

Micro-Events: A Potential Tool for Navigating Consent and Accessibility in Immersive Theatre

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As an immersive theatre enthusiast and scholar, I have often been surprised by how performers navigate moments of interaction with me in unexpected ways. This recurring dynamic has piqued my interest, particularly as my academic research focuses on the intersection of risk management and care ethics in immersive theatre. Early in my studies, I encountered Jorge Lopes Ramos' (2015) concept of micro-events, which reimagines how performances can be segmented. Unlike traditional frameworks like French scenes, Ramos' approach emphasizes aesthetic beats, creating a more nuanced system for understanding participatory moments. This paper explores how breaking down immersive performances into micro-events can become a practical tool for achieving both aesthetic and accessibility goals. By analyzing these moments in detail, immersive productions can meet the needs of diverse audiences, fostering inclusivity while maintaining artistic integrity.

Immersive theatre refers to performance experiences where the audience plays an active role in shaping the narrative, often through direct engagement with the environment, actors, or story itself (Bucknall 2023; Machon 2013). Micro-events are the individual moments within these participatory performances, broken down into smaller, manageable segments for analysis. Jorge Ramos defines a micro-event as a "quadrangular relationship at any given time in the event – between four key elements: the guest's role, the host's role, the use of physical space and the fictional moment (or context) it represents" (2015, 59). This definition underscores the essential components of immersive theatre: the roles of the performer (host) and audience (guest), the dynamic use of space, and the narrative context. In immersive theatre, where boundaries often blur, understanding how these elements interrelate is crucial for assessing audience engagement and overall experience.

By breaking a performance into micro-events—from audience arrival to their exit—this framework allows for more specific assessments of risk and inclusivity focused on maintaining the highlighted artistic moment of that micro-event. It provides a means of understanding how audience participants interact with space, performers, and the evolving narrative. This approach mirrors the traditional French scene breakdown used by directors and stage managers to divide performances into smaller segments for rehearsal. However, rather than breaking the show into smaller segments based on when people enter and exit the stage, which is the approach to segmentation in French scenes, micro-events identify and divide the show into the core aesthetic beats, often the key moments of performer/audience interaction. By identifying and analyzing

micro-events, the core artistic moment of the micro-event can become the focus of what needs to be upheld and translated equally in any parallel event. This also calls attention to “the use of the physical space” (Ramos 2015, 59) and the moment it represents, highlighting that this is also a key construct that needs maintenance and consideration across any parallel tracks that are developed.

Research at the intersection of theatre and disability, often termed disability theatre, typically emphasizes logistical needs over aesthetic concerns. This prioritization reflects a larger issue: the lack of research addressing the experiences of audiences with disabilities within immersive contexts. Betty Siegel, Director of Accessibility at the Kennedy Center, highlighted in her 2022 Event Safety Alliance Summit talk that one in seven adults will experience a disability during their work life, with 84.7% of those being mildly disabled and many disabilities being invisible. While audience scholarship has expanded significantly in the twenty-first century, little attention has been paid to how immersive theatre can better support audiences with disabilities (Hadley 2015).

This oversight is unfortunate, as many accommodation considerations align with the objectives of immersive and participatory experiences. In sorting accessibility considerations, the focus moves further onto the spectator, with an interest in how the spectator perceives and interacts with both the experience and other spectators in the experience. Drawing on principles from crip studies, this paper reimagines accessibility in immersive theatre not as a logistical challenge but as an integral aspect of artistic expression. This perspective echoes Alison Kafer’s assertion that accessibility must be understood not merely as compliance but as a “visionary act” that reshapes cultural norms (Kafer 2013). Rather than layering multiple accommodations onto a single track, I propose that breaking performances into micro-event beats can reveal opportunities for creating parallel accommodation tracks. These tracks, while offering different accommodations, can preserve the core aesthetic interactions of the performance for all audience members—a quality often absent in current practices. Parallel tracks are already a common aesthetic tool in immersive theatre, making them a compelling framework for exploring accessibility innovations.

