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a journal on video games, value and meaning

A Special Issue on Playable Theatre

EDITED BY CELIA PEARCE & NICK FORTUGNO

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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 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 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 it's 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

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TPK IN ELSINORE: THE LARP INSIDE HAMLET (2015)

EVAN TORNER

TPK, n. – total party kill; when a role-playing adventure ends with the death of all player-characters

The author (right) and his fellow Stormguard players (left), Inside Hamlet 2015 (photo by Erik Pihl, used with permission)

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602) is one of the modern world's most widely performed and multi-generationally, cross-culturally

relevant works of theater. The tale of a doomed prince, his equally doomed revenge plot against his father's murderer, and thrice-doomed family and kingdom has become a rubric for the representation of tragic failure born of existential frustration and indecision. To make a game out of it seems both natural, and yet somehow overdetermined: games provoke us to engage with failure (Juul, 2013), but *Hamlet* asks us to confer our interpretation special significance. The play is an undisputed classic, oft-taught at that. Most of the global middle and upper-classes are both familiar with it and have a ready interpretation at hand. Hamlet has been adapted in game form many times: *Hamlet or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* (mif2000, 2010) as an ironic mobile puzzle game, Matthew McFarland's *A Tragedy in Five Acts* (2013) as a tabletop role-playing game, Ryan North's *To Be Or Not To Be: A Chooseable-Path Adventure* (2016) as an interactive gamebook, *Elsinore* (Golden Glitch, 2017) as a time-looping adventure game, and so forth. Unlike tone-deaf prior literary adaptations such as the Nintendo sidescroller *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (SETA 1989) based on Mark Twain's book, *Hamlet* games openly experiment with games as storytelling vehicles and invoke notable actions and dynamics from the play itself. Adapting *Hamlet*, after all, means close attention paid to the way narrative failure is rewarded.

Narrative failure in live-action role-playing (larp) is a cognitive and somatic enterprise. Larp, only slightly divorced from theater in principle (Bowman, 2015), permits a "first-person audience" view of its content (Sandberg, 2004; Montola and Holopainen, 2012): the players themselves are the most important recipients of the larp performance, and their experience is fundamental to its final interpretation. Larp designers then may then craft a full-body experience that lets them play pretend and engage in decadence. *Inside Hamlet* (2015) is one such Nordic larp experience. The game is a two-day event written by Bjarke

Pedersen, Martin Ericsson, Johanna Koljonen, and Simon Svensson. Best played to be believed, *Inside Hamlet* is seen here through the lens of actual play, a thick description of what it was like. I describe several aspects of the design, my player experience, how the game structurally encourages fateplay (Fatland 2000) and steering (Montola, Saitta, and Stenros, 2015), as well as the larp's progeny over the past 5 years. *Inside Hamlet* adapted the mature content and subtext of Hamlet into an appropriate game form that models how adult players can calibrate their desires, wishes, and actions. In other words, what Hamlet accomplished for drama many centuries ago, *Inside Hamlet* may have accomplished for larp in the 21st century.

THE POWER OF LARP

Prevailing schools of thought often mean "tabletop" when they say the words "analog games" or "non-digital games," but larp is certainly analog yet requires no table. Larp has its roots in Babylonian ritual, pre-dating theatre as a means of expression (Stark, 2012; Ericsson, 2014), and manifested itself in centuries of theme parties, parlor games, masquerades, and dancing games before being codified in its present form largely on American college campuses and in European forests in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By the 1990s, several primary genres of larp had emerged: fantasy larp using foam swords, "vampire" supernatural or cyberpunk urban intrigue, ship larps which involve pretending to be on a spaceship or sailing boat, historical reenactment larps, and "parlor larps," which run the gamut from medieval court intrigues to kitchen-sink dramas.

There are many, many motivations to larp (McDiarmid, 2011), but the ones of interest in this essay are twofold: the desire to be someone else, coupled with the desire to see social systems work themselves out, with tragic consequences. Larpers do not so much suspend their sense of disbelief as willingly activate their ability to pretend, with a mind that they are but one

protagonist among a sea of protagonists. While pretending, larpers seek activities to do –– not only talking to people, but also to hatch schemes that will have in-game consequences, perform rituals, fight, flirt, etc. –– and some of these activities stretch beyond a player's normal comfort zone. In a 2013 talk, Johanna Koljonen describes "alibis for interaction," or the ways in which certain rituals and affordances prompt human beings to engage in heightened interaction, including interactive play. Larp lets one don the mantle of a character, and then deploy this alibi of a character to engage in interaction outside the purview of normal experience.

Characters gather in the court of King Claudius, Inside Hamlet Run 1 – 2018 (photo by Boris Bernhard, used with permission)

When I am larping, I can suddenly engage in mechanics to cast spells, kill others, persuade others against their interests, have sex, or threaten other characters with my non-existent pet tiger. I can also use these mechanics to opt in or opt out of certain play

experiences, thus modulating the forms of fantasy that I am able to engage in.

But as Lizzie Stark (2016) and Eirik Fatland (2014) argue, larp also helps create temporary, social realities, instantiating sociological fictions in prototype form. Larp as a technical form is "storytelling for the network age" (Saitta, 2017); a way of enacting social systems in real time, and perhaps brainstorming alternatives. Certain forms of larp may fall under the umbrella of political modernism, role-playing used to form a Brechtian distanciation from the subject material (Torner, 2018). Other forms tend toward escapism, but can never erase political and social ideology from their designs. Larp lets us immerse in a role and interact, but also maintain a meta-level perspective of the social outcomes. I write all this to frame my play experience of *Inside Hamlet* Run 1 in a positive light, for I –– a Jewish-American larper –– wound up playing the head of a peacock regiment that developed into a fascist brotherhood before dying in a bloodbath, and I still do not know how to feel about it.

INSIDE *INSIDE HAMLET*

Imagine the following alternate history: the French Revolution never happened, Denmark never became a democracy, and in 1939 the country supplants Nazi Germany as an authoritarian state with imperial designs and corrupt, autocratic policies. Following the recent death of Old Hamlet, King Claudius has assumed absolute power over the state and military, with a Gestapo-style secret police at his disposal on the one hand and a squabbling viper's nest of aristocratic families trying to curry his favor on the other. Meanwhile, the Soviet communist revolution has swept far into Europe; Norwegians led by revolutionary Fortinbras have seized the means of production in their home country and have assembled a ragtag-but-fierce army that also inspires parts of the Danish populace to revolt. Ensconced in Castle Elsinore and surrounded by defenses, the Danish elite

command their seemingly invincible armies to take strategic European sites and put down communists. But morale appears to be waning. How long can members of the court remain protected when young Hamlet returns to court suspecting something amiss about his father's death? Or when some of the castleguard claim to be possessed by Old Hamlet's ghost, who harbors a few secrets of his own?

Inside Hamlet is an explicitly Marxist reading of Hamlet that places the story in a context that, for lack of a better analogy, resembles Hitler's bunker in the final days of World War II. An illegitimate coronation quickly transforms into a claustrophobic castle under siege, and then into a murder-suicide orgy comparable to the bloody end of the original play. Of interest is the fact that the game is based on a legendary Swedish-language larp Hamlet Inside (2002) mentioned in Jane McGonigal's 2011 book Reality Is Broken, but was re-written and re-configured so it could run twice in Fall 2015 for an English-speaking international audience from 11 different countries in Kronborg, the very Danish castle "Elsinore" at the center of Shakespeare's play. The fact that the play is an English story about the Danish court makes the English language and Danish location all the more poignant. *Inside Hamlet* ran four more times between Fall 2017 and 2018.

Nobility and military characters squabble near the war board, Inside Hamlet Run 1 (photo by Boris Bernhard, used with permission)

The game takes place in three Acts over two days: there are workshops during the afternoon on Friday introducing the game's rules and social groups; Act One of the game commences early Friday evening and ends in a party around midnight; players go to sleep and meet in workshops to re-calibrate their play on Saturday morning; Act Two commences after lunch; a dinner break between the acts allows for more meta-level discussion; Act Three ends the game by Saturday midnight; there is an after-party; and the event itself closes with a Sunday debrief. The game cost 1500 kr (around 240 USD), which includes room and board. Besides the rigid Act structure, there are keywords that help players modulate their play: one says "pure" to de-escalate a scene and "rotten" to encourage a partner to intensify whatever emotional play they're engaged in. As the game involves in-game drinking, the act of spiking a drink with vinegar changes over the course of the game. If one drinks something laced with vinegar in Act One, the player is to act

as if hit with a strong aphrodisiac; in Act Two, it becomes a truth serum; in Act Three, it's a poison. Fateplay guides much of the player's decision-making: it is near 100% certain that the character will die, so how one arrives at that death is partially up to the player.

My experience playing *Inside Hamlet* started with buzz and marketing materials released in 2014 promising a groundbreaking, edgy larp experience –– "You are the rot in the state of Denmark." –– with an additional enticement: playing in the actual castle of Elsinore. Castle Kronborg, located in Helsingør, Denmark, was built in the 1570s as a Renaissance-era upgrade to the original 1420s fortress built by King Eric of Pomerania. Significant are the castle's cobble-stoned courtyard, epic ramparts, spiral staircases and large-arched interior rooms, where Shakespeare's Hamlet has been performed hundreds of times over centuries.

Shortly after I signed up for the larp, I received and filled out a questionnaire that included logistical details such as dietary preferences as well as story-relevant questions about what larger themes I'd like to play on. I marked a checkbox declaring "I wouldn't mind playing a leadership role," which turned out to be crucial for my eventual casting. A few days later, I received my character as a PDF per email: Colonel Perdue.

Colonel Perdue was the leader of the Stormguard, the decorative military unit defending the royal family. He served as the fabricated "boss" to actual Hamlet characters Marcellus and Bernardo. Recalling the play, the primary action of the guardsmen is to run around after Old Hamlet's ghost, and to stand idly by as the Royals kill each other in dishonorable combat. My character sheet for Perdue opened with a quote from an entirely different Shakespeare play ("It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". –Macbeth, Act V) and two paragraphs of short description of an overworked officer

who may be too jaded already to do much more than "muddle on" in defending the castle. The next section of the character sheet detailed Perdue's relations with various characters in the larp, including his long-time friend, the Companion (prostitute) Giselle. His tasks in the game under a section titled "To be" included trying to do his best as Stormguard leader, decide who will be the next Watch-Sergeant, "stay strong when others come unravelled," and of course figure out what all the ghost nonsense was about. His unsavory tasks under the "Not to be" subheader –– i.e., nasty things that I had the alibi to do during the larp, given fellow players' consent –– included casually hurting someone, naming an arbitrary person Watch-Sergeant, collapse from overwork, "try to get an orgy going," punish Marcellus for spreading ghost stories, and "utilize unnecessary force to keep the peace." Finally, Perdue's vice was introduced as "Lust. For everybody." Hoo boy.

We were living in Berlin at the time, so I was able to procure at the Mauerpark flea market a former East German police uniform for 40 euros, along with an intimidating hat and set of boots. Upon arrival in Helsingør, we accumulated additional decoration and fake weaponry: cap pistols, several dull sabers, and assorted war medals to pin on ourselves. My guardsmen Bernardo, Francisco, and Marcellus and I looked like the motley, over-decorated paramilitary crew ready to guard the royal family. Our arrival at the castle meant workshops: every Nordic larp now comes with several hours, if not a full day, worth of workshops so that players can align with the goals and play style of the larp. Held in the old fortress barracks, these workshops were to teach us the "rules of engagement," namely safe words, methods of tapping out of a scene, and how to invite other players into our stories. I learned, too, that actual punches were OK as long as they were consensual, and that "what happens in Elsinore, stays in Elsinore." Essentially, we would do our best never to connect a character or player's actions to a particular

person in our post-game narration of events in the larp. Apparently the 2002 Hamlet Inside run had some risqué sexual activity among 20-something larpers while in-character. The organizers wanted to be sure that we had the alibi for that too. We were also informed that no characters could be killed before the second half of Act Three.

Two players fence live with real foils and kit while others look on, Inside Hamlet Run 1 – 2018 (photo by Boris Bernhard, used with permission)

The first adventure was simply entering the castle, which was not so easy for dozens of larpers in 1930s-appropriate high-heeled costumes and elaborate clothing and props which they then had to maneuver up tight spiral staircases with no railings. We entered into a drab stone room with huge wooden beams, an epic sound set-up, and a staged throne area. Right before the game began, we were reminded by the organizers of "playing to lose," a collaborative play style typical of Nordic larp that encourages players to enjoy watching their characters fail. Since Hamlet was a tragedy, this was easy to wrap my head around.

We were all horrible people who were going to die. No problem. The next statement, however, gave me an even stronger grip on what to do in the game. "You are all Hamlet." This meant that Hamlet's tragic flaws –– his lethargy, indecision, feverish action in the wrong direction, plotting, and losing –– were all for 90-some players to experience over the course of the run. This allowed me to view my play in terms of steering (Montola, Saitta, Stenros, 2015), or using my character to fulfill my player-need for structure. There were fewer and fewer "wrong" ways to play the game.

Act One had us start off with an opening meta-level scene in which we as the guardsmen conducted the first séance, given that Old Hamlet had been trying to contact us. I would deliver some lines from the play while "possessed" by Old Hamlet, and then carried off unconscious, and then the game would begin. These meta-level interludes certainly made *Inside Hamlet* feel like playable theater: every now and then, the action would shut off and the acting (with pre-written lines) would begin. The scenes helped the players take a breather, which is critical to such intense play, and occurred as naturally as cut-scenes do in video games.

Perdue was caught between a myriad number of threads. There were communists in the streets of Denmark and needed to be dealt with! But also we were loyal to Old Hamlet and desperately wanted to know what happened to him! But we were also horrible, indulgent people who mostly needed to drink, lounge around with the castle Companions, and not do much of anything at all! Act One had some court intrigue that culminated first with Hamlet having some actors put on his play that accuses Claudius of murder, and then bombs from Fortinbras' army took us by surprise and forced us all to evacuate the Throne Room to occupy the cellar. This organizational move allowed the team to serve us dinner and drinks, as well as moved us out so they could set up the rest of the castle rooms for the next two Acts. There

was also a DJ in the cellar, providing us with ample music and ambience. Perdue gossiped much about the séances and royal family, made himself known to those characters he had relations with, and then abruptly left the party in order to take on the communists gathering outside in the streets. This was a bit of steering to let myself cross that magnificent courtyard to go to the bathroom and then take a rest in the organizers' area, as I had been going non-stop since we had arrived early that morning. I came back into the larp refreshed, at which point I started a fight with the Polish ambassador, whom I accused of being a communist. Hamlet got mad at Claudius and fled Denmark for England, leaving his entourage behind. Then the music was cranked up and we were encouraged to dance, and some sensual play had begun. Unfortunately, there were not a lot of pillows or areas to lounge in that cellar, so the affordances encouraged me to stand around and talk, mostly. By the end of the night, our group returned to our room both exhausted and angry –– this larp could not decide whether or not it was a weird dance party in a castle basement or a Shakespearean urban intrigue larp. A player among us chose to depart the game for good the following morning. We were restless, for sure, wondering where our play was headed. And that was when the design saved us.

The morning was spent at the hostel, out of character. We ate breakfast as players, got to talk a little bit about some meta-level issues, and began another workshop. The workshop let me rebuild lots of small connections between various characters, as well as begin to establish limits of consent for failure play. For example, the Polish ambassador agreed upon how hard I ought to hit him. I chatted with Hamlet's entourage, who were in need of an Act Two plotline, and I said "Well, if Act Two has us under siege by Fortinbras' army, then I've deputized you all as new Stormguard members. Act Two can be your training!" That turned out to be a pivotal decision.

Refreshed, our Stormguard group began Act Two by patrolling

the ramparts of the castle. This meant physically leaving the play area and being photographed by a number of Japanese tourists as we sang a battle hymn together slightly out of key. We returned and started teaching the song, which we had just taught ourselves as players, to our new recruits from Hamlet's entourage. Suddenly, we had an established mentoring relationship and Stormguard values began to emerge and solidify due to intense play. It is difficult to even summarize the flurry of activity in Act Two. Giselle (the Companion) and Perdue confess their feelings to each other and fantasize about running off. The guardsmen continue to conduct séances and almost –– but not quite –– get an answer out of Old Hamlet about who killed him. At one point, a clergyman deceives one of the guardsmen and we decide to go rough him up. It was a particularly disturbing scene, in which we were boot-stomping a helpless man, but complicated by the meta-level fact that the player chose not to take the fictional punches very well; he acted as if nothing much had happened to him. We all had failed to negotiate boundaries of consent, in this instance. Nevertheless, such activities also gave play to others: the new recruits began to show off their brutal power over others, and they got to gaze into the amoral heart of our organization. Late in Act Two, Claudius begins to show extreme signs of faltering leadership, at which point we choose to declare loyalty to ourselves as Stormguard rather than the crown. Ophelia dies in the bathtub, and it is the Stormguard's duty to carry the larper's body before the Royals, who are aghast in horror. We are then given a dinner break before Act Three.

The dinner break was unforgettable. We had been instructed that Act Three would continue as with Act Two until Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead (a Stoppard reference), at which point our characters could then kill any characters we wanted until the end of the Act. Players whose characters were killed would lie in place until someone physically carried them, via 1930s stretcher, through the castle into the room designated as a chapel, where

they would lie. Intermittently, "dead" players could leave the larp through a side door from the chapel and join the after-party in the basement. What this encouraged the Stormguard to do was to draw up a "kill list." Who were the characters who most deserved death? The clergyman, obviously. We devised a signal that, once Rosencrantz & Guildenstern's meta-death scene had elapsed, would have us gather and destroy him. But whom else would we kill? All of the personal grudges built up over the larp spilled out, various Stormguard enemies and rivals among them. Our energy for Act Three was high and our weapons ready.

A character in Act 3 has a nasty surprise in store for them. Photo of Inside Hamlet Run 1 – 2018 by Boris Bernhard, used with permission

Act Three delivered to us the results of previous efforts. It turned out that half of our new recruits from Hamlet's entourage were actually communists (!) and the other half were sadists, exploiting the Stormguard office for profit. Meanwhile, the Stormguard themselves were incompetent enough to let Hamlet sneak back into the castle with the help of Horatio. I was able to play on this

extreme dramatic irony when Perdue mused aloud to Horatio how he had no idea how Hamlet got past all his guards. The communists in my ranks pushed hard on the angle that, since we were no longer loyal to Claudius, we could open the gates to Fortinbras and he would hopefully spare our lives. Giselle lured Perdue away from the action and he got a chance to lounge around amidst all the intrigue. And then Rosencrantz & Guildenstern died in a meta-scene, and the bloodshed began –– the TPK.

Captain Bernardo was swift with his whistle and we immediately found the clergyman. In the fiction, we described to the player that we threw him down the spiral staircase, and then we brought him out to the courtyard, where we first shot and then beheaded him. Never have I felt so satisfied and so conflicted about inflicting a death on someone in-game. Our crew was then drawn into a final séance with a psychic and a number of spirituals, wherein we finally learned Old Hamlet was indeed slain by the treacherous Claudius. But there was something malevolent about that spirit, because he wound up cutting down several people in the ritual. The Stormguard suddenly had a player-logistical task on its hands: carting several bodies the long way to the chapel, one by one. Marcellus took a pause from this work, only to be called into a duel and fatally injured. The Stormguard sang a hymn in honor of his demise. I was so tired afterward that I settled onto the couch next to Giselle, who started to talk to me about leaving the castle forever. "Aren't we… a part of the castle, the Companions and the Stormguard?" I asked, suggesting that we would outlast any corrupt regime. It was at that point that Fernando showed up with 2 champagne bottles. He gave one to each of us. Unbeknownst to me, Fernando's advances had been rejected by Giselle earlier in the game. Giselle's bottle was poisoned; mine was not. Giselle took a swig, realized she had been killed, and chose to take Perdue with her, strangling me right then and there on the couch. Fernando

returned to find me dead, but when he checked on Giselle, she strangled him too with her dying breath. I sat "dead" on the couch for quite a long time before I was then carted off to the chapel, having the pleasure of then having my gun stripped off me by a rival. Quietly, I snuck out down to the courtyard and then to the cellar, where the game was over and I could drop character entirely. The full debrief would be at the hostel in the morning, so we partied into the night, swapping character stories.

