# LESS PREDICTABILITY, MORE PLAY

*An Experimental Syllabus for Theatre in Pandemic*
NICA ROSS & STUART CANDY

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

*'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.' ––Arundhati Roy, The Pandemic is a Portal* [1]

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, in-person theatre performance came to a standstill,[2] along with so many other aspects of our lives. Against this backdrop, a short summer research course, 99-520 *Theatre in Pandemic: An Experiment*, was offered at Carnegie Mellon University, aiming to 'leverage interdisciplinary expertise to make live performance… born for social distancing.'[3]

With a dozen graduate and undergraduate collaborators of varied disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, faculty from the Schools of Drama and Design facilitating, and a protocol in place that prohibited meeting in person, the group gathered on the

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1. Roy 2020. This was the key assigned reading prior to Episode 1.

2. Brantley, Green and Phillips 2020.

3. An earlier version of this piece appears at https://medium.com/@futuryst/theatre-in-pandemic-an-experimental-syllabus-ac66885e886b

Zoom video conferencing platform, one afternoon per week for a month and a half.

Theatre is a profoundly social, intimate and physically situated artform. Reimagining it for socially-distanced conditions posed some challenges. What kinds of immersive narrative, participatory storytelling, and collaborative art-making might be possible under these new constraints? How could we connect––socially, playfully and empathically––across these divides?

The course took shape in a period of not only pandemic disease, but also political turbulence. After the police killing of George Floyd, protests spread as communities in the United States and around the world tried to reckon with some of the pervasive racial inequities in contemporary life. Within American theatre culture, these developments lent urgency and momentum to efforts to confront systemic racism,[4] and in this course they helped underline the significance of attention to questions of power, consent, and meaningful participation in the development of theatrical experiences.

*Theatre in Pandemic* centred on experiential learning and co-creation. It was structured over six sessions or 'episodes'[5] of four hours each; a solid half-day timeslot per week in which we could all work together or divide up; varying modalities and group sizes as needed. The substance of the course initially revolved around a series of 'in-class actions' and games, and assignments

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4. For example see the website We See You White American Theatre, which demands an end to systemic practices prioritising white power in theatre making (https://www.weseeyouwat.com). Note also the adoption by many theatres and schools, including CMU's School of Drama, of Anti-Racist Theatre practice (https://howlround.com/anti-racist-theatre).

5. The episode-based approach to designing classes is borrowed from radio program This American Life (https://futuryst.blogspot.com/2019/10/teaching-long-now.html) and is also inspired by the example of Candy's longtime collaborator, the late Jeff Watson, who staged a popular weekly course at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts using the format of a late night variety show.

or 'weeklong actions', supported by 'mini-lectures' to introduce certain concepts or survey prior art. This all paved the way to a shared fund of experience, vocabulary, and trust, and culminated in a series of live performance experiments devised and staged by participants.

Rather than trying to replicate on Zoom the approaches and outcomes of traditional theatre, we embraced the opportunity to seek new possibilities through games and playful experimentation. The result was a set of design briefs and performances for a kind of pandemic-prompted 'playable theatre'.[6]

This document is an edited and annotated version of the syllabus, offered in the same spirit of collective learning that animated the course itself. Designed from scratch for this experiment, it began as a skeletal template and was gradually fleshed out as we went. This gave us a vital way to keep the class responsive and adaptive. The reading, media resources, and 'action' briefs are all included here, with commentary and footnotes added for context, clarification or connections, in the hope of inspiring further exploration.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course students should be able to:

- Orient in new creative spaces with a transmedia mentality.
- Identify and use a range of appropriate tools for creative generativity.
- Apply a greater understanding of media platforms and their narrative meanings.
- Apply a method for research, experimentation and approaching digital platforms.

6. https://medium.com/the-playable-theater-project

- Maintain conceptual targets while moving through the production process.

- Economically apply tools to achieve their narrative goals.

- Prioritise experience over function.

- Consider accessibility in design.

- Think and feel through uncertain futures.

APPROACH

- Fearlessly experimental.

- Collaborative (no one-person projects).

- Meet once per week with additional work (as appropriate for a 9 unit course).[7]
    - Mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning.

SKILLS

The class is intended to accommodate a mix of knowledge and specific skills.

- Required: Passion for live performance; desire to experiment collaboratively; writing skills.

- Useful: Knowledge of theatre-making or other experience design, computer-based design, animation, graphics, coding, online collaboration platforms.

CLASS REQUESTS

- Please keep your camera on as much as possible (use a virtual background if needed); this is a major part of this class, and you will need it on to participate.

- Mic off unless speaking.

7. The course was 9 units, which, for a course duration equivalent to half a semester, roughly equates to 18 hours of class effort per week, including contact/studio time and homework.

- Be gregarious with hand gestures and emoji reactions to encourage each other.

- Use chat sparingly when the discussion is primarily verbal. Consider raising your hand to speak instead.

- Chat is a great way to add links and resources!

- Please add your pronouns to your display name.

- This is an experiment––we are all trying something new. Let's approach each other with compassion and support.