When discussing risk in theatre, it’s easy to default to traditional Health & Safety assessments, which often focus on regulatory compliance, including basic accessibility mandates. While compliance is important, it does not inherently guarantee true accessibility or

inclusion. As Bree Hadley (2015) observes, functional accessibility barriers—such as narrow entrances and stair-only access—are among the primary factors preventing spectators with disabilities from fully engaging in theatre. The other factors include frustration with stereotypical representations of disability and the lack of authentic portrayals by disabled authors and performers. While these definitions of risk are valid, they are inherently limited. Drawing from disability justice principles, the concept of parallel tracks proposed here seeks to transcend compliance-based accessibility. As Sins Invalid (2019) emphasizes, access must be holistic and attentive to intersecting identities, creating experiences that prioritize disabled agency and autonomy. In immersive performances, known for their deeply interactive and participatory nature, additional psychological risks arise from the intimacy these experiences often demand.

Intimacy in immersive theatre manifests in various ways, ranging from heightened physical closeness, such as direct touch or shared moments of eye contact, to psychological and emotional engagement, such as vulnerability or personal reflection. While such connections often aim to deepen the participant's immersive experience, they do not rely solely on physical or emotional closeness. Kelsey Jacobson and Bethany Schaufler-Biback (2024) contend intimacy is multifaceted and subjective, defined not merely by touch or emotional bonds but by “spontaneous relation and engagement with the other” (56). These elements of intimacy, whether physical or abstract, invite participants to connect personally with the performance while introducing unique risks to both physical and emotional safety—risks that extend beyond the considerations of conventional performance settings.

Adam Alston (2013) shares the psychometric paradigm for considering risk within immersive theatre, which correspondingly emphasizes the technical/physical considerations, though also stresses consideration of the social/psychological aspects. When engaging with audience on such an intimate level, risk assessments need to expand beyond the practical and into the emotional and ethical. The breakdown of a performance into micro-events helps clarify needs that arise at each different step of the performance, especially in the realm of more ambiguous emotional or ethical triggers, than merely looking at the performance from a meta view.

Orientation Micro-Events as Gateway Accessibility Moments for Audiences

A key element of successful participatory experiences is clear audience onboarding, or the process of introducing the audience to the performance, its environment, and the expectations

surrounding their participation (White 2013). Amanda Rose Villarreal (2021) emphasizes the importance of consent during orientation or onboarding, ensuring participants are aware of what to expect and can make informed decisions about their involvement. Cody Page (2024) expands on Villarreal's work, applying this idea to the context of role-playing games as "Session 0" (74), a preparatory phase that aligns participants' expectations and establishes boundaries.

This approach can also be applied to immersive theatre, where orientation serves as a critical tool for clarifying accommodations and setting expectations, especially for disabled participants. The orientation micro-event, which is the first interaction the audience encounters upon arrival, is pivotal in creating a supportive and inclusive experience. Onboarding is crucial because, as noted by Ramos (2015), it begins with an intentional engagement with the physical space and should be integrated into the overall narrative of the experience. While orientation does not necessarily need to be embedded directly into the story, immersive productions that push boundaries or require a significant suspension of disbelief could greatly benefit from an orientation micro-event that helps ground the audience in the world of the performance. This could involve introducing the audience before they even enter the venue, providing a neutral entrance space, or guiding them step-by-step into the performance's fictional world.

To clarify, micro-events are small, interactive segments within a performance that serve as a moment of engagement or transition. These moments, often tied to the interaction between the performer and audience member, can help guide participants through the narrative while ensuring that accessibility and inclusion are prioritized. In immersive theatre, these micro-events help bridge the gap between the audience's real-world identity and the roles they are invited to play within the immersive world. For example, Rose Biggins (2020) describes a performance where repeated consent warnings, though necessary, felt at odds with the hedonistic tone of the show, leaving the audience feeling uncomfortable. In this case, the delivery of these necessary messages could have been more effectively integrated into the performance's world, creating a smoother transition for the audience.

Embedding orientation tasks within a world-specific or adjacent setting can help ease audiences into their roles without disrupting the flow of the narrative. A strong example of this can be seen in ZU-UK's *Hotel Medea*, where the character of o Capitão interacted with the audience as they arrived at a world-adjacent setting, such as the docks near the training camp, and then continued the orientation process once they entered the camp (Ramos 2015, ix). This

approach, which integrates both the physical environment and the performance's narrative, allows for an immersive introduction that sets the stage for further engagement and establishes a shared understanding of roles, including accommodations for diverse audience needs.

