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Let's Get Phygital? Playformance and Spatiality

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Abstract

This paper examines and seeks to define the emerging concept of *playformance*—a creative practice that merges performance art with video games in physical spaces. During the spring semester at the Department of Performing and Digital Arts, University of Peloponnese, we conducted creative experiments to explore the different forms this practice can take. Grounded in spatiality and audience engagement, our research identified three distinct forms: phygital experiences (where physical and digital spaces coexist); video games spilling into reality (where game mechanics structure live performances); and physical spaces integrating digital elements (where game essences are abstractly reimagined).

Our analysis differentiates *playformance* from related practices such as in-game performances, primarily through its emphasis on physical space and the audience's role as players. Based on the type of game experience being creatively evoked, we propose a further distinction between *playformance* and *game performance*. Rather than producing a strict categorization, this paper aims to design a framework that follows the open structure of both performance and games, revealing potential opportunities and limitations in both fields.

Let's Get Phygital?

Blending Performance art and video games has long been explored and, paradoxically, at the same time, often misinterpreted in contemporary art culture. As artist and game designer Hejazi noted in a 2024 interview (Huuhka & Hejazi), both performance and games have historically existed on the periphery of the art world. Thus, experimenting with their intersection opens space for diverse and, at times, controversial analysis.

Video games span various genres, technologies, and experiences, from poetic walking simulations like *Dear Esther* (2012) to first-person shooters like *Call of Duty (*2003, 2024). Similarly, performance art has evolved through diverse forms and modes of expression. Cornblatt's 2008 in-game performance *Grand Theft Auto IV: Crime-Free Law-Abider* subverted the violence inherent in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games, 2008) by avoiding aggression, challenging the game's moral framework. Stern's works, such as *Runners* (1999) and *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001), merge game mechanics with art, performance, digital/analogue elements, and even cooking (Quaranta et al., 2017), pushing the boundaries of game design. Triantafyllidis integrates mixed reality, video games, performance, and site-specific installations. While these works differ in creative approach, their artistic grammar varies as well, encompassing mixed-reality performance, machinima, and live game performances. This paper examines the emerging concept of *playformance*, aiming to define its framework by focusing on spatiality and player agency.

Defining Playformance and Game Performance

The term *playformance* has been used in various contexts. Frasca (2007) describes it as the player's experience of navigating digital space through game mechanics. In performance studies, it refers to the ludic interplay between an artist and augmented technology during a performative act (Ghaderi, 2014). This paper takes as its point of departure the use of *playformance* by the French collective Sous les Néons. Specifically, Bachelier and Landais frame *playformance* as the interplay between video games and live theatrical performance, creatively linked through storytelling. The performer does not simply play a video game on stage, but transforms the in-game, on-stage energy into a new narrative, with the audience becoming a part of the experience[1]. What is particularly compelling, however, are the possibilities that *playformance* suggests when our focus shifts from the virtual space of the game to the immediacy and shared presence of the live exprience.

Backstory

In Spring 2024, an undergraduate course at the Department of Performing and Digital Arts, University of Peloponnese, explored *playformance* through experimental practices. We first analysed the intersection of performance and video game experiences, examining works like *The Inchcolm Project* (Bozdog & Galloway, 2016; Bozdog & Galloway, 2017) and *Future Dance of Nostalgia* (Xiao & Rodrigues, 2024,). In the second phase, we established key criteria: performances had to take place in the real world: retain the ephemeral nature of art;

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[1] https://www.souslesneons.com/playformance/en/

develop a concept conveyed through *playformance*; select a video game that supports this concept; and determine its integration into the performance. In the final phase, students collaborated in groups to design and experiment with their own *playformance*. Through this procedure, three distinct types emerged, helping to define *playformance*'s framework.

The Phygital Experience

In this type of *playformance*, we observed the emergence of parallel spatialities, where the physical space of the live performance and the digital space of video games coexisted, creating a novel interactive experience.

Figure 1
From left to right: The performer cooking, a screenshot from Sarah's Cooking Class game.

During *Cooking for the Oppressed*, Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) provided a foundation for exploring gender identity in games. Integrated with the cooking simulation *Sarah's Cooking Class* (2012), students developed a mobile app that let participants issue live cooking instructions to the performer, who enacted them as an alternative Rosler (Figure 1). The app replaced the game's point-and-click mechanic, with players selecting actions like "stir" or "add eggs," announced via a pre-recorded voice. The performer, cooking live, responded at times with visible dissatisfaction and at other times with contentment. In this example, live performance and video games symbiotically coexisted, striking a balance between digital interactivity and physical embodiment. The audience assumed the role of players, the performer became a live avatar, and the experience unfolded entirely in the physical space.

A different approach to audience engagement was observed in the *Street Fighter playformance*. Here, the digital world of the iconic video game *Street Fighter* (1994) merged with the physical through a customized interface created by the students. The *playformance* explored themes of generational conflict and video game violence with humour, as two siblings accidentally entered the game and became street fighters themselves. The

audience watched their "fight" in real-time, with the game menu and score projected on the wall, while video game conventions, such as character movements, music, and the arena-based combat style, were creatively integrated into the script. Unlike other *playformances*, the audience remained passive spectators, not interacting with the performers. In this practice, the video game was stripped of its most fundamental element: interactivity. The question is whether this example fits within the concept of *playformance* and, consequently, whether player interactivity is a crucial factor. We will revisit this in the next section.

