'Green Experience Economy':
The Power of Events in the Green Transition. The case of *The Ocean Race Stopover Aarhus,* Denmark

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Abstract

This paper makes the argument that the experience economy can be turned green. We argue that by creating a 'green experience economy'-mindset, we can bring sustainable development at the front stage of our (event-)businesses. It has an innovative and transformative power that can be explored and developed specially at events, because people attending here are open minded. We call this 'the power of events'. Value-based events, based on a groundwork of people, planet, profit-values can, when activated in 'inviting working narratives', help the world in going in a more sustainable direction. The paper demonstrates that it is urgent that we do this now, because of the state of our world, and offer scalable principles for implementing similar design in other event organizations and other businesses.

Key words Green Experience Economy, Sustainable development, Value by design, Doughnut Economy, Event design, Business development,

Track Sustainability and Ethics

Focus of paper Industry/Applied

Introduction

This paper argues that we need to see the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1998) in a new perspective where sustainable development (Elkington 1999, 2018, Rockström and Gaffney 2021, Raworth 2012/2017) is the core of every experience, service, and process. We bring, in the following, these thoughts into the area of event design (Richards et al. 2015, Antchak et al. 2020) using the global

event *The Ocean Race* 2022-23 as the concurrent case. We end this work in progress with suggestions for scalable principles for event- and experience design.

Why this 'need'? We all know the case; time is limited for our planet, the climate is changing in dramatic ways and in the worst-case scenario we, human beings, could end up making our planet, our home, not suitable to live on. This calls for action.

In June 2023 the global sailing event *The Ocean Race* has a stopover in Aarhus, Denmark.
The Ocean Race is an elite sport event lasting 6 months sailing around the globe. The Race has 6 stops. Each of them an event-scene celebrating en route the elite sport performances on the oceans but also its implicit values. Sailing around the world, the participants experience climate change at first hand. A consequence of this is the commitment to *racing with a purpose.* This meaning, sailing with a higher purpose than 'just' competition. Making the fantastic adventure that The Ocean Race is into a stage for showing and teaching the world about sustainable development and ocean rights.

In Aarhus the local event organization therefore sees their role as using the stopover as a platform for showcasing sustainable solutions, both backstage and front stage, to inspire both national and international with scalable solutions to copy for both businesses and other events. One way to show this is the creation of *Sustainability Island*, a physical area in Aarhus Harbor, where conferences, learning and showcases of Danish solutions comes to sight. Along the lines of the global Ocean Race organization that states *Sports first, sustainability everywhere*.

Preparing events calls for innovative thoughts and new designs both practical and experientials. This paper claims that events like this could move partners, guests, and spectators a step in the right direction to help overcome our climate crisis. If this potential is true, we need to focus on people, planet, profit (3P) in a holistic approach. Event design and -management along these lines of thought we present in the following under the concept of *the green experience economy*.

Planetary Boundaries in Economics and Business Models

In the following, we map out the theoretical concepts and scientific positions on which we create our argument for the *green experience economy* and the potential *power of events*. Our argument is informed by global sustainability theory (MacArthur 2015, Rockström and Gaffney 2015), economic theory (Raworth 2012) and event- and business development (Dijkstra 2021, Lanning 1988, Osterwalder 2010, 2014, Pine and Gilmore 1998, 2019, Woge and Jensen 2021).

We draw on a core integration of the three well-known (sustainability-) values: *people, planet, profit* (*3Ps*)*, also called *triple bottom line* (Elkington 1999, 2018). The *3Ps* are interrelated and are reflecting a holistic approach. Sustainability becomes the core of all elements. Integrating the *3Ps* as core is the fundamentally important step in all development. It is a shift from a narrow profit-based thinking to including three equally important values.
There is work to be done in enlightening profit-based businesses and consumption culture on the importance of a speedy so-called 'green transition'. Steering towards a sustainable planet demands a *green formation* and an economic inclusive framework to grow both 'a will to change' and the doable framework that gives direction to new business strategies and action plans towards a *thriving economy* (Raworth 2012), meaning an economy in an environmentally circular balance.
A way to anchor fundamental commitment to green transition and keeping 3P-values in all core business is to integrate the values in models for project and business development (e.g. *Business Model Canvas*).