Good orientation micro-events also have the potential to become a key moment in manifesting accessibility, ensuring that all audiences have equal access to the experience without undermining the aesthetic goals of the production. Cody (2024) highlights a useful technique for ensuring inclusivity in role-playing games: the use of a pre-game boundary sheet that outlines accommodations and helps players set expectations for the game, as well as a verbalized follow-up during Session 0. This proactive tool could be similarly embedded in immersive performances, allowing audience participants to share their access needs before the performance begins. A tailored orientation micro-event, built into the early stages of the experience, could provide a space for performers (hosts) to address and verbalize accommodations, ensuring all participants feel comfortable and prepared. This would not only help ensure that access is seamlessly integrated into the immersive experience but would also allow for a more personalized engagement where participants have the autonomy to voice their specific needs. Additionally, sharing these broader announcements of accommodation during orientation, without singling out specific audience members, may encourage any audience members who may have been hesitant to ask for any desired accommodations to make a request at that time as well.

Integrating access needs early in the orientation phase allows performers (hosts) to communicate specific accommodations clearly, addressing accessibility without disrupting the performance's flow. For instance, employing parallel accommodations—such as sensory modifications, clear instructions, or choice-driven paths—can meet a diverse range of needs while preserving the agency and decision-making central to immersive theatre. Jane Ensell highlights that the traditional approach of segregated accessible tracks often limits choice and undermines inclusivity; instead, the goal should be to design open-world experiences where disabled participants can exercise choices alongside others (Immersive Experience Network 2023). This ensures that accessibility enhances rather than diminishes the agency and personal connections that define immersive performances. While pre-game boundary-setting and orientation strategies can aid in creating parallel tracks for tailored experiences, crip theory prompts us to critically examine whether such measures inadvertently uphold compulsory able-

bodiedness by privileging normative standards in the primary track (McRuer 2006). To counter this, these tracks must actively challenge, rather than reinforce, ableist assumptions about performance and participation. Micro-events can help frame these accommodations within the performance, allowing each audience member, regardless of ability, to engage fully with the narrative on their terms—whether through sensory or cognitive accommodations or through ensuring that the experience doesn't inadvertently coerce participants into a specific role or reaction.

Crip aesthetics reject the separation of artistic and accessibility concerns, proposing instead that disability culture can inform and enrich the creative process (Kuppers 2011). This perspective reinforces the need for parallel tracks to be designed not as afterthoughts, but as co-equal narrative pathways that reflect diverse embodied experiences. This approach calls for planning from the outset, incorporating accessibility consultations and considerations into the rehearsal process so performers are prepared to adapt without disrupting the story or performance flow. The goal is to develop a structure that doesn't isolate disabled participants but rather weaves accessibility into the very fabric of the production, ensuring both inclusivity and artistic integrity are prioritized from the start. Micro-event breakdowns allow for a systematic evaluation of each of these moments.

Adopting Micro-Events for Diverse Participant Needs

As we look to risk assessing micro-events, a possible framework to apply to each event is to look at it through two lenses: physical and psychological. Adding to this the caveat that experimental theatre continues to grow in such unexpected ways that presently unseen lenses may need to be added in the future per the needs of new productions. Physical assessments include typical Health & Safety concerns such as clear paths, proper emergency exits, functional first aid, and firefighting measures, which fall under the basic compliance standards required for public spaces. However, compliance alone does not equate to true accessibility. To create genuinely inclusive spaces, productions must also consider the audience's experience beyond compliance. Following Kafer's critique of inclusion as a retrofitted solution, accessibility can be woven into the artistic fabric of immersive theatre from the outset (Kafer 2013). By designing with disability at the core, performances can move beyond token gestures to truly transformative experiences. For example, what are they being asked to do? Do they need to sit? Do they need to

lay down? Do they need to run? And if they can't, what is the plan for the performer (host) to not only continue the narrative cleanly but also ensure that the audience (guest) feels included and respected within the performance?

