

# INTERACTIVE THEATRE

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## *Audience and meaningful agency in live theatre*

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## INTRODUCTION

We are a team of Entertainment Technology students with backgrounds in digital media, computer science, software engineering and computer graphics art. In our semester-long project, we explored the issue of giving guests meaningful agency in live theatre with technology through creation of prototypes and development of an analytical tool. We worked closely throughout the project with our instructors, and with our project partners Sam Turich and Gab Cody from Long Bodied Mouse Productions, who provided an opportunity to share their experiences in immersive theatre. Our project was focused on improving our understanding of the issue, so we did not create a theatrical production. In this article, we focus on our discoveries while discussing and learning about what constitutes meaningful agency for our project. We propose that our diverse backgrounds help add a new point of view to the conversation around agency in theatre.

When it comes to theatre involving audience participation, we believe that guests or audience members are often given the means to participate and interact with an experience without ever being given meaningful agency. There is a potential gap in

exploration of interactive theatre in which there is **meaningful** agency. By reconsidering the type of agency used in interactive theatre, it would be possible to create a strong and novel experience where guests have meaningful agency.

## TAXONOMY

Before we discuss our point of view, we acknowledge that there are many differences in understanding and terminology when it comes to non-traditional theatre. Terms like “immersive theatre” or “interactive theatre” do not necessarily specify what to expect from an experience and to what degree an audience member is engaged. Even the term “agency” is not understood the same way among practitioners.

Creating a standardized language was crucial not only for our team to communicate internally and minimize misunderstanding between us, but also to help those outside of our group understand the goals of our project. Here are the key words we are focusing on for this article.

### **“Participatory Agency”**

Agency is concerned with the range of actions that are available to the guest. When guests have the capacity to act on their will in some way, choose or make a decision, they have agency. Any restriction on what the guest can do limits their agency. Taken to the extreme, a world with full agency would be a world akin to *Westworld* (HBO, 2016), where anyone can do anything without limitation by the law, morals or conscience. It is up to the designer of the experience to limit the guest agency such that the experience would still be practical for the showrunner and enjoyable for the guest.

### **Reactive, Interactive and Proactive Agency (Astrid Breel)**

In the article “Audience agency in participatory performance”,

agency is described as follows: “Agency is concerned with intention and choice, so for a participant to have agency they should intentionally perform an action (however small) that causes something to happen or change within the performance as a result.” (Bree, 2015) It is emphasized that guest perception of whether they made a choice can be manipulated. She further defines three forms of agency. Reactive agency refers to interactions like “answering a question, either verbally or physically; reacting to a trigger or command; or responding to a request such as placing your phone in a circle on the floor”. Interactive agency refers to “completing a task that involves mutual activity, such as sending a text message to be read out, or engaging in a two-way conversation.” Proactive means the guest is “displaying self-initiated behaviour, such as leaving the space or initiating verbal or physical communication.”

### **“Meaningful Agency”**

We chose our definition of “meaningful agency” to be when guests perceive that they are able to influence the narrative of the experience. The fact that the guest’s actions truly affects the narrative is important. Only when guest’s actions have consequences in the narrative are guests truly exercising agency. We also consider guest perception to be important: guests have meaningful agency only when they *perceive* that they do. If guests change the course of events without realizing how they have done so, they have not truly exercised their agency.

With the word “meaningful”, our intention is not to suggest that other understandings of agency are pointless. As Image 1 shows, different understandings of agency are simply concerned with different aspects of the guest’s experience and interactions. Rather, with “meaningful”, we are pointing to “of significant consequence”. That is, our definition of agency is particularly concerned with the consequences of the guests’ actions in the context of the narrative.