OUTSIDE *INSIDE HAMLET*

Games are genealogical, and all designs emerge from iterations of previous ones. In the case of *Inside Hamlet*, its direct design predecessor would be the Swedish spaceship larp Monitor Celestra (2013) co-created between Cecilia Dolk and Martin Ericsson and run three times on the real destroyer ship Småland. Monitor Celestra was inspired by the television show Battlestar Galactica (2004-2006), and thus had its play divided into Episodes, which would then become *Inside Hamlet*'s Act structure. That larp also had stark divisions between those serving on the Bridge and those who were at the lowest levels of the ship, showing off the kind of class-structure play that would emerge between *Inside Hamlet*'s Royals, Nobility, and everyone else. This should remind us that larp design is deeper than the typical traded genres. There are deep structures to larps that transcend fantasy boffer, urban intrigue, spaceship, and/or parlor larp distinctions. It also points to another source of inspiration for *Inside Hamlet*'s development: television. Royal Houses in *Inside Hamlet* take inspiration from, among others, *Sons of Anarchy* (2008), *Game of Thrones* (2011), and *Dune* (2000). Adaptation of serialized entertainment into easy-to-understand character networks of larp is not an uncommon practice.

Inside Hamlet would also lay the groundwork for several further important Nordic larp developments. One was the acquisition

of White Wolf by Paradox Interactive and the appointment of Ericsson to create the new line of World of Darkness larps and TRPGs. Ericsson would work together with effectively the same team as *Inside Hamlet* –– including Pedersen and Koljonen –– to deliver the first new World of Darkness larp *End of the Line* (2016), which had its initial run in an abandoned squat near Helsinki (Bowman, 2016). There, much as with *Inside Hamlet*, the event was organized as a party experience in a unique location that contained both alibis for interaction –– a predator-prey relationship between vampires and humans present –– and characters who were essentially horrible people who should be "played to lose." *End of the Line* joined *College of Wizardry* (2014) as a high-profile Nordic genre larp that would be run in the United States and receive critical accolades, including a nomination for a Diana Jones Award. Its direct descendents, now that further runs of *Inside Hamlet* have been postponed indefinitely due to Danish heritage politics dealing with Kronborg, can be found in the horror larp *Baphomet* (2017). This has been run numerous times at Lungholm Castle in Denmark, and presents players with the personal horror of being entrapped by a death cult. Players play cultists in the 1930s who, over the course of a weekend, are alternately possessed by the gods Pan and Baphomet –– signified by the necklace they're wearing –– and given over to madness and death. *Inside Hamlet* inspired much of the safety mechanics, the costume stylings, and the overall arc of the game. Seeds of horror were planted by the tragedy of *Hamlet*, leading me to believe that, at least in terms of larp, horror and tragedy are perhaps not that far from each other.

A character in a quiet moment, contemplating whether to die––to sleep––or continue to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Inside Hamlet Run 1 – 2018 (photo Boris Bernhard, used with permission)

FINAL WORDS

Without a doubt, *Inside Hamlet* also accomplished something quite banal: re-enchanting Shakespeare's play for me. This is, however, where I took note of the experience as a literature scholar. *Inside Hamlet* had not only brought the main characters to life in the form of active co-players with whom one could drink and have intrigue, but it also made visceral the various stages of the drama as it unfolded. Act One felt like a ghost hunt, misruled state, and messed-up party all rolled together in one; Act Two was filled with intrigue and ever-complicating allegiances; Act Three with weariness and then violent, unforgiving death. Although the original took 5 acts to explore these things, centering on Hamlet and witnessing his gut-wrenchingly slow downfall, the "structures of feeling," as

Raymond Williams (1977, p. 128) once put it, are all contained within the game.

If we consider the run through the earlier-posited frameworks of larps as alibis for interaction and as temporary, social realities, then different aspects of play reveal themselves. For one thing, it is not that exciting to be a guard in a larp. The designers adapted the original *Hamlet* guard stage business into a larp-length activity: holding séances that would determine Claudius murdered the elder Hamlet. But the beautiful play we experienced turned out to be emergent: recruiting new Stormguard trainees without regard for their background and forming genuine feelings of camaraderie with them, only to have them turn out to be the exact wrong people to have in a uniform with authority. Our temporary social reality revealed a military institution increasingly folding in on itself and becoming self-serving, not dissimilar to the institution of the "thin blue line" rhetoric of the American police in the 2010s. When we served no higher purpose, then we suddenly formed an organization that would protect our own, and not only failed to do so, but adopted increasingly petty and fascistic methods to enforce our rule. Five years later, I see that *Inside Hamlet* succeeded at letting us watch ourselves become the dark social clichés we were always meant to be. "Go," Fortinbras said at the end. "Bid the soldiers shoot." We deserved it.

A character mourns Ophelia, as she lies in state, Inside Hamlet Run 1 – 2018 (photo by Boris Bernhard, used with permission)

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INTERPRETING INTERACTIVE ROLE-PLAYING AT EVERMORE PARK

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> Ever wanted to enter the pages of your favorite book? #Evermore is a place where you can #EntertheStory and even influence what happens! Make friends with characters and join them on their adventures. What are you hoping to see from #Pyrra?
>
> Tweet from @evermorepark, May 28, 2019

Evermore Park is an interactive themed entertainment experience located outside of Salt Lake City, Utah. Ken Bretschneider, who earned his fortune in the early 2000s in a digital security company and who co-founded the virtual reality entertainment company The Void, created Evermore Park, LLC alongside former Disney Imagineer Josh Shipley. Evermore has been described as a "fantasy European hamlet of imagination" and "an experience park where guests of all ages can escape to a new realm" (*What Is Evermore | Evermore.Com*, n.d.). Evermore has historically been open three evenings a week during its two-to-three-month seasonal events, and visitors can interact with costumed residents of the town who are responsible for improvising their way through a loosely constructed overarching narrative that takes many weekends to unfurl. Evermore Park

is a storytelling platform that simultaneously engages all four of Steve Dixon's four levels of interactivity: *navigation, participation, conversation,* and *collaboration. (Dixon, 2007, p. 563).* Guests can *navigate* the park and watch scenes play out before them, *participate* in quests by interacting with the characters, have in-depth *conversations* with actors and other visitors to uncover the story, and even become *collaborators* who shape the narrative by influencing how events unfold and how characters develop.

Image 1: Evermore Park in Pleasant Grove, Utah decorated for the 2019 Lore season.

Although most of the plot beats are pre-determined by a creative writing staff, the park's destiny is not fixed. Visitors to the park can actively engage in shaping not only elements of the story but also the dynamics between characters, the outcomes of events, and can even choose to become characters themselves by dressing in costume and adopting in-park personas. Alternatively, visitors can (and often do) choose a more passive experience by electing to stand back and watch. It can be a challenge to describe Evermore Park. For example, YouTuber Ginny Di opens her overview video called "Evermore Park is D&D in Real Life" by explaining that she didn't know what to

expect when she visited with her friends, because Google Maps search listing described it as a "theme park" while the Evermore website used the phrases "experience park" and "a world of play." "Was it going to be like a Renaissance Festival? Was it going to be like a LARP? Was it going to be like *Westworld* without robots?" she wondered. The answer, it seems, is a little bit of everything because it encourages engagement across the spectrum of interactivity. How visitors interpret it often involves making references to related media and entertainment that occupy each of Dixon's levels of interactivity. Interviews conducted at the park during two visits in 2019 most often revolved around a spectrum of *pleasures of agency* (Murray, 1997, p. 128) supported by design elements at Evermore that promote *immersion* and *interactivity*. In the same way that videogames negotiate the illusion that balances agency and structure (Charles, 2009; Stang, 2019), Evermore attempts to appeal to a broad audience from casual observers to dedicated participants who learn to interact with the park through *designed structures* and *media referents*.

This study of Evermore Park—close-reading/playing informed by participant observation and interviews— follows the methodological examples provided in entertainment and media tourism of Hobbiton (Peaslee, 2010; Singh & Best, 2004), Harry Potter tours in London (Larsen, 2015; Lee, 2012), and The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios (Gilbert, 2015; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2018). At their core, these studies combine first-hand accounts from their authors (who are well-prepared to dissect the place) with interviews of visitors who expand the interpretive view. This article is based on four trips to Evermore Park during two different seasons in which my colleague Dr. Stephanie Williams-Turkowski and I participated in the experience, conducted interviews with attendees on-site, and examined online fan discussion to understand how the park is "played" by its audience. Because themed entertainment experiences are complex, no single methodology can capture the

milieu of the place. This work is equal parts auto-ethnography, participant observation, participant interviews, close reading/playing, and design analysis. Evermore Park is continually evolving, and this work captures the state it was in from the opening season in summer 2018 through the end of its winter season in early 2020. The park was in-between seasons when the COVD-19 pandemic paused its reopening and, when it resumed for its summer 2020 season Pyrra, a number of structural changes were implemented that are different from those described here. More recently, Evermore Park LLC released a statement explaining that even its summer 2021 seasonal operating procedures were no longer tenable and will need to undergo major changes to the interactive theatrical components. I will briefly address these differences at the conclusion, but they invite follow-up study. The goal is to paint a picture of what Evermore Park was during its "initial" run, how it was experienced, and how it was perceived.

When Evermore Park opened in 2018, the company assumed that its visitors would understand how to navigate an immersive theater presentation that asked them to engage with the actors to uncover its stories. During the seven seasons the park has operated, however, its designers have adapted to different audience expectations by creating structures for play such as quests and treasure hunts. Because Evermore Park is an entertainment space that blends theater and play, this research builds off of the example set by Rose Biggin in *Immersive Theater and Audience Experience* which examined the popular "immersive" performances by Punchdrunk, the company whose production *Sleep No More* gained popular global appeal. Biggin also drew on Dixon's levels of interactivities and her work theorized immersion and interactivity as related to the history of theater, play, and games. Her subject of study prioritizes the *immersive* experience in which "participants are asked to lose themselves in the drama as it progresses and makers work towards the aim

of keeping illusion to a maximum" over *interactive* experiences in which "participants are asked to bring their own experience and understanding to bear on the drama as it progresses and illusion is kept to a minimum" (O'Grady, 2011, pp. 168–172, cited in Biggin). As a subject of study, Evermore Park offers a new perspective on the topic by providing a concrete example of how a company can operationalize the game-like potentials of immersive theater that Biggin alluded to in her later chapters, and that Rosemary Klich describes in her comparative media studies analysis of *Punchdrunk* and videogame interactivity (Klich, 2016).

Of particular utility here is how Biggin examined the *themes* that emerge when audiences are asked to describe an experience like *Sleep No More*. Reactions from participants (and, in particular, *fans* of the form) "can be used to build a vocabulary of what is valued in immersive experience, with consequences for theorising the value and effects of immersive theatre" (Biggin, 2017, p. 97). The language used by our interviewees and discussion about Evermore Park demonstrate how parkgoers find enjoyment (or do not) at each of Dixon's levels of interactivity. Wandering the grounds and listening in on conversations is as viable a mode of interaction as adopting an in-park persona and befriending the characters. Because Evermore Park is new to both its audience and its operators, the illusion is managed by all involved. Not only does participation in an immersive storytelling world require an invitation and structure but, as Jonas Linderoth (2012) observes, it also takes sustained work by even the most motivated participants. These visitors are willing to engage in spite of the shortcomings of the system. Inside of the park, visitors can choose to engage at any level, though it is often the park's dedicated fans who develop relationships with Evermore's characters that enable deep collaborative labor. Outside of the park, Evermore relies on fans whose labor, as Carissa-Ann Baker describes, is used to

"interpret both the space [of the park] and the practices [of fandom]" by documenting events, posting guides, and promoting this unique experience (Baker, 2016, p. 22). This magic requires work.

The journal of our experiences at Evermore Park that follows alludes to the messiness of categorizing it. Though it has no rides, it's often discussed as a theme park because of its ambitious scale, fantastic architecture, and narrative environment. It's like a Renaissance fair with its mashup of genre fictions, British Isle character accents, and archery contests, yet it has a persistent story that binds these elements together. It's like a live-action role-playing event that takes place in front of an audience. It's like a game because newcomers are encouraged to go on quests, yet the only reward is more knowledge. It's like visiting Star Wars Galaxy's Edge at Disneyland or Hogsmeade at Universal Studios, except that visitors are encouraged to talk with the performers and direct the action. And because visitors to Evermore Park are able to choose their level of engagement, experiences can be plotted on a wide spectrum. It's possible to visit and never directly speak with one of the many characters who populate the town, opting instead to be a passive observer. At the other end of the spectrum, it is also possible to become steeped in the lore and wear an elaborate costume that supports a character with an imagined backstory while deeply engaging with other Everfolk. By examining how Evermore Park's amalgamation of media—theme park, immersive and interactive theater, games, and play—is structured and interpreted, we can understand the unique experience it strives to create.

INTRODUCING EVERMORE PARK

The grounds of Evermore Park (called the town of Evermore) are modeled as a small European village in an architectural style commonly seen in the fantasy genre. The Evermore narrative is set during the 19th century, which means that when attendees

cross the threshold into the park they are "coming through a portal" and stepping back in time. Activities in Evermore Park take place in a mix of indoor and outdoor spaces. The Crooked Lantern tavern, Hobbit-like home of the Burrows, the mausoleum, catacombs, and the Glass House (host to a bird and reptile show) draw visitors inside while outside hubs such as the town square, courtyard in front of the statue of St. Michael, faerie gardens, the paths around the crypts, the Fallen Alter Ruins, and the various canvas tents along the sidewalk that circles the town serve as public gathering spaces. Though the park shares common elements with something like a Renaissance Festival—a mashup of fantasy tropes in a historical setting—Evermore Park is architecturally consistent and plausible. The town of Evermore is populated by characters who are either residents or visitors who have come through a special portal that opens each season to new realms. Residents include the mayor and her staff, the postman, the tavern keeper and his employees, the acting troupe, the musician dwarves Lanny and Turno, and members of the various "guilds" that call Evermore home. Transient visitors from other realms may eventually come to reside permanently as the story dictates. All of Evermore's inhabitants ("Everfolk") are involved in a narrative that unfolds over the course of the 8–10-week season.

Each narrative season at Evermore Park begins with the same event: the opening of a portal located in the center of town. In the backstory, the village of Evermore was founded when this portal opened from another realm centuries ago and the first settlers (who we would think of as humans) came through. Not long after, the portal closed and sealed the other realms away. It remained sealed until two years ago (mid 19th century in the fiction) when a powerful witch named Wen Weaver and a scientist-inventor named James Wikam figured out a way to re-open the portal in order to explore what was within. All was well for a short while (the Mythos 2018 season) until the portal to

the realm of Lore opened and various evils poured through. This inaugurated Evermore Park's second season and was followed in the winter by Aurora and again in the summer by the re-opening of Mythos. Some actors have played the same role from season to season while others have inhabited new characters as dictated by the backstage production group who crafts the story and directs the show. Supported by the costume and set designers, and makeup and special effects artists of Evermore Creative Studio, the story of Evermore Park is ever-changing.

Each night that the park is open, actors play out parts of an ongoing story while guests (known in the Evermore Park fiction as "World Walkers") can choose their level of participation. Many guests—whether groups of friends or families with children—come dressed in everyday street clothes with little information about the park's ongoing story. Others, who may have spent time before their trip reading about the intricacies of that season's ongoing narratives on fan websites and Facebook pages, attend in costume in a manner akin to a pop culture or comic convention . The park also has regular attendees who are experts that try to visit as often as possible. Major story beats are planned in advance, but the day-to-day lives of the characters and unfolding of the narrative is malleable because the actors improvise with one another and the World Walkers. With the exception of a novella published in 2020 to tide fans over until the park could re-open, Evermore Park has no media tie-ins—it is neither based on an existing franchise nor has been adapted into other forms of media. The only official method of participating is by living in or traveling to Utah and purchasing admission. This reveals the challenge of Evermore Park: it is a participatory experience unfamiliar to many Americans and, as a result, the park operators have had to adapt their structures by borrowing from other familiar forms of playful performance including (as elucidated in my travelogue below) immersive

theater, live-action roleplaying, tabletop role-playing games, video games, Renaissance Fairs, media tourism, and theme parks.

CLOSE-PLAYING THE PARK IN TWO VISITS

I had some sense of what to expect during my first trip to Evermore Park (which occurred during middle of the 2019 season of Lore), having heard it described as being like a "theme park without rides." I also knew that other attendees might be in costume like any number of the geeky conventions or Renaissance fairs I had previously visited. Crucially, I knew it was participatory and prepared myself to engage as deeply as possible to take in all that it had to offer during the Saturday and Monday evenings of my visit. Assuming that most first-time visitors would go in with little-to-no knowledge of the on-going story, I purposely avoided learning any details not advertised on the website. Notably, Evermore Park does not publish an official record of events in the park nor the details of the story. Any visitor who wants these details must turn to the efforts of other fans who maintain the Facebook groups, a wiki, YouTube channels, and podcasts. Two-day ticket in-hand and liability and media release wavier signed, I boarded a plane to what would be the first of two field trips to study Evermore.

Evermore Park is located in a suburb of Salt Lake City called Pleasant Grove. Interstate 15—which leads south from Utah's capital along the narrow band between Utah Lake and the Wasatch Range of the Rocky Mountains—is packed with suburban homes, shopping centers, and corporate offices overlooking the highway. Three-quarters of the way to Provo, Evermore Park is conspicuously tucked away amidst newly built business parks and fast-casual restaurants in a way reminiscent of a Disneyland Resort butting up against neighboring homes in Anaheim, CA. The approach, via car, lacks the gravitas of a large sign announcing the visitor's arrival and it has a simple parking lot adjacent to the entrance. Like Disneyland, Evermore Park is

surrounded by tall fences, an earthen berm, and walls that keep the outside and inside worlds from mingling. By the time the park opened at 5 p.m. Saturday, a line of nearly one-hundred people had formed on the sidewalk outside the gate. The queue showed a mixture of costumed and un-costumed visitors. Most attendees came in groups and regular visitors greeted one another and the staff who was managing the line. A cursory estimate of the demographics revealed that the large majority of Evermore attendees were racially white, ages seemed to range from teenagers to 60-somethings, and there was a diversity of gender expressions represented in costuming.

The structure of Evermore Park demonstrates what it values in its visitors' experiences. First, it offers an immersive and detailed place to explore. Second, it encourages visitors to become active participants in order to learn about the on-going narrative and the stories of the park's many characters. Third, if a visitor's intrinsic desire to learn about the stories is not enough, they motivate interaction through reward mechanisms like earning gold or ranking-up with the park's various factions. In addition to its core mission of a participatory narrative experience, Evermore Park appeals to a broader audience through seasonal activities designed to draw in local Utahans. The 'Lore' season drew on the popularity of the Halloween "haunt" industry, wherein one might expect to encounter spooky corn mazes or haunted attractions populated with actors jumping out and frightening visitors. Thanks to the mix of attendees, the story beats of the weekend, and the seasonal event, this first visit turned out to provide a reasonable overview of the Evermore Park experience.

