

A Practical List of Things to Consider When Composing an Immersive Ambulatory Experience for Audience

Jorge Just has spent his career exploring how online media shapes people's lives and narratives. He has been a pioneer of interactive technology, from designing an app that reunites families with lost children for UNICEF, to pioneering viral music videos on YouTube as part of band promotion for OK Go, to his work with Detour creating interactive city tours accessed through an iPhone. He creates immersive experiences that enhance collective imagination and story-making.

Applied Mechanics is an immersive theatre ensemble based in Philadelphia: we make plays you can walk through, with intricate installation sets where many interlocking stories unfold simultaneously and the audience is free to wander, explore, and choose what to watch. We hosted Jorge in Philadelphia for a workshop on interactive technologies and immersive experiences.

Below are some guidelines that Jorge and the Mechanics arrived at, as they compiled their knowledge in designing experiences for An Audience That Moves.

Beginnings: Audience Expectations & Managing Anxiety

Making your audience feel safe

This kind of experience can really make people feel nervous or anxious. A lot about starting out is about managing those nerves and expectations, which means acknowledging the possibility of those feelings and making a decision about your attitude as the designer of the experience. In our experience, we have found that a certain amount of audience comfort is necessary for the story to be communicated.

Do you want your audience member(s) to feel safe and comfortable, or nervous and alert? How can you gain their trust and still allow for the occasional thrill or moment of unpredictability?

Preparing people for what they will encounter (including the unpredictable)

Not all the elements of the immersive experience are controllable, by virtue of the fact that your audience member is a participant. In the case of a Detour tour -- the iPhone-guided experiences that Jorge Just helped design -- there are a host of potential participants. You never know who will happen along when your set is a live city street. Acknowledging these unpredictabilities is important when preparing your audience member, allowing them to make an educated decision about how and whether to participate.

What can you control and what can't you control? Are there some reliable, consistent elements you can direct your audience's attention to as touchstones? How can you communicate the mix of plan and chance that comprise the experience they are heading into?

Allowing the option to leave

Both Detour tours and Applied Mechanics shows begin as an offer: here is the experience we would like to give you, and here is what to expect. You are always free to exit the experience, or to leave before it begins, if this sounds like too much for you. Even being given this option helps manage audience anxiety.

Acknowledging the dangers of your chosen locale and putting people at ease

One of the Detour tours Jorge helped create is of The Tenderloin – a San Francisco neighborhood that is not generally considered tourist-friendly. The narrative voice of the tour, which participants access through their smartphones, is a resident of the Tenderloin. The narrator gently explains, through the listener's headphones, the risks that exist in this area. The narrator also provides them some simple tips for how to conduct themselves in the neighborhood – including going into the Rite-Aid on the corner to buy socks to drop off at a local shelter – and reassures the audience member that the risks are manageable and worthwhile. The tour takes a second to pause to allow the audience member time to purchase socks should they choose.

Similarly Applied Mechanics has created shows in warehouses and other found spaces. Every show begins with an explanation of potential dangers, other eccentricities of the space, and tools for managing them. We also provide some time for audience members to explore and acclimate before the story gets rolling, as well as a moment for the audience member to opt out should they choose.

Starting people on their journey (beginnings are hard)

Both Detour tours and Applied Mechanics shows begin with an orientation. In Jorge's work, the audience members must be given consistent reassurances they are on the right track (this will be to your left, this to your right, head toward the blue building with the mural on it). In Applied Mechanics shows, we often give audience members a map of the imaginary space -- *this corner is Vienna, this structure is Paris, etc.* Sometimes we give a timeline, which shows major events in the arc of the world. This helps the audience members decide which storyline they wish to follow, since Applied Mechanics shows involve a great deal of agency and freedom of choice for the audience.

Managing anxiety of choice

When an immersive experience involves many choices as to how the audience member may conduct themselves, or which story to watch, it is good to acknowledge at the start that those choices exist. It gives permission to the individual to make those choices. It prepares them and helps reduce anxiety. Applied Mechanics shows begin with signs and sometimes pre-show or welcome speeches, all of which clearly put the onus on the audience members to design their own view of the story: "Go where you want, watch what interests you." In the creation of the experience, however, it is good to limit the available choices in accordance with the risk the audience member might incur. In Detour tours, for instance, fewer choices are presented because of the many variables existing on a city street, as well as the responsibility Jorge and the team have to be sure they are providing as safe an experience as possible. That said, whenever a choice is presented ("You can enter the Rite-Aid to buy socks now if you wish"), appropriate time is given within the tour for the individual to make a choice.

Managing Behavior: What do You Need Your Audience to Do or Not Do?

"It's not about not trusting the world, it's about not trusting your audience" --Jorge Just

Trust is an issue in the tacit contract between audience and the performers or, in the case of Jorge's work, between the audience and the neighborhood. Detours send people out into the world. You don't want to send an irresponsible person out in the world and have them act disrespectfully to the neighborhood. Designing an experience requires a realistic look at your expectations for your audience throughout -- how can you limit how they act and interact to safeguard yourself (your space, the rest of the people in the world) against disrespectful or non-mindful behaviors? Ask yourself what you expect of your audience, and how much you trust them to fulfill those expectations. Make those expectations clear from the beginning of the experience, provide your audience with the tools to meet them, and reinforce when and where necessary.

