

# Designing Audience Participation and Gamification in Intermedia Performance: Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Implications Post COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

“Humanity: From Survival to Revival” (“Dystopia to Utopia”) is a participatory survival game and audiovisual performance work that depicts the transformation of the dystopian state of humanity to utopianism in both the visual and sonic realms. Audience members are invited to participate in humanity’s interactive survival games and to contribute their photographic facial outlines as visual content for the performance. This paper explores the theoretical framework behind designing audience participation and interaction by reflecting on the notion of dystopia as related to the COVID-19 pandemic, while also reflecting on this event’s outcomes and challenges. In doing so, this study showcases the process of visual transformation, depicting the transition from dystopian to utopian paradigms via audience participation and musical performance.

## KEYWORDS

Agency, Audience Participation, Audio-Visual Performance, COVID-19 Pandemic, Dystopia, Foucault, Human-Computer Interaction, Interactivity, Interaction Design, Intermedia Performance, Surveillance

## INTRODUCTION

“Humanity: From Survival to Revival” is an intermedia performance that focuses on audience participation as an integral part of the audiovisual performance. The preliminary conceptual framework, interactive design, and first round of programming were done on Max/MSP software (programmer: Martin Ritter) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, the work was briefly halted because of the uncertainty of the COVID situation since this performance requires the live participation of audience members. Approximately one year after the onset of the pandemic, this work was resumed by working closely with the programmer on ongoing experimentation, revision, and further development. As of the writing of this article, “Humanity” has been performed in three different venues. The first performance was showcased at the Humanities and Creative Arts Festival at Miami University Regional on April 8, 2022; this was a trial performance, more or less, since the artist wished to test the technical aspects of the interactive games as played by a live audience. Since then, this work has been slightly modified and was performed at the Eugene New Music Festival in

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Eugene, Oregon, on October 16, 2022, and the Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology, 17th Biennial Symposium at Connecticut College in New London on November 11, 2022. The new media artwork made via live performance and audience participation was also included as a solo exhibition at the New Media Art Conference at the CICA Museum, Gimpo, Korea, June 8–12, 2022.

This article offers an in-depth exploration of how audience and audiovisual interactivity were designed for this performance, reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-COVID era. In doing so, the paper focuses on the theoretical implications of the visual representation of dystopia and how that relates to Foucault's notion of *docile bodies*. Because "Humanity" is an experimental performance combining multiple mediums, this work yields manifold interpretations and topics of analysis from a wide spectrum of disciplines. A slightly different variation of this work which the author created during the pandemic period also exists. "Me, Myself and I in Dystopia" (Suhr, 2021) utilizes the same software program design, but the interactivity occurs solely between the artist and the camera, documenting the facial expressions of a person living alone during dystopian times. Another thematic variation involves viewing this work from the peer-to-peer blockchain modality. The point is simply that other possible interpretations and applications exist outside the dystopian and COVID-19 pandemic frameworks. Therefore, it is important to clarify that the intent of exploring theoretical connections in designing audience interactivity and gamification is not an attempt to limit or restrict the subjective experience of the audience. Instead, the aim is to unpack how the act of reflecting on contemporary culture and society creates a symbiotic synergy in the design process of building gamification for audience interactivity and participation.

Furthermore, as an artist and researcher, the author wishes to discover ways in which practical aspects of artistry and creative work can integrate theoretical with personal reflection. With that said, unpacking an intermedia performance that involves both audience participation/gaming and musical performance can be tackled from two primary standpoints: (1) understanding the artist's vision, conceptual background, and theoretical implications; and (2) analyzing emerging themes arising from audience participation. This paper aims to achieve both points based on overarching observations from the three performances that took place in 2022. In doing so, this article further raises the potential curatorial challenges to incorporating audience interactivity in this performance.

## **HUMANITY: FROM SURVIVAL TO REVIVAL**

The original version of this performance focused more on the broad, general ideas of the transformative process of people from a survival state to a revival state. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this work was reframed in the context of Foucault's notion of a disciplinary society, as a means to analyze emerging societal issues. Before discussing how the recent pandemic influenced the theoretical implication of this performance, it is essential to share the conceptual framework and synopsis of the work.

"Humanity: From Survival to Revival" depicts the transformation of the dystopian state of humanity to utopianism in both the visual and sonic realms. This intermedia performance not only involves the direct participation of audience members, but it creates an aesthetic experience wherein audience members collectively overcome a crisis, bond, heal through transformation, and create a new vision for humanity. In doing so, the performance raises the question of how can people collaborate to save themselves from crises to build a better humanity? The integral aspect of this performance involves allowing the audience's direct participation and collaboration to drive the audiovisual multimedia content. This multimedia, interactive, intermedia performance represents the change, progress, and rebuilding of human relations, collective healing, and bonding. Structurally, this work consists of four primary acts: (1) the audience takes photos of facial outlines; (2) an interactive survival game; (3) collective healing and bonding; and 4) rebuilding new humanity via an audiovisual performance. This work is interdisciplinary in that it crosses multiple creative genres and mediums and synergistically creates a unique aesthetic experience at the nexus of gamification, digital art, and music performance.

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