Unlike the uniformed/naïve approach I took to Lore, during my second trip in December—accompanied by fellow researcher Dr. Stephanie Williams-Turkowski—I took the opposite perspective and attempted to learn about the "Aurora" season's on-going story ahead of the trip to see how the experience changed. I

already possessed some knowledge of the characters from Lore (especially the Evermore residents) and was able to reference YouTube videos and a fan wiki site to identify new characters. This strategy enabled me to choose what level of familiarity I wished to perform and, crucially, made finding and referring to characters much easier. For example, I entered the Crooked Lantern Tavern and warmly addressed the owner "Suds" as an old acquaintance so that I could ask how he had been since the tumultuous events of Lore. When I met the Elves of Light, however, I feigned ignorance of their backstory that I had read online so that I could begin my participation with a clean slate. During this visit, Dr. Williams-Turkowski entered the park with only a bit of background knowledge, and we negotiated with each other on the fly whether I would step back in particular situations so she could have an unfiltered first-time experience. Dr. Williams-Turkowski also conducted semi-structured interviews with eighteen attendees while I attempted to follow along with the core events of the two evenings.

TRIP 1: LORE, FALL 2020

When I arrived at Evermore Park, I was given a guide that had a map on one side and a list of introductory quests on the reverse. The map revealed the village's circular layout along an asphalt path. The entrance and town square greeted guests, who would then proceed past the gardens and glass greenhouse, the tavern, the crypt and mausoleum, a large courtyard and marble stairs in front of a colorfully illuminated statue of St. Michael, the Hobbit-like Burrows underground home, and the "ruins" that housed a fifteen-foot-tall talking demon. Though the circular path reconnected back to the town square, the eastern half of the park was still largely under construction at the time. In the center of the park was a hay maze, a handful of multipurpose tents and stalls, and an axe throwing and archery range. A series of quests—which were new as of the 2019 Lore season—were intended to orient a first-time visitor to the park. Some

introductory quests offered gold as a reward which could then be used to buy information or influence (or a souvenir postcard), while others led to new parts of the story.

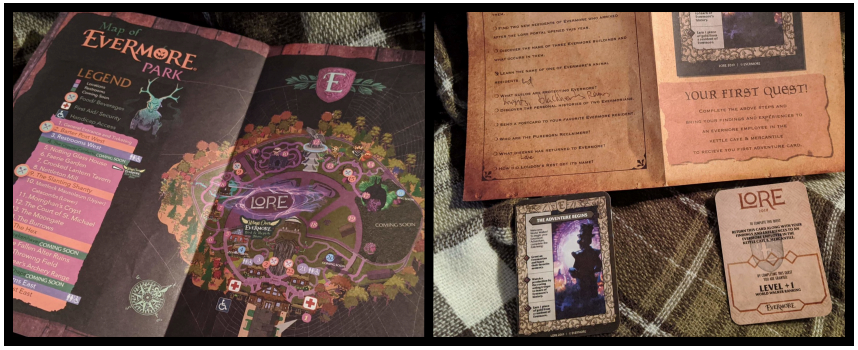

Image 2: Park map, orientation guide, and quest cards. Photo courtesy Theme Park ASMR blog.

The goal of these quests is to help World Walkers learn about the story of the park and Evermore's residents, and to familiarize them with basic mechanics of participating: you can converse with the actors, the park is intended to be explored non-linearly, and Evermore is a persistent world that carries on in a clockwork fashion. Before entering, I was also given a copy of the *Evermore Gazette*—a broadsheet "newspaper" recounting some of the events that had taken place in previous weeks (though, without context for who the characters were, it was difficult to decipher its significance). The Gazette functioned like a television show's "previously on…" segment and provided additional story "rabbit holes," a term derived from *Alice and Wonderland* used to describe covert mechanisms in Alternate Reality Games that invite players to follow a thread without overtly revealing it as a game or quest (Montola et al., 2009, p. 27).

When the gates opened, I used the theme park tactic of heading straight toward the back of the town in hopes that I could skip past some of the crowd bottlenecks and encounter characters

one-on-one. (In retrospect, this was a mistake because I should have tagged along with my fellow newbies to get better acquainted with the backstory.) Taking in the layout of the village, I was curious as to where actors would be stationed and what it would be like to approach them. I consulted the quests and asked a few Everfolk for information, though it became clear that characters who had more significance to the on-going narrative were less accessible than characters whose primary purpose was to answer introductory questions. Because attendees are permitted to wear costumes, one of the foremost important things to learn was that Evermore cast members could be identified by necklaces that display a glowing green gem. As the evening progressed, I got a sense of how the park was operating but had trouble following the main story thread. Upon my return visits, I realized there are not many mechanisms that enable new visitors to dive into the deep end this way. Evermore Park very much relies on visitors taking the initiative to ask questions of the actors, rather than the actors offering up invitations.

The 2019 Lore season's story began when one of Evermore's protectors became corrupted and transformed into the gruesome Fae King, who then aided creatures called the Darkbloods in infesting the village. Thus, not only was the overarching story of the Lore season appropriately macabre for Halloween, Evermore Park added additional "scare actors" to terrorize visitors in the catacombs and graveyard, turned the Burrows into a swampy cesspool using fog machines and green lasers, and built a hay maze for kids, Unlike the visitors who were ready to dive into the story when the gates opened at 5pm, local casual visitors looking for a Halloween haunt attraction arrived throughout the evening and eventually outnumbered the costumed visitors. The park was well-attended on Saturday until a light rain drove most away. Monday, owing at least in part to a favorable forecast, was much more crowded.

That weekend's storyline presented a new challenge: the Darkbloods were beginning to infect Everfolk with a plague, slowly turning them into zombie-like beings with fading memories. It was a dramatic plot point that meant that a number of the actors were being taken out of commission for conversational interaction. Knowing that this was the primary conflict at the moment, I tried to get involved by asking various Everfolk if there was anything I could assist with. The idea came from my experiences with roleplaying video games , and it seemed like an open-ended enough question. In a couple of instances, I was asked to deliver information to another character ("tell them I'll meet them here at 9 o'clock") or was instructed to ask another character for information. In the other instances, I was told by the character that they didn't have anything for me to do and they suggested I ask somebody else. Both of these cases presented the same problem, though: as a newcomer to Evermore I didn't know who most of the Everfolk were. And asking around to identify who they were was made more difficult by the fact that character names, while unique, were hard to remember and easy to mix-up: the Elven archer Vaella, Ariadne the Princess of Spiders, Kyrah and Caderyn and Kilyrie, Arawn the Knight Captain and Oran the Pirate. Frustrated by my inability to accomplish the goals I had set out for myself, I turned back to a pre-existing structures of participation: the guilds.

Evermore is home to a number of guilds that group particular characters into factions. During Lore 2019, there were the Knights of Mythos, the Elven Rangers, the Bards (comprised of the Acting Troupe characters), the Blackhearts, and the Pirates of the Last Shackle. The tenants of each guild are multi-purpose: they influence that guild's motivations and involvement in the day-to-day of Evermore, they function like a "personality quiz" that can align a visitor's allegiances to invest them in particular characters, and they are a utilitarian narrative justification for

the tutorial tasks the guild assigns that help orient visitors to the dynamics of the park. As I learned, joining a guild is a matter of completing a series of three tasks that represent the ethos of that group—the structural behind-the-scenes purpose of which is to promote exploration and interactivity. For example, the Knights Guild represents *honor*, *loyalty*, and *wit* while the Blackheart Hunters value *bravery*, *strength*, and *wisdom*. The tasks often involve seeking out other characters to talk with and learn something from, visiting a specific location, performing for other characters in the park, answering riddles and reciting stories. The actors in the park, so long as they are not presently involved with either another World Walker or story event, are prepared to make suggestions that will help visitors fulfill the requirements of the various guilds. I wanted to join the Pirates of the Last Shackle, which involved me showing the value of *freedom* by asking someone to take my photo while "meditating on being incarcerated" in a dangling cage, testing my *luck* by trekking through the scare-actor infested crypt, and proving my *boldness* performing a dance for one of the members of the Acting Troupe. When all three were completed, I returned to Captain Duphrane who taught me the sign of the pirates (a hand gesture that could be used to indicate my membership to other actors who wouldn't know me) and gave me additional "insider" tasks that I could complete while waiting for the induction ceremony near the end of the night. Again, I found myself frustrated by not knowing the names of characters while trying to accomplish these new tasks. With the cold rain coming down steadily and the induction ceremony still a ways off, I left the park discouraged.

The second night, in many ways, was what the first should have been. The four hours of experience I had from the previous visit were an immediate boon. I could greet the handful of characters I knew with a knowing nod and friendly hello. As opposed to Evermore's regular visitors, who the actors come to know, new visitors like me need to indicate to an actor that they *should*

know me within the fiction. Gestures like this function as an immediate shortcut that changes the dynamic between World Walker and Everfolk. During this second evening I was successfully able to join the Pirates Guild, followed the core story of the infection more closely, and felt more confident in my interactions with both the Everfolk and other visitors. I closed out the second night wrapped up in the action: Hal, one of the infected members of the Rangers Guild, had been banished to the quarantine zone surrounding the Statue of St. Michael. We learned that Hal was working on a cure for the infection and needed to smuggle ingredients to his laboratory to work on his concoction. The quarantine area was located at the back of the park whereas the lab was at the front. Thus, a group of World Walkers needed to band together to sneak him away. In this scenario, Hal was permitted to walk the grounds of the cemetery adjacent to the quarantine zone. So when the clock struck 9:30 he began pacing a route through the cemetery and the mausoleum. We followed to provide protection and, when another Everfolk spotted him attempting to deviate, he resumed walking the same path again. The behavior was like watching a video game character on a programmed patrol route. Another World Walker (who I later learned is a regular attendee) played the role of antagonist to us and tried to foil our escape. I then devised a plan and whispered it to my companions: when we reached the mausoleum, our group would flank the entrances to block the pursuing World Walker while Hal was inside. I quickly threw my rain jacket over top of him and pulled the hood up to hide his long blonde hair. I then put on my other coat and pulled its hood up and we split the group into two different directions. I resumed walking Hal's route and our adversary lost track of the real Hal in the mix-up. (I then had to break the immersion in order to find someone from the other group to retrieve my jacket, at which point the park began closing for the night.) It was only in this final hour of my trip that I understood what fans have come to love about Evermore Park.

TRIP 2: AURORA, WINTER 2020

As previously noted, I prepared heavily for my return trip during the winter season. I listened to summary podcasts of what had happened since my Lore visit. The Portal to Aurora brought with it the cheery Elves of Light who were being chased by the steely-eyed Wolves of Winter. Ahead of the trip, I made note of the new characters in my phone's notes app by copying their names and headshots from the Evermore Fans wiki. (This was used to keep track of who I met rather than to approach the characters as if I already knew them.) I was congenial toward the characters I met on my previous excursion, such as Suds the tavern owner, Sir Philip the postman, and the singing dwarves Lanny and Turno. I shed my affiliation with the Pirates and decided to try joining other guilds to meet new characters. Another important event that came into play during this visit was an unexpected run in with the woman who runs the Evermore Fans Facebook and YouTube pages. Recognizing her (and remembering seeing her husband during Lore), I introduced myself. I learned that she and her family visit every night the park is open and are responsible for nearly all of the Evermore footage that can be found online. Their deep understanding of the narrative and familiarity with all of the characters around Evermore means that, like intrepid journalists, they can chase the story. The family participates together, recording videos from multiple angles or splitting up when necessary to capture events happening simultaneously in different locations. Not only were the videos themselves useful as primers before visiting, but I could be assured that if any member of the family was rushing off with camera in hand, I should pursue them because an important narrative event was bound to be taking place.

During the weekend of the Aurora visit, the central conflict was that the Elves of Light had been providing the townsfolk—who were slowly starving because the events of Lore destroyed their crops and cut off their food supply lines—with a "snowberry pie"

that instantly satiated those who ate it, but inflicted them with a form of manic joy that seemed to be controlling their minds and bodies. The newly "pie-eyed" Everfolk were rambunctious and humorous; this gave the normally serious actors a chance to joke around and behave like children on the playground at recess. The Wolves of Winter, distrustful of the Elves, attempted to convince Everfolk not to eat the narcotic snowberry pie and the evening featured a number of confrontations between characters. I was also privy to an intimate gathering inside of Mausoleum on the second night, when the Wolves of Winter broke one of the Everfolk free from the Elves' spell and recruited her into their pack.

Image 3: Up close and personal as a scene plays out with the Wolves of Winter.

On the first night, we encountered an example of a repeatable story-relevant task that could be assigned to World Walkers. The mystic wizard Zhodi—who had expended much of his power in a previous weekend while trying to save another character—had taken up meditation in the catacombs. World Walkers who stumbled upon him sitting in a corner would notice that he was

infatuated with the twinkling lights being projected on the stone walls around him. If they chose to ask him what he was doing, Zhodi would respond by wistfully ruminating about wanting to make "the spirits happy" (Evermore Fans, 2019). If a World Walker decided to pursue this further by asking how they could help (which we did), Zhodi suggested it might be possible to feed snowberry pie to the spirits and that he would like to know the ingredients. Later, on subsequent trips through the catacombs, we overheard him make this same request of other groups. In this way, this particular challenge could be "instanced" — a term from online games in which individuals or small groups of players receive the same quest as one another but complete that task as if it is unique to them.

In the same way that Lore was designed to complement the Halloween season, Aurora featured Christmas trappings. A children's choir performed carols, the Elves of Light dressed in red and green outfits trimmed with white fur, and the festively lit gardens and often snow-covered grounds were ready-made for Instagram. Evermore Park, in this way, could serve as holiday leisure for people not invested in the narratives of the park. Anecdotally, we spoke with a number of people (including a number of parents attending with their children) who explained that this was the reason they were in the park, though none of these were captured in our interviews.

How Visitors Make Sense of Evermore

> It's difficult to explain because Evermore is so unique. Because it's like a play. It's like a theme park. It's like a "Choose Your Own Adventure."
> (World Talkers, 2019, Ep. 1).

Evermore Park strives to be the kind of place that would be described as "a well-designed environment, [in which] agency and immersion reinforce one another through the active creation of belief" (Murray, 2011, p. 24) and the two prominent high-level

concepts that emerged when interviewing participants were the way they expressed the values of *immersion* and *interactivity*. On the surface these may seem obvious, but the interviews reveal how these ideas are informed by frames of reference from other media and how that drives different levels of participation. Following Biggin's analytical approach to interpreting the language that *Sleep No More* fans had used to describe the performance, we examined Evermore visitors' discussions to gain insight into how they make sense of the park. Based on our interviews, the most frequent media descriptors were "theme park" and "live-action Dungeons and Dragons." These were complemented with mentions of other tabletop RPGs, board games, video games , *World of Warcraft*, and *Lord of the Rings*, and amusement parks and theater. Emerging from these examples were the intertwined qualities of *immersion* and *interactivity*.

VALUING IMMERSION

Our interviewees (whether organically or as part of a prompt) agreed that "theme park" at least in-part applies to how they would characterize Evermore Park, but it always came with an elaboration that alluded to an imagined definition of what a theme park is and is not. "I heard it described as, like, it's a theme park but there's no rides" (Michelle, personal interview). "I say it's an interactive amusement park; like an immersive amusement park" (Finley, personal interview). "Theme park" was repeatedly as shorthand for a narratively themed experience like one would find in places like Disneyland or the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. This aligns with early theme park scholar Margaret J. King's interpretation of theme parks as "total-sensory-engaging environmental art form built to express a coherent but multi-layered message" (King, 2002, p. 3). Drawn from a pre-history that includes landscaped gardens, lavish palatial architecture, fairs and exhibitions, King's description of the theme park could be applied to Evermore Park. But it does

not recognize the tight association between theme parks and rides in the popular consciousness. During a promotional campaign when Evermore Park was first announced in 2014, CEO Ken Bretschneider told *Theme Park University* that he viewed the park as "location-based entertainment" and wanted to focus on storytelling because, "We have polled people and found that when it comes to a Disney experience, guests tend to rate attractions like *Pirates of The Caribbean* or *Haunted Mansion* higher than the thrill attractions" (Young, 2014). Rather than experience the pirate town of Tortuga from a boat in a canal track, Evermore's creators wanted to give visitors the freedom to wander around the sets. In the lead up to the park's opening in 2018, Chief Creative Officer Josh Shipley explained on the ThrillGeek podcast that "Evermore is a giant theatrical stage […] We have to correct people when they ask about Evermore and refer to it as a theme park because a lot of times you heard the word 'theme park' and you think of the D[isney] and U[niversal] out there and you tend to paint these different pictures with attractions and stuff, and we are very much an immersive theatrical space. […] a space that you walk into to react and be a part of" (ThrillGeek 2018). Walking into a park fully surrounded by walls and a berm has a positive effect on the "magic circle" quality of the space: "It's weird because, you know, we are staying at the hotel across the way and then you come in here and then it's completely… it's a different realm, right?" (Michelle, personal interview).

Why visitors tend describe it as a theme park, then, can be attributed to resemblance: The 'theming' of a theme park is what "renders this strangeness domesticated," describes theme park scholar Deborah Philips. "It is the employment of well-loved and recognized tales that makes the 'empty space' and alien territory of the theme park pleasurable and familiar" (Philips, 1999, p. 91). Absent of rides, elements of theme parks present in Evermore Park include: the fabrication of other places through

architecture, navigable physical space, the use of environmental storytelling, narrative attractions (in Evermore's case, tableau performances), and design informed by the convergence of many media (Baker, 2019). Mia, who described it as "Disneyland for nerds," elaborated that Evermore Park's attractions are designed to be enjoyed by geek culture fandom in the same way Disney parks appeal to fans of Disney animation or Pixar (Mia, personal interview).

In the realms of entertainment, media and theater, *immersion* and *illusion* carry particular (and perhaps contentious) meanings. Media historian Janet H. Murray describes immersion as an illusion in which "a stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us" (Murray, 1997, p. 98). But, as Lizzie Stark (2012) describes, even though the desire to play make-believe appeals to a broad portion of the population, not everybody is going to feel comfortable playing *Dungeons & Dragons* or cosplaying at their local comic convention, and therefore need guidance when joining LARP experiences. In Evermore, parkgoers need not plunge into the deep-end of the immersion pool–they can wade in and out as the evening requires. This is a fascinating tension. Striving for immersion, Evermore Park faces an uphill battle. Its visitors come to it with different levels of experience with related forms of media, so it cannot fully rely on familiarity with any single reference point. Immersion can be broken if the actors have trouble improvising in a given scenario, if a piece of the set (like a Styrofoam jack-o-lantern) blows away in the wind, if the visitor runs into a narrative dead-end or becomes frustrated by their inability to engage.

Image 4: World Walkers gather in the Burrows to sing and dance with Lani and Terno the dwarves and the Elves of Light.

However, in our interviews, the use of "immersion" by parkgoers was not an indication of "obliterating" the real world but rather seeking out exciting potential. "Immersion" (or "immersive") was used by our interviewees in a handful of ways: requiring participation, engaging in a way other media are not, and separated from daily life. In contrast to other themed environments that may be visually/physically immersive, immersion in Evermore Park is often collated with agency: "I like the immersive part about it and just being in the world and then as an actor being able to participate and have fun like this is my sort of play" (Finley, personal interview). Perhaps counter-intuitively, watching other people become immersed is its own form of pleasure. William, who described having visited "many times," said, "I see the same people. Not just the actors. People get really immersed." But he surprised us by admitting that immersion isn't necessary for enjoyment: "We just walk around. I never do any of that" (William, personal interview). (William

proceeded to contrast Evermore Park with the Renaissance Fairs he attends, which he felt were not immersive.)

Visiting Evermore Park may not be the typical form of "fan pilgrimage" (Couldry 2005; Brooker 2007), but it has earned a reputation as a place where visitors can bring their creativity to life. Costuming was perhaps the most commonly referenced mechanism for immersing oneself among our interviewees. (Author's note: we did not dress up during either visit to the park and thus did not have first-hand experience with this aspect.) As Marco explained, he and his partner dressed in costume because, "we like to be fully immersed—that way we leave our own portal ["the real world"] behind." Interviewee Finley elaborated on this further:

> "[Dressing in costume] has an impact on how I'm playing in this world too. Like, I walked in and the actor came up to me with an accent and I was like 'okay, we're going in with an accent!' just to fit in and just to feel *in it* more. It's just easy to slip into it."

