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# Engaging Audiences

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## Introduction

The dynamics of human interaction are often cited as the key characteristic that distinguishes live performance from recorded work [1]. Despite this audiences are usually treated as generic, undifferentiated entities. The particular patterns of engagement and interaction that contribute to an audience response are rarely analysed. Nonetheless performers routinely distinguish in their working language between “good” and “bad” audiences and between moments of intense engagement – “crackle”, “movement”, “lift” – and moments of “drop” and “drift”. Although these are arguably the moments that define live performance little or nothing is known about how, why or when they occur. As a result, many basic questions about the phenomenology of audience engagement, the dynamics of collective and individual experiences of performance and the ways in which these moments are triggered and transmitted remain unanswered.

We are seeking to answer these questions by examining the detailed communicative organisation of audience-performer and audience-audience interaction. Models of interaction from the social sciences provide a rich framework for characterising moments of engagement and disengagement. For example, through collective body position and orientation, synchrony of

movement and nonverbal displays of affiliation and reciprocity [2,3].



Figure 1: Seminar Speaker and Audience with Head Markers

We are drawing on this work in two ways. First, we exploit motion capture techniques to explore the fine-grained inter-relationships in patterns of body movement between performers and multiple members of an audience (see Figures 1 and 2). The motion of each marker is recorded in three dimensions and then cross-correlated across participants. The results of a pilot study using this approach with clusters of head markers indicate that the head movements of a performer, in this case a seminar speaker, are reliably triggered by head movements in members of their audience.

In a second strand of work we are developing performance experiments that directly thematise interactional aspects of engagement in order to explore the responses and experiences of performers and audiences. This work, which builds on Oxley's previous works on miscommunication, takes advantage of the

potential for integrating the audience responses, in real-time, into a performance. The performance experiments are exploring the effects of direct mimicry and repetition of performers and audience. They are also investigate the use of motion capture and animation to take advantage of the potential for spatial and temporal displacement of body movements and voices as well as for the integration of virtual audiences members into a performance (Figure 3).

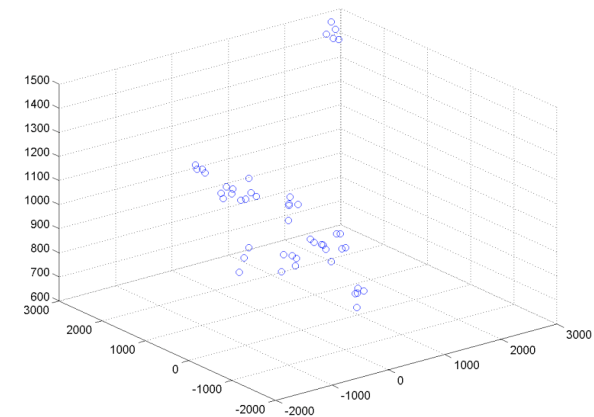


Figure 2: Raw Motion Capture Data From Presenter (top) and 9 Members of Their Audience.

The workshop will provide an opportunity to explore these themes through a specially designed exercise involving the use of audience cue cards ("Mimic Speaker", "Glance at Neighbour", "Sit Forward") that are designed to probe the individual and collective boundaries audiences draw in their interactions with a performer.



Figure 3: Performance Experiments In the Pinter Studio Theatre.

The overall aim of this research is to provide basic insights into the interactional processes that underpin engagement and disengagement in performance. It promises to provide both a new analytic vocabulary and a new space of possibilities for live performance. It will also provide new concepts and tools for the

development of virtual rehearsal and live performance environments.

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### References

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