A Digital Campfire in a Multimedia Hive: MOMENT FACTORY

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Founded in 2001, Moment Factory is a “multimedia entertainment studio,” specializing in the creation of immersive environments. Sparked by the meeting of two ravers keen on innovative technology (Sakchin Bessette and Dominic Audet, joined in 2007 by Éric Fournier), the studio first made its mark by developing architectural lighting and creating imaging tools for corporate events, concerts, and stores. Today, the studio employs 250 people, maintains offices in London, Los Angeles, Paris, and Tokyo, and has expanded its scope to include the production of its own creative projects (such as the Lumina walks, designed for natural sites). Moment Factory has created work for the Red Hot Chili Peppers tour, a Madonna concert, several Cirque du Soleil productions, the Jacques Cartier Bridge in Montreal, the Los Angeles Airport, a cruise ship, a Japanese restaurant, etc., with shared features, a signature style, and a consideration of technology—a “digital campfire” they invoke as a gathering place.

When one walks through the door of 6250 Avenue du Parc in Montreal, one has the impression of plunging into a hive: buzzing, frenetic activity, groups of collaborators (focused individuals wrapped up in their work or having intense discussions, sometimes on skateboards!). In going from one floor to another, which are like the “supers” of a hive, one doesn’t see bees born in honeycombs, but multimedia projects! The ground floor entrance leads to a communal room that looks like a hip café (but one where everyone can go behind the counter) and to several strategic areas, such as the “protoroom” (a studio for preinstalling projects, conducting research and development, and filming) and the “black box” (a lab equipped with all kinds of sensors—Kinect, thermal imaging camera, 2D scanner, etc.). There is also the “bridge room,” so named because it contains a large model (1:100) of the Jacques Cartier Bridge, as well as various digital projectors permanently installed in the room—which allowed the teams to do their tests throughout the creative process that stretched over four years. On the second floor, in the main area, the studio’s three main departments share an immense open space, surrounded by meeting rooms: design, research, and administration/production (which also manages the scenography division).

A Collective Experience:
Moment Factory emphasizes the collective experience it offers with its creations, which act as gathering places. The mythology of the public around a digital campfire is very close to Robert Lepage’s imagining of theatre’s origins in the quarry. He evokes the same original fire around which people gathered to tell and hear stories. However, Lepage adds an element by conjuring the storyteller’s shadow, visible on the quarry wall, as the storyteller stands among those assembled. Lepage is keenly aware of the actor’s future on the screen—a two-dimensional future—and the autonomy possible for the shadow that can recount something other than what the storyteller recounts—the autonomy of the projected image able to free itself from its source. Stage
projection, just like the multimedia environments created by Moment Factory, often plays with the shadow’s autonomy by displacing a reflection, slowing down an echo, rendering the shadow independent of its object, and this is partly where the magic and disorientation of Moment Factory’s installations reside. In both cases, the narration, the fire, and the image created by the fire are vital.

There is also an impulse to recreate the collective, the emotion shared through immersive experience, in opposition to contemporary individual consumption (via television, tablet, computer, phone). This explains why the studio does not use virtual reality headsets in the works, since that would lead to a more individual experience.

Moment Factory seeks to gather people through work that reflects clear technological mastery but which also serves to reintroduce magic into our environments, particularly public spaces. There is a manifesto in this, even a political gesture, which complicates the simple label of a “multimedia entertainment” studio. Thus the interesting shift of their slogan from “music for the eyes” to “we do it in public.” “Whether at a concert, a flagship store, or across an urban space, we aim to inspire a sense of collective wonder and connection,” announces the company’s website. This can be read as a reconnection and awareness of collective interaction. Whether it calls for using light sticks in the Lumina projects or speaking out via microphone in public spaces (Mégaphone, Nova Lumina), the event depends on public participation. In Nova Lumina (2016), an illuminated night walk by the sea in Chandler (Quebec), “the walking stick literally ‘connects’ visitors to the place, the story and the multimedia installations, reacting as one approaches the various installations, projections and visual effects zones.” As Léa Behr—who works on interactive design and is in charge of the Lab—explained when she had me test the “black box,” it’s a question of “transforming public space into a play area.” Already in 2013, Mégaphone rendered public speaking visible and legible through a playful exploration made political by giving participants a public voice and by the work’s effects. A participant’s entire speech, delivered through the megaphone, was projected onto containers, and fragments of the text were 3D projection-mapped onto the facade of UQAM’s President-Kennedy building—not an anodyne intervention, given that this occurred shortly after the student protests of 2012.3