The subtext in our conversations with both new and veteran World Walkers was that immersion was less of an overarching goal than an invitation to participate. Whereas cosplay at a pop culture convention relies heavily on representing characters from media, Evermore Park's attendees dress more like visitors to a Renaissance festival—genre fiction and period costumes using "generic representation" (Hale 2014). Some visitors enjoy costuming for costuming's sake, while others transcend the "generic representation" description by bringing an "original character" (OC) developed outside of the park into Evermore's world. *Theme Park ASMR*'s Beedy, who had been looking forward to their first Evermore trip after learning about it and following along online, said in their write-up:

> "I attended with my dnd party and so of course we made up our own characters. I came as 'Sundew the Bog Witch' (hence me

joining the coven) and my costume helped me garner characters' interest and was a great conversation starter" (Beedy, 2019).

Shari concurred:

> We played *Dungeons and Dragons*. So, I like to dress up. I like to make clothes. And this is, if like I was thinking of it kind of like an extension of when we dress up for the Ren. Faire at home […] maybe like a little lower-key Comic Con. But it adds to the experience" (Shari, personal interview).

Michelle reported,

> "I thought about coming here in street clothes and just being […] No, like, I feel like it's kind of an excuse to dress up—put on elf ears. No one's going to look at me too weird" (Michelle, personal interview).

And Mia mused that dressing up is important because,

> "that's part of like what the magic of it is, isn't it? [It's] that you walk into this fantasy experience and it's all the TV shows and the books you've read, and then you're in it, so [you are] of course wanting to be your own character."

When contrasted to other similar media, Alan explained that even though roleplaying games are "mentally encompassing," when compared to Evermore they are "not as immersive as […] dressing (in costume) and everything like that" (Alan, personal interview). And, unlike the rigidity of video games , "the really cool thing about here is […] because they've got the actors and they're improv-ing, they can gently steer you back without it feeling like a big clunk, or they can kind of take what you're saying and send you off in a particular different direction" (Rhett, personal interview). The "clunk" that Rhett describes is the place where a text breaks immersion by revealing its illusion.

VALUING INTERACTIVITY

"Interactivity" was seen in contrast to being a passive audience

member, demanding effort from the visitor like a video game or tabletop roleplaying game. "Interactive" was also often used as a qualifier to establish variation from the norm such as an "*interactive* theme park" or "Renaissance Fair *with live-action roleplaying*." Comparisons to *Dungeons & Dragons* are frequent because it is the singular piece of media regularly lauded for its spontaneity, malleability, and socialization. And two interviewees referred to Evermore as similar to the popular HBO show (based on the 1973 movie) *Westworld*. One of the interviewees even clarified that it was like a "PG Westworld," to reference its family-friendly atmosphere. Westworld's promise of a dynamic, interactive experience is brought to life not by robots, but by Salt Lake City's pop culture fans and theater community. Returning to Dixon's categories of interactivity, our interviewees spoke about *participation, conversation,* and *collaboration.*

In a perfectly illustrative example of spontaneity and interaction, Aubrey (a frequent World Walker) began to describe the way visitors are "actually here and you can see these people, you actually interact with [the characters]" when suddenly an Everfolk named Vaeilla (who was behaving like a child with a sugar high) tried to interrupt the conversation. Aubrey tried to proceed: "You can actually intera—you can actual—whatever you're, you're tryi—," he stumbled before turning to Vaella to implore, "I'm in an interview, please be nice!" Aubrey's companion leaned into the moment and told Vaella, "Go play hide-and-seek, I'll come find you in about ten minutes!" Aubrey was able to continue, "So you're not just interacting with the characters, you're crying with them, you're rejoicing with them, you're playing with them, you're fighting alongside them. So, it's way more powerful and way more interactive."

Interactivity, of course, is a two-way street and often how much a person puts in is how much they get out. Laura, an interactive theater performer from Las Vegas herself, explained that though

she frequents the Renaissance Fair in costume, Evermore allows her to evolve her own relationship to the park: "Every time I leave, there was something in my head like 'oh I can change this, I can do this.' This is something new I've learned from the character—a lot of it teaches like, life lessons" (Laura, personal interview). Rhett, who had attended previous seasons without fully engaging, explained that "I decided to go full in, as you can tell, and say okay let's go and see what the stories like how far that can go I am interested in how they construct the place how the actors interact" (Rhett, personal interview).

Interactivity meant not only being able to converse with the actors, but also a sense of narrative agency. Unlike most places the average person encounters actors, Evermore is surprising in that "you can actually interact and affect the story" (Gem, personal interview). For the fans of Evermore Park that we interviewed, the impression that they could impact the story was a significant part of the magic. Though none of our interviewees believed they could totally dictate the narrative outcome, they did think it was possible to nudge events. Interviewee Finley recognized how structure of interaction allows for

> "specific events where you know, if I tell another character, this is happening, they can come in and stop it […] So it's not like, *'Oh, this is scripted,'* there are so many different endings you could have to these stories. It's very exciting to know a lot of World Walkers affected what happened during the [Lore 2019] war. So, this is really cool how you can impact the story yourself" (Finley, personal interview).

Mia concurred, saying,

> "I think World Walkers do a ton to, you know, drive the story forward and really make it what it is. And [World Walkers] who portray characters really do that, too. I believe when they World Walk and stuff, but no I think World Walkers really do have a huge effect" (Mia, personal interview).

Anecdotally, the regular visitors who came dressed up believed in their agency because they had experienced it or witnessed it in the community. Less frequent attendees did not answer with the same enthusiasm. Tanya's response to the question if World Walkers impacted the story was more hesitant: "I think we do. [By way of] the people we interact with." Her partner Alan conjectured that it was more likely the way "[we] create our own story."

Jamie expressed a similar sentiment:

> "I don't know. Okay. Yes, kind of, we were here months ago and we were here for two nights [and] like the actors remember. Yeah, some of them […] remember your name. So, I mean, at least for like our little bubble that we created. Yeah, like we have carved our little characters' miniature niche in the story."

Rhett responded,

> "I don't know, I've heard that in the original Lore people that were 'playing the game' did manage to influence what was going on, for example the relationship between Suds and Clara. There's kind of been a running thread through the story that actually came from a participant rather than the scripting team. So that was kind of fascinating. But I have no idea."

What seems most likely is that the more experienced World Walkers have evidence of impacting the story and thus have come to value it, while less frequent visitors have heard (through promotional material or discussions online or TripAdvisor reviews) that it is possible, but it's not a thing they would know how to approach or would even feel motivated to do. The conflict at any given moment is easy to follow—something bad is happening or somebody wants something—but Evermore Park's nightly stories and arcing narratives are convoluted. Helping a guild leader or the Mayor is quite different from understanding the kinds of character motivations and mythology that guide the park's story bible. For visitors, there's an air of mystery around

the operation of the park. Who writes the stories? How involved are the actors and how much is determined by the behind-the-scenes staff? How do they keep track of what happens on a given night? Rhett, who attends frequently, pondered this question:

> "I'd love to get us behind the scenes here. To see if they have like a big board with people. I mean do they… I've had actors come up to me saying my name, who I haven't told my name to. So, the question is, am I on the board back there with 'this is him'? I don't know" (Rhett, personal interview).

Evermore Park's welcoming attitude toward costuming returned as a theme in promoting interactivity. As Jaime said,

> "I mean, for just general cosplaying we go to the Renaissance Fair in our town. This is the first time I would say I've done anything that could probably be constituted as LARP. It's not really LARP. I don't have like a whole sword or anything… but we made our characters and we're here doing our little adventures and stuff" (Jaime, personal interview).

Laura described how costumes function as an "interface" (Lancaster 2001; Godwin 2017) between her and the characters in the park: "I feel like you're able to immerse and talk to the characters better if you're in an outfit. Because if I'm in my normal like human clothes, I'm just not in the headspace of Evermore." Rhett concurred: "the thing that's brilliant about it—the way they've structured it, you know—you come in in normal street clothes and the actors have to judge what level of engagement you're going to do." Michelle also confirmed the value of the role-playing experience while using Evermore Park as a platform to develop her O.C. (an "original character" created to participate in a storyworld) by explaining how she was "trying to think about […] getting in this headspace. How would [my "original character"] Meena react to this?" She then proceeded to contrast her group's usual dynamic ("usually [he] is the DM, so most of the time like when I played D&D, […] we're on opposite sides of that [dungeon master] screen) to the collaborative quality

of sharing Evermore in which "we're actually able to do this together."

Samuel discussed the way that dressing in costume extends beyond interactions with the actors of Evermore Park and into interactions with other visitors:

> it seems like the people in the park seem to want to approach people—if you're more comfortable approaching other people—that are also here [in costume], because they know that you're here to be in character. You're here to represent something. So, I know I'm going to be able to get the RP [role-playing] experience that you want, I know I can deliver what you're looking for. Because I know what you're here for: you're here to play here."

Samuel went on to create a dichotomy between costumed attendees looking to role-play and become a part of the story, as opposed to "World Walkers" who are just tourists:

> "Whereas if you're in street clothes, you're here as an observer (the world Walker thing). You're here as the observer. You're here maybe with your family and you have kids […] But yeah, I think the dressing-up experience just kind of enhances it. (Costuming at Evermore is wonderfully complex and deserves further study.)

In addition to social interactions, interactivity through game-like mechanisms helps orient and structure the visitor experience. Many of our interviewees described the park as being like a living tabletop role-playing game (more so than just a traditional LARP), while others spoke of it like single-player video games and MMORPGs which should be familiar to "somebody who's played *World of Warcraft* or *Everquest*. *Final Fantasy*" (Marco, personal interview). Given its influences and content, it's easy to see why someone might describe it as a "video game" theme park (Victor F, Trip Advisor). The game systems have changed between seasons but have included quests, elements resource management and trading, information gathering and puzzle solving, and generalized tasks (akin to "fetch quests"). The video

game-like ideals were part of the park's mission before opening. As former Chief Creative Officer Josh Shipley explained in an interview with the amusement and entertainment trade publication Blooloop, "If you want to enjoy it passively, that's fine. But if you are an Evermore Park player/hard-core fan, and you quest multiple times, you actually begin levelling up. Just as you would in an online game. Your established personality and character will level up; the park will actually start to recognise you, based on your seniority" (Merlin, 2018). These plans—which would have relied on digital technology—were likely shelved during the early years of the park because of their expense and because the physicality and human-nature of the park were so appealing. (We conjecture that this is the reason the park has come to appeal to fans of immersive theater, role-playing, and tabletop games.)

During Mythos 2019, Evermore sold five sets of "Adventure Cards" as way of structuring participation in the park. Visitors completing the Apprentice rank introductory tasks could then ask to buy the first set of Mentor rank cards followed by Elite, Paladin, Master, and Champion. Quests on the cards served primarily as a checklist of activities available in the park. One card specifically tasked World Walkers with visiting the archery range and gaining the approval of the training master. Another card gave the more generalized quest of earning five pieces of gold and donating it to the guild of their choosing. The Adventure Cards used during Mythos were a double-edged sword: though they provided a convenient structure, they minimized spontaneity and discovery. YouTube personality Ginny Vi described this experience in her video recap: "During the first hour-ish (when we completed this first level) it def[initely] did feel like everywhere we went there were a dozen people already there doing the same thing as us. Which is a little unfortunate, but this first quest does sort of function as a tutorial level on how to navigate Evermore and interact with the

characters. Once we got past it, things got a lot more interesting and a lot more unique to our party" (Ginny Vi, YouTube). These cards were retired after one season. Though difficult to manage, the quest-giving works well when it comes directly from the Everfolk. The actor who played Faldo, responding to the YouTube video posted by Ginny Vi, mentioned that "Our cast is full of actors passionate about character building, and oftentimes half of them are DMs (dungeon masters)."

The example of "instancing" quests that we encountered during Aurora (in which the Evermorian Zhodi was asking World Walkers to learn what magic was contained within the Snowberry Pie) was echoed inside the cozy, spirituous Burrows home. Listening closely, we could hear the "Elves of Light" and their caretaker Gafruk throughout the evening giving out pieces of this recipe to inquiring World Walkers. Successfully returning to Zhodi with the information earned some participants gold, though by the time we returned he only had a small plastic trinket he had received from another World Walker. Again, as is prevalent in online games, emergent systems like these artifacts—plastic gems, charms, cards, etc.—developed into an unofficial economy in the park by fans who wanted a way to trade with the characters and each other (Thelin, 2019). Similarly, as gold became more common (introduced into the park both through official channels and unofficially by visitors buying fool's gold at hobby shops), the park responded by developing an economy. By the end of Aurora 2019, regular visitors could store the park's official gold currency in a bank. Gold was subsequently used to purchase the rights to buildings around the park.

What the performers really desire, it seems, is for structured tasks to arise naturally out of the conversations between World Walkers and the Everfolk. When the hosts of the World Talkers podcast interviewed park actor Bobby Cody, he explained

> "But the real meal is talking to us, engaging us, and asking us more than just, '*Do you have gold for me?*' Which became a huge annoyance for a lot of us because people would just come up and not even … no social interaction other than, '*Hey, I want gold. Hey, give me silver.*' And so we would be like, '*Are you robbing me?*' I would spin it all kinds of ways, but some actors got very frustrated by that. And even some actors got frustrated when people were like, '*Hey, you have a quest?*' But we are kind of in a video game, so …"

The familiarity of quests and treasure hunts will only get newcomers so far in Evermore, so the only way for regular visitors and fans to advance through the story detail is to become involved personally with the Everfolk. Biggin's work well articulates the scholarship regarding the spectrum of levels of involvement in fan practices, highlighting in particular Susannah Clapp's observation about "aficionados" of *The Drowned Man* who "poke eagerly into a place, suss out whether there is any action and move on" (Clapp, cited in Biggin, 2017, p. 99). These aficionados purport to have expert knowledge and are akin to the 'hardcore' players of video games who spend their time probing a game's inner workings, or a theme park superfan who is quick to share optimized trip plans or the detailed history of a ride. During my visit to Lore 2019, I was watching one of the Everfolk who was slowly being overcome by the plague and a crowd of visitors had gathered to watch the tableau. But I was distracted by a lone World Walker who was holding a book, asking one of the members of the Acting Troupe about one of the passages inside. What I could suss out was that the book may contain some secret or important information, but I could not understand why this man was entrusted with a prop or why he was having a personal moment with a single actor. It was not until I returned for Aurora 2020 and saw this same man again that I realized he was one of the World Walkers who attended every night and was deep down the rabbit hole. The Evermore fan community—many of whom cannot travel to the park more than once a season—shares information and theories online to

probe the depths of the story. But they also (through orientation blog posts and responses to newcomer questions of Facebook and Reddit) tend to agree with Biggin's assertation that though aficionados can reveal insight into the media, they are neutral on whether there is "intrinsically a 'right' or 'better' way to engage" (Biggin, 2017, p. 99). The "real" way to enjoy Evermore Park is to learn the rhythms of its storytelling, the motivations of its characters, and the mythology that guides its infrastructure. But the actual way is by constantly moving back and forth along the Dixon's spectrum of immersion while drawing comparisons to other familiar forms.

THE FUTURE OF EVERMORE PARK

In some ways, Evermore Park is reminiscent of media tourism destinations such as The Lord of the Ring's Hobbiton site in New Zealand, the Making of Harry Potter at the Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, and the recently opened Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disneyland in California and Hollywood Studios in Florida. Like Disneyland, it is a travel destination that is described as an inimitable experience worth venturing to. It is a highly themed theatrical set adorned with a level of detail that one might find on TV or on a movie screen. Its stories are familiar—drawing from character types and mythology that have pervaded fantasy media. With the exception of a self-published novella intended to bridge seasons, Evermore Park has no referent in film, television, literature, or games. Evermore Park *is* the media.

When it was announced that the park was re-opening following the COVD-19 pandemic that forced amusement venues across the United States and the globe to shutter for months, it was immediately evident that changes to the structure were coming. The time away from the weekly grind of directing, fabricating and performing provided time to reconsider how the park could financially continue to operate. Evermore Park had been experimenting with new streams of revenue such as corporate

events and private parties before its closure. And, when it re-opened for Pyrra 2020, it looked like it was trying to solve the issue at the very core of this discussion: how can you introduce a broad audience to immersive and interactive play? The answer was "Epics" —a new repeatable quest structure in which participants can sign up for timeslots to embark on a single, nightly adventure. This replaced the real-time theatrical performance tableaus that had previously told the town's stories (but were easy to miss). These short "campaigns" (in tabletop RPG parlance) were easier to manage, required fewer actors, and helped congregate the audience in a more structured way by providing predictable performances and guided navigation. They also required an additional fee but could be "replayed" to gain new information or affect their outcome differently. During the summer of 2020, the "base price" Evermore park ticket still included interactions with characters, but the plot was relegated to a paid experience. In 2021, the future of the park's operation is uncertain. Much like the fictional portals inside the park that open up to new fantastic worlds each season, there has long been a sense among Evermore's fans that it could suddenly close its gates and the magical experiment will be over. Based on a retracted Facebook press release, rumors have circulated that the park will do away with its serialized narrative performances and instead become more like a themed pleasure garden with nightly entertainment. If so, it will lose what made it a special place for so many people. Its legacy, however, will be the grand experiment its founders, hardworking employees, and ardent supporters undertook to build a living participatory storyworld. In the same way it borrowed from related forms of media, Evermore Park will surely influence future designs of interactive entertainment.

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FROM EXCAVATION TO RECONFIGURATION

Emergent co-creation in playful performance

DR. JAMIE HARPER

'A whistle-blower contacts you, says they have information which the public should see. But they need your help getting it out there' (Fast Familiar, 2020). This snappy call to action is the first line of the publicity material for *Smoking Gun* (2020), a recent interactive work by the UK-based company Fast Familiar. Two of the creators of this piece, Dan Barnard and Rachel Briscoe, are former theatre directors who have abandoned work requiring conventional spectatorship in favour of more participatory projects (Briscoe, 2020). As such, *Smoking Gun* may offer a useful snapshot of the current state of 'playable theatre' in the United Kingdom. The publicity text continues, stating that 'over 6 days, you receive information on your phone – you solve puzzles and put clues together to figure out what is going on' (Fast Familiar, 2020). I suggest that the use of the word 'puzzles' is salient in describing many interactive works that might be described as 'playable'. As I have argued elsewhere, interactive performances can often be understood as puzzles, in the sense that they provide a latent text which is to be decoded, and this article develops my critique of a 'textual paradigm' in participatory performance (Harper, 2019) by proposing that works which centre upon excavation of pre-existing content are fundamentally unplayful. Drawing on the work of Brian Sutton-Smith, I suggest that play is, essentially, an act of experimentally

reconfiguring prior experience to develop new agential capacities (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Consequently, since puzzle solving is an unravelling of latent text rather than a reconfiguration of textual material, this type of activity is less likely to confer the developmental benefits of play.

My theoretical propositions are concretised through discussions of Punchdrunk, the internationally renowned purveyors of immersive theatre, alongside further consideration of the previously cited piece, *Smoking Gun*. Although Punchdrunk's work may appear to be relatively unplayful in comparison with more obviously interactive works, I suggest that the agential limitations of promenade exploration are similar to other works that are restricted to exploration of pre-existing performance texts. In contrast to interactive performance forms that are based on textual excavation, I discuss the practices of live action role-play in the Nordic tradition, focusing on *SelfConference* (2020), a recent online larp produced by a team of Russian designers. This piece, which invites players to collaboratively construct a character and develop several different versions of their life story, exemplifies emergent co-creation through which players originate their own narrative material and sculpt it into new configurations.