VIAble GROWTH model (Woge, B. and Jensen, R.H. 2021) is such a model. A holistic model with a core of 3P to analyze and develop existing businesses and develop new ones, with a focus not only on profit and growth.

This integrates the need to look at the values for people and planet as the essentials in making designs that fits the planets boundaries and to help people create and develop better and more safe living conditions. The change in Business Model is about securing a sustainable development of the businesses and products, also in events in a more holistic approach. Holistic thinking is no stranger to the Hospitality Industry.

Taking care of guests integrated in all organizational levels we traditionally call *Hostmanship* (Gunnarsson et al. 2017). Be it, in direct personal service relation to the guest or on a more strategic level, cross departmental or in partnerships on destinational level. This is Holistic Hostmanship.

Along the lines of the green transition, we must include the caretaking of the planet and people in every move and at all levels. This turns hostmanship into an act of governance, of planetary *housekeeping.* Hostmanship becomes *stewardship* when including the planetary level in the mindset. Stewardship is a state of mind, as is hostmanship. It is thinking along the lines of a people, planet, profit-based business model.

Turning to the environmental part of the 3P, *planet*, the *Planetary Boundaries* (Rockström 2009) show us the limits for human actions and the limits for a business paradigm focusing on eternal growth. According to this logic, businesses must be committed to solving environmental issues and to limiting material use.

[Rockström, J. *The Planetary Boudaries*, 2009]

Planetary boundaries is a concept involving earth system processes that contain environmental boundaries. It is an illustration of the limits of material use and the limits of losses in biological diversity that the planet can handle and crossing them could make permanent change in the conditions on earth.

Rockström and Gaffney (Rockström and Gaffney 2021) have elaborated a vision for caretaking of the Planet building on the diagnosis of the planetary Boundaries model. This vision that aims to rethink human relationship with the planet, they call *Planetary Stewardship* which this paper integrates with Gunnarsson's levels of hostmanship (Gunnarsson 2017) as an extra planetary level and a scalable mindset for events.

With P*rofit* we must start thinking of growth in another sustainable thriving context. This brings us to economist Kate Raworth's frame of *the doughnut economy*.

Meeting the challenge of staying within the Planetary Boundaries, when producing large scale memorable event-experiences, we approach the experience economy from the *doughnut economy*.

Raworth's doughnut is an economy that can fight poverty and climate destruction, not either or, but both. Raworth takes the challenge of the Planetary Boundaries' interconnected problems into a new economic paradigm, shifting an economic focus on *growth* to a *thriving* economy.

In recognition of economies based on infinite profit creation, Raworth suggests an economic frame that aims at prosperity and equality without endless growth, which leads to the heavy load on the planetary resources.

[Raworth, K. *The Doughnut Economy*, 2012]

Instead of endless growing we must stay balanced inside the models lower and higher borders. On the inside, above the minimum for social foundation for humanity, and on the outside, belove the maximum for pressure on the ecological ceiling for the planet.

The synthesis of the above-mentioned thoughts are the theoretical positions that lies beneath our argument; the turn to the interconnected set of core values, people, planet, profit, that we in this paper bring into the experience economy, in an attempt of value-by-design, to rethink it, or 'color it' *green*.

The Experience Economy

Recognizing that goods and services no longer are enough for the demanding guest/customer, *the experience economy* was introduced as a new economic order (Pine and Gilmore 1998). Stage a memorable experience for your guests and turn the unforgettable into loyal returning ambassadors and doing so, memories into profit. At best, customers are brought into a state of flow, where they forget time and space, and the memorable outcome of the experience is developed. Or – even better, following *The Progression of Economic Value* (ibid.) – a business must aim to unlock the transformative potential of the guided experience (i.e., a fitness program). A costumer is willing to pay an even higher price than for the experience itself, if she can see the transformative potential, (i.e., the toned muscular body after training). Then, what she pays the extra price for, is the new version of herself at the end of the process. In short, the argument is, stay relevant to customer needs by customization and transformative experience design, which can lead to economic growth.

What is Green about the *Green Experience Economy*?