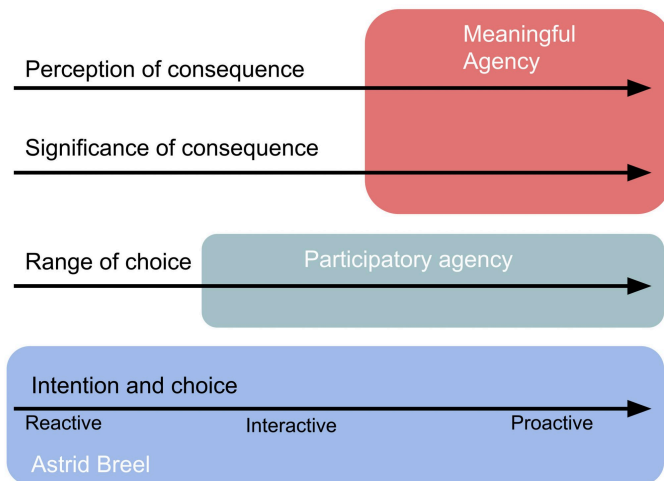


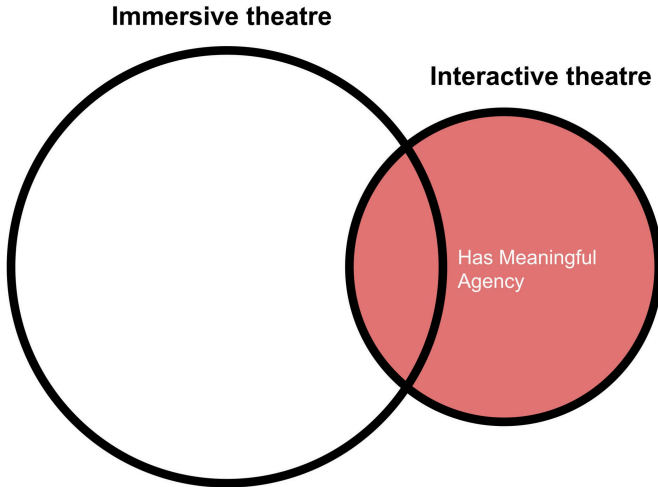
Image 1: Different types of agency that we have encountered and the aspects of agency they are concerned with.

## Immersive Theatre vs. Interactive Theatre

Meaningful agency is the difference between the terms “immersive theatre” and “interactive theatre”. Immersive theatre is a large category that can include everything from promenade theatre like *Sleep No More* (Punchdrunk, 2003), choose-your-own-adventure experiences like *The Speakeasy* (Boxcar Theatre, 2014), or encounter-based experiences like *Then She Fell* (Third Rail Projects, 2013). We believe that, in general, an immersive environment surrounds guests and may allow guests to participate in a variety of ways but does not necessarily give guests agency.

On the other hand, interactive theatre means that guests are given either agency or a sense of agency, where they have the

capacity to influence the narrative itself. It would be more difficult to achieve than immersive theatre because it is difficult to truly give guests so much control and still have guests have a satisfying experience.



*Image 2: Immersive vs interactive theatre. Interactive theatre does not necessarily have to be immersive, and immersive theatre could be but does not have to be interactive. The main difference is that interactive theatre should have meaningful agency.*

### **Games and Role Play**

The argument can be made that meaningful agency has already been achieved in live experiences by games and role play. In an escape room, for example, guests' actions directly determine whether they can escape, and guests know that they are performing their actions in order to escape. In live action role play or LARP, guests directly create the story by acting it out and know they are free to do so.

However, games and role play are distinct from theatre. While techniques from game design and role play are very useful and have been used in theatrical experiences with success, there is a way of achieving meaningful agency in theatre without turning the live experience or the part of the live experience with agency entirely into a game or LARP.

### *Games vs Theatre*

Games usually involve players problem-solving to achieve a goal within the bounds of certain rules (Schell, 2019). Live performance from actors may enhance the experience of the game but is not the point of the experience. For example, an escape room can usually be considered a game, because participants are puzzle-solving to achieve the goal of escaping within the boundaries set by the puzzle. There might be live performance to “theme” the game, but it is not the main point of the experience.

The line between game and theatre can, of course, be blurred, and that is indeed an increasing trend. Game design techniques can be used to enhance or inspire theatre experiences. A well-known example is Punch Drunk’s *Sleep No More* being inspired by free range video games. In experiences like *The Secret Ball* (Pseudonym Productions, 2019) and *Crooks* (CoLab Theatre, 2016), guests are given roles and goals to help focus their engagement.