In the latter portions of the article, I suggest that the textual paradigm of much interactive theatre tends towards a structural determinism that drives players on pre-existing narrative pathways or steers them towards the rhetorical affirmation of dominant ideologies. I subsequently engage with the theory of Jacques Rancière, who proposes that emancipation in the reception of an artwork is to be found through interpretive autonomy rather than increased (forced) participation (Rancière, 2009). Having considered the allure of autonomous independence in immersive theatre, however, I draw on the work of Lev Vygotsky to suggest that play activity must include a heteronomous plurality of participants if players are to expand

their capacities beyond what they already know (Vygotsky, 2004). In other words, whereas autonomy promotes independent interpretation of texts based on the pre-existing perceptual capacities of individuals, I argue that the collision of multiple subjectivities in heteronomous play can stimulate emergent narratives and enable players to strengthen their creative agency by absorbing the capacities of diverse others.

BEYOND A TEXTUAL PARADIGM IN THE PLAY OF PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

In a 2014 interview with the *The Guardian* newspaper, the director of Punchdrunk, Felix Barrett, gave a neat summary of the relationship between audiences and narrative in the company's works. In discussing his production of *The Drowned Man*, he commented that 'rather than an audience member creating their own narrative, they are peeling back layers of story archeologically' (Barrett, cited in McMullen, 2014). This reference to archaeology clearly indicates that audiences are expected to excavate latent story material in much the same way that players of puzzle games uncover pre-existing content by solving clues. Although puzzles may be considered as a type of game, the fact that they are concerned with unravelling pre-existing material entails a necessary limitation in the creative agency of players. Greg Costikyan affirms this view in his comparison of puzzles and games. He describes games as 'state machines' in which the system of interrelated parts that makes up the game responds to player action to generate new game states. With puzzles, however, although the play activity of tackling problems will have experiential variability, the fundamental structure of the puzzle does not change:

> *The solution to a logic puzzle is contingent on the clues provided. The only uncertainty involved is in the solver's ability to sort through the contingencies; or to put it another way, a puzzle is static. It is not a state machine. It does not respond to input. It is not uncertain and it is not interactive. (Costikyan, 2013, p. 14)*

This robust assessment of the agential limitations of puzzles resonates with Rose Biggin's analysis of Punchdrunk's work. Like Costikyan, she contrasts the emergent properties of games with 'static puzzles' and suggests that the designs of Punchdrunk are 'not particularly "interactive" at all' because 'audience members are not invited to influence, change or complete anything' (Biggin, 2017, p. 90).

I have previously proposed that the tendency of interactive performance makers to approach narrative design like the composition of a puzzle can be understood as a textual paradigm because it requires participants to decode a pre-existing text, with little affordance to change the text or originate their own. The work of Punchdrunk provides an obvious example since audience action is mostly limited to spatial exploration which does not alter the pre-existing structure of the event. I suggest, however, that the textual paradigm is also in evidence in works that appear to be more interactive. In Fast Familiar's *Smoking Gun*, audience members are invited to interact with each other in a web chat as they sift through the evidence that they have been asked to investigate. These interactions may change participants' perspectives on the performance text, influencing which characters they suspect of wrongdoing, for example, but they cannot change the structure of the work or develop anything new. The only constitutive action which players can take at the conclusion of the event is to decide, by group vote, whether or not to reveal the evidence they have gathered, which gives rise to one of four pre-authored outcomes. It should be noted that, in my view, *Smoking Gun* is a work of high quality, offering a compelling experience for those who enjoy solving puzzles. In developing a more refined discourse about playable theatre, however, I suggest that it is necessary to delineate work that has the emergent properties of game play from performance works that operate within a textual paradigm.

In contrast with the process of reading a text, which involves

excavating and interpreting the content, I argue that play involves the reconfiguration of players' pre-existing experiential material. This argument is informed by Brian Sutton-Smith's theory that play functions as *adaptive variability*, enabling players to adapt to changing circumstances by experimentally repurposing existing experiential knowledge to develop new capacities (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 198). In describing the fantasy play of children, Sutton-Smith argues that the activity helps them develop labile flexibility through an exploration, and exaggerated extension, of their lived experience, dismantling the constituent parts of the world as they know it and reassembling these parts in myriad reconfigurations:

> *It takes the world apart in a way that suits their own emotional responses to it. As such, their play is a deconstruction of the world in which they live. If the world is a text, the play is a reader's response to that text. There are endless possible reader responses to the orthodox text of growing up in childhood. There is an endless play of signifiers of which children and all other players are capable. All players unravel in some way the accepted orthodoxies of the world in which they live. (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 166)*

Sutton-Smith's reference to reader response theory is useful, for my purposes, because it points to the active role of players as constructors of meaning. Rather than simply receiving the sensory stimuli of the world, as if this world were a static and unchanging text, players dismantle the elements of their sensory experience and reconstitute them. Effectively, they create a textual collage, or palimpsest, by reshaping the experiential material that they have gathered, gaining new capacities in the process.

The theory of play as adaptive variability shares similarities with theories from performance studies which suggest that all performances involve imitation and adaptation of previous performances. In much the same way that Sutton-Smith sees play as a reconfiguration of players' existing experiential material,

Richard Schechner argues that 'performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to *nth* time. Performance is "twice-behaved behaviour"' (Schechner, 1985, p. 36). Schechner's ideas on the reiterative nature of performance also resonate with Lev Vygotsky's work on the role of play in childhood learning. Vygotsky's theories of play are strongly, if indirectly, theatrical because they are focused on imitative mimicry, which is central to theatrical performance. This playful imitation is not merely a mimetic reproduction of observed behaviour, however, it is a transformative act, 'allowing the child to perform as if a head taller' (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16) so that they incrementally become other than what they are. The significance of this understanding of play is that it is based on an *excavation* of pre-existing experiential material as the basis for creative *reconfiguration*. Unlike the textual basis of puzzle activities, therefore, I contend that play is a fundamentally generative and future-oriented activity that repurposes the old to create the new.

Generative play is strongly evidenced by the practices of larp in the Nordic tradition. Nordic larps commonly include preparatory workshops that invite players (either directly or indirectly) to load their subjectivities into creating the contextual circumstances that provide the basis for fictional role-play (Montola, 2003; Stenros, 2014). Consequently, Nordic larp can be understood as a fundamentally co-creative activity, combining a framework offered by designers with the subjectivities of participants who play the work into actuality and without whom the work could not exist (Stenros, 2010). Marjukka Lampo describes the co-creative nature of larp as an 'ecological' approach to performance, whereby players receive a series of creative stimuli within the conceptual frame of the scenario and generate responses that construct the fabric of play (Lampo, 2016). For example, in the online larp, *SelfConference*, designed by Anna Volodina, Elena Ashmarina and Lilia Barladian, a group of seven players are invited to invent a teenage

character by proposing an array of likes, dislikes, hopes and fears, then develop four reconstructions of that character's life, which ranged (in my play experience) from a successful author with financial anxieties to a successful veterinary surgeon plagued by an obsession with dead bodies. Following Lampo's idea that larps can function as 'ecologies', I suggest that this work invited experimental reconfiguration of the fictional ecology that the players had created. Rather than simply excavating a text, they were enabled to construct (and reconstruct) a play ecology by building upon and adapting other players' contributions. As Sutton-Smith and Vygotsky both maintain, the developmental benefits of play stem from this type of selective reiteration of pre-existing experiential materials. Consequently, since larp can invite players to move beyond textual excavation towards the creation of their own ecologies of performance, I suggest that this form of creative practice is conducive to the expansion of players' powers of creative action, as the co-creative interweaving of subjectivities enables them to absorb new capacities from each other.

BEYOND DETERMINISTIC LINEARITY IN PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

In considering the narrative design of interactive performance in the United Kingdom, I suggest that the approach of many practitioners is characterised by a linearity that harks back to the narrative theories of Aristotle, whose ideas on cause and effect yield a conception of tragic drama in which the Fate of the protagonist is pre-determined (Aristotle, 1996). In other words, Aristotelian narrative is fundamentally linear and deterministic, and I suggest that this model continues to dominate Western conceptions of story development, even in discourses of interactive performance. For example, Gareth White proposes that interactive theatre makers can be understood as 'procedural authors' who construct a sequence of interactive episodes, then

invite audience members to engage in a performative 'process' that sets the authored procedure into action (White, 2013, p. 31).

White articulates his ideas on procedural authorship by describing his work as a facilitator of an interactive theatre workshop about bullying in schools with London-based theatre in education company, Armadillo Theatre (White, 2013, pp. 65-71). His account of this workshop sets out the combination of pre-scripted scenes (performed by professional actors) alongside interactive sections in which students are cast in the basic role of children in the playground. As the 'procedure' is enacted, it becomes clear that the participatory action is carefully orchestrated to lead towards a pre-determined conclusion in the narrative, which suggests that standing up to bullies with physical aggression never solves the problem. The clearly rhetorical structure of a procedural authorship that uses audience participation to reach a pre-determined ending (which seems analogous to the narrative determinism of Aristotle) raises the fundamental question of how participatory agency may manifest in interactive forms of theatre. White's discussion of this topic is problematic, in my view, as he suggests that agency is about the *feeling* of being able to pursue an intention or goal (White, 2013, p. 64). In other worlds, according to White, if participants, like the children in the fictional playground scenario, have the impression that they can achieve something within the framework of the drama, they have agency, even if the design structure of procedural authorship precludes this.

The tension between the semblance of agency and the actual preclusion of it is common, I argue, in contemporary interactive theatre practices. In a recent article describing their acclaimed immersive work, *Hotel Medea*, Persis Jade Maravala and Jorge Lopes Ramos describe forms of 'interactive gameplay' that participants are invited to engage in, such as hide and seek, which is played by audience members while they pretend to be Medea's children. Although this play might be extremely enjoyable, it

is questionable whether it can be seen as agential play since the outcomes of the game cannot change anything within the fixed linearity of the Greek myth. Irrespective of how well the children hide, they cannot escape death, because Fate has pre-determined it. Consequently, it is apt that Maravala and Ramos share White's argument that agency is a matter of perception. They state that they are seeking to provide audiences with 'the *experience* of agency as opposed to *actual* agency…the real sensation of empowerment, even if they don't actually shape the narrative' (Maravala & Ramos, 2016, p. 167), which again presents a vision of agency in participatory performance that is limited.

In response to the arguable limitations in scholarly accounts of agency in interactive performance, I propose that understandings of agential play and emergent narrative potential can be expanded by a developed awareness of how games function as complex systems. Jesper Juul neatly articulates the contrast between emergent and linear play by distinguishing games of emergence from games of progression. He argues that games of progression are composed of sequences of play challenges, much like White's procedural authorship, which lead through a pre-authored play narrative towards the completion of the game. Games of emergence, by contrast, are based on rule-comprised systems that combine with player actions to generate new game states and emergent variability in how the narrative of the game unfolds (Juul, 2005). Arguably, since performance makers often wish to craft a story experience for audiences, they tend to favour a model of progression which leads from one challenge to the next, in a linear fashion, towards some narrative denouement. In contrast with this deterministic linearity, narrative design in larp focuses on the creation of story context that provides an array of fictional materials with which players can co-create emergent narratives (Pearce, 2016; Harper, 2017).

The distinction between a game of progression and emergent

play can be observed in comparing *Smoking Gun* and *SelfConference*. *Smoking Gun* delivers a sequence of pre-authored units of narrative (in the form of hacked emails and company accounts) over a five-day period. Players excavate this material during daily web chats to progressively reveal the full story, leading to the narrative denouement in which players blow the whistle on either, or both, of the dubious characters within the fiction. This marks the piece as a game of progression since it follows a linear path through a pre-determined sequence of narrative revelations, and although player choice can yield four different outcomes, all of these outcomes are pre-authored. In other words, the piece offers no emergent potential for players to reconfigure the contextual circumstances of the fiction. *SelfConference*, by contrast, can be seen as an emergent work because the players are invited to originate the elements of the play system then reconfigure these elements within the framework of participation that the designers have created. In considering the possibility that works of playable theatre might enable players to expand their agential capacities, I argue that it is necessary to move beyond the structural determinism of linear narrative progression that is evidenced by *Smoking Gun*. Given that adaptive variability, as theorised by Sutton-Smith, is based on reconfiguring existing experiential material to develop new behavioural capacities in preparation for uncertain futures (Sutton-Smith, 1997, pp. 221-224), I suggest that the inherent uncertainty of play activities like *SelfConference* is fundamental in supporting the creative agency of participants in playful performances.

FROM AUTONOMOUS ACTION TO HETERONOMOUS CO-CREATION IN PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

In much the same way that the 'procedural rhetoric' deployed by game designers can lead players to pre-determined conclusions (Bogost, 2007), interactive and immersive theatre practices can be seen to deploy rhetoric by producing performance texts that

participants are required to activate, but which they cannot influence, either in narrative outcome or thematic meaning. Adam Alston argues that immersive works in the United Kingdom often implicitly affirm neoliberal ideology by inviting audience members to become productive consumers through their participation in the event (Alston, 2016). Alston goes on to suggest that this performative labour is, effectively, appropriated as aesthetic material by the designers of immersive events, becoming part of the scenography to be consumed by other audience members (Alston, 2016, pp. 157-158). A striking example of this can be found in *The Black Diamond*, Punchdrunk's collaboration with Stella Artois Black, in which participants were invited to playfully explore an immersive party world whilst consuming the branded beverage, effectively turning the audience of productive consumers, in Alston's view, into unpaid brand ambassadors (Alston, 2016, pp. 125-127).

Despite the fact that many immersive works may be seen to exploit the performative labour of their audiences, Alston maintains that audience-participants can preserve their autonomy and resist such exploitation by engaging in an introspective manner with the affective outcomes that occur in their bodies and embodied brains (Alston, 2016, pp. 55-56). This positive valuation of introspective autonomy is strongly influenced by the ideas of Jacques Rancière whose book *The Emancipated Spectator* offers a critical perspective on the artistic ambition to activate audiences by making them participants in an artwork (Rancière, 2009). Instead, Rancière proposes that the spectator does not need to be emancipated since she is always actively observing and interpreting the work before her (Rancière, 2009, p. 13). Central to Rancière's concept of emancipated spectatorship is interpretive autonomy. He argues that perceptual independence must be maintained in order to avoid the hierarchical ranking of differing interpretations and

maintain the *a priori* assumption of perceptual equality (Lewis, 2012, p. 61).

The pursuit of autonomous participation is strongly evident in immersive theatre practices in which participants are encouraged to seek one-of-a-kind experiences, such as the exclusive and intimate one-to-one encounters in Punchdrunk productions. (Zaiontz, 2014, p. 425). Arguably, though, there is a paradox in Punchdrunk's work between the apparent freedom of autonomous spatial navigation and the collective homogeneity imposed by the company's use of masks (Wilson, 2016, p. 166). This point resonates with Daniel Schulze's claim that masked audience members 'are no longer subjects who are free to voice their thoughts…they are a silent, scenery-like, exploring mass' (Schulze, 2017, p. 162). Even in interactive works that do invite participants to voice their thoughts, however, I argue that the use of fixed performance texts anonymises audience-participants because the text does not recognise or respond to the particularity of individuals. In *Smoking Gun*, participants are invited to give themselves a codename when signing up for the event, and although substantial interaction can occur as they type messages to each other on the web chat, their particular subjectivities have no influence on the progression of the pre-authored narrative. Consequently, I suggest that although participants are able to offer personal perspectives on the latent text, the fact that the text does not respond may make them less inclined to express their subjective viewpoints or seek to engage with the subjectivity of others, with the result that cultural differences are, effectively, elided and replaced by homogeneous anonymity.

In contrast with Rancière's valorisation of autonomous engagement with artworks and the assumption of perceptual equality amongst emancipated spectators, Lev Vygotsky's theories of childhood learning through play are founded on the premise that development occurs in conditions of relational

sociality with a diverse plurality of players. Essentially, rather than operating in autonomous isolation, players learn by interacting with diverse others who possess a varied, or unequal, range of capacities. In discussing the influence of environmental factors on learning, Vygotsky argues that a child's development is necessarily enabled and constrained by the relative capacities of other individuals in their social context. With regard to parental influences, for example, he describes the presence of a fully developed adult as the 'ideal form' from which children acquire knowledge through imitative performance. In the absence of this ideal form, the child will simply fail to develop, even if they have no impediments to their physical or mental faculties (Vygotsky, 1994). In other words, the child will only develop new capabilities by imitating others with greater, or diversified, capacities, which suggests that an inherent unequalness in the capacities of players is fundamental to playful learning.

Vygotsky's ideas on the importance of a diverse heteronomy in playful learning spaces resonate with more recent studies of social play. Celia Pearce argues, drawing on the work of James Surowiecki, that 'collective intelligence emerges at a much higher level in groups that are diverse than in groups whose individuals have uniform skills and abilities' (Surowiecki, cited in Pearce, 2009, p. 48), and she claims that such homogeneity is likely to undermine emergent variability (Pearce, 2009, p. 47). To counter the stability of homogenous uniformity, Vittorio Marone proposes that asymmetry in game design can promote emergent possibility. He argues that 'dynamic asymmetry…can lead to a spontaneous evolution of roles, from peripheral to central, from reader to author and from player to designer' (Marone, 2016, p. 11). Similarly, Thomas Markussen and Eva Knutz claim that 'participation in art as in ordinary life is never symmetrical or equal; it will always rely on an asymmetrical distribution of control' (Markussen & Knutz, 2017, p. 9). Markussen and Knutz do not frame this unequalness as something negative. Instead,

they point to the capacity for asymmetrical social play 'to increase resilience in the players by reconfiguring the social relationship between them' (Markussen & Knutz, 2017, p. 3) so that they can 'play imaginatively with alternative identities, forbidden identities and even identity switching' (Markussen & Knutz, 2017, p. 7).

The fluidity of identity in the social play that Markussen and Knutz describe is evident In *SelfConference* as players draw upon a wide range of experiential material (related to their different nationalities, ages, sexualities and countless other cultural particulars) in the co-creation of a gestalt character who subsequently becomes several radically different characters. In undertaking these character transformations, players are invited to observe, creatively imitate, and adapt the performances of others, and I suggest that this playful imitation is conducive to the development of new perspectives and creative capacities, in line with Sutton-Smith's theory of play as adaptive variability. The potential of role-play to generate emergent transformation in the capacities of players can be further explicated with reference to the work of George Herbert Mead, who suggests that adopting alternative roles enables people to develop reflexive awareness of their potential for developmental change. According to Mead, as described by Nick Crossley, individuals become aware of their own 'self' by 'adopting the role of another in relation towards their "self"' (Mead, cited in Crossley, 2016, p. 28). Subsequently, the ongoing absorption of the perspectives of others enables role-players to reflexively alter their habitual dispositions:

> *Perspectives are constantly coming into contact, affording agents a new viewpoint upon their self and generating new synthetic and hybrid cultural forms which can never achieve taken-for-grantedness. We are creatures of habit, for Mead, but we are equally conversational agents and our conversational tendencies, whilst rooted in habit, tend to disturb at least some of our sedimented repertoires of action, bringing them into view for*

> *us. Tradition and culture lose some of their grip upon us by virtue of our experientially-rooted awareness of their relativity. (Crossley, 2016, p. 30)*

In other words, by creatively imitating others in play communities that are characterised by diverse heteronomy, role-players are able to absorb the perspectives and behaviours of others and thereby shift beyond deterministic repetition of their existing repertoires of behavioural action. Rather than being seen as autonomous readers of fixed performance texts, therefore, I suggest that heteronomous role-play creates emergent systems in which the contexts and narratives of play can be collectively authored (and reauthored) by the players themselves.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have argued in this article that in order for playable performance works to support adaptive variability, they must do more than invite players to excavate latent narrative content in the mode of decoding a puzzle. Instead, as Brian Sutton-Smith suggests, the developmental potential of play is based on the ability of players to reconfigure the substance of their lived experience to experimentally develop new affordances in preparation for uncertain futures. By extension, if players are to achieve an emergent transformation in their capacities, I argue that play designs must function as emergent systems rather than linear structures that deliver pre-authored content and pre-determined narrative outcomes. Alongside these arguments, I have noted that performance scholars often suggest that autonomy is key to participatory agency in interactive theatre works. I have argued, however, drawing on the work of Lev Vygotsky, that autonomy undermines the developmental potential of play, since playful learning is founded upon creative imitation of others. Consequently, if players are to have a broad range of behavioural material to imitate and learn from, playful performance must be understood as a

heteronomous activity based on the relational sociality of intersubjective exchange.