- If you are presenting material that may be difficult due to violence, tragedy or something emotionally traumatising, please give everyone a heads up.

- This is a space where challenging topics may come up––because that is the nature of our world––but let's make it a space of care and allow each other to take care of ourselves when needed without judgement.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Adapted from the Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA):[8]

- No One Knows Everything; Together We Know a Lot: This agreement asks that we all practise being humble, and look for what we have to learn from each person in the room. It asks us to share what we know, as well as our questions, so that others may learn from us.

- We Can't Be Articulate All the Time: We want everyone to feel comfortable participating, even if you don't feel you have the perfect words to express your thoughts.

- Move Up, Move Up: If you're someone who tends to not speak a lot, please move up into a role of speaking more. If

8. AORTA 2017.

you tend to speak a lot, please move up into a role of listening more.

- Embrace Curiosity: Allow space for play, curiosity, and creative thinking.

- Acknowledge the Difference Between Intent and Impact: The ask in this community agreement is that we each do the work to acknowledge that our intent and the impact of our actions are two different things, and to take responsibility for any negative impact we have. (This can be as simple as apologising.)

- Be Aware of Time: Please come back on time from breaks, and refrain from speaking in long monologues.

**Online Collaboration and Safety:**

- Making work online will present some new interactions between collaborators. Please exercise caution with your privacy and personal access when working together.

- Do not share passwords with collaborators, no matter who they are to you. If necessary make sure it's a temporary password and that no one else has access to personal information that could be used to compromise your privacy.

- If using any remote control application for your computer research, use best practices to maintain security for your computer.[9]

- If you don't know whether something you are sharing or accessing is safe, ask the instructors.

- Please get in contact if considering any platform or software for your projects that would require participants to create an account or enter personal information.

9. Fitzpatrick 2017.

COURSE OUTLINE: EPISODES, BRIEFS AND LECTURES

## Episode 1: This is Theatre Now

*'Identification is not about a static, linear, measurable connection to a character. Rather, it is about seeing ourselves reflected in the world and relating to images of others, both of which are critically tied to arguments for representation that focus on media's ability to create possible worlds.' ––Adrienne Shaw* [10]

- **Introductions**

  ◦ Introduce yourself by sharing: your names, including their origins and meaning, your community, your gift, and how you are coping during the pandemic.[11]

- **Warm-up Game**

  ◦ Word-at-a-time Story.[12]

- **Break**

  ◦ During the break please add into our shared spreadsheet, Socially Distant Production Resources, in the Work Examples tab, whatever online theatre or experiences––interpreted as broadly as you like––you have taken part in recently.[13]

- **Class Discussion and Shareout: Theatre Review**

10. Shaw 2014, *Gaming at the Edge*, pp. 70–71.

11. This form of introduction was inspired by Native Hawaiian elder and facilitation expert Puanani Burgess's activity 'guts on the table'.

12. Adapted from improv theatre, when played in person the game relies on participants in a circle formation, making the order of contributions self-evident. To adapt for Zoom, we posted names in the chat window, cycling through the same sequence in which folks had introduced themselves. See Improv Encyclopedia 2007, p. 123.
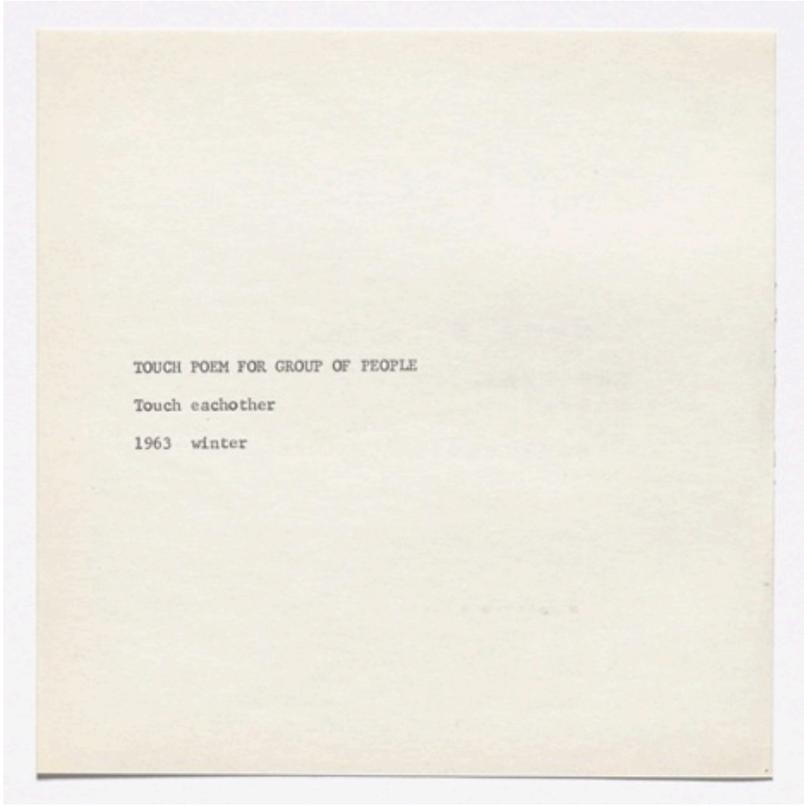
13. Continuously crowdsourcing and periodically discussing leads to interesting shows and socially-distanced theatrical (and related) experiments was an important part of growing our collective 'reference universe' and in-class culture. For a publicly shareable version of this collected material, see Socially Distant Production Resources 2020.