Immersive theatre gives the audience a show and opportunities to interact. However, when it comes to audience participation, there is a moment when too much agency turns the experience into a game. Guests who are an audience member for a theatre show typically expect a show. For games, guests expect a chance to take action. The moment the amount of agency given turns the audience into a protagonist and no longer an audience member,

the experience is very “game-like” and perhaps something that an audience member may not want.

### *Role play vs Theatre*

Live action role play or LARP is a role-playing game where players physically embody the characters they play. (Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavaki, 2006). The rules for role play may resemble table-top role-playing games, or they may be more life-like, where there may be sets that depict the setting of the story. Though there may be a resemblance to improvisational acting in the player’s interactions,LARPs stem more from gaming. Unlike theatrical performances, players are usually not professional performers and perform in the game for themselves and their fellow players, as opposed to an actor putting on a performance for an audience.

As in the case for game design, techniques for LARP have also been used successfully in theatrical experiences to help give guests agency in an experience, as we will discuss. Just like for games however, there remains the question of the extent to which role play elements should be incorporated into a theatre experience and whether there comes a point where the entire experience becomes a LARP.

### EXISTING EXPERIENCES COME CLOSE

With our taxonomy labeled, it becomes clear that most existing live performances can be seen more as immersive experiences rather than interactive experiences. Yes, there are participatory moments, free will to roam around, and the chance to make decisions to do whatever action desired, however these moments lack meaningful agency when it comes to the interactions that audience members execute. This is not to say that interactive theatre does not exist at all. There are experiences that try to bridge this gap.

Among prior projects created by Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology graduate students, one that attempted to solve this issue is an adaptation of the story of Rashomon into a 360-degree live viewing experience (Chautauqua Interactive, 2009). In this experience, a small group of five guests were seated in the middle of a round stage. There were several versions of the same story playing on screens around them. Guests had to swivel their chair to face the perspective which they believed was the truth. Live performers would only act out the scene that the majority of the guests believed to be true. This agency allowed guests to choose the narrative they wanted the story to focus on. Guest decisions influenced the ending. Although this experience was very close to the meaningful agency that we want, it did not quite make a satisfying experience. If the majority of guests faced one direction while a small number of guests faced the opposing way, it left the smaller group to have feelings of frustration for being overruled and not be able to see the scene they believed to be acted out. Despite potential flaws, the experience did attempt to give the majority of guests a perceptual change of the overall narrative.

An immersive production made by professional theatre is *Project Amelia* (Bricolage, 2019). In this show, there were approximately ten different outcomes. A large group of guests were given individual roles and based on the role given, some guests were given instructions to find hidden truths while others casually explored the set. From personal experiences within our group, we know that some guests did leave the experience feeling empowered; however, the majority left feeling confused. For this particular experience, it was difficult to give individuals their own unique meaningful moment that influenced the outcome of the story. It was difficult to find the moments of agency where any of the guests realized that one of their actions could have altered the ending. Despite all this, when guests found the



courage to take charge and seek the hidden truths on their own, they did feel personally that they had an influence on the outcome, although it was difficult to relate their actions to the ending. Even though there were more confused than empowered guests, this experience still comes close to attempting meaningful agency within a large group.

*The Mortality Machine* (Sinking Ship Creations, 2019) is an example of an experience which gave guests meaningful agency which was influenced by live action role play. In this experience guests were cast in the roles of relatives of people who had died in a laboratory accident. The guests explored the place of the accident, and could choose, among other possibilities, to make significant sacrifices for the sake of others. Guests were guided by actors who played roles in the story that were sometimes indistinguishable from the roles of other guests. This experience clearly allowed guests to influence how their narrative ended by making at least one significant choice. There is some discussion on whether this experience is immersive theatre or LARP, or, if it is both, which genre it is “more” of (Spira, 2019; Feldman, 2019). In any case, the question remains whether a mixing of LARP and immersive theatre is the only way to create an experience where the guest has meaningful agency.