In a recently published piece entitled 'The post-immersive manifesto', Jorge Lopes Ramos and Persis Jade Maravala reflect on their previously cited immersive theatre work, *Hotel Medea*, and conclude that despite the acclaim that the production received, they had to accept that they were 'working with the wrong model and had inadvertently been co-opted into a problematic trend' of using the word 'immersive' as a marketing buzz word for boosting commercial success (Ramos, Dunne-Howrie, Maravala & Simon, 2020, p. 199). Subsequently, their new manifesto, co-authored with Joseph Dunne-Howrie and Bart Simon, asserts that 'post-immersive participation emerges when the individual becomes a part of a temporary community'. They go on to state that membership of this community 'is determined by an individual's capacity to influence the construction of the social codes underlying these communities, not by the unfree choices they make over the course of a performance' (Ramos, Dunne-Howrie, Maravala & Simon, 2020, p. 202). Drawing on these excerpts from the post-immersive manifesto, I argue that play designs which recognise and respond to the subjectivities of players can empower them to co-construct the system of play and contribute to its ongoing reconfiguration, in contrast with interactive works based on textual excavation, in which player choices may hardly be choices at all, since the text has already been written. In sum, I argue that playful performance, far from simply being an artistic text that autonomous players explore, interact with, and interpret, is created by heteronomous communities of players who apply their subjectivities in constructing the system of play, reconstructing it in myriad reconfigurations, and gaining new capacities from each other in the process.

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CURIOSITY AND COLLABORATION

Values at Play in Meow Wolf's House of Eternal Return

DICKIE COX

Over the last decade, visibility of "in real life" (IRL), immersive play experiences has increased, blending built environments, transmedia storytelling, and digital assets. These experiences include selfie palaces, VR arcades, micro-theme parks, immersive theater, and immersive art installations. Such emerging experiences captured enough attention to warrant notable industry practitioners to prepare the inaugural *Immersive Design Industry Annual Report*, which valued the industry's 2018 worth at $4.5 billion (Brigante, 2019). Meow Wolf is referenced four times in this 29-page report. As an art and entertainment production company based in Santa Fe, NM, Meow Wolf creates immersive art installations. Their installations combine numerous elements of studio art, scenic design, architecture, sound, interactive technologies, and narrative storytelling. Meow Wolf artists and designers aim to create extremely collaborative and maximalist environments, drawing on science-fiction tropes while working from a process of collective group ideation.

Meow Wolf opened its first permanent exhibition, *House of Eternal Return* (*HOER*), in March 2016. Thrillist.com described *HOER* as a "20,000-Square-Foot Psychedelic Funhouse" (Zwickel, 2017), and the *New York Times* pronounced it was "part commentary on what's real and what's not in an increasingly

'virtual' age" (Payne, 2016, para. 3). *HOER* experienced a meteoric rise in popularity, becoming a top tourist attraction in New Mexico with the millionth guest visiting in July of 2018. After opening *HOER*, the company began work on additional permanent installations for Las Vegas and Denver, which were originally slated to open in 2020 and 2021, respectively. The COVID-19 global pandemic delayed the opening of Meow Wolf's Las Vegas site to February 2021. And, at the time of writing this paper, the company has not announced an opening date for their Denver location.

HOER shares a number of qualities with adventure and sandbox games. The production of the exhibition is akin to AAA game development, involving million-dollar budgets and hundreds of workers. Further, in terms of play experience, guests of *HOER* become collaborative investigators the moment they enter. There they find themselves wandering through a two-story, family home populated with portals that lead to various fantastical locations throughout the "multiverse."

During June and July of 2018, I served as a researcher-in-residence at Meow Wolf Creative Studios. In this capacity I performed an ethnography of the once art-punk collective turned corporation. My study's participants included artists and designers on the art, fabrication, narrative, and technology teams. Since June 2016, I have been a guest of *HOER* nine times–eight of those visits were during Summer 2018—and I have spent more than 40 hours in the house and multiverse playing, studying the exhibition, and observing the experiences of other guests. In this paper I analyze *HOER* and the values upheld by the project for both the guests who visit and for the company's artists and designers who labor behind the scenes.

To conduct my study, I will highlight select game elements from Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum's framework as described in their *Values at Play in Digital Games* (2014). They outline the

following premises: "(1) there are common (not necessarily universal) values; (2) artifacts may embody ethical and political values; and (3) steps taken in design and development have the power to affect the nature of these values" (p. 11). Thus, "There are many elements in a game, and each affects how games access, represent, and foster particular values" (p. 33). While the authors focus on digital games, the model they provide is very helpful in uncovering the expression of values that come to the fore in my analysis. Flanagan and Nissenbaum list 15 game elements that they use to analyze digital games, noting their list is not exhaustive (p. 33-34). From their list, narrative premise and goals, actions in game, player choice, and interface are most applicable for beginning to understand the multifaceted *HOER*. As I will demonstrate, analyzing these elements reveal the embedded values of curiosity and collaboration in the game play of *HOER*. Many artists and designers involved with the design and build of *HOER* and Meow Wolf's forthcoming exhibitions described experiences that similarly value curiosity and collaboration.

Curiosity can alter one's worldview, an undertaking that Flanagan and Nissenbaum encourage as one becomes a more conscientious practitioner (p. 11). When curious, one learns and questions, learns more and questions more, and continues in the process of growing beyond their own known experiences. Making the world bigger is a necessary and political undertaking at a time of strong partisanship and deadly ideological divides. One of the ways critics dismiss experiences like those of visiting *HOER* is to call such endeavors "mere entertainment" or escapism. A similar criticism has been lobbed at video games and all sorts of play. But play is productive (Bogost, 2011; Flanagan, 2013; Upton, 2015). Curiosity can change worldviews. We can take the tool sets and ideas from immersive, fictional spaces and weird the everyday world a little more so that we do not have as much need to escape from it. Similarly, having the value

of collaboration provides an important mode for working cooperatively during an age of political gridlock, ongoing culture wars, and a shrinking labor market that often exists at odds with soaring stock markets.

It is important to note that Meow Wolf's internal team structures and divisions continue to evolve. I participated in my 2018 residency when *HOER* was firmly established for two years, and the company had recently grown considerably to accommodate more workers for the design and build of the Las Vegas and Denver projects. This specific moment in Meow Wolf's history delineates a particular formation of their organization—a moment to examine the utopian optimism felt by many of the creative workers I spoke with that paralleled the excitement expressed by many of the guests roaming throughout *HOER*. Many artists I spoke with were willing to sacrifice personal control or aesthetic style to be part of the team as it undertook new projects that dwarfed the scope of *HOER*. However, evolving structural needs of Meow Wolf also resulted in frustrations as a more formalized hierarchy began to emerge, fomenting a more cultivated curation of ideas when compared with the earlier days of the artist collective. Finally, I will share some recent structural changes the collective-become-corporation has undergone—some of them unforeseeable in 2018. Doing so shows how, in practice, Meow Wolf has not always fulfilled its ideals.

DISCOVERING PORTALS TO THE MULTIVERSE WITHOUT LEAVING THE HOUSE

HOER's narrative premise is that the Selig-Pastore family home in Mendocino, CA, has become frozen in spacetime and quarantined in Santa Fe by "the Charter." The Charter is a no-nonsense bureaucracy with a self-mandate to maintain order in the multiverse. The Charter chose to freeze the house because "the Anomaly"—an unwieldy chaos of creative forces—has

caused multiple spacetime rifts. The Selig-Pastore family and their home appear to be at the center of an ongoing cosmic skirmish between the Charter and the Anomaly.

While fans have leaked clues from the exhibition and fan theories on social media, Meow Wolf does not offer any definitive narrative summary in the lobby, within the exhibition space, or in their public-facing media. The only introduction Meow Wolf provides is a strongly backlit "man-in-black" styled character, Agent 35 of the Charter. He greets guests on a TV monitor above the lobby door that leads into the exhibition and recites a handful of IRL rules while setting a tongue-in-cheek tone for the in-world experience:

> *The zone you are about to enter is a classified zone and it has been quarantined not only for your safety but for the safety of the entire universe. Please be respectful of the contents within this zone. Please treat this zone with the utmost love and care. Please remember to watch your head. Remember to watch your step. But most importantly, remember to watch your mind. No running. No gossip. No food. No wrestling. Please just nothing radical. Charter agents are watching you.*

Once guests watch the video and enter the single point of entry into *HOER*, they stand in the front yard of the Victorian house. The pastel siding, intricate wooden railings on the front porch, and bay windows feel familiar. Looking for the seams of what must be a façade, the strangeness of finding a two-story home inside a renovated bowling alley creeps to mind. A lulling soundscape plays above the yard as the scene's oddity deepens. The windows frame glimpses of other guests poking through the home's domestic spaces, including a living room, dining room, kitchen, and studio on the first floor and bedrooms and a bathroom on the second. The multiverse extends out from, and intertwines with, the house's floor plan.

Image 1: When guests enter House of Eternal Return, they immediately confront a two-story Victorian house.

Regaining their bearings, guests may next notice a post-mounted mailbox labeled "Pastore" to their right. Inside lie several sympathy cards that express condolences for the loss of Lex Pastore, the family's ten-year-old son and grandson, and a cryptic missive from the Charter. Many guests then decide to enter the home's front door. The welcome mat carries the message "Beyond Here There Be Dragons," an idiom derived from the medieval cartographic practice of illustrating monsters on unexplored territories. Guests can be forgiven for not immediately realizing that pathways on either side of the yard could lead them elsewhere. For the moment, these paths remain unknown and unexplored passages

As a physical interface *HOER* unfolds as a labyrinthian structure that invites guests to follow their own curiosities. Guests use their perceptions as guides to uncover what their personal experience will be in the sandbox gameplay of the installation. They are not provided with a map. There are no docents leading tours or wayfinding aids. Narrative engagement in *HOER* is not

a required ludic goal. Some guests roam the immersive space, enjoying the interactive elements without narrative engagement. But many choose to learn what is happening in the story, at times influenced by the actions of other guests. They investigate the house and the family by exploring dozens of rooms, portals, secret passages, interactive light and musical objects, print periodicals, computer files, libraries, journals, videos, and photo albums.

Image 2: Guests examine the contents of the Selig-Pastore family home.

A number of portals connect with rooms in the house. One of the most iconic portals is the kitchen's refrigerator. When the refrigerator opens and guests walk through, it is like finding a doorway to Narnia. As the door opens, a blinding white light emanates from a void where the appliance's shelves should be. Guests step into the refrigerator and walk down a sterile, white hallway, disappearing from the view of other onlookers. The

hallway unfolds around rounded corners until it terminates at the interdimensional travel agency "Portals Bermuda."

Image 3: Guests step into the refrigerator portal.

Futuristic LED light columns offer a glowing ambience in Portals Bermuda's circular room. Venting in the ceiling tapers to a central holographic kiosk. A couple of touch-activated, pneumatic doors lead out of the travel agency. Alva, the holographic kiosk guide, takes a feminized form with gradient colored face and effervescent uniform. Below Alva's translucent hologram—the product of a Pepper's Ghost illusion—a touchpad lists possible travel options to "St. Malibados," "Todos 7," "Murok-Inoo," and "Viridian Heights." In the outside hallway, a robotic voice routinely reminds guests, "You are okay." Perhaps a guest in Portals Bermuda has already spent time in the living room and read through Uncle Lucius's day-planner, or watched some of his cultish videos about the Power of Positive Mechanics, and can draw a connection to Portals Bermuda. But perhaps not.

Image 4: Alva helps a guest make interdimensional travel plans.

If a guest chose another path and found themselves in the living room, they might see others crawling through the fireplace. Beyond the mantle and hearth, they confront an alien cave filled with speleothems. Glowing crystals embedded in these large rock formations resonate musically when touched. Hugging a few of the stalagmites generates an ambient soundscape. Colorful striped worms adorn the ceiling. Inside the largest rock formation, the skeleton of a mastodon glows light blue and purple. Mallets hang from the beast's fossilized ribs as a platform beneath the skeleton comfortably accommodates six adults. Striking a rib with a mallet sounds a tone reminiscent of a marimba. It is not uncommon for guests to create music together.

Guests who undertake the hours-long task of reading the journals, documents, or periodicals found throughout the house often move methodically from room to room. They see other guests dashing off through the portals, but hunger to know the story: Who are the members of this family? What happened to them? Why is the Charter quarantining the house? Is the

bedroom in the back of the house actually a part of the family home, or is it from elsewhere in the multiverse? This detecting style of play rewards such guests with access to the meaning of visual motifs spread across the exhibition, helping them solve puzzles found elsewhere in *HOER*.

As one example, Lex's bedroom upstairs houses his inventor journal, drawings, and a "missing" flyer for the family hamster, Nimsesku. A guest who spent time reading these materials may well feel rewarded for their efforts when they later find Nimsesku in a diorama in a back alley of the multiverse. Nimsesku appears gargantuan on an experimental platform surrounded by scientists and engineers. Cables run from a make-shift helmet strapped on the hamster's head to a control console. The family pet has become a power source for a pyramid with four eyes gazing toward the cardinal directions. Hundreds of other clues like this interconnect with puzzles, visual motifs, and spatial constructions throughout the exhibition.

Overall, the rooms and twisty passages of *HOER* defy expectations as the wonder of what will come next activates many guests' playfulness. One does not know where the next portal or passage will lead. A different kind of geometry is at play. A whimsy guides how one moves from room to room and arouses curiosity, often leading strangers into cooperative mindsets. Guests play music or dance together. Guests looking for certain rooms are often directed by other guests. Guests speculate with one another about the meaning of clues that they have found. Guests talk about their favorite space so far and marvel at how many artists it must have taken to make *HOER*. The large physical and conceptual scale of *HOER* activates the critical play that comes from allowing curiosity to lead the way and demonstrates the magic that collaboration can produce.

Image 5: Guests play with interactive light and musical objects.

CHANNELING THE MULTIVERSE INTO EXISTENCE

Meow Wolf began in 2008 as a collective of friends making art via pop-up exhibitions and parties, often in rented venues. Some of the early co-founders of Meow Wolf talk of their difficulties finding breaks into the fine art galleries of Santa Fe. As the telling in *Meow Wolf: Origin Story* goes, eager to make experimental work, and finding a pronounced apparatus of gatekeeping, the disenfranchised youth culture set out amongst themselves to find alternative ways to live, work, and make art in Santa Fe (Renzo, Capps, & Spitzmiller, 2018, 0:03:34). A few Meow Wolf artists shared stories from a time before their employment with the company when they worked multiple part-time jobs and spent all their money and leisure time making art, recalling it as a practice in "reverse capitalism" (Shakti Howeth, personal communication, June 22, 2018).

Just prior to my residency, former IT and Infrastructure Director Chris Clavio described the organizational structure at the time (personal communication, May 13, 2018). About 40 employees had been working together since the art collective period, which

culminated in the collective's breakthrough 2011 temporary exhibition, *The Due Return*. Several of the employees who were part of the collective before the company's incorporation as a LLC in 2015 expressed that the initial motivations to grow the scope of their installations were not founded on a capital agenda, but, rather, were due to a passion for creative undertakings and working with their friends. Most Meow Wolf creative workers did not earn wages for their labor on the organization's temporary exhibitions from their founding in 2008 until 2015, when the number of employees expanded to about 75 people who worked on the design and build of *HOER* at an estimated cost of about $3 million (Monroe, 2019, para. 26).

In 2017, Meow Wolf LLC elected to assess and evaluate their business model impact to officially become a Certified B Corporation. B Lab (2020), which administers this legally binding certification, explains that this business model balances purpose and profits and is for mission-driven institutions. B Corps are legally bound to consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment and to do so with accountability and transparency. For its employees, Meow Wolf provided living wages, healthcare, paid time off, sick time, college tuition, and paid parental leave. Nearly all of the artists and designers that I spoke with in 2018 shared with me that this was the first time in their adult lives that they had health insurance.

By the time I arrived at the Creative Studios in 2018, Meow Wolf employed a staff of over 300. More than half of those employees had been with the organization for less than a year and were working on projects associated with the upcoming installations in Las Vegas and Denver. Project managers had been instituted at the beginning of 2018. This shifting composition of the organization was both a source of excitement and minor frustration. It indicated the quick growth and potential for the projects' scales that the artists and designers were creating: while

I am unable to locate the estimated budget for Las Vegas, the 53,000 square-feet space is more than twice that of *HOER*. Denver's site is even larger with an estimated budget of $60 million to build a 90,000 square-feet experience (Monroe, 2019, para. 6).

In the collective days, all the members knew one another. An ethos and shared language emerged to help guide the group through both worldbuilding and design conflicts. But in 2018, Meow Wolf personnel were becoming acquainted with strangers as production on multiple installations ramped up. Interviewees expressed that they did not know who they were working with and opined for a way to know more about new employees and what abilities they brought to their large-scale work. All workers that I talked with were genuinely curious about who their colleagues were, their backstories, and what they did for the company. Some of the former collective members thought critically about how a decade of ethos-building could be onboarded.

Meow Wolf uses design and transmedia production strategies to cultivate the discovery of intra-company relationships. But they also make their approach known in public documents, showing that highlighting their behind-the-scenes processes serves to further promote and market their productions to their audiences. The company uses the practice of design sprints that invite personnel to ideate and prototype in stochastic, small-group pairings. Part of their public-facing corporate language touts, "Meow Wolf champions otherness, weirdness, challenging norms, radical inclusion, and the power of creativity to change the world" (Meow Wolf, n.d., About). The way that I have come to understand the claim of "radical inclusion" translates roughly to the acceptance of all ideas having a place in their maximalist constructions, not necessarily having a fully inclusive workforce in terms of racial and gendered equity. They use techniques from synectics, architectural charrettes, improv, and design thinking

to collect and synthesize all of the group's ideas, even with hundreds of people.

In fact, the organization has a name for gatherings when all members of the company come together: All Shrimps Meeting. Many of the artists and designers shared lore from All Shrimps Meetings when the group began their initial designs for Las Vegas' and Denver's installations. They recalled the week-long company ideation sessions around specific anchor areas for the new exhibits and the month of design sprints that followed. Project meetings offer another opportunity for Meow Wolf personnel to demonstrate the emphasis of the company's value of collaboration. Due to the maximalist nature and the interconnection of liminal spaces in their installations, the exhibition spaces are managed internally as discrete projects. Each project has a project lead and any number of support personnel from various teams as dictated by the concept (Meow Wolf, n.d., *House of Eternal Return* Credits).

Image 6: Part of the Meow Wolf art team meeting in the Creative Studios in June 2018.

Finally, employees from various eras of the company's history are interviewed in Meow Wolf's podcast, *Too Sick* (Bradley,

Langford, & Schafer, n.d.). Their YouTube channel hosts the series *Meet Meow Wolf* and *Meow Wolf Artist Docs* as artist show-and-tells of sorts. And, as both promotional media and historical record, the company released the 2018 feature-length documentary *Meow Wolf: Origin Story* (Renzo, Capps, & Spitzmiller).

In 2018 the day-to-day operations of the Creative Studios were as much an immersive environment to me as Meow Wolf's exhibitions were. Nearly all employees I spoke with commented positively about the workplace and the projects that they were contributing to the new exhibitions. I also observed moments that hinted at the challenges of this kind of stake-holding and collaboration. Employees had the benefits of health care and paid time off, but long days working towards deadlines were exacerbated by implementation changes. I heard stories of amazing synergies coming to life and collective action galvanizing shared visions. I also heard about some groups losing control of an idea to another team and teams at odds with competing directions.

