

INTRODUCTION: BUILDING A PLANE IN MID-AIR

CELIA PEARCE

Playable theatre, simply put, is live performance that integrates meaningful audience agency, where participants have some kind of perceivable and transformative impact on the experience. Playable theatre can take a variety of forms, from immersive and participatory theatre, to live action roleplaying (larping), to pervasive alternate reality games, to escape rooms with live actors, to interactive theme park experiences, to some of the mediated live performances that have become commonplace in the age of COVID-19. Playable theatre merges aspects of theatre, games and larping, which is perhaps the most developed subset of the genre. The term is adopted from “playable media,” which broadly describes mediated playful and interactive experiences, both inclusive of and beyond games.

Playable theatre is often, though not always, immersive; immersive theatre can be but is not necessarily playable; and the distinction is debatable. Immersive theatre aims to surround the audience in an embodied theatrical experience, with full 360-degree physical scenography, sound, lighting and actors. In my first encounter with what is perhaps the most well-known of the genre—Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*—I initially found myself

interacting with the space as if it were an adventure game. I quickly realized that the exquisitely composed sets were primarily a backdrop for actors, who I'd better go find if I was to have the intended experience. On my second visit, armed with my ethnographer's lens, I followed the audience instead of the actors, and discovered emergent behavior underway: masked audience members huddling around a seated actor, then parting like the red sea to allow him to move about the room; a group of miscreants stealing sweets from jars in the candy shop. Though the proscenium had been removed, the vaunted invisible fourth wall between actors and audience was still very present, I concluded, it was just three-dimensional now. A masterpiece of theatrecraft, it nonetheless left me with the nagging feeling "There must be more..."

Sleep No More is perhaps the high watermark of "promenade theatre," a genre that in modern terms dates back to the 1980s mystery show *Tamara* (Isenberg, 1989; Fuchs, 1996). Promenade theatre uses navigation as its primary agency, in the form of open but guided exploration. The audience cannot change the outcome of the show, but they have a fairly high degree of control over their individual experiences, a pattern that Fuchs describes as shopping-style theatre (1996). Make no mistake, this navigational mode of interaction, limited though it is, requires carefully crafted moments and events, including audio cues, to draw audience members to particular areas, similar to the way "weenies," large, highly visible attractions, draw guests to different areas of Disneyland (Girard-Lagoroe, 1997; Hench and Van Pelt, 2003). The playability of promenade theatre is debatable, because agency is highly constrained and the show remains more or less the same during each run and from one to the next. Importantly, interaction between audience and actors is discouraged if not shunned, unless by invitation from the actor.

The roots of contemporary practices of playable theatre can be traced to three domains: theatre, performance art, and games.

One of the oldest examples of a playable experience explicitly framed as theatre is another 1980s classic, *Tony N' Tina's Wedding*, set at a caricatured Italian-American wedding, a cult classic that has run dozens of times since its premiere (Cassaro, 2017). Here, rather than a static experience, the show was more improvised, and audience members, in the roles of guests, could at their discretion interact directly with the actors, and even emergently create characters for themselves. Because its various runs tended to be staged in real churches and actual wedding reception venues, it skirted on the edge of alternate reality, one of the game angles, causing some passersby to walk away confused (Small, 1988). More recently, a number of theatre companies have emerged that specialize in crafting engaging audience interaction. Since theatre tends to be regional, it's a little hard to get a handle of all that is going on, but there are numerous examples from West Coast—*Hamlet Mobile* and *Red Flags* (Capital W), *The Headlands Gamble* (First Person Travel), and *Ghost Party* (Dacha Theatre)—to East—*Mortality Machine* (Sinking Ship), *Chaos Theory* (ikantkoan), *Club Drosselmeyer*, *Save the Munbax* (Green Door Labs), *Crown Me* (Incantrix), to the UK companies like Upstart Theatre and ..., and numerous others. Even Punchdrunk is in the process of rethinking its approach to audience interaction, including revisiting the role of space in storytelling (Ophelia, no date; Judge, 2019).