- ◦ What have you learned and what can you recommend from work recently encountered?

- **In-Class Action 1: Pass Around a Shared Object**

  - ◦ In assigned groups of three or four, find a shared object and 'pass it around' between windows while in a Zoom breakout room. Inspiration and reference point: 'Phenom' by the band Thao & the Get Down Stay Down, a music video produced in one take over video conference, early in the Covid-19 quarantine.[14]

- **Weeklong Action 1: Create a Score**

  - ◦ This action takes inspiration from the example of Fluxus scores, the work of Yoko Ono, Miranda July, Lawrence and Anna Halprin, and others. The task is to create and perform a 'score' in an assigned pair. Per Halprin 1969 (p.1): 'Scores are symbolisations of processes which extend over time.' This score will be enacted using an online platform of your choice. It may either be prerecorded or presented live in Episode 2. The performance must in any case be documented. Presentation should take no more than five minutes.

- **Mini-Lecture: The Score**

  - ◦ Reading and References: Ono 2000 & 2013; July & Fletcher n.d.; Halprin 1969; Friedman et al. 2002.

14. Deahl 2020.

*Fig. 1: Various Artists, Flux Year Box 2, 1967. Box of scores curated by George Maciunas. (via Walker Art Center https://walkerart.org/collections/artworks/ flux-year-box-2)*

TOUCH POEM FOR GROUP OF PEOPLE

Touch eachother

1963  winter

*Fig. 2: Yoko Ono, Touch Poem, 1963. (via MoMA https://www.moma.org/audio/ playlist/15/372 )*

*Fig. 3: Mike Figgis, Timecode, 2000. An experimental feature film in which four parallel stories are followed on-screen, simultaneously and apparently with no cuts, for over 90 minutes. The film was enabled by the advent of continuously-shooting digital video. Left: Part of Figgis's score*

## EPISODE 2: BUILDING WORLDS TOGETHER

*'If you introduce writers to the idea that everything that develops in a society has developed for a reason––it's not just natural; human behavior is learned; societies are developed; none of this stuff just happens––then that makes those writers more conscious and more capable of depicting not just a secondary world, but even our world. It makes them better at analyzing human behavior.'*
*––N.K. Jemisin* [15]

- **Weeklong Action Review 1: The Score**[16]

- **Debrief and Discussion: Consent and Spectacle**

  ◦ Discussion about the power of a participatory work lying in the balance between consent and spectacle. How is the

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15. Vox Media 2018, at approx. 1h 5m 40s.

16. Scores included a protocol for using our phone-video to reveal what the rest of our respective rooms or workspaces looked like; sharing a morning tea; and using Twine to check in and provide relief.

audience invited into and enabled to take part in the work, or not?

- **Break**

  ◦ During the break read the text provided, which will be either *Homunculus* by Anna Kreider, or *So Mom I Made This Sex Tape* by Susanne Vejdemo (Kreider 2017; Vejdemo 2016).

- **In-Class Action 2: Play a Live Action Roleplaying Game (LARP)**[17]

  ◦ In two parallel groups, we set up, play, and then debrief a LARP in up to 90 minutes total.

- **Debrief Discussion: The Mixing Desk of LARP**[18]

  ◦ What were the main design choices structuring and scaffolding the stories that we co-created in these two LARPs?

- **Weeklong Action 2: Design a Ritual**

17. Almost all the larps available for consideration were designed, pre-pandemic, for live, face-to-face gameplay, and so selections were made with a number of filters in mind: (a) accessible and suitable for first-time larpers, (b) straightforward adaptation to online/remote interaction, (c) appropriate duration (up to 1.5 hours), and (d) playability for our group size of 11 students and two instructors. In addition to the two ultimately selected a number of alternatives were also considered: *Are You There God? It's the Quarterly Earnings Report* by Margo Gray, *Dog Eat Dog* by Liam Liwanag Burke, *Four Lovers* by Jason Morningstar and Lizzie Stark, *Reunion With Death* by Mo Holkar, *Sign* by Thorny Games, and *This Is Fine: An Apocalyptic Networking Event* by Jenny Bacon, Allison Cole, Jess Rowan Marcotte, and Dietrich Squinkifer. Thanks to Jason Morningstar, Lizzie Stark and Evan Torner for excellent suggestions and advice.
18. The 'Mixing Desk' is a design metaphor and tool devised and primarily used in the context of the Nordic Larp scene. It was encountered by Candy in 2014 at the Larpwriter Summer School, held annually in Lithuania (Stenros, Andresen & Nielsen 2016), and he has since made it a regular part of experiential futures classes to help orient students in the highly multivariate project design space of 'Time Machines'; immersive, experiential scenarios bringing alternative futures to life at the scale of a room (Candy 2014a).