What are they allowed to do? Are there certain permissions they need to be made aware of or encouraged to take? Are there limitations to their permissions that they should know about in advance?

Directing Audience Attention

Where do you want to direct their attention and how are you going to do it? Are there moments when they all must be in one place or looking at one thing? Are there moments when they can be wherever they want? When must you direct their attention and how will you do it when necessary?

Detour tours and Applied Mechanics' performances differ greatly in the specifics of this question. Applied Mechanics performances take place inside a controlled environment (indoors, a theatrical installation) where the audience has use of all five of their senses. A great deal of freedom is afforded the participant, therefore, in their body and attention. During the course of a show, when there is a moment where all the storylines come together and it would be ideal for all audience members to be directing their attention to a single point of focus, the characters and choreography generally lead them where they need to go--a gentle corral which audience members are encouraged, though not required, to oblige.

Detours, on the other hand, happen in the outside world, with both high-risk and high-reward to the audience member. The participant's ears are occupied by headphones, and their visual attention taken by narrative. The audience member may not be able to immediately see or hear if their body is in danger; reaction time is definitely compromised. Detours, therefore, spend a lot of time navigating the body of the participant to a safe locale, before the narrative can direct their eyes. The human eye then becomes a camera controlled by the suggestions of the narrator. While their body remains stationary, the audience member's gaze roams over a mural, a streetscape, or a monument. It's a different way of displacing someone, using just their eyes. The tour guide uses markers both to guide bodies and gazes to the appropriate view: "beside that yellow bench", "just above the image of the woman laughing", "at the top of that column". Adjustment of the audience gaze is a careful, meticulous process that requires both specific language and a relaxed, playful tone in the narrative voice.

When creating a piece, take a look at how you want the rules of movement to exist and whether they fluctuate. When does the audience have freedom to go wherever they want and when do you need them to be in a particular place? How are you going to tell them which it is? How are you going to tell them when and where to go when you do want to direct them? In both Detour and Applied Mechanics shows, the goal is to do this directing without taking the observer out of the experience of the piece, integrating the directions into content and into the relationship between performer and audience. How can we keep the listener/viewer inside the painting, the place, the experience, and what information and tools will they need in order to do this?

Staying In It

Once things have gotten rolling, how will you help your audience stay in the experience? We must acknowledge that once they are moving around, theirs is not an experience you can completely control—so what will you choose to control? And how can you help them know that they're on the/a right track even though much is left up to chance?

Applied Mechanics often uses a “you are here” map, to help audience members feel confident about where they are, and to literally put in their hands the tools to orient themselves in the space and confirm that they're in the “right” place (that is, the place they want to be.) These maps also often include a key to characters, and sometimes even a timeline of events, so that audience members have multiple tools to navigate through the world and story as they wish.

Detour puts a lot of stock in picking signposts they cannot be missed. These signposts are also chosen for their significance; they are functional, but also further the story. Description is also navigational tool. Making use of what is in the environment, any “signpost” can become a framing device, a way of orienting people to the world.

In our conversation with Jorge, we asked, “Can people still get lost [on a Detour] and is there a way of getting them back on track?” Jorge replied: “You try and write it in such a way so as to make sure [they won't get lost], give people enough time to check in; always try and write it from your own physical perspective.”

In creating immersive work, it's good to put yourself in the observer's shoes and determine what language and/or other strategies will help orient bodies in the space, helping people know that their bodies are oriented “right” or okay. Both sound and visuals will help you reassure them that this experience is curated, not random, and that following your cues yields interesting rewards. Applied Mechanics is able to control the environment of our pieces; we often use light to condense a large space, or bring all the characters together for a moment, creating a piece of unison in an otherwise polyphonous piece, in order to demand audience attention on a point of action that is necessary to understand the story. Jorge, in turn, is thinking about hearing and seeing as related experiences, both engaged by the curator in composing an experience for the audience member.

Composing an Experience

What do you want them to see? What do you want them to think about? What is your throughline? What is the tone of the journey?

In acknowledging that you don't have total control over the audience's experience, it is also important to acknowledge that you are actively creating the circumstances and conditions of that experience. Whether this creation takes the form of a recorded audio tour, as in *Detour*, or a set of interlocking stories played out by actors, as in an *Applied Mechanics* show, or any other variant on immersive form, the authors of this experience do well to ask themselves lots of questions about tone, event, and intention. While you can't control everything, you can choose to ask them to look at this mural and notice certain things in it, to pull an example from *Detour*, or to squirt the spray bottles they've been handed into the air to help make a rainstorm, to pull an example from *Applied Mechanics*. Each audience member's experience is going to be singular and belong to that audience member alone; that singular experience is born of an interaction with the objects, moments, and landmarks that you, the authors of the event, have curated and arranged.