Another professional production, *You Me Bum Bum Train* (Bond & Lloyd, 2004), is an immersive theatre experience that we found comes closest to tackling the problem of meaningful agency. This one is unique because it is an individual experience that gave guests as much agency as possible. Guests were taken through a series of scenes in which they had a role to make decisions that were improvised without any preparation. Based on guest reviews, the show was not only extremely popular, but it also left guests feeling satisfied and empowered (Bowie-Sell, 2012; Hanra, 2015; Ian, 2010). The only hitch is that it was possible for the guests to not realize that their influences change the plot, thereby not fully meeting our requirements. This is the

only production we have found where guests are prompted to make decisions that influence what happens immediately around them. *You Me Bum Bum Train* might actually be one of the few meaningful agency productions that could be a strong example. Unfortunately, without being able to experience this firsthand, this is only an observation we can make. This type of production is not cheap. There were over 300 workers and it needed volunteers to run (Hanra, 2015; Ian, 2010). If *You Me Bum Bum Train* is truly a production with meaningful agency, it could inspire a genre of similarly novel experiences.

All these experiences are successful in their own ways and might not even need to have more added. Guests can leave feeling satisfied and empowered and have had moments of perceived agency, however in none of those instances can each individual guest feel as if they were able to change the overall narrative. When groups are smaller, they have a stronger sense of power to change the world around them; however, in letting guests influence the narrative, creators must include moments to let the guests control what happens. This is hard to balance: Too much freedom for the guests, and the experience can go off the rails and become difficult to control. Too little freedom and the guest might not even know they can influence the story. Perhaps in trying to create a moment that empowers their audience through a moment of meaningful agency, immersive shows can become a more satisfying experience.

## VISUALIZING EXISTING WORKS AND MEANINGFUL AGENCY

We were motivated to create a visualization of the existing works we have reviewed to better illustrate our point. We were particularly interested in two aspects of the works, the types of agency that the experiences give to guests and the extent to which the experience has moved from traditional theatre to becoming more like a game. As we have discussed, it is difficult

to strike a balance between the tension of giving guests too much agency or too little. We wanted to determine if there was a point on our visualization that we could point to that shows a promising area to explore.

### **Iterations of the Visualization**

Our visualization went through several iterations. We started with a “spectrum”, ranking the works from “least agency” to “most agency” as well as from “traditional theatre” to “game”. We quickly found that we could not keep “game” and “agency” on the same axis: plays like *Night of Jan. 16th* by Ayn Rand (Aynrand.org, 2020), *Edwin Drood* by Rupert Holmes (Buckley, 2020) and the aforementioned *Rashomon* (Chautauqua Interactive, 2009), for example, allowed audiences to change the ending of the play by voting. These are clearly theatrical experiences, yet audiences had meaningful agency.

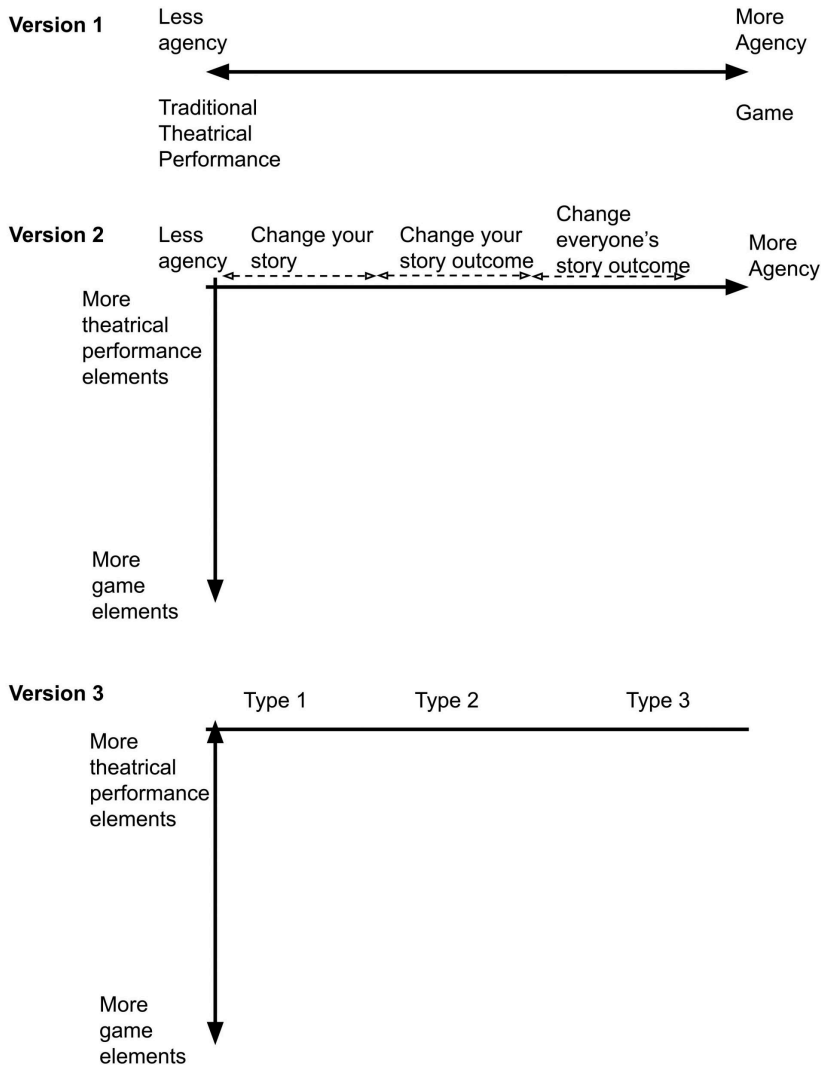
To accommodate experiences like this, we turned this spectrum into a graph, separating “game elements” and “agency” into two separate axes. This worked well for us: it allowed us to decouple the concept of agency from games; experiences that clearly gave guests meaningful agency but were indisputably not games now had a place on our graph.