- Brief: In your assigned group of three or four, create a ritual for us to carry out together next week (Episode 3), to support the development of our mini-culture within the class. Use guidance in the articles provided to explore and experiment as a group, then come in ready to enact a ritual on Zoom with everyone's participation. You may carry it out with us from a 'cold' start, or teach it to us to then perform together. It may be a one-time event, or something you propose as an element of the course for us to repeat as part of subsequent gatherings. However you choose to tackle it, each group's ritual enactment will have 10–15 minutes in total.

- **Mini-Lecture: What Is Ritual?**

  - Required Reading for Weeklong Action: Ozenc 2016; Tate n.d.; Sacred Design Lab n.d. Further reading on LARP: Saitta et al, 2014; Stenros & Montola 2010; Stark 2012.

- **Project Poll: The Final Action**

  - We are asking the following questions to get a sense of your learning goals for this class and how best to serve them in the formation of the class's final project:

    - As you know, this course is a collaborative research experiment! As we move towards the final project, what would you like us to know about the scale or nature of collaboration you are most interested in (or not)? [confidential]

    - Do you have a specific research or experience goal that you'd like to work on in this class? [confidential]

    - Do you have anything you'd like to add that wasn't asked above? [confidential]

    - The answer to the following question will be shared with

the entire class as we communicate and make collective decisions. Rank your research/practice interests for the final project. Assume the word 'online' precedes every option: Performance, Technology, Production Process, Experimentation, Realising Work, Research. Please fill out before Monday.
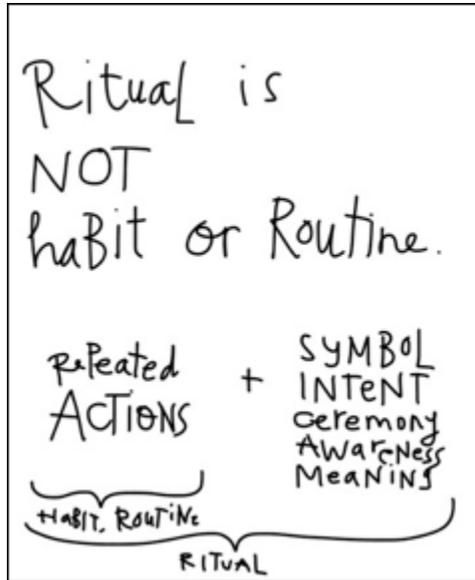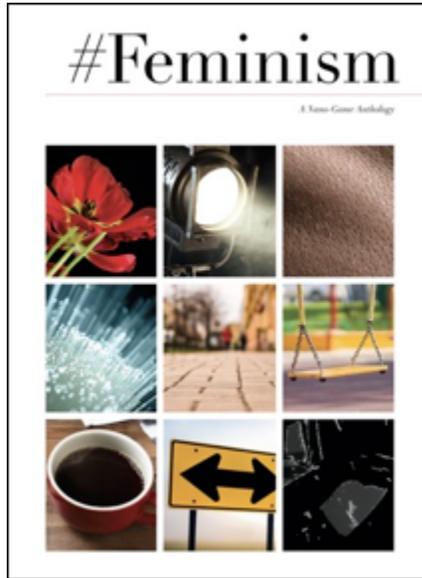
Fig. 4: What is ritual? (Ozenc and Hagan 2016)

*Fig. 5: Cover of the #Feminism nano-larp anthology (Stark et al, 2016) containing So Mom I Made This Sex Tape by Susanne Vejdemo; played in Episode 2 of the course*

## EPISODE 3: MEDIUMS AND MEDIA

*'"Preferred mappings" have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings.' ––Stuart Hall* [19]

- **Welcome to Class: One word Check-in**[20]

- **Weeklong Action Review 2: Ritual Design**

  ◦ We have ten to fifteen minutes per ritual, followed by five

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19. Hall 2007, p. 394.

20. A 'one word check in', inviting participants to share a distillation of their mood at the outset, provides an important chance for folks to tune in to each other's starting points (as well as their own) and prepare for the collaborative work of the day. Carried out through the chat window in Zoom, this produces a kind of collectively authored 'chat poem'; a practice which came to us thanks to Etta Cetera from the community racial justice organisation What's Up?! Pittsburgh.

minutes of conversation. A basic three-part project debrief:[21]

- ▪ What did you see and hear?
- ▪ What did you feel?
- ▪ What did you understand?

- **Mini-Lecture and Conversation: The Medium is the Message?**[22]

  - ◦ References: Marshall McLuhan – Digital Prophecies: The Medium is the Message, (Al Jazeera, 2017a); Stuart Hall – Race, Gender, Class in the Media (Al Jazeera, 2017b)**;** Shaw 2017.