A significant number of participatory practices that I've personally encountered love to involve the use of hands, likely because many devisers perceive it as a relatively safe way to initiate intimacy. I use intimacy here to mean fostering a connection between the performer and audience—in this case, through physical means—that encourages a more profound engagement with the performance and its story. A very quick way for a performer to disrupt that connection is to falter when they haven't prepared for a moment where they extend their hand hoping I'll reach out, only to realize I have a limb difference. This lack of preparation often leads to discomfort for both parties, particularly when the performer proceeds without acknowledgment, holding my hand and unintentionally making the interaction feel forced. In these moments, my focus shifts entirely to whether I'm making the performer uncomfortable, likely detracting from the artistic intent of the interaction. The issue here isn't my existence in my body but the performer's unprepared response. Conversely, the few performers who have acknowledged my difference with a simple added request for consent not only eased my discomfort but also created an opportunity for genuine intimacy, capturing what Mia Mingus describes as "access intimacy" where the embodied stress of managing the situation dissipates because "someone else 'gets' your access needs" (2019, para. 11). These moments, where I grant permission for the performer to touch a part of my body that doesn't often receive touch, feel profoundly personal and meaningful. Building this kind of flexibility into rehearsals—through invitations rather than rigid choreography—can allow performers to approach interactions with multiple modalities that prioritize audience agency. Such an approach supports individual needs while reducing the risk of imposing biases or predetermined expectations on audiences' experiences. Crip Studies foregrounds care and interdependence as central values, challenging the neoliberal emphasis on individualism (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Applying this ethic to immersive theatre demands collaborative design processes that honor diverse access needs without prioritizing efficiency over inclusion. An extra minute, sometimes even just a beat or two, despite the interaction potentially being in a tightly choreographed moment, can make a big difference for inclusion.

Issues like this are potentially avoided by developing micro-event breakdowns for performance. In a situation like the one above, a key narrative beat is the performer (host) taking

the audience's (guest) hands. Rather than trying to assess for every disability imaginable, a micro-event breakdown exercise would allow performers to ask "what if I can't take someone's hand?" in a more relaxed rehearsal setting. This not only provides them with the opportunity to brainstorm alternative ways to uphold the artistic and aesthetic impact of the moment, but also opens the performer to a more adaptive mindset, a non-catastrophic response to these differences.

Balancing Accessibility and Artistry: Strategies for Parallel Track Implementation

Immersive and participatory practices offer a unique flexibility that allows for improvisation and personalized responses, creating an ideal environment for the implementation of parallel tracks designed with accessibility in mind. However, as accessibility needs often conflict from one disability to another, it may not always be possible to accommodate every individual. Nevertheless, by conducting a risk assessment for each micro-event and asking the crucial question, "Who does this leave out?" it may be possible to create parallel tracks that allow for the artistic goals of the performance to be conveyed in multiple ways. The key challenge here is ensuring that each parallel track is equally developed and fulfilling artistically, without reducing the experience for any participant.

Hadley (2015) highlights that accessibility work is often approached on a logistical level, neglecting aesthetic, symbolic, or social access, which are essential to fully inclusive artistic expression:

Most disabled spectators can describe the blank look of the attendant wondering why a disabled person would want to burden or disrupt the rest of the spectators by, for example, leaving on their own timetable, leaving a device on, talking, failing to move during a promenade part, etc. when they had already been 'helped' so much by an ad hoc solution provided to deal with the problem of disabled people wanting to attend at all. (160)

A primary challenge in creating parallel tracks lies in the time and financial resources required. Developing alternate tracks that maintain the same depth of immersion and narrative integrity as the original production necessitates additional rehearsal time, space, and potentially more performers or crew. However, the investment in carefully evaluating micro-events for accessibility can help avoid the ineffective ad hoc solutions that Hadley (2015) describes as the prevalent mindset of how to do "enough" (Hadley 2015, 161) to get through the one

performance, again often limiting the accessibility considerations to only the logistical level and often creating temporary separation from the performance for the audience member. Rather than offering “opt-out” areas where disabled participants are segregated or excluded from parts of the show, parallel tracks can offer alternative experiences that allow everyone to engage with the performance in a way that aligns with their needs and preferences.

Additionally, incorporating accessibility measures into the ticketing process, as suggested by Siegel (2022), can further streamline the planning and delivery of these accommodations. Asking about accessibility needs during ticket purchase allows production teams to pre-schedule accommodations for specific performances, making it easier to deliver a seamless experience for all attendees. This proactive approach enables more thoughtful integration of accessibility measures into the overall design, rather than relegating them to logistical concerns for a few performances or participants.

