame for engagement. External procedures imposed by the hosting entity should also be factored in so as not to unwittingly subvert the intention of the artist. In contrast to this, however, it should be acknowledged that there is also great value in unexpected, expressive, or ineffective participation, and that this unpredictability is at the heart of what is exciting about participatory work. Despite the value of thinking procedurally, overreliance on procedural systems can turn participation from an intriguing agential experiment into a ‘labor-like action’ (Sicart 2011a) in which participants act as workers in pursuit of realizing dogmatic agendas of artists. Thus, an aspirational procedural authorship would facilitate co-authorship in a way that can act, establish limits, and still surprise.

IV. Conclusion

In *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the politics of spectatorship*, Claire Bishop laments the dearth of aesthetics in participatory art, writing, ‘Without finding a more nuanced language to address the artistic status of this work, we risk discussing these practices solely...by focusing on demonstrable impact’ (2012, 18). And indeed, it is disingenuous to place the mantle of ‘social catalyst’ squarely on the shoulders of participatory art when measurable outcomes are so difficult to find. To do so implies that the vast majority of artwork in this genre fails to meet the benchmark of its existence.

And yet, precisely because most participatory art strives to act as a social catalyst, critically engaging in rooting out neoliberal, colonialist, racist, ableist, etc...biases in its processes, an *aesthetics of procedure* could illuminate the societal value of this genre. In his description aesthetics game elements, Nguyen argues:

A game designer can use the medium of agency to get the player to perform a particular activity and attend to it. Just as a painter is framing a particular visual experience, isolating it and drawing attention to it, the game designer is framing a particular kind of practical activity by instructing the player to approach a particular practical environment from a particular motivational angle. (2020, 128)

In viewing participatory art as an agential artform, procedures come to light as aesthetic elements that operate cooperatively to direct, motivate, and reflect on a particular mode of agency. Participants find aesthetic experiences within created intersubjective environments because the choices at their disposal regarding how to engage with others have been limited, and thus framed. Procedural authorship is the technique by which this framing occurs.

Furthermore, an exploration of procedure could help address criticism that participatory art frequently fails to meet its own expectations regarding promise of experience. Alston calls out what he perceives as an unethical gap between the idealized form of participation envisioned by the artist and the actual experiences of participants. He demonstrates that despite audiences being capable of framing their own experiences, they are often strongly encouraged to pursue this idealized experience even when it is unattainable (2016, 244). When this occurs, the artist presents the *experience* as a type of finished product, acting at odds with the prevailing conception of participatory art as a genre that uses process as the basis of aesthetic experience (Kwastek 2013, 47). This pressure to attain an ideal experience also prioritizes the artist's interpretation above the interpretive performances of those participating, disallowing them to fully explore the potential of the procedural environment. An *aesthetics of procedure* would, therefore, highlight the unique ability of participatory art, as an agential artform, to suggest ways of acting and deciding together without assuming the outcome that might result.

By reflecting on what imbues a process with an aesthetic quality, it may be possible to use procedures in the same way a painter chooses a brush or a classical musician ornaments a cadence. Understanding these nuances could have applications that extend outside the artworld into the realm of public discourse. Participatory art, perhaps even more than games, can demonstrate unique ways to form intersubjective agential modes, and this can be experientially valuable to people facing intractable collective problems. As Collective Intelligence scholar Geoff Mulgan states, learning to act collectively 'is in many ways humanity's grandest challenge since there's little prospect of solving the other grand challenges of climate, health, prosperity, or war without progress in how we think and act together' (2018, 6). By understanding how procedures interact to determine our choices in the world, a greater variety of ways to activate our communities might become available, and this could help when facing difficult conversations or attempting to amplify the voices of the underrepresented or absent stakeholders in our shared future.

In the end, participatory art is an ephemeral touch on the psyches of participants. Unlike games, which can be played many times and enjoyed because of the challenge they present to a player's competency, participatory art asks participants to take action for the sake of experiencing *being together* in an unrepeatable context. Many of these experiences could be unsettling, unrealistic, or simply removed from what one might choose in a complex real-world situation. However, because time spent in the magic circle requires the ability to operate within an illusory environment while simultaneously using the procedures it presents as a tool for insight about larger societal issues, transferrable truths can be found in many participatory artworks that would never be able to claim a tangible impact on the issues they address. In this way, they serve to catalogue a vast library of agencies, and give us room to 'try on' an inexhaustible number of ways to exist together in the world (figure 3).

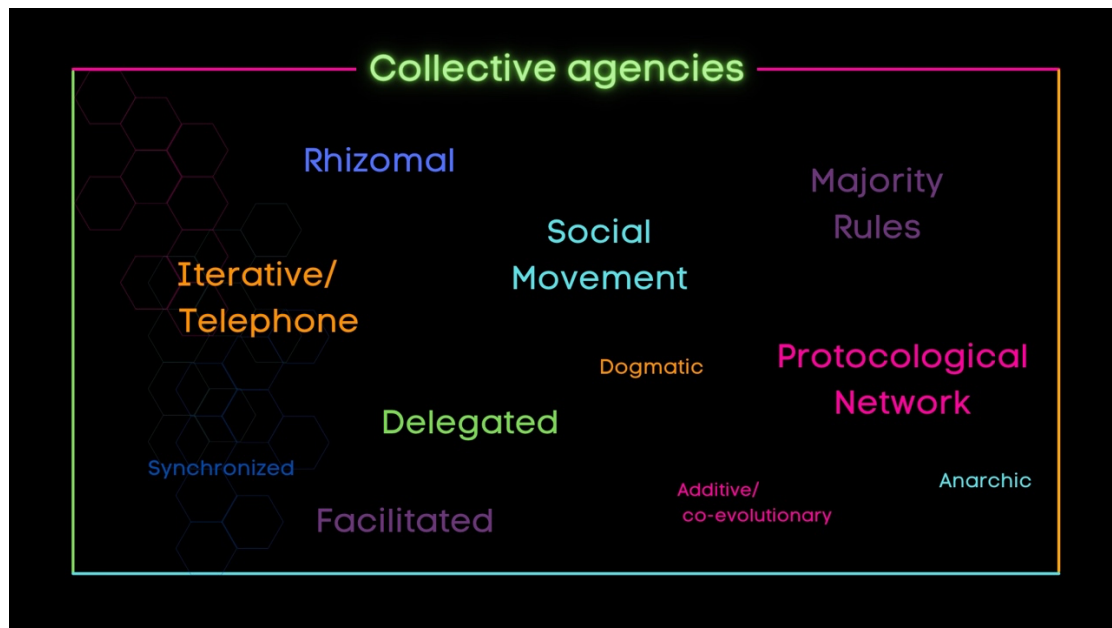


Figure 3, word cloud of collective agential forms

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