- **In-class Action 3: Research and Experiment**

  - ◦ Brief: In groups of three or two, use the links provided (Socially Distant Production Resources 2020; Rhizome n.d.; Washko n.d.) as resources for 'scavenging inspiration'. First: For 30 minutes, individually research a performance/piece made by an artist/performer. Use the resources above, unless you have a specific artist or focus that you'd like to research. Second: Present your research to your group and

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21. This simple structure for debriefing experiences seems especially apt for online and experimental theatrical and play-based work, in the way it guides attention from a relatively straightforward baseline of observation into more interpretive and subjective registers. To the extent that participants literally encounter different material, for instance in larps or hyperlinked narratives, it invites listening and a comparative consideration of the actual diversity of experiences as a precursor to articulating judgements or conclusions.

22. Using Marshall and Eric McLuhan's 'Tetrad' tool to consider the effects of Zoom on contemporary society, together we discussed: What does Zoom enhance? What does it make obsolete? What does it retrieve (that was previously obsolete)? And when pushed to an extreme, what does it reverse or flip into? We then discussed Stuart Hall's theory on hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional relationships when decoding and encoding media, and concluded with Adrienne Shaw's argument that 'misuses of technology are often framed as failures' but that we can 'reclaim those "misuses" as not a fault' but rather as 'plausible deployments of a technology's affordances'. See McLuhan & McLuhan 1992; Hall 2007; Shaw 2017, p. 597.

discuss intersections between artists/technology/concepts. Find connections between each other's research and create a Google slideshow for the group to present the curated material to the whole class. (Connections need not be literal; they can even be contradictory.) Third: Present your slideshow to the class and share what came out of your conversation with your group; you will have five minutes. Overall, look for ways to use concepts from the lecture. Approach the medium in a way that acknowledges its message.

- **Research Presentations**

  ◦ Five minutes per group, plus Q&A / discussion.

- **Weeklong Action 3: 60 Second Play**

  ◦ Brief: In two groups of five or six, use a Text (this might be a selection from a play, the news, a Twitter thread, etc.) to create a 60 second online play, using whatever medium/platform makes sense for the work, including consideration of what you have access to, medium/message appropriateness, and so on. Each person brings a text to the first group meeting; the group chooses one to use. Assign roles and maintain them throughout the process––these may be hybrid, for example Actor/Director.[23] Come in prepared to perform live in Episode 4.

- **Class Discussion: Final Action**

  ◦ We will discuss people's poll responses as part of preparation to launch next week, Episode 4.

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23. To our delight, most groups ignored this convention and deliberately hybridised and evolved roles as they worked on the project.
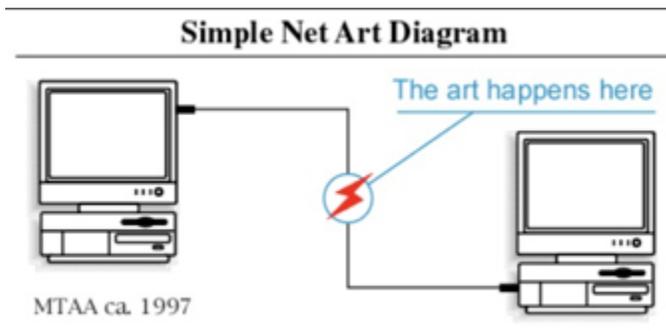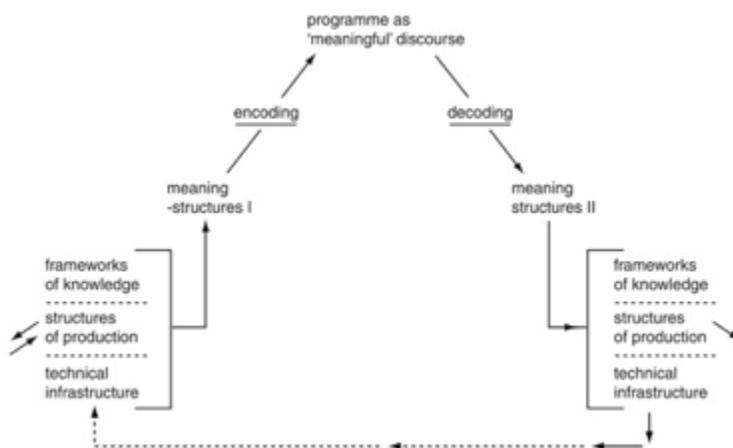
**Simple Net Art Diagram**

The art happens here

MTAA ca. 1997

*Fig. 6: MTAA, Simple Net Art Diagram, 1997 (via Rhizome*
*https://anthology.rhizome.org/simple-net-art-diagram)*

programme as
'meaningful' discourse

encoding          decoding

meaning                          meaning
-structures I                    structures II

frameworks                       frameworks
of knowledge                     of knowledge

structures                       structures
of production                    of production

technical                        technical
infrastructure                   infrastructure

*Fig. 7: Encoding and decoding media. Diagram from Hall 2007 [1973], p. 388*

## EPISODE 4: A PLAY AND A PROJECT

*'The absence of limitations is the enemy of art.' ––Orson Welles* [24]

24. https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/05/24/art-limit/

- **Weeklong Action Review 3: 60 Second Plays**

  ◦ Starting 15 minutes after the hour to allow for setup time. Discuss expectations of the medium, message and encoded meaning––where do we allow room for readings and failure?