The performance art roots of playable theatre can be found in Dada, Fluxus events and scores, and Alan Kaprow's Happenings from the 1960s and 1970s. *Dimboola* (Hibberd, 1969)—a participatory performance set at a wedding and staged at LaMama art theatre in Greenwich Village in 1969—is sometimes cited as the precursor to *Tony N' Tina's Wedding*. Other examples of proto-playable theatre can be found in the pages of C.Carr's *On Edge*, a collection of reviews from the Village Voice that captures some of the experimentation with audience agency that was going on in the New York performance art scene of the 1980s

(1989). One of the best examples of early participatory theatre comes from British art collective Blast Theory, which has long traversed these overlapping zones. Their 1999 piece *Kidnap*, in which people bought lottery tickets in order to win the chance to be kidnapped, was arguably the first alternate reality game (Blast Theory, 1999). Their piece *Uncle Roy All Around You* (Blast Theory, 2002), explicitly referred to as a “game,” took players on an adventure in the streets of Brighton reminiscent of the movie *The Game* (Fincher, 1997), which is often cited as the inspiration for the first official ARG—*The Beast*—released by Microsoft in 2001 (Weisman, Lee and Stewart, 2001).

This brings us to the third angle of entry to playable theatre: games. Alternate reality games, also referred to as pervasive games, tend to blur the boundary between game and reality and often involve live game masters and both in-person and mediated performance (Montola et al., 2009). But perhaps the most developed game genre in the realm of playable theatre is the live action roleplaying game (larp). According to legend, larps originated from the question: “What if we played tabletop roleplaying games standing up?” This led to Dungeons & Dragons themed medieval fantasy campaign larps featuring large-scale simulated battles, spun off into other fantasy genres such as vampire larps, and spawned a branch that is more considered a form of interactive narrative (Stark, 2012). While also popular elsewhere, the nexus of live action roleplaying as an art form is the so-called Nordic Larp movement which, though centered in the Northwestern European countries, has had widespread influence around the globe (Stenros and Montola, 2010; Koljonen, Stenros and Anne Serup Grove, 2019). Nordic larps range from blackbox to fully immersive 360-degree experiences. What is notable about larps, and what differentiates them from “theatre” in the classic sense, is that the audience and actors are one and the same. Audience members typically play characters, with a small handful of “NPCs” (non-player

characters, derived from tabletop roleplaying parlance) serving to moderate and keep the action moving. Nordic larps are typically preceded by a workshop, improvised from a loosely defined, highly procedural script, and often lead to emergent outcomes (Pearce, 2016). The Nords have coined the term “scenario” to define such scripts and “larpwright” to describe those who write them. As the Playable Theatre Project discovered in our first Participatory Theatre Game Jam, to a theater person a larp looks a lot like process drama, and vice versa. The other influence from the game sphere has been escape rooms, the fastest growing sector of both the games and immersive entertainment industry (Spira, 2019), a topic covered extensively in *Well Played 10:1*, this journal’s special issue on the topic. Additionally, hybrids have emerged, such as VR theatre, a completely mediated form that bridges disciplines and holds great potential to impact not only theatre but digital games, typified by works Tender Claws’ *The Tempest* (Rogers, 2019; Laharia, 2020). Perhaps the best aggregator of immersive, and interactive works across all genres is *No Proscenium*, a website and podcast series started in 2013 to track this rapidly expanding immersive and experience design universe.

The Playable Theatre Project was launched in 2018 at Northeastern University as an interdisciplinary arts research project aimed at both exploring and supporting the creation of live theatre that integrates meaningful audience agency. Its aim was to build a community of reflective practice across the discipline areas mentioned above to engage in thinking deeply about bringing audiences in on the action. The project has been devoted to incubating creative projects and aggregating resources for those both creating and studying such works. In response to ongoing discussion among affiliated practitioners, in March of 2020, just as the pandemic was getting underway, we launched a nonprofit to further these aims. The proposal to edit a special issue of *Well Played* was both on-topic and timely.

Then everything changed.