In a second iteration, we adjusted what our chart implied about the concept of agency. We initially visualized agency as a continuous range, suggesting that it only has one dimension, that there can only be “more” or “less” agency. We made approximate judgements based on our understanding of meaningful agency as to where on the spectrum a work belonged. If a work only allowed the participant to change small aspects of their experience, for example, it would fall under the “Change your story” zone. If a work allowed participants to change the core of the story, the experience had “more” agency and fell into the “Change outcome of your story” zone. We considered the

“Change everyone’s story” zone, where participants might make decisions that affected the whole world in the experience, to have the “most” agency.

This visualization of agency worked well in that it tended to group similar works together. Promenades and free-roam experiences like *Sleep No More* (Punchdrunk, 2003) and *The Echo of the Shadow* by Teatros de los Sentidos (Hernandez, 2016) were grouped together, while projects with more proactive choices for guests like *Then She Fell* (Third Rail Projects, 2013) and *Project Amelia* (Bricolage, 2019) tended to be grouped in another, distinct visual section. All would otherwise be categorized together as immersive theatre, but in this way, they can be visually separated.

We eventually readjusted the concept of agency in the visualization and no longer used an arrow to suggest “more” or “less” agency. We did this because, as we reviewed more works, we felt that suggesting some works having less meaningful agency was unfair, when it was clear that the intent of the work was to give guests a different type of agency. We revised our visualization to show our new understanding: that experiences can be categorized by different types of agency and our definition only emphasizes some of them. The different types of agencies differ in the areas they are concerned with, from the type and amount of freedoms and interactions they give guests to the type of consequences that come from guest decisions. This cannot be meaningfully simplified with a one-dimensional axis.



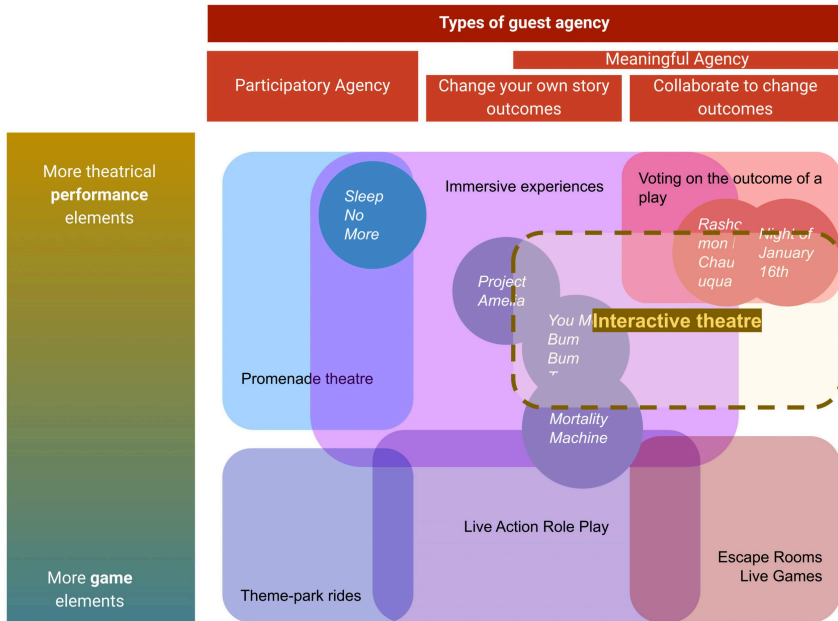
*Image 3: The iteration of our visualization of game elements and agency in theatrical performance.*