- **Introduce a New Platform: Livelab**

  ◦ LiveLab is a new tool for collaborative online video streaming and presenting created by CULTUREHUB, New York.[25]

- **Break**

  ◦ During the break, prepare to access Livelab on your own machines; installing CamTwist (Mac) or OBD Virtual Cam (PC).

- **Short Lecture: Play with Generative Constraints**

  ◦ While interacting on the LiveLab platform, we build on previous sessions' big-picture engagement with the relationships between medium and message, and the mixing desk's parametric scaffolding for exploring design space, by practising the embrace of constraints as affordances, and prompts for creative response. Further reading references: Hayles 2001; Hunicke et al. 2004; Candy 2018.

- **In-Class Action 4: The Thing From The Future**[26]

  ◦ Brief: Breaking out into three parallel play groups in three different instances of LiveLab, devise a performative

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25. Lead Software Developer: Olivia Jack. Contributors: Tong Wu and Jesse Ricke.

26. This activity was undertaken in the same groups as assigned for final projects, proposed by instructors and taking people's interests and goals into account via a confidential survey sent out halfway through the course.

response to the following customized Thing From The Future prompt (Candy & Watson 2018): 'IN 2050, IN A {*as a group, choose your own adjective to insert here*} FUTURE, THERE IS A **VIGNETTE** RELATED TO **WORK**. WHAT IS IT?' You have half an hour to create a five-minute experience suitable to this platform that gives us a glimpse of a future of work thirty years from now.

- **Review In-Class Action 4**

- **Project Launch: The Final Action**

  ◦ Brief: In your assigned group of three to five members, devise an experimental online performance in a novel way. As a point of departure, one person will bring an image; another a text; another a sound. Together create a scene, game, narrative or experience out of these prompts. You must include these three elements within the final presentation of the work. Use a novel technical approach. If you use Zoom, do so in a way that we have not yet experienced in this class. You're also invited to use other platforms, however, the entire class must be able to watch your presentation live within class time in Episode 7. Consider the invitation to your peers: If the mode of access to your performance requires anything more than a URL, then you must email the instructors before Episode 5 to check on accessibility constraints. Please consider a backup plan to any performance delivery that requires more than a link, so that your group's final presentation is not dependent on an inaccessible platform. Timing: Each group will have a total of 45 minutes for both performance and feedback, so you should likely limit your performance to 30 mins. Groups will lead their own post-performance debrief using a format, questions, etc of their own choosing. Explaining your work is not recommended, and learning

whatever you can about how the experience went very much is!

- **Group Work**

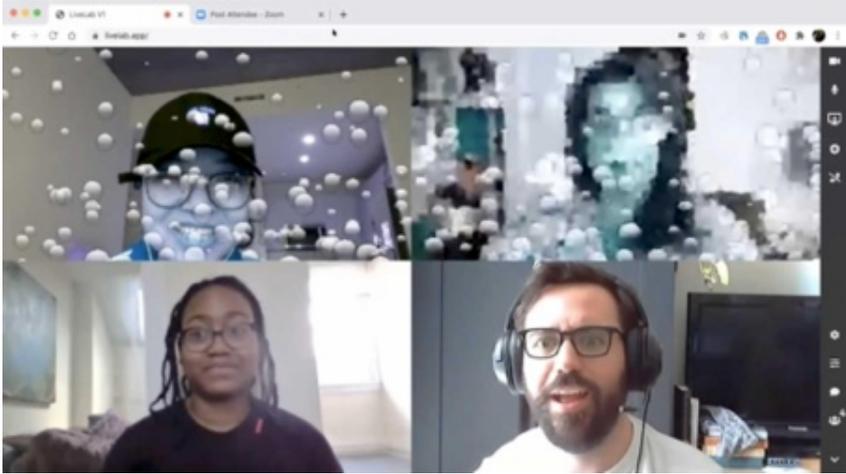  ◦ Spend time in breakout groups working on your Final Action.



*Fig. 8: A student group tests out the affordances of a new streaming platform*

### EPISODE 5: STUDIO TIME

*'Toys and games are the prelude to serious ideas.' ––Charles & Ray Eames* [27]

- **All-Class Meeting**

  ◦ For the first half an hour of class. To discuss: Audience and invitations; documentation sharing; the Final Action schedule. Reminder: Please add any new research or online theatrical experiences to our spreadsheet.

- **Group/Instructor Meetings**

27. https://www.eamesoffice.com/blog/five-things-charles-ray-eames-teach-us-about-play/

- The sequence and timing of group-based feedback sessions is the same as for the final performance the following week.

- **Final Check-in**

  - Everyone returns to our main Zoom location for a briefing in the last half an hour of class time.