When we first announced this special issue, we were still using the term “playable theatre” to refer primarily to in-person live experiences, including those with digital and technical augmentation. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the term “live” has evolved to encompass a broad range of mediated performance practices across social media, transmedia, streaming platforms, video conferencing and virtual reality, with the common factor that some aspect of the experience is happening with live actors in real time. In the early phases of the pandemic, online theatre was dominated by the Zoom proscenium, mostly resulting in little more than “Zoom plays,” reminiscent of early cinema’s attempts at filmed theatre. Some, however, took advantage of the artistic affordances of new platforms to experiment with a variety of forms of audience interaction. Creators who had already been exploring VR for live performance were joined by gamemakers and theatremakers, sometimes in combination. A number of theatre companies co-opted Twitch, a streaming platform originally developed for live video game broadcasts, due in part to its onboard audience interaction capabilities. These developments pushed creativity, turned theatremakers into mediamakers, and forced a redefinition of what it means to be “live” (Cox, 2020). They also expanded theatre audiences and spawned new modes of audience interaction.

Although the papers in this collection reference pre-COVID-19 work, they still remain relevant to the broader questions posed by this special issue. How do we create satisfying live experiences that provide meaningful audience interaction? What do we mean by “meaningful” and “interaction”? It’s not simply a matter of “how many clicks” you get as an audience member, but whether you feel, individually or collectively, that your contribution matters, that the events would have played out in a different way had you not been there. Meaningful agency is when you leave

feeling that you just had an experience that was entirely unique because you were part of it, ideally, one in which the particular combination of people you were playing with made it distinctive by coming together as a play community, even if only for a few hours. Such an experience is what the late Bernie DeKoven (who came to games from a theatre background) described, aptly, as “well played” (De Koven, 2013).

Now that we have a sense of how it feels, how do we describe it, craft it and ensure we’ve hit the mark? These are the questions to which this special issue of *Well Played* is devoted. What techniques are creators using to draw participants into the action? What shared language is developing to describe what we’re doing? What disciplinary frameworks do we draw from? What forms of measurement and metrics do we use to evaluate whether agency is meaningful or not? How is the idea and expectation of “audience” evolving as more is being asked of it? In speaking with practitioners working in this space, a recurring metaphor has been that we are “building the plane while we’re in the air.” We don’t precisely know what we’re doing, but we’re doing it anyway. In the process, we think it’s important to share our insights, discoveries, successes and failures, in order to begin to collectively build new genres of art, entertainment and narrative and new modes of interactivity.

Thus, the remit of this issue is to take a crack at starting to share some of what we are learning from building the plane in mid-air. This work falls squarely into the category of “practice-based research,” making it a bit distinct from the classic *Well Played* format of experiential and critical walkthroughs of games. Instead, this issue combines a mixture of experiential accounts, participant observation, design research, what might be termed “practical taxonomies,” and pedagogical approaches which attempt to define and understand the plethora of different forms and styles of audience agency that can be employed in works that fit into the broad category of “playable theatre.” Our goal

is to begin to build a shared vocabulary, across disciplines, to help seasoned and emerging scholars and creators to better understand how meaningful agency operates in live performance.

This collection of essays, by a diverse array of contributors, represents a range of perspectives and disciplines that combine scholarship and reflective practice to the full gamut of playable theatre genres. It includes experiential accounts (1,2), empirical player studies (2,5,7,9,10), designer ethnographies (4) and post-mortems (6,7,9,10); theoretical perspectives, drawn from both game studies (4) and performance studies (2,3,5,8,10), as well as educational perspectives pointed towards the future (10,11). Performance genres covered include 360 Nordic (1) and Blackbox Larps (6), theme parks and installations (2, 4,5), mixed reality (7,8), and pervasive games (9,10).

As we head into the post-pandemic moment, judging by the sudden spike of activity throughout the growing Playable Theatre community, this in-progress airplane is poised to take off in a big way. If history is any indication, the appetite for live, in-person and social events is only going to explode (Mounk, 2020). Meanwhile, new forms of mediated theatre, often using game technologies, have radically changed the relationship of the audience to live theatrical experiences. As I was writing this introduction, Disney announced the launch of its first premium roleplay hotel experience, Star Wars: Galactic Star Cruiser (Star Wars: Galactic Star Cruiser, no date), and a feature story in a Chinese business magazine highlighted the massive explosion in luxury larps in China (Williams, 2021). So as we take off, we may not know precisely where we're going, but this diverse collection of essays and reports can help us to lay the groundwork for getting there.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Playable Theatre Project www.playabletheatre.org

No Proscenium <https://noproscenium.com/>

Everything Immersive everythingimmersive.com

REFERENCES

Blast Theory. (1999) *Kidnap*. <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/kidnap/>

Blast Theory. (1999) *Uncle Roy All Around You*. <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/uncle-roy-all-around-you>

Carr, C. (1989) *On Edge*. Wesleyan University Press.