In one case, a long-time artist's project had to be shelved midstream for budgetary reasons. I was to interview artist Mat Crimmins the day he discovered his project was being removed from an upcoming installation. He asked to reschedule our interview and was not at work the following day. But a day later, I found him sculpting at his work area with a pleasant gleam in his eye. During our rescheduled interview, his disappointment was clear, but he shared that when he joined Meow Wolf in 2011, he realized:

> *the kind of art that I could be a part of with Meow Wolf was much bigger than what I could do by myself. And the kind of obstacles that we ran into would never be solved by me. Working toward one experience was amazing. No longer did I think in terms of what I could do or what I could accomplish. I started thinking on a bigger scale. It was motivating, and,*

> *in the end I felt an obligation. I think everyone here feels it; we have an obligation to one another.* (personal communication, June 25, 2018)

Such an insight into company workings suggests that, at least for some, collaboration brings the power of perspectives and skillsets, a motivating drive of obligation, as well as the necessity of ego-wrestling during periods of compromise.

Reflecting on my time at Meow Wolf, I cannot help but draw some allusions between the massive undertaking of the company and the narrative surrounding the Selig-Pastore house. Creative chaos drives the artists and designers to dream big new worlds of incredible nuance into being. The tensions between the Anomaly, as creativity, and the Charter, as order-keeper, parallel those I witnessed beneath the surface of the studio. With so many people working on different projects, a bureaucratic order seemed increasingly important for directing creative exploration into managed timelines, presenting a challenge to art-punk ideals.

Since my residency, newsworthy moments at odds with Meow Wolf's stated values dot the landscape of the company's timeline. Multiple lawsuits allege gender discrimination, unfair labor practices, and copyright infringement, each in conflict with the company's idyllic language, such as that of radical inclusivity (Bear, 2019; Cascone, 2020; Smalls, 2019). In 2019, while Meow Wolf employed nearly 500 people, the company paid back its micro-investors to the surprise of those investors (Kohler, 2019). These micro-investors had made small and moderate investments toward a few million dollar budget for *HOER*, providing a lifeline to help keep the company afloat during its startup phase of incorporation. In a sense, these micro-investors collaborated to provide much-needed capital for Meow Wolf, only to be suddenly forced out of further returns on their investments. When Meow Wolf filled its SEC Form D, which allows for the sale of stocks without the company going public,

it disclosed that it raised more than $150 million from private investors (Krabbe, 2019). In the same year, CEO Vince Kadlubek stepped down, remaining on the organization's board. He was replaced by a three-person CEO leadership team: Ali Rubinstein, formerly of Walt Disney, Jim Ward, formerly of LucasArts, and Carl Christensen, formerly of Goldman Sachs, further formalizing a corporate entertainment management structure for the once art collective (De Vore, 2019).

The Spring 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused Meow Wolf to shutter *HOER* temporarily for public health concerns, closing their primary source of revenue. At this time, the company laid off 201 employees, furloughing another 56 (Duke, 2020, para. 1). Even before the pandemic, speculations that cuts to the workforce were inevitable began to circulate (De Vore, 2020). This twofold inevitability is because by June of 2020 the company would have exhausted its capital, and much of the design and build of Meow Wolf's new permanent installations were nearing completion, but the new sites had not opened yet. In order to maintain a company, Meow Wolf had to balance their bottom line while caretaking for their employees' wellbeing, particularly as a B-Corp. Yet the company's decision to implement these cuts under the shadow of the pandemic becomes a possible act of "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2007). The most recent changes to the company's structure have not altered the immersive experience of *HOER* for guests. But, as the pandemic's restrictions ease, and as Meow Wolf opens its new installations, we will have to see how the company chooses to honor their varied and ongoing corporate social responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I focused primarily on the *HOER* and Meow Wolf Creative Studios during the slice of time I undertook my ethnographic research in 2018. What emerged was the excitement and promise that Meow Wolf offered as it rapidly

geared up production on multiple exhibitions. Even though the overall sense I recorded from artists and designers was one of utopian optimism, the transition-in-progress from collective to corporation was apparent in the subtle confrontations between varying constituencies from the organization's history.

Additionally, the creative workers at Meow Wolf have continued to uphold the value of collaboration while trying to care for their collective well-being. In October 2020, they voted to unionize so they can collectively bargain with management (Vitu, 2020). It a public statement, the newly formed workers' union stated:

> *Meow Wolf taught us art should always be a radical endeavor. It will require time, effort, listening, and creativity. In short, it's a collaboration. Meow Wolf, which believes radical art can change the world, taught us to rethink the way we work together. Now we ask Meow Wolf to rethink the way it works with us. When we work together, we build worlds.* (Meow Wolf Workers Collective, n.d.)

Meow Wolf engages a variety of communities. I limited my discussion to the guests of *HOER* and the artists and designers who create the company's exhibitions. Further analysis needs to focus on Meow Wolf's relationship to the larger populations who live and work near its sites and who participate in its programming and philanthropic endeavors. For example, Meow Wolf promised to support their neighbors by offering an "inclusive economy" (Anderson, 2018). Yet their popularity as a travel destination, along with their capacity to purchase and lease real estate, intertwine with gentrification, which most often benefits wealthy white communities while harming communities that are lower income and/or of color. The successful implementation of socially-conscious corporate responsibilities, such as those espoused by Meow Wolf and facilitated, in part, through curiosity and collaboration, would go a long way toward creating new and necessary worlds.

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CURATE IT YOURSELF!

Game Mechanics and Personalized Experience in the Immersive Performance Installation Strawpeople (Das Heuvolk) by Signa

ÁGNES KAROLINA BAKK

INTRODUCTION

Immersive playable theatre performances are becoming more and more widespread. These performances have a double promise: the promise to transport their audience into another fully-discoverable-world and the promise of a certain level of agency for their audience for them to discover the set design and the plot in a playful way. The form that these immersive performances are taking can vary from small-scale interactive theatre with almost no technological devices and game theatre performances (which are replicating the settings of a video game by offering a level of agency similar to video games) to big scale performances where the set design offers a narrative by itself and the actors are interacting with the audience on various improvisational levels. The parallel between video games and immersive theatre performances has also been around for a while as pointed out by some authors (e.g. Rosemary Klich, 2017; Biggin, 2017; Bakk, 2019) who draw attention to the variety of game mechanics that can be observed in immersive performances and how these mechanics nurture the development of such performances. The corpus for analysis is, however, limited (the UK-based Punchdrunk or the US-based Third Rail Project's company being some of the few examples),

and performances outside the Anglo-Saxon world are almost entirely missed.

In this paper I aim to discuss how certain forms of immersive theatre amplify the participant's sense of playability. In the first section of the paper, I will outline what societal and cultural context gave birth to this neoliberal audience attitude and why it is important to create artistic and critical immersive environments. In the following section I will present the performance *Das Heuvolk* (The Strawpeople) by the Denmark-based theatre company Signa I will also outline the audience survey that I conducted in the summer of 2017 with the aim of mapping the level of the participant's agency and immersion in the performance. After this I will explain why the concept of immersion in experience-related discussions is becoming more common and how it pushes the creators to create environments that urge the participant to discover as much as possible. I will also outline how these immersive performances are in particular using the thrilling effect of the new horror genre (Ndalianis, 2012), and the feeling of uncertainty (Bar-Anan et al., 2009) which intensify the thrill of choosing between multiple possibilities. By relying on these aspects of the performance, I will point out how certain forms of immersive theatre, with the help of horror, create a element of playability , and I will also briefly discuss the history behind the current societal context and design frameworks that created the conditions that led to the rising demand for, and therefore the development of, this kind of playable immersive phenomena.

SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE RISE OF THE "NOTION" OF IMMERSION IN THE CONTEXT OF EXPERIENCE

In order to understand the recent boom in immersive business, it is useful to digress and look at the history behind the commodification of experiences and its relation to the notion of immersion. Although the origin of this kind of immersive

performances can be traced back to the mid-20th century (Bishop 2012), performances started to be tagged with the adjective "immersive" since the rise of the UK-based company Punchdrunk. But certainly, the roots of this desire to experience immersion is related not only to carefully curated or created artistic events, but widespread in the daily life of the society. Media-specific and genre-specific distinctions, as well as historical ones, should be made when analyzing a specific immersive environment or experience, and Dorisch Kolesch notes that these immersive environments all have a narcissistic or hedonistic side: "Extra-aesthetic immersive worlds of consumerism, employment and computer games primarily seek to promote feelings of self-assurance, subjective potency, sometimes even narcissistic hubris. In contrast, artistic designs tend with striking frequency to bring the dystopian, unsettling and jarring aspects of immersion to the fore" (Kolesch, 2019, p. 9). In order to understand better how this longing for immersion developed, it is important to outline some sociological studies that influenced the concept:

1. In his book *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Experience Society) published in 1992, the German sociologist Gerhard Schulze argues that the German society after the 2nd World War turned from outward orientation towards the inward orientation, meaning that their behaviour was not only influenced by external conditions like material wealth, but they were also motivated by the "experience orientation", meaning that they wanted to achieve a "nice life" that is also aesthetically valuable. Following this idea, in 1999 Pine II and Gilmore published their famous work *The Experience Economy*. In their seminal work they explain the concept of experience economy as the last stage of an economic progression after going through the phase of commodities, goods and services. The demand for experiences is rising as it promises a transformative experience to their

consumer that can be interpreted as the unique selling point of these goods or services. Parallel to this, we can observe the rise of a storytelling boom (Fernandes, 2017). In *Curated Stories*, Sujatha Fernandes coins the concept of political economy of storytelling, which has two intertwined meanings in the context of neoliberal economics and the subjects within it: 1. "production, circulation, and consumption of stories that are mobilized toward certain utilitarian ends"; 2. "a second activity which involves the deployment of stories in processes of subject-making" (Fernandes, 2017, p. 11). The latter is the "curated storytelling practice" which, according to the author, is a tool for "producing subjects who are guided by these principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance". Developed on this idea, Andreas Reckwitz stressed that '[i]n the mode of singularisation, life is no longer simply lived; it is curated." In the late modernity, the subject is living in a context that dominantly orientates toward the new: this turns the experience society towards being an innovation society, where a new and unique good, service or experience always has to be created.

2. Theatre researcher Adam Alston formulates the concept of "entrepreneurial participation" in relation to the neoliberal aspect of our society (Alston, 2013). He offers a definition package for immersive theatre, which he conceptualizes as a "participatory theatre style" that aims to serve or to produce sensory stimulations and free-roaming experiences within a space or set of spaces for its audience with the audience usually being "implicated in a situation". Their experiences may vary between being hedonistic or narcissistic in character, "bolstered by receiving the fruits of one's own participatory effort as well as the efforts of others." He further remarks that immersive theatre is the "experience of risk" (embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt) and lists in what ways the risk taking attitude can reveal itself:

The risk can manifest itself in:

- not understanding the protocols of a given theatrical practice;
- participatory rules being unclear, resulting in a need for a structure to guide audiences through an event;
- the tension between risk and chaos that is key to navigating participatory risks for audiences (Jubb, 2012);
- production of affect and emotion, such as embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt and shame.

3. Another factor that contributed to the prevalence of the concept of immersion is its connection to the VR technologies and their promise of transporting their users into another, totally immersive environment. The concept of VR or of the 3D-image seen through a stereoscope has already been around since the mid-21st century. More than a hundred years later, engineers developed various types of virtual reality headsets, and from the 80s on each decade brought a new wave of these technologies, and each wave promised us that this time these technologies will work out and will be widespread. In 2020, this promise is still with us, and not totally fulfilled: the VR headsets are not accessible for everybody, not only due to their price (see, for instance, the price of Oculus Quest) but also due to shipment issues. The content that is created today for VR still cannot satisfactorily entertain full-time the VR users. However, game engines and cinematic content creation modes are constantly being developed further, and technologists consider that we might be in the era for make-or-break for VR. (Hardawar, 2019).

IMMERSIVE PERFORMANCES

Adam Alston (2013) states that "[o]nce spectatorship is acknowledged as an embodied and potentially affective activity,

all theatre and performance is, or at least has the potential to be, an immersive activity." (p. 129) Even though this statement could be used as a springboard for our discussion, it is too broad as it includes a large variety of interactive theatre formats, so for the current case study it should be narrowed down to the genre of immersive theatre performances. The approach of Doris Kolesch's can be useful for this purpose. Even though it might be subtle, it exactly points out where immersive theatre performances could redefine themselves in contrast with other types of commercial immersive productions made purely for entertainment: "Immersion is much more about a subtle choreography of diving in and surfacing, about the play of illusionment and disillusionment. Next to their perceptual intensity, a distinguishing characteristic of many contemporary immersive experiences is also their physical-corporeal dimension, whether it creates disorientation, dizziness, shock or (the impression of perfect) bodily control." (Kolesch, 2019, p. 9) Kolesch emphasizes how important it is in artistic practice to always change the perspectives of the participating audience, and the importance of occasionally revealing the "interface" of the immersive performance, by creating disorienting sensations or even dizziness. In this paper, I will be presenting a performance where, on the level of the story arc and on the level of intimacy between the performers and participants, these disorientations, shocks, and states of illusionment and disillusionment can be observed.

First, in order to have a better grip on what immersive theatre can be, I will outline certain characteristics common to immersive theatre performances:

1. Panoramic 360-degree physical environment (however limited), where the set-design in which the performance takes place can be explored in very fine detail by the members of the audience, enabling the spatial storytelling to unfold.

2. Involves all senses of the audience members, that is, not only the visual and the auditory senses, but also the senses of touch, taste, warmth and cold, and even the sense of balance is "in-game", in order to create a strong immersive effect.
3. The medium of immersive performance bears no meta-reference (for example it is not an adaptation and it is not based on an existing well-known narrative).
4. Anything that independently happens in the vicinity of the performance (such as the ambient sound from the surrounding environment) can be integrated into the storyworld of the performance.
5. The performers of an immersive performance don't have a fixed text, but rather a well-defined character, which they express through improvisation and interacting with the members of the audience.
6. The audience can have the sense that they have some control over the plot (even if this sense of agency is only illusory.)
7. Intimacy as an atmosphere arises (usually) from interpersonal relationships, which means that it is formed and it materializes in interactive practices. It is an atmosphere-creating trigger feature that defines these spaces and it creates a compulsory need for the audience to have a participative attitude. I also find the practice of intimacy (especially in the context of LARP practices) a discursive practice, especially due to the close body encounters that happen in spontaneous ways and that offer the possibility for expressing deep feelings even between two strangers who have just met for the first time.

In the following section, I will present the immersive performance installation *Das Heuvolk* (Strawpeople) by Signa, where the above mentioned characteristics can all be found. After discussing the performance, I will present the audience

survey with the help of which I aimed at double-checking with the audience the existence of these features. At the end of the paper I will present the socio-cultural context of the reason why I argue that we are in a time which is very apt for this type of performances to be developed fruitfully as the audiences are open to let themselves be "totally immersed" in these productions.

ABOUT SIGNA AND THE PERFORMANCE STRAWPEOPLE

The Danish-Austrian company SIGNA[1] was founded in 2007 and usually stages performances in Germany or Austria. The two founders, Signa and Arthur Köstler, describe their works as performance installations: the setting of their productions are big houses or complexes, where 30 to 50 actors perform in an evening. Their performances usually last 5 to 12 hours. They use mechanics from LARP (such as framing the magic circle), theatre, and their performances can also be interpreted as open world games or MMORPGs (see Köstler, 2017; Bakk, 2019).

Strawpeople (Das Heuvolk) was presented in 2017 in Mannheim, Germany, in the frame of Schillertage Theater Festival. It took place in the suburbs of Mannheim in Benjamin Franklin Village. While entering that suburb by bus, one could already see a gathering of performers. When the bus stopped, the audience was welcomed by performers wearing costumes that resembled the solid monochrome dresses of cult members. The performers divided the audience members into several rooms where they received initiation training: they learned that they were there because Jack, the head of the cult, had recently died and the group was recruiting new members in order to find their missing gods. This was necessary for surviving the end of the world and

1. Portions of the following three sections have been published before in Bakk, Á.K. (2019). Epiphany Through Kinaesthetics. In: F. A. Igarzábal & M.S. Debus & C. L. Maughan (Eds.) *Violence. Perception. Video Games.* (pp. 213-223) Transcript Verlag.

becoming the "Himmelfahrer" (Ascencioners). The audience was told by the performers that they could encounter various rituals at certain times in the different rooms, where they could follow the cult members as they called upon the gods to return. There were also certain house rules that had to be obeyed (e.g. when entering or leaving a room one had to greet the mythological tricksters with a hand signal). After this, the audience could wander around in a two-level building that contained many thematic rooms where the performers carried out rituals. For example, one could enter a room filled with red, blue, and black carpets, heavy furniture, and drinks with high levels of alcohol. This was the Peacock's Room where men were fighting each other (in the frame of the ritual). The audience, in close proximity, experienced the weight of the punches and kicks, how the fighters were sweating from physical exertion, and how their skin was reddening from being struck. In the Cowboy Room, the audience faced a real life struggle, as they witnessed the "bull" (a performer) suffering from being possessed by a god. After five hours spent in this house (which is not enough time to visit all of the rooms), the audience was guided into a nearby chapel. Here, everyone was seated near the walls forming a circle. A ritual started accompanied by songs about gratefulness, where the audience members could finally decide whether they wanted to join the cult or not. There was only one condition: they had to undress in the middle of the circle and join a washing ceremony. Those who chose this option could stay one hour longer (while the rest of the audience was brought back to the city with a bus) and attended a further performance. This final event was a private after party with the actors, where the old and new members of the cult sang together and embraced each other. The cult members appeared content, as they were able to recruit more members to help them with their search for the missing gods. If an audience member who joined the cult revisited the performance, they were greeted at the start as a member.

Survey: attempt to measure immersion

As mentioned above, the performance was presented at Mannheim Schillertage Theatre Festival in June-July 2017. The audience members were transported to the performance venue and back by a bus. I took advantage of this opportunity and conducted an audience survey in cooperation with the organizers. Altogether 201 audience members answered the questionnaire on their way back right after the performance.

The survey was conducted with the aim of measuring the player experiences of immersive performance participants by asking questions related to the characteristics of the immersive theatre performances (see the list above). It was important in the survey to understand the spectators' level of literacy in 'immersive performances' and other 'immersive genres'. The level of agency and immersion is also crucial when discussing these performances: this is where it can be measured how successfully these productions can achieve their aim. The responses to the survey show that those members of the audience who were already familiar with the practice of immersive performances were also those who enjoyed the production's ludic immersion (see Ryan, 2009, p. 54). This has parallels with what Kilch (2017, p. 226) observes about ludic immersion in a Punchdrunk performance, that the audience "…has agency in terms of their pace and direction, their interaction with the set, and their response to the performers' actions. Some choices are more or less rewarding; a decision to follow a particular character or to stay in a particular room will lead to different encounters. 'In the know' audience members develop strategies to traverse the vast environment and employ tactics to increase their likelihood of receiving the elusive goal of the one-to-one performance." This self-pacing agency made possible by being presented with a wide spectrum of reward is very similar to what the visitors of an amusement park may feel. Interestingly, one of the creators of SIGNA also referred to some of their visitors as amusement park

visitors, those who want to better exploit the variety of bodily and mental states that such performances can offer (Köstler, 2017). The aim of this particular spectator attitude is to gather as many experiences as possible, given that it is up to the subject to curate her own collection of experiences.

The results of the survey can be summarized as following:

- Measuring audience expectation about the performance. It was important to find out how many of them knew about or have participated in this format of immersive theatre and whether they have chosen specifically this performance as they knew what to expect: approximately 80 participants knew about it and 80 did not. (105 noted that they wanted to experience something new. It was interesting to see that those who mentioned that they accompanied a friend or they came as a result of someone else's suggestion had less pleasurable experience than those who knew what was expected of them.)
- Measuring the level of immersion from the participant's perspective: the survey mapped how the participants have felt about taking a more active attitude (137 participants marked themselves as an active participant and 128 claimed to have put themselves "totally" into the fictional world of the performer) and how much they could "live" the fictive world of the performance (more than half of the participants marked that they totally let themselves into the fictional world of the performance). In the survey I also attempted to map and to ask about immersion by using examples from other media, asking, for instance, how would the audience compare this genre with playing video games and/or using VR (in order to understand whether there is any correlation between their media literacy and perception of the performance): some of them (7) found a resemblance with the genre of video game or with LARP, but only 3 found resemblance with interactive VR productions.