EPISODE 6: FINAL ACTION

*'We must make our freedom by cutting holes in the fabric of this reality, by forging new realities which will, in turn, fashion us. Putting yourself in new situations constantly is the only way to ensure that you make your decisions unencumbered by the inertia of habit, custom, law, or prejudice — and it is up to you to create these situations.'* —CrimethInc [28]

- **Queerantine 2020**

  - 1:30–2:15PM––Lenora, Lyam, Petra
  - A user-navigated web-based archive with mixed media content, both contextualising and telling the story of a triad of people trying to navigate the criminal justice system, queerness, academia, and life in a pandemic.

- **PBC**

  - 2:30–3:15PM––Carey, Sean, Maggie, Zeja
  - A live-streaming, 360-degree cut-up play incorporating the words of James Baldwin, Michelle Tea, Hua Chunying, and CNN to create a conversation at the intersection of diverse lives, conflict and care.

- **S.99520**

  - 3:30–4:15PM––Cynthia, Davine, Major, Rachel

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28. Quoted in Graeber 2015, *The Utopia of Rules*, p. 96.

- An online LARP ('live action roleplaying game', or alternatively here 'live action online game', aka LAOG) in which United States Senators and industry lobbyists persuade, bribe and cajole each other in the closing minutes before the crucial vote on the Bill for the Green New Deal. Hosted on the web-based virtual space and conferencing platform gather.town that stylistically emulates an 8-bit video game, the participants navigate their way around the game space to find each other, activate video chat, and engage in high-stakes negotiations.

- **Debrief and Celebration**

  - Questions for collective discussion:

    - How would you describe this class/experience/experiment?

    - What are the major takeaways for you?

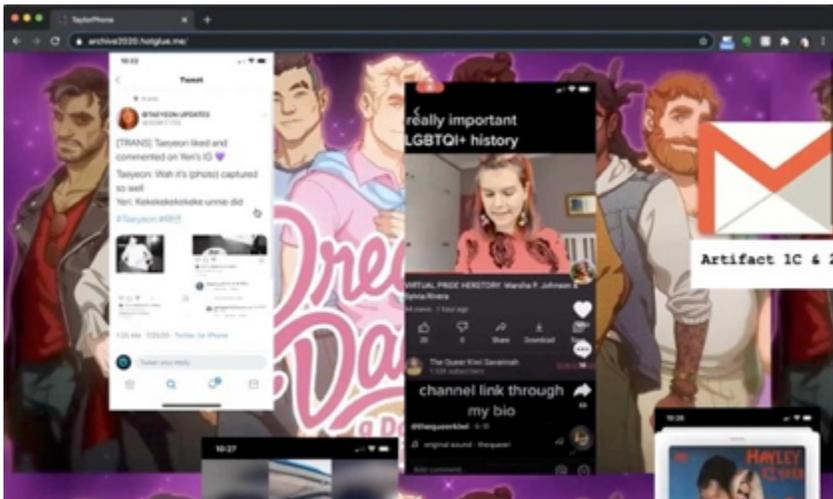    - What do you want more of? What was valuable for you?



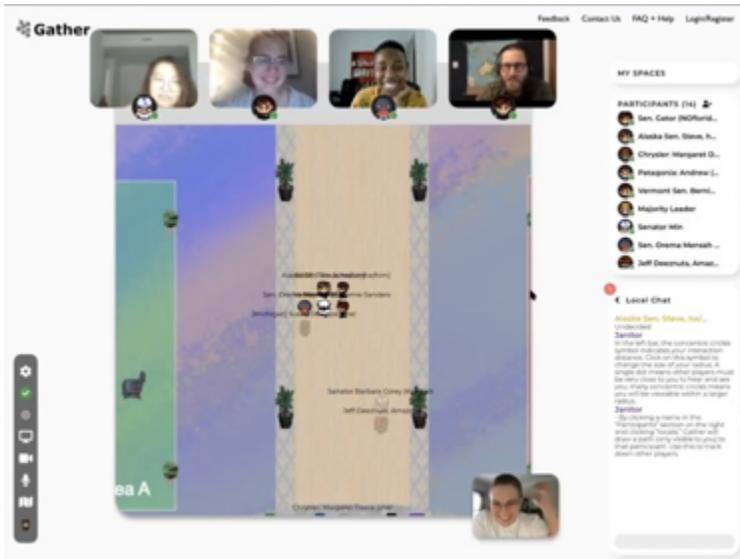*Fig. 9: Screengrab from the user-navigated mixed media production Queerantine 2020*

*Fig. 10: Mid-game during the Green New Deal-themed online larp S.99520*

## REFLECTIONS

*'The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression.' ––Jane McGonigal* [29]

The social distancing practices of the Covid-19 pandemic, as we have all come to appreciate, are more challenging to some enterprises than others. This course represented an earnest effort not to maintain business-as-usual momentum in an online class, but to renew and even reimagine the very conditions of possibility for theatre as an artform, mid-crisis.