Cassaro, N. (2017) *Tony N' Tina's Wedding*. Samuel French, Inc.

Cox, G. (2020) "All Arts Organizations Are Media Companies Now": How the Pandemic Is Transforming Theater', *Variety*, 24 November. Available at: <https://variety.com/2020/legit/news/digital-theater-pandemic-broadway-1234836759/> (Accessed: 27 May 2021).

De Koven, B. (2013) *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*. MIT Press.

Fincher, D. (1997) *The Game*. USA: Propaganda Films, Polygram Films.

Fuchs, E. (1996) *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*. Indiana University Press.

Girard-Lagoroe, S. (1997) *Designing Disney's theme parks: The architecture of reassurance*. Flammarion.

Hench, J. and Van Pelt, P. (2003) *Designing Disney: Imagineering and the art of the show*. Disney Editions.

Hibberd, J. (1969) *Dimboola*. La Mama Theatre.

Isenberg, B. (1989) 'Secrets of the Play That Refuses to Close', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 February.

Judge, A. (2019) "Playable shows are the future": what Punchdrunk theatre learned from games', *The Guardian*, 8 February. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/feb/08/playable-shows-are-the-future-what-punchdrunk-theatre-learned-from-video-games> (Accessed: 18 June 2021).

Koljonen, J., Stenros, J. and Anne Serup Grove, A. D. S. A. E. N. (eds) (2019) *Larp Design: Creating Role-play Experiences*. Landsforeningen Bifrost.

Laharia, U. (2020) 'VR Theatre Doesn't Seem So Distant Anymore', *American Theatre*, 18 May. Available at: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2020/05/18/vr-theatre-doesnt-seem-so-distant-anymore/> (Accessed: 18 June 2021).

Montola, M. et al. (2009) *Pervasive games : theory and design*. Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.

Mouk, Y. (2020) 'Prepare for the Roaring Twenties', *The Atlantic*, 21 May. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/i-predict-your-predictions-are-wrong/611896/> (Accessed: 27 May 2021).

Ophelia, M. (no date) 'Punchdrunk Enrichment | Fallow Cross'. Available at: <https://www.punchdrunkenrichment.org.uk/project/fallow-cross/> (Accessed: 18 June 2021).

Pearce, C. (2016) 'Role-Play, Improvisation, and Emergent Authorship', in Lewis, G. E. and Piekut, B. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 445–468.

Rogers, S. (2019) 'How Technology Is Augmenting Traditional

Theater', *Forbes Magazine*, 6 December. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/solrogers/2019/12/06/how-technology-is-augmenting-traditional-theatre/> (Accessed: 27 May 2021).

Small, M. (1988) 'Holy Matrimony! An Acting Troupe Joins Together, in Bonds of Satire, the Irrepressible Tony and Tina', *PEOPLE Magazine*, 18 April. Available at: <https://people.com/archive/holy-matrimony-an-acting-troupe-joins-together-in-bonds-of-satire-the-irrepressible-tony-and-tina-vol-29-no-15/> (Accessed: 28 January 2021).

Spira, L. (2019) *5 Year US Escape Room Industry Report* (August 2019). Room Escape Artist. Available at: <https://roomescapeartist.com/2019/08/08/5-year-us-escape-room-industry-report-august-2019/> (Accessed: 19 May 2020).

Stark, L. (2012) *Leaving Mundania: Inside the Transformative World of Live Action Role-Playing Games*. Chicago Review Press.

Star Wars: Galactic Star Cruiser (no date) *Disney World Website*. Available at: <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/destinations/star-wars-galactic-starcruiser/> (Accessed: 27 May 2021).

Stenros, J. and Montola, M. (eds) (2010) *Nordic larp*. Sweden: Fëa Livia.

Weisman, J., Lee, E. and Stewart, S. (2001) *The Beast*. USA: Microsoft.

Williams, G. A. (2021) 'Luxury's Next Frontier: Live Action Role Playing', *Jing Daily*. Available at: <https://jingdaily.com/live-action-role-playing-luxury-hermes-ferragamo/>.