Moment Factory develops three types of projects: themed entertainment, signature shows, and works for public spaces. Themed entertainment springs from an institution’s invitation to create a multimedia installation through which an aspect of the institution’s history or activity can be discovered or rediscovered. Moment Factory has thus created immersive experiences and multimedia journeys for Pointe-à-Callière Museum (Yours Truly, 2010), Museum of Ingenuity J. Armand Bombardier (2016), as well as Tobegami Sama (2017), an immersive and tactile installation that inaugurates a new collaboration between Moment Factory and Sony Music Communications Japan. Here, visitors are offered a journey through Japan’s culinary tradition and are invited to interact with touchscreens displaying superb sequences of images, even to stir rice onto which visuals are projected.

Aura, at Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal, also belongs to this category. This luminous, immersive experience allows visitors to rediscover the Basilica and see it as never before: the play of lights showcases various aspects of the interior decor, while video mapping creates innovative environments. One particularly effective sequence suddenly transforms the Basilica into glass architecture, rendering the building transparent against the background of night and seasonal vegetation. The sound quality and immersive experience,
including certain mapping effects, are stunning; this is less the case with the soundtrack which gets overly melodramatic as it begins and ends with singing more related to the context of the Basilica. Some of the signature shows are created for hotels and casinos, such as those developed for Royal Caribbean International (RCI) and its cruise ships. For Anthem of the Seas, Moment Factory designed a performance space that offers live shows (Spectra Show, 2015) and multimedia vignettes (such as the beautiful Leonardo’s Dream). The performance space features glass walls, facing the sea, that can be covered by an immense screen, as well as a six mobile Roboscreens synchronized with the projections. These shows are exemplary of Moment Factory’s expertise and ability to use traditional techniques (animation, motion design, 3D animation) in a non-traditional—and highly modular—setting by means of virtuosic, multi-screen interventions. In Leonardo’s Dream, viewers are immersed in da Vinci’s rich imagination and his dream of creating a flying machine. There are wonderfully ambiguous passages, animation sequences in which drawings come to life (the drawing of the Vitruvian Man becomes an acrobat spinning in his Cyru wheel), and even the screens themselves seem to come alive and take flight.

The same trilogy of multimedia effects—narrative-interactivity is at work in the second type of “signature shows” with the Lumina series: site-specific, immersive, and interactive multimedia journeys tailored for extremely different environments that have become Moment Factory’s signature. Created in 2014, Foresta Lumina is a night walk that celebrates a walking trail in Parc de la Gorge de Coaticook: after nightfall, the walk—part haunted, part enchanted forest—draws on the topography of the place and the trees to create a universe of projections and sounds. In a similar vein, Anima Lumina, created in 2016 at the Zoo Sauvage de St-Félicien, is an original way to experience the nighttime universe of the zoo. The projections of animals among the leafy trees are particularly amazing. “In Lumina, the forest is already there, we simply enhance it.” For Dominique Audet, the technology remains simple in the Lumina series: “It’s always about developing an analogical, tangible side and a digital, virtual one and then exploring the collision between the two.” This collision often occurs at the intersection between reality and fantasy. This is the point of departure for Nova Lumina (2016, Chandler), the night walk by the sea to encounter stars, or Lumina Borealis (2016, Kingston). Here, visitors walk through a frosty landscape and gather around real fires while mysterious creatures stir on old stone facades, greeting visitors before transforming into fiery creatures, then into aurora borealis that the visitors themselves set in motion by varying the intensity and rhythms of the songs and words they voice into vintage mics. The 5th Lumina will be created in mid-July at the Mont Tremblant Ski Resort.