It asked us to engage with a mess of new canvases, and also to reorient our social selves. From the first, we chose to eschew standard staging strategies and experiment our way into a deeper

29. See McGonigal's Twitter bio (twitter.com/avantgame, retrieved 31 January 2021). Her book *Reality is Broken* attributes the quote to play psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith (McGonigal 2011, p. 28).

understanding of the performative, technological, and interactive constraints in play. Accordingly, the final actions navigated these possibilities in strikingly different ways, with three contrasting modes of interaction and playability emerging on three alternative 'stages'.

In *Queerantine 2020*, users navigated an array of multimedia story materials, in a unique sequence entirely up to them. *PBC* was a livestreamed video performance embedded in a 3D environment, with a trio of performers speaking alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, but audience members throughout could choose their own direction and focus. The project *S.99520* was a live action roleplaying game mounted on a new, if stylistically 'retro', video conferencing platform, with mutual vision and audio triggered by proximity in the virtual space, allowing for many conversations to occur in parallel.[30]

Students had full control in devising the format and content of their culminating projects, and worked intensively in parallel towards the end. The specific theatrical strategies and logics that came about were in no way preconceived or imposed from without, although the variety itself was very much an intentional outcome of course design. The narrative and theatrical possibilities that arose were not only generated as a result of play, but they were also themselves all examples, in different ways, of 'playable theatre'; experiments which might be arrayed in various

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30. The main platform used for *Queerantine* was the web-based 'samizdat' publishing tool Hotglue (https://hotglue.me/), with embedded elements from Vimeo, Instagram, Gmail, and other web-based media. *PBC* was livestreamed over YouTube with the video and audio feed modified on the back end via a range of transformations. While unfortunately a technical problem rendered the final performance in a 2D-only array, the demo staged in Episode 5 successfully showed the concept in action. The main platform for *S.99520*, the Green New Deal larp, was Gather (https://gather.town/), and the final scene was conducted back in Zoom, with an image of the U.S. Senate provided to serve as background for the Senator characters while they voted. One of our guests made the interesting observation that the (randomly allocated) sequence of team performances must surely have made a difference to the playability of the third, most interactively demanding or user-dependent experience; had it been first, it might have proven harder to 'get into'.

ways on a 'mixing desk' with faders for interactivity, structural/
narrative contingency, and form.

Stepping back to reflect on the course overall, we find a paradox
in the way the coronavirus pandemic made this experiment at
once easier and harder. It lowered barriers to collaboration
across disciplines, departments, locations, and timezones, and
it offered both impetus and licence to try new things. At the
same time, the stress of unfolding crises at multiple scales, and
the taxes on mind, body and spirit of spending day after day in
screen-mediated interaction, were significant. Taking advantage
of the first without being overwhelmed by the second seemed
to demand a less conventional, more experimental approach. We
anticipated and consciously tried to address the elevated risks
of fatigue and burnout by harnessing games and play, within a
stable remit of collaborative art and theatre making at a distance.

Devising the course as a generative structure represented a
conscious strategy for welcoming the contingencies of
participants' own interests and learning; encouraging 'freedom
within the framework', as our colleague Kyle Haden later
observed. It also made the class, on the whole, not as exhausting
and easier to run than it might otherwise have been. Less
belaboured input, more surprising output. Less planning, more
improvisation. Less scripting, more scoring. Less predictability,
more play.

Framed generally, the question of how to invite and maximise
generativity is enormous, though in particular situations it
becomes, fortunately, more tractable.[31] In any case the quest for
conditions that support participatory generativity is a kind of
playful maker's heuristic, and wondering about the right level
of abstraction at which to pitch the rules for co-creation, what
parameters to specify for one experiment or another, is valuable

31. See Kate Compton's remarkable work in this space, Compton 2019.

practice. It is not relevant solely to theatre, to teaching, or to the peculiar circumstances of a once-in-a-century pandemic. Rather, it's an approach to inviting discovery that travels across different domains and scales of creation; a strategy of design for emergence.[32]

Finally, it is critical for us to reiterate the fact that theatre practice is not affected only by our inability, for a time, to gather in person. The fight for racial justice and the civil unrest provoked by an ongoing negation of our society's deepest wounds is a major force for change in theatre––in its structure, in whose voices it amplifies, in whom it serves. Playing games may seem an inadequate response to such far-reaching and serious needs. Certainly, they are not in themselves the systemic change that is desperately needed. However, these approaches can invite us to a place beyond scripted storytelling, where opportunities open for the voices and lived experiences of many to help shape the narrative.

Through playful experiments with theatre in pandemic we reached for, and sometimes grasped, tools and strategies to cope with a universal grief. These efforts could not and did not 'solve' the loss of the live theatre experience, but together we found some doorways to mutual understanding and intimacy––partly in spite of, yet also partly thanks to, our collective predicament. Venturing and playing into possibility space outside the constraints of traditional theatre, we could catch glimpses of each other, of ourselves, not just on new stages but in new worlds, created collaboratively.

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32. For a discussion of city-scale design for emergence, see Candy 2014b. For discussion of scaffolding co-creation in experiential futures / design fiction practice, see Candy & Dunagan 2017.

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