The Video Game Spills over into Reality

One of the most popular types of *playformances* among students was the "bring-a-video-game-into-reality" type. In this format, the structure, mechanics, and logic of a video game dominated, framing the live performance within the boundaries of an existing game. One such *playformance* took the form of an escape room titled *Can You Escape*, where each game level corresponded to a different life stage (infancy, adolescence, adulthood), and life challenges manifested as physical tasks, with the performers assuming the role of instructors.

Another example was a live re-enactment of *Buzz! Quiz World* (2009), the console party game, which served as a critical commentary on the contemporary educational system and the suppressive power of teachers. In this case, the game's structure, the animated movements of avatars, the abusive scripted dialogues, and the overall game setting were translated into the physical space. The *playformance* used the dominant power of the host, the vulgar language, and the unfair pointing feedback system, as a metaphor for a failed educational system (Figure 2). In both instances, the audience assumed the role of the player.

Figure 2
From left to right: During the playformance, screenshot from the game Buzz! Quiz World.
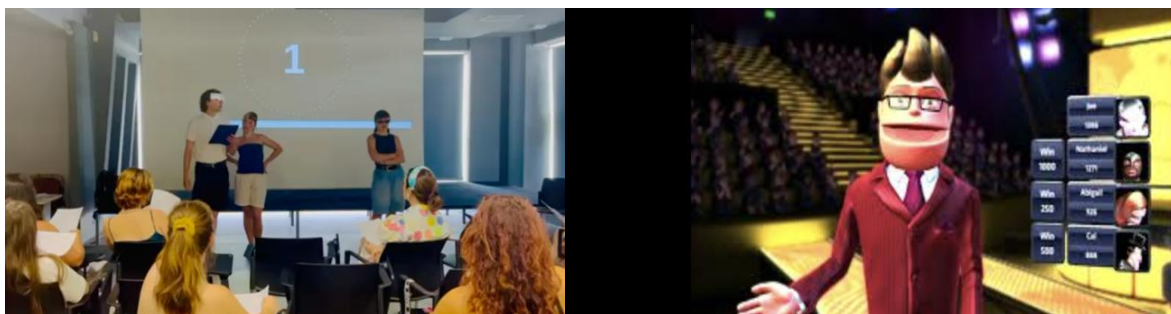
The Physical Space Integrates Digital Playful Elements and Conventions

In this category, the video game has been deconstructed into its core elements and reimagined in a new, playful manner. Rather than directly replicating aspects of a video game, its essence is woven into a live performance. This is arguably the most demanding form of *playformance*, as the designer-performer must remain faithful to the conventions of the game while ensuring they remain recognizable in their transformed state.

Figure 3
From left to right: During the playformance, screenshot from the game Flower.

In *Flower: Reimagined,* the aesthetics, flow, and central theme of *Flower* (2009)—being carried away into a state of calmness—were translated into an on-stage performance through movement, lighting, and sound (the game's original soundtrack). Unlike other forms, the video game conventions in this *playformance* were abstract (Figure 3), making the audience not players in the traditional sense but still active participants. This engagement was realized at the end when the performer handed each audience member a flower and invited them to act, subtly extending the game's themes into the physical realm.

Defining a Novel Practice

The aforementioned types of *playformance* are not exhausting but build an interesting starting point of analysis. Spatiality helps differentiate *playformative* practices from other artistic expressions that merge performance and video games, such as in-game performances. When the performer operates solely within the digital game world—as seen in Cornblatt's work—the performative act remains embedded in the game space, with the artist's agency manifesting entirely within the digital realm. This has significant implications, including the recording of the performance within the game environment; the performer assuming the role of the player; and the absence of physical space. As Hejazi notes (Huuhka & Hejazi, 2024), the artist may also

take on the roles of game designer; creating the game in which the performance unfolds; and director. This aligns with Huuhka's (2020) concept of *gameplay as performance*, in which the game's mechanics and rule-based system are used in contrast to its intended goals. Another important aspect is the absence of an audience-player role, which, in turn, leads to the disappearance of the concept of the game as an experience.

Even though these characteristics are not intrusive they signify a different approach than those manifested above. In the students' experimental practices, emphasis is placed on physical space, situating *playformance* within the context of live arts, while the video game world serves as the source code and creative input.

Within this framework, we can define the concept of performance to better accommodate these emerging practices:

Playformance is the practice of creatively blending performance art with the world of video games. Rooted in physical space, it manifests as a live performance that actively engages the audience through storytelling, open-ended game mechanics, and a creative make-believe rule-base system.

Furthermore, differentiating *playformance* from *game performance* through the theoretical lens of game studies—where game (or *ludus)* represents rule-based structures and play (or *paidia)* denotes free-form, expressive play (Caillois, 1958)—provides a valuable analytical framework. When video game conventions structure a performance through predetermined rules and systemic mechanics, as seen in escape room adaptations, the term *game performance* is more appropriate. Conversely, when video game elements manifest primarily as aesthetics, atmosphere, or improvisational engagement—such as in *Flower: Reimagined*—the term *playformance* better captures the essence of the experience.

Discussion

Artistic practice is a dynamic, evolving process, particularly when intersecting with the vast and ever-changing field of video games. This intersection introduces new challenges but also provides opportunities for deeper understanding. Analysing this spectrum helps identify possibilities and clarify the limitations not only of what we define as *playformance* but also of two seemingly unrelated fields of research: performance and games. A key starting point for research and analysis lies in examining spatiality and audience engagement, as these elements influence the performative experience. What we can learn from this remains open for discussion, but from a game studies perspective, it is intriguing to observe how a video game can claim the physical realm.

Acknowledgements

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