Whether to disorient or marvel, Moment Factory seeks to spark public participation. This is equally true for works for public spaces, such as Mégaphone or the Los Angeles Airport already mentioned or, more recently, Montreal’s Jacques Cartier Bridge. For the bridge—now equipped with 2807 LED lights and over 10 km of cables—it is not only a question of paying tribute to the architecture, but also of giving rise to another perspective, or even giving another purpose to the bridge, which will be able to provide the weather and a sense of the city’s pulse that changes according to its traffic, cultural events, tweets, etc.—all “generative” and live material that is behind the installation’s title: Living Connections. These external variables, processed in real time, will evolve over the expected 10 years of use around semantics that will become more refined over time. At present, a colour calendar corresponds to the seasonal cycle, and the impact of rain and snow has been explored. At the time of our meeting, the teams were still testing the functionality of the material. Six companies collaborated with Moment Factory to produce this project (Ambiances Design Productions, Atomic3, Eclairage Public/Ombrages, Lucion Média, Réalisations, and Udo Design).

**Vertical Synergy of the Hive**

Recently, a team of five people was assigned to start Research and Development (R&D), a key division that can pursue crucial research outside of any specific creative project—just like Josef Svoboda was able to do in the 1950s with a studio of almost 50 people for the Prague National Theatre. This team devotes 50% of the time to R&D revolving around four themes: mixed reality, connected objects, tracking, and content creation in real time.

At the same time, various initiatives are fostering creative avenues, tools, and devices outside of creative projects, therefore outside of commissions: there is a database managed by the Lab and key times of the year when research gets underway—one is called “camping” and others involve workshops whose form, length, and development vary each time. On Moment Factory’s website, one section introduces the public to some of the Lab’s research, which can be filtered by four categories (content, interactive, system, scenography) or by 46 tags (particles, laser, glitch, projection, LED, touch, etc.). By browsing these pages, visitors will get a sense of the research being done on systems, rendering, scenography, as they dive right into the lab, into the arcana of the research that will have future destinations. The Lab’s database represents a kind of stock; in fact, that is the name of one section on Moment Factory’s internal network, to which everyone can upload a track, a material rendering, a programming language flowchart, etc. This is actual material that can then be used by anyone else. In this way, a video clip produced while macro filming a soap bubble or a mix of materials (milk, acrylic paint) will be used by another creator to test the 3D rendering on which they are working. This resource, which functions as an archive of research (by conserving the precious trace of ephemeral explorations or intuitions), also allows the 250 collaborators to have an internal and visual understanding of what they are each developing. Many coincidences are discovered, encouraging vertical interaction, which is much more efficient than if the information were transmitted through meetings and work reports: the high efficiency of exchanging information in the hive! For Behr, “the Lab connects people and circulates information in real time.” It functions as “a generator of inspiration, which circulates creativity and better realizes potential talent.”

Therefore, it is not just a humanist stance, but also a way of working interactively and transversely that connects an entire community of individuals in a project. This is common in multimedia creation, but the high efficiency here must be part of Moment Factory’s recipe for success. It is a new hive genus, since here the queen is invisible or rather, she is made of the entire set of collaborators, which corresponds to the reality of bees—although the queen is a worker that gets fed royal jelly, she is a worker all the same! In this new hive genus, the royal jelly has been replaced by the digital campfire!

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Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

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1. https://momentfactory.com/accueil
3. Mégaphone was commissioned by the National Film Board of Canada and the Quartier des Spectacles of Montreal. See a video montage of the work at https://momentfactory.com/projets/destinations/public-spaces/megaphone
4. Personal interview with Dominique Audet during my visit to the studio (2017).  
5. Personal interview with Léa Behr during my visit to the studio (2017).