The argument of the paper lies in the transformative potential of the experience economy. The desire for a transformation towards a more ideal version of oneself can – of course – rest on more than the bodily transformation of the fitness-example. By doing good, becoming aware of the need for change to avoid planetary disaster, during the event and potentially after the event, the guest and her ecological footprint on the planet can be changed. New ways and visions of life can be adopted. Is this possible?

When people become event guests, they walk into another world, the event venue. Her they are, we argue – *open to change*. Separated for a while from everyday life in the potential flow of the sports- or culture-based event, the guest may have the open mindset of the curious spectator when being involved in the place, the narratives, and the atmospherics of the event experience design. Here we can aim our design and our competitive strategy for a trans*formation* to a 'green mindset'. It is a formative goal and a shift in the created value. What we call, *the working narratives* of the event becomes key. This is scalable to other industries, we argue.

The *Stop Over Destinations* of the global event *The Ocean Race* 2022-23 become subsequently venues on the same route, this is place making in line. The overarching narrative of *Racing with Purpose*, a brand experience, a narrative that *The Ocean Race*-Organization have put into the world is set to work in local event design. The global race grows local narratives as in Aarhus, where the venue of *Sustainability Island* invites guests to get involved in local experiences based on *3P*-values. We see this 'constantly zooming out and zooming in' in the design process as an iterative scalable design principle and connecting these levels in the work we call *the working event narratives*

In the case of the Aarhus stopover, experience design such as *The Sustainability Maze*, *The River Clean-up*, and the *Plastic Sculptures made by the Sea* were discussed as relevant designs. These designs, installations, and guest-experiences, have a narrative character and making *new narratives* is one of our arguments scalable principles of bringing your event or business into what we call the *Green Experience Economy.*
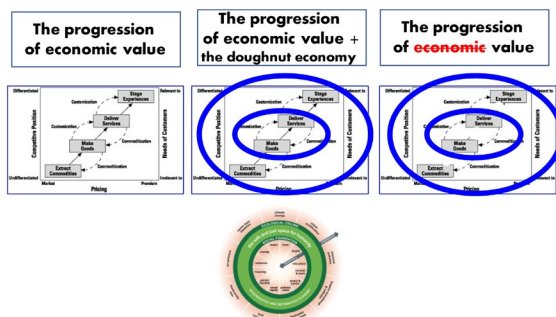
[Own adaption of Pine and Gilmore: *The progression of economic value*, 1998 and Raworth: *The Doughnut Economy*, 2012]

Transparent Housekeeping

So, looking at the event in Aarhus, *stewardship* at all points is necessary if we are aiming for an event as sustainable as possible. This means, to consider the caretaking of the planet in all moves and to inspire people to do the right actions, also after the event. Stopover destinations like Aarhus must work with *sustainable transparent housekeeping*, another principle, meaning that the actions backstage and frontstage needs to show and use the most sustainable solutions regarding food, drinks, electricity, transportation etc. We understand *transparency* as a 360 degrees look around the event, that must pick and develop technical solutions in a sustainable manner. This also goes for partnerships and collaborators and the involved municipality which take on the leading role. *Transparency*, in our argument, means that people, staff and volunteers should have easy access to do the right thing and to act the most sustainable. We see events as a possibility to promote and test sustainable solutions and by transparency show and maybe help the city, the country, and the international society to implement new standards and systems in a broader term. *Sustainability Island* is an example in working with *stewardship* and the thoughts of *doughnut economy* because here all ages are involved in solutions with sustainable development where possible. Event organizations can show people how to sort waste

correctly by teaching them about waste types and materials (in *The Sustainability Maze*), they can show people what materials is reused when sorting the waste (and put plastic waste at the *Plastic Sculpture by the Sea*) and most important they can help people in minimizing their waste by having no/or minimizing single use items on site (by *River clean-up*).

This is an Ocean Race working narrative *Sport first, Sustainability everywhere* trickling down the different venues and with this, the innovative experience design (with 3P) has due to the power of the event communication the possibility to spread wider. Therefore, this is of course an *iterative process* (through prototyping etc.) when working with sustainable development and innovative experience design. You can use the experience from one event to another to capture the ways in which we need to show and involve people in new solutions.