### **The Visualization Suggests New Area for Exploration**

In the final version of our visualization, we can see many of the aspects of the problem we are trying to describe. There are many

experiences that offer the type of participatory agency found in promenade theatre, but much fewer experiences that offer the meaningful agency that we have described. “Immersive theatre” is sometimes used to describe experiences that *could* give guests meaningful agency, but the term covers such a wide range of experiences that it does not always include the type of experience we are searching for, and excludes some non-immersive experiences that nevertheless give guests meaningful agency. Game genres like escape rooms, live games and role play may well give guests meaningful agency but are clearly not theatrical experiences.

Some experiences such as *Project Amelia* and *You Me Bum Bum Train* are starting to explore the kind of meaningful agency we describe. The question remains whether there will be more attempts to achieve this kind of meaningful agency in theatrical performance without having the experience become a game or role play altogether. We think that by defining interactive theatre as we have, a theatrical experience that gives guests meaningful agency, we help bring into focus a type of experience previously missing on this visualization and in need of exploration.



*Image 4: Our visualization shows where interactive theatre could fall and the types of works it would include.*

### Limits of This Visualization

The chart shown in Image 4 is to help us visually distinguish between different experiences based on the type of agency the experience has, allowing similar types of experiences to be clustered together. This categorization is especially useful for our student team who have just started diving into the theory of theatre. The placement of experiences on our chart are based on rigorous research that covered the type of agency involved and the extent to which game-like elements are included.

When we created this visualization, we were game-centric individuals with limited theatre knowledge. Our visualization places experiences along a theatre-game axis, highlighting a potential for debates and cooperation between theatre

practitioners and game designers. There are undoubtedly different axes that experiences could be measured against, which would provide different insight.

We note that we have limited first-hand experience with immersive theatre. Much of our analysis comes from our best understanding based on intensive research, reviews, texts and discussion with our instructors, project partners, and immersive theatre industry professionals.

Our chart does not account for all the types of agency that currently exist in theatre, nor does this type of chart accommodate for experiences having a combination of agencies together. We understand that there is a very exciting world of experiences and ways of guest participation of which we have only scratched the surface.

## CONCLUSION

Theatre experiences have come a long way, from traditionally being behind a fourth wall to finding different media and techniques to break this fourth wall to better serve the guests' needs for satisfying and engaging experiences. Our goal is to help create a discussion about what agency means and how we can strive for a more powerful type of agency. By using meaningful agency, we can create experiences in which audience members are compelled to return for the feeling of empowerment. The replayability of each experience will increase as audience members want to try for different paths and endings. However, often the meaning of agency is confused with offering interactions that just serve the purpose of making a connection with the performance, but do not necessarily affect the narrative. These types of interactions do not always help to create a satisfying experience for the guests. Therefore, as we mentioned, meaningful agency should make the guests feel that they affected the narrative in some way. We draw the focus to the guests' perception of their actions, more than to the action event in



the play itself. We believe that to provide meaningful agency, we need to build agency in successive beats and moments. The key is to scope it down, vary parameters like audience size, interactions, possible endings and slowly build agency moments that best fit with the parameter values. Inclusion of complex moments might score for a great narrative but might also fail to pass as meaningful agency for the guests. We believe that a simple defining narrative moment is a good building block to start with if the idea of meaningful agency in live theatre is to be further explored.

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