Parallel tracks are not a new concept in immersive theatre. A notable early example comes from the company Talking Birds and their production *Solid Blue* (2002) at a medieval monastery. When a lift broke, rendering the primary performance space inaccessible to people with mobility impairments, the company devised an innovative solution. They set up a live video and sound link to a downstairs cloister, complemented by live visits from actors when they were not performing upstairs. This solution, while inexpensive and reliant on existing resources, successfully maintained the aesthetic and narrative integrity of the production. Audience feedback indicated that the downstairs experience felt exclusive and engaging, underscoring how thoughtful accessibility solutions can enrich the production for everyone, not just those requiring accommodations (Anonymous 2014; Nisbet 2020).

However, the implementation of parallel tracks must be handled with care to ensure they do not inadvertently segregate the audience in a way that undermines the overall experience. Instead, the aim should be to craft tracks that reflect diverse needs while maintaining artistic integrity, ensuring that every participant feels included in the full narrative arc, which is where micro-events shine as a system for segmenting and analyzing the performance. For example, if parallel tracks are created for themes or interactions that might be difficult for some participants, it is essential to provide equally engaging options that do not compromise the narrative's impact. Audience members should not be pushed into or sorted onto tracks based on biases or assumptions about their preferences. Instead, creators could consider how parallel tracks can be

designed to allow participants to choose the type of experience they feel comfortable with, ensuring that the artistic goals remain intact across all tracks.

Drawing from my own lived experience, I attended a performance of Houseworld Immersive's *Bottom of the Ocean* in Brooklyn, which featured a segment centered on redemption and absolution. Following an emotionally intense prior encounter, the segment faltered for me when the performer attempted to absolve me by washing my hands. The interaction was awkward; the performer hesitated, took only my left hand, and performed a half-hearted wiping motion. This incomplete gesture left me feeling uncomfortable and disconnected from the intended emotional resonance of the moment. Through the lens of Disability Justice, this moment highlights the limitations of existing paradigms in immersive theatre that fail to account for diverse participant needs and responses. The act of handwashing, while symbolically powerful, assumes a universality of touch as a medium for connection, potentially alienating individuals for whom touch is either unwelcome or inaccessible. A more inclusive approach would incorporate pre-planned options for expressing absolution—such as verbal affirmations, symbolic gestures, or interactive objects—ensuring the experience remains meaningful without unintentionally othering anyone. Additionally, clearer communication between front-of-house or stage management and performers could better equip them to anticipate and adapt to participant needs, reflecting the Disability Justice principle of fostering environments that honor diverse embodiments and modes of interaction.

Towards a More Inclusive Future: Embracing New Tools for Improved Accessibility

Immersive theatre has the unique potential to model crip futures—a vision where accessibility and artistic innovation are seamlessly intertwined (Kafer 2013). By expanding the tools and frameworks used during the development process to prioritize accessibility, immersive theatre can lead the way in dismantling ableist paradigms and creating spaces where all participants can engage meaningfully. This is not merely about compliance but about embracing the transformative potential of diverse perspectives to enrich the creative process. As Bruce Barton (2021) noted in a discussion on accessible practices, “Even if something you add into [a performance]... only two people out of a hundred will have the sensibility or the condition to experience it in some ways, I think it enriches the work... it's thicker, it's denser, there's more

going on in it” (23). Accessibility, approached as an integral part of artistic design, deepens the artistic experience for everyone.

Micro-events emerge as a particularly powerful tool in achieving these adaptable futures. With their inherent flexibility, micro-events allow creators to conduct detailed risk assessments and implement accessibility measures without sacrificing aesthetic integrity. This granular approach provides a framework to guide the planning and rehearsals necessary to develop immersive theatre experiences that are not only inclusive but also innovative. By centering accessibility in this way, immersive theatre can adopt a generative model of creative problem-solving, where challenges are reframed as opportunities for artistic growth and richer audience engagement.

In conclusion, immersive theatre makers have an unparalleled opportunity to lead the cultural shift toward accessibility as a foundation of artistry. Tools like micro-events provide the structure and adaptability needed to craft performances that celebrate interdependence, equity, and the diversity of lived experiences. By integrating accessibility as a core creative principle, immersive theatre can help realize a future in which performance spaces not only accommodate differences but actively thrive on them—modeling crip futures where creativity and accessibility are inherently linked.

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