

The Digital Future of Live Events, October 2020

Author: Melanie Doerner, with advisement from Elizabeth Doran

While the coronavirus may have put the future of in-person live events on hold, the demand for entertainment and meaningful cultural engagement, however, shows no sign of diminishing and could actually be enhanced as a result of the pandemicⁱ. Some in the field predict a “Roaring 20’s” post-COVID, fueled by pent-up demand for the arts, and a building boom of theatre venues similar to the period after the 1918 Spanish flu, except this time the building boom will be in the digital space.

The closure of venues in 1918 due to the Spanish flu was not a death knell for the arts. Rather, the “Roaring 20s,” the decade after the 1918 flu, fueled by the post-war boom, saw the rapid development of theatre venues and a sustained period of well-funded creative development. Of the current number of seats on Broadway (roughly 50,000), nearly half of those are in theatres built between October 1919 and October 1929 (nearly 21,000)ⁱⁱ.

For 2020-2030, it will be technology rather than construction that underpins our online-offline future. Today we convene in our digital spaces. “Town squares” emerged organically around existing infrastructure and behaviors, like theatre going, to fulfill existing civilian and commercial needs. Town squares or ultimately, any place of congregation — be it a theatre, bar, park, or museum— is attended because of who or what is already there, not because it’s a place in of itself. The same is true of digital experiencesⁱⁱⁱ. Video games and other digital spaces are proving a new way of consuming entertainment, an alternative world, ideal for meeting up with friends in the current global context. One can imagine the live stream of a Broadway show or Ballet whose sets were designed by a video game engine or other technology that audiences can experience in person or as an avatar, in both the physical and digital worlds.

The economic constraints of the professional performing arts are such that only certain shows in certain spaces with certain artists can get made, and are only seen and enjoyed by certain by audiences that can afford to pay the top ticket prices. The resulting effect is often white led arts organizations serving white audiences. The digital space has an incredibly wide range of contributors and participants, some of whom are independent individuals, while others might be informally organized groups or commercially-focused enterprises. The digital space could be the next great labor platform, where would-be performing artists and audiences that live outside the big arts cities like New York and Los Angeles are able to participate, with a potential new sub-economy for performing artists as we see shifts in where we live, the infrastructure that’s built, and who performs which tasks^{iv}.

While a Metaverse in its truest form may be decades, even lifetimes away, it is important today to talk about what the theatre arts in such an environment could and should be, so that artists and non-profits have influence over that destiny. Because the platforms towards the Metaverse are being built today, and if artists don’t imagine, inform and determine how their art is to exist in those platforms, we risk that future being controlled and determined by proprietary companies.

ⁱ <https://cdn.charcoalblue.com/files/News/Performance-Buildings-in-the-Post-Pandemic-World.pdf?mtime=20200401150717&focal=none>

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ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.matthewball.vc/all/themetaverse>

^{iv} <https://www.matthewball.vc/all/themetaverse>