The Working Narratives and *The Power of The Event*-Experience

The narratives of the event in question are not just alarming news on the condition of the planet. While the story of the *Planetary Boundaries* is the formative 'no entry sign' of our days, we need to be empowered to act. *Invitations* and collaborations are called for; join the *Racing with Purpose*, come build on *Sustainability Island*, understand the responsibility in the installation *The River Clean-up*, learn systemic thinking while you connect one Sustainable Development Goal to another and find your way through *the Sustainability Maze*. Formation while the kids play, while the adults compete, and the business environment showcase their green innovations, communicating CSR and ESGs. Alongside being able to attract people to venues, these *inviting narratives* are different stories, that goes from *no entry* to *invitations*. We claim in this paper, that building awareness, interaction, engagement, responsibility, ownership maybe even formation with event narratives is possible, and narrative theory supports such a claim.

Narratives - the stories we tell each other and ourselves, including event narratives - are in our theoretical perspective culturally mediated practices (Schachtner 2020). In our everyday lives the narratives about climate change are there all the time. Most of the time as, someone said, "as alarming news" (Lykkeberg 2021) such as snowstorms in Colorado, 48 degrees in Siberia, floods, and fires. Narratives connect the dots, they create meaning, they affect us emotionally, and at best we remember them. Regarding Climate, the storytellers are often politicians, scientists, and business leaders, often world leaders. The forms are reports, action plans, speeches, and promises.

In theory, 'experience' comes from involuntary interpretations of cultural narratives (Ricoeur 1984) and we know from cognitive therapy (White 2006, Lawler 2008) that narratives can be understood as products of social interactions. This helps us to understand both *stewardship*, the *working narratives* of the event, and see the *contact zones* of social interactions in the event experience as potentially transformative. Narratives organize the experience and are according to Michel Foucault technologies of self-construction (Foucault 1988). People develop experience, we argue a long this line of thought, when interacting with events, event-activities and -spaces as they will do visiting *The Ocean Race*. They come in to contact zones with *Value driven invitations* (Racing with Purpose), *place bound discourses* (Sustainability Island) and *involving experience design* (The Sustainability Maze etc.) People and world views evolve, Foucault would say, between conflicting priorities of autonomy and heteronomy. The event spaces of *The Ocean Race* are charged with globality and interconnectedness. They are (in Foucault's words) heterotopias, particular spaces, that is, designed for certain activities. Guests intervene with symbolic actions positioning them in experimental new relation to the planet and awareness might be created. Experience might be shared on social media where the involved guest

becomes co-narrator sharing the strong visuals of event atmospherics and experience design potentially reaching beyond the venue in different co-created narratives and networks.

Adding experience theory to this narrative perspective, the powerful experience is understood as a *memorable experience* (Pine and Gilmore 1998) and guests are to be *affected and moved* (Timm Knudsen 2021). Event initiatives are forms of praxis and experiences are add-ons, *a mediating layer on top of such places and initiatives* (op. cit.). Maybe your business brand becomes part of a temporary theme park (op. cit.) which enables your business to communicate and affect in ways out of the ordinary. This is *the power* of the experience economy - turned into event design – it builds relationships, maybe even lasting collaborations across industrial areas normally separated, and then again, in *iterative* process, it builds *new narratives* and new *3Ps-value driven* solutions.

Preliminary Conclusions

Summing up our preliminary conclusions on scalable principles of event design within a *green experience economy*-mindset whose scalability are yet to be tested in other industrial areas.

Taking our considerations in to other areas, we aim to highlight the following principles of such a mindset; 1) the need for *new narratives*, culturally mediated *inviting working narratives* that transform 'alarming narratives' into *planetary stewardship integrated in the host mindset*, 2) the organization must put forward a *sustainable transparent housekeeping*, 3) creating *value driven invitations* in diverse forms of event contact zones as brand experience, as place bound discourses, and as involving experience design, 4) do this *design work in an iterative process*, 5) create strategies on *business models that builds value proposition on the core values of people, planet, profit*, And 6) It is necessary to transform the way we are consumers and guests and the experience economy have the necessary *transformative potential*, therefore we propose a *green experience economy* as a new area of *iterative investigation*. Here sustainability works as a driver for both experience design and practical innovation and *value-based events* are the powertools where this paper starts and where our invitation begins.

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