- Measuring agency, by asking about how they would describe their attitude, how strongly they felt that they were able to control what was happening or to hack the storyworld of the performance. It was also important to measure with these questions whether the audience felt that they had entered the "magic circle" of the performance that acts as a border between daily life and the performance storyworld. It was additionally important to find out whether there was anything in the performance that they would have done differently if they were to participate in it again.
- In the survey, I also asked the participants about specific senses that influenced the phenomenological aspect of the performance. We were aiming to map whether the audience had any specific body feelings such as disgust. 115 participants answered that they felt something "in their chest" or nausea or dizziness , which means that their sensorium was very much affected by the detailed set design, and their attention was always kept busy.

AMPLIFYING THE SENSE OF PLAYABILITY

Non-player vs. player characters

The above description of the performance does not focus on the narrative framework, but on how all the characters have a pre-established biography, with a set of characteristics and behavior. Within the community, everyone talks freely about other cult members, but a constant fear of the future can also be observed, while sometimes secrets are only partly revealed, encouraging the audience to gather further information. As an active audience, the experiencers can also choose which room to visit, with which performer to interact, how to act themselves, or whether they want to stop a certain act of violence. Even though the spectators cannot have a direct influence on how the narrative path develops, they can have an effect on which

experiences they gather throughout the evening. They can choose to have more (superficially) joyful moments or to investigate the dark side of this community. In these heavily themed rooms the experiencer engages with other people in various ways: they act together with the performers and other experiencers, and in this way they can encounter various social emotions such as guilt, disgust, embarrassment, or shame.

In the "traditional" game theatre performances (such as the Germany-based Machina Ex, a company the practice of which is based on video game adaptation for the stage) the actors are the non-player characters: they can only perform pre-written tasks and game mechanics on a very narrow spectrum. Meanwhile, the participants are the player characters: they have to figure out the game mechanics and the solutions for how to overcome the challenges in the games. In Signa's performances the performers, due to their having an established and well-developed autobiography, still cannot step beyond what is allowed to them by their roles, but they can actively influence the way the story arc is perceived by the audience members. Beside this, the actors can also actively pay attention to the variety of the behaviour of the audience members, and help those who are lost or calm down the more aggressive participants (see Köstler, 2017).

Spatial Storytelling Character

One peculiar characteristic of immersive theatre performances is their incorporation of some aspects of environmental storytelling, by making preconditions for immersive narrative experiences in four ways (see Hameed and Perkis, 2018, p. 327; Jenkins, 2004, pp. 118-130). It is a common feature of immersive theatre performances that they actively make use of spatial storytelling as a tool to keep the spectators' attention engaged. We can follow Jenkins and deconstruct spatial storytelling methods into the following characteristics:

1. Ability of spatial stories to evoke pre-existing narrative associations;
2. Providing a backdrop where narrative events unfold;
3. Embedding narrative information within the mise-en-scene;
4. Providing resources for emergent narratives.

In *Strawpeople*, the carefully arranged, meticulous stage design helps the audience members to figure out the socio-economic and cultural context of the narrative (e.g. in which era the performance takes place); and also such issues including what the relationship is between the performers or in between the performers and their personal objects. The variety of symbolic set design elements also offers an abundance of meaning-making strategies, which help the performers when improvising background stories for unfolding events.

The real backstory of the performance's venue is merged with the story-world of the performance: real-world facts are mentioned by the performers when talking about the place or the venue, and these can emerge in various formats (in the case of the *Strawpeople* performance some questions that the performers often discussed to keep the alternate reality immersion level high was "what happened with this military base", "how the cult members occupied it" and the like.)

As I mentioned above, the performers could not "act" freely as they had a prescribed biography, but on the other hand, thanks to their highly skilled improvisational skills, they could offer new, emergent narratives to the audience, by answering all kinds of questions that the spectators were asking.

Winning or losing

In *Strawpeople*, there are some gestural elements that are required in order to unfold the story (e.g. always greeting the trickster

when entering a room, or keeping some "traditions" alive.) The aim of the participant is to visit as many rooms in the building as possible and to talk to as many performers as possible. By this, the participants can assemble a well-curated storyline, which creates for them a sense of comfort and a sense of being at home with the performance. If the participant feels challenged enough and feels open towards the environment, at the end of the performance she can commit to the cult by facing one last challenge, namely to undress in front of the other participants and performers. As the performers are also undressing in front of the audience the visual effect of this act may not be so striking, but for participants it can be an element that stops them from entering the cult. This particular performance of SIGNA offers a reward for the winners, namely the one hour long extra performance, that only the new cult members can attend. Here they can sing together with other members and establish a cozy physical encounter that can raise the endorphin level. (And it is also worth mentioning that those who joined the cult and stayed for an extra hour had no organized vehicle to bring them back into Mannheim center, so they had to face a one hour long walk back to the city.)

Horror as guiding element

In her book *The Horror Sensorium*, Angela Ndalianis states that "[t]he spaces of horror media not only fictionalize—in vividly sensory ways—their own sensorium, but they also demand that we cognitively and physiologically respond to their fictions by translating their sensorial enactments across our bodies." (Ndalianis, 2012, p. 3). As I mentioned previously, immersive theatre performances have to directly engage multiple senses of the participants, and through this they can create very striking physical responses. But how can the horror genre create this direct physical effect? Ndalianis explains this by saying that "[a]s a genre, it's capable of intensifying the range of reactions and experiences in which we can become enmeshed when

connecting with media texts and, over the last decade in particular, the proliferation of horror texts across media have amplified their focus on sensory encounters" (Ndalianis, 2012, p. 6). And as I have remarked elsewhere, in the case of the cinematic medium, the horror environment constitutes the "aesthetic of disgust." In this performance the participants gain experience through "carnal elements" such as sweat, saliva mixed with dirt, real time violence, and also taxidermies. We can say that these "sources of disgust boost the hunting attitude of the audience, and it is this attitude that actually guides the experiencer through the performance space and unfolding story" (Bakk, 2019, p. 217). The continuous disgust that one can encounter in almost every room enhances the expectation of the next shocking element in another room. This expectation is strong, as the feeling of uncertainty can often intensify affective reactions. Bar-Anan et al. conclude in their study that uncertainty intensifies affective reactions to an ongoing positive event, but this can also intensify negative emotions in case of negative events. It is also important to note that the feeling of positive or negative uncertainty depends less on the actual knowledge of the participant, but more on their feelings (Bar-Anan et al. 2009, p. 126).

Strawpeople is an in-between performance: It uses the mechanisms of unpredictability, and the violence that can be viewed from very close and the symbols of occult cults to give the audience the feeling that something horroristic might happen. On the other hand, the performance also offers many "happy moments" for the audience members, that intensify together with the rise of the level of intimacy and improvisation that the performers are mastering. As the director of the performance Signa Köstler admits in an interview (Schütz, 2019, p. 55) the environment in this performance was "positively harmless", which is also a reason why some visitors, even though a minority of them, decided to join the cult, as their uncertain feelings were

intensified but the expectation of something positive will happen was stronger.

CONCLUSION

As I have stated at the outset relying on an observation by Doris Kolesch, immersive performances and environments should feature a balance of illusionment and disillusionment. Although Signa company's performances involve the kind of narratives that create not so harmonious feelings and very directly present the inequalities (and, as a consequence, violence and humiliation) inside a community, *Strawpeople* is more of a feel-good performance. In this paper, I have analyzed this performance to present through it various aspects of immersive theatre and its ludic character, as I wanted to demonstrate that it is not only the performances with tragic elements and negative, uncertain atmospheres that can create a sense of immersion among their spectators. This is important, given that the spectators of such performances can try out not only shameful or disgraceful situations (that in daily life are usually avoided), but they can also get a chance to experience being in a community that is attempting this collectively. Signa's immersive performance can reveal the multilayeredness of every socio-cultural situation, by allowing the participants the agency to try out situations that they would like to try out (e.g. entering the room they want or following a protagonist that they found interesting to follow). This way, the production can offer personalized experiences for their visitors by allowing them to exploit some degree of freedom while still possessing a solid game mechanics system to maintain the narrative of the performance.

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AUDIENCE AND EMOJIS

A #TheRealColdtown Post-Mortem

KATHERINE CASTIELLO JONES & JULIA B. ELLINGBOE

This is a post-mortem of the live-action role-playing piece *#TheRealColdtown* written by Julia B. Ellingboe and Kat Jones. Originally created for BlackBox Copenhagen 2019, scenario writers were explicitly encouraged to create works that integrated an audience into the blackbox format. Inspired by the YA novel *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown*, *#TheRealColdtown* included ten pre-written player characters and a ten-person audience that took on the role of Social Media during the game. Using "emoji cards," audience members responded in real time to player characters during structured role-play scenes. They also were able to ask questions and make comments during *social media interludes* that took place between the focused scenes.

The scenario ran three times: at BlackBox CPH, at Intercon 2019, and at Big Bad Con 2019. This post-mortem will focus particularly on the challenges of integrating an audience into a live-action scenario, examining the various iterations that the game went through to more effectively engage the audience, and the limitations presented by the live-action role-playing format.

#THEREALCOLDTOWN: ABOUT THE SCENARIO

Inspired by the novel *Coldest Girl in Coldtown* by Holly Black, this scenario tells the story of a group of characters who are

living in or traveling to a Coldtown, a quarantined city where vampires and humans dwell. Five of the ten player characters are driving to the Coldtown, including four teenage humans and one vampire. Five of the ten player characters are actually living in the Coldtown. Some are human, some are vampires, many of them are the social media stars that the other group is watching.

#TheRealColdtown: Player Info

The Cast

On the Road-trip to Coldtown:
Shori Brooks: A teenager bitten by a vampire. Wise beyond their years. Loves vampire fiction but hates the fixation with Coldtowns and real vamps.

Lee Montoya: A wild child who was also bitten by a vampire. Shori's ex. Not excited about having to go to Coldtown. Related to Montoya in Coldtown.

Tommy Rheinfeldt: The Podcaster. Their podcast *The Night Inside* focuses on vampires and Coldtowns.
This character will have a significant social media presence during the game.

Aubrey: The Social Media Influencer. Their Youtube channel *Leaves Look Pale* focuses on Coldtown makeup and fashion.
This character will have a significant social media presence during the game.

Enos Blaire/Gabriel Thorne: A Mysterious Vampire with a past. Rejects the romanticized images of vampires coming from the Coldtowns. Doesn't trust the Coldtown system but wants to see what's really going on there.

Already in Coldtown:
Safiyya al-Baghdadiyya: (woman) Vampire Influencer--famous makeup influencer,PR machine for the vampires. Less well known for her poetry.
This character will have a significant social media presence during the game.

G. Milton-Lloyd:(man) venture capitalist, real estate mogul, exploits humans and vampires, *not a nice guy.* Think Elon Musk but with less of a conscience.

Leslie Goddard: A teen and Wannabe Vampire.Documents the awesome life in the Coldtown. No one will turn them into a vampire.
This character will have a significant social media presence during the game.

D. Summers: stuck in Coldtown when it was quarantined--on twitter as #RealColdtown. Scandal caused by displaying open hatred of vampires.
This character will have a significant social media presence during the game.

Montoya: Owns Mariachi Shoe Repair. Helps out the human community in the Coldtown. Distrusts people in power. Related to Lee Montoya.
No social media presence at all.

Image 1: List of #TheRealColdtown Characters

The scenario is structured as a prologue and two acts. The

prologue functions as both an introduction to the world and a workshop to allow players to practice the mechanics for simulating social media that are used during the game. The first act focuses on the road trip to the Coldtown, juxtaposed with scenes from the characters within the Coldtown. At the start of the second act, the teenagers arrive in Coldtown and meet the other characters.

One of the main themes of the scenario is social media and the depiction of reality. Scenes are a mix of "in real life" (*irl*) interactions and simulations of the characters' social media videos and posts. Through the metaphor of the Coldtown, the scenario is also meant to be a commentary on white flight, ghettoization, and gentrification of urban spaces. The scenes in Act One were all pre-generated, while Act Two was meant to be more improvised, giving facilitators more freedom to follow plot threads that arose in Act One.

Scenes:
Act 1:

Scene 1a, Roadtrip #1: Seating assignments--make the space uncomfortable.
Interlude (Roadtrip): Aubrey or Tommy announcing their trip
Scene 1b, Coldtown #1: Mariachi Shoe Repair (just the Coldtown folks)
Interlude (Coldtown): The first #TheRealColdtown post by Dawn/Don
2a(Roadtrip): Aubrey attempts to make a video-- how do the others react?
Interlude (Roadtrip): Aubrey's breakdown of Safiyya's look from a past Meat Market party
2b(Coldtown): Meat Market--Leslie's last attempt to become a vampire (Leslie and Safiyya)
Audience (who opt in) play vampires
Interlude (Coldtown): Safiyya's flattered reply to Aubrey's tutorial and invitation to the Coldtown
3a, Roadtrip: Car breaks down--fix it first or document it? Chaos-- if they don't fix the car then the cops show up. Cop alert on social media.
Audience plays cops.
(Short 5 min max.)
Interlude: Text/Tweet/FB post from Shori or Lee about their trip (what do they tell people is happening?)
3b, Coldtown: The Library, Milton Lloyd "offers" to buy the Mariachi Shoe Repair
4, Roadtrip/Coldtown: Who meets them at the Sears? (The Sears is closed!!) How is the reality of the Coldtown life demonstrated by the Coldtown characters?

Interludes for Act 2: AMA for the characters (similar to the "hot seat" meta-technique)

Act 2:

Scene 1: Mariachi Shoe Repair
Scene 2: The Library Salon (Freeze frame to highlight different meetings)
Scene 3: Meat Market: Document what Coldtown is *really* about. Is what they show everybody else reflecting their own ideas? Tie it into social media.
Scene 4: Epilogue: the Coldtown has gone Dark. No more social media. Audience gets to respond with what they think has happened. What is your life now? What are you doing?
(Monologues in the Dark--30 seconds per monologue)
If the character is dead (like *really* dead), just say, "I'm dead."
Only Milton-Lloyd (and possibly Rheinfeldt) can leave.

Image 2: Scene List for #TheRealColdtown, BlackBox Copenhagen Run.

Several scenes focus on the juxtaposition of the actual conditions within the Coldtown and the version presented on social media for consumption by outsiders. Social media was an incredibly important aspect of the novel *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown* and one of the aspects that got us interested in adapting the material. We initially considered using actual social media or a digital

simulation such as a Discord server for the social media aspect of the scenario. As we began drafting the scenario as one with a social media audience playing the role of a Greek chorus commenting on the actions taken by the players, we decided that simulating social media in a more live-action or analog way would work better for our purposes. We had some concerns about how using actual social media might impact the experience; this included concerns about privacy, previous experience with international larps that relied heavily on digital media and experiencing technical and bandwidth issues, and the difficulty of designing the tech while also play-testing the scenario itself. Additionally, we had played other larps that had attempted various simulations of social media (with varying amounts of success) and worried that relying on digital media would result in the audience and players spending most of the game on their phones, which seemed counter to the live-action role-playing experience.

While some people have the wealth and resources to protect themselves within the Coldtown, for many others existence is much less pleasant as they face limited resources, non-existent infrastructure, and threats of violence from vampires or other humans. While some of the characters traveling to the Coldtown hold romanticized notions fueled by their consumption of social media, several of the other characters are more skeptical about the reality of the Coldtown they are traveling to. Characters within the Coldtown also have differing relationships to social media: the vampire Safiyya uses social media to portray the Coldtown as a fun and glamorous space for humans and vampires; local human resident D. Summers uses their twitter account #RealColdtown to portray the struggles of human residents in the Coldtown; and Montoya, a local human resident, tries their hardest to have no social media presence at all.

Written initially for BlackBox CPH 2019, *#TheRealColdtown* is meant to accommodate an interactive audience. Audience

members watch the actions of the player characters but also portray the general social media audience. The participants in the audience do not play full characters during the game but are asked to respond to simulated "social media" posts during the game with monologues or questions and participate in the opening workshops to practice these interactions.

The main social media mechanics in the initial run were *emoji cards* and *social media interludes.* The *emoji cards* were 8×11" cards with an emoji printed on them. The emoji cards featured a range commonly used emojis: happy, sad, angry, celebratory, as well as a few emojis more tailored to the scenario including vampires, coffins, and a red shoe (because of the local hangout in the Coldtown known as the Mariachi Shoe Repair). These cards could be held up by audience members as a way of reacting to the player characters' actions. The form that these responses took changed over the various iterations, from being used during all play in the first iteration to being used only during *social media scenes* in the subsequent iterations. *Social media interludes* were used in between *irl* scenes in the initial run, but expanded to *social media scenes* in subsequent iterations, these scenes took place in a unique location in the play space. In the initial run *social media interludes* were largely determined in advance, such as a call for social media influencer Aubrey to announce their roadtrip, or a video response to Aubrey by the vampire Safiyya inviting Aubrey to Coldtown. Subsequent runs allowed players who were not in a current *irl* scene to run *social media scenes* for the audience that they generated on their own.

Image 3: Run-time photo of #TheRealColdtown from Intercon S.

RUN ONE: BLACKBOX CPH 2019

BlackBox CPH is an experimental larp festival that takes place in Copenhagen. In 2019 the call for larps asked specifically for designs that incorporated an audience in some way.

Blackbox Design features some unique aspects in terms of live-action role-playing (Blackbox Design, n.d.). Blackbox larps use theatrical forms of expression such as lighting, sound, scenography, and props. Blackbox larps are meant to be accessible to newcomers, and everything needed to play the larp should take place in workshops before the scenario begins. Blackbox larps focus on interactions and iteration, and the organizers of BlackBox CPH encouraged designers to engage in an ongoing conversation during the design process. Finally, BlackBox CPH bills itself as an *experimental* larp festival, encouraging designers to "Take chances, push the limits between

larp and theater, try new things. Blackbox larps are experimental, playful and always challenging the limits for the blackbox larp media" (Blackbox Design).

BlackBox CPH player culture emphasizes helping the designers realize their artistic vision. There is a focus on playing the scenario correctly and it is common for players to ask clarifying questions of the designers during breaks in action to clarify intent, mechanics, or story. There is little emphasis on preparation or communication in advance of the festival, but a widespread reliance on pre-game workshops as part of the game slot during the festival. While an audience is not common in blackbox games, some past scenarios have included audience roles for players while they are not directly involved in the action of the scenario.

To take advantage of the blackbox format scenes in *#TheRealColdtown* were designed around set locations with their own specific scenography, lighting, and music/sound. These included a car constructed out of chairs, ringed by color-changing lights to reflect the mood within the vehicle, The Library Salon, an upscale vampire club in the old public library featuring conversation spaces and a baby grand piano, the Mariachi Shoe Repair, a local hangout featuring a cooler with drinks and limited seating space, and The Meat Market, a vampire club featuring strobe lights and 90's club music. Chairs were set up around the perimeter of the blackbox theater, allowing audience members several vantage points from which to view the actions taking place in different scene locations. The "Social Media" space for BlackBox CPH was the same physical space as the vampire club, but used blue lighting to evoke the virtual space of the internet.

Image 4: Run-time photo of #TheRealColdtown at BlackBox Copenhagen.

In the initial run at BlackBox CPH, Act One was structured so that scenes on the "roadtrip" to the Coldtown and scenes played within the Coldtown took place one after another, separated by *social media interlude* scenes. In order to accommodate the time slot, this meant scenes were each quite short, 10 minutes for most scenes, with some additional time given for the final scene of the act. Act Two was played as short scenes that included characters from both the "roadtrip" and the Coldtown who were now all together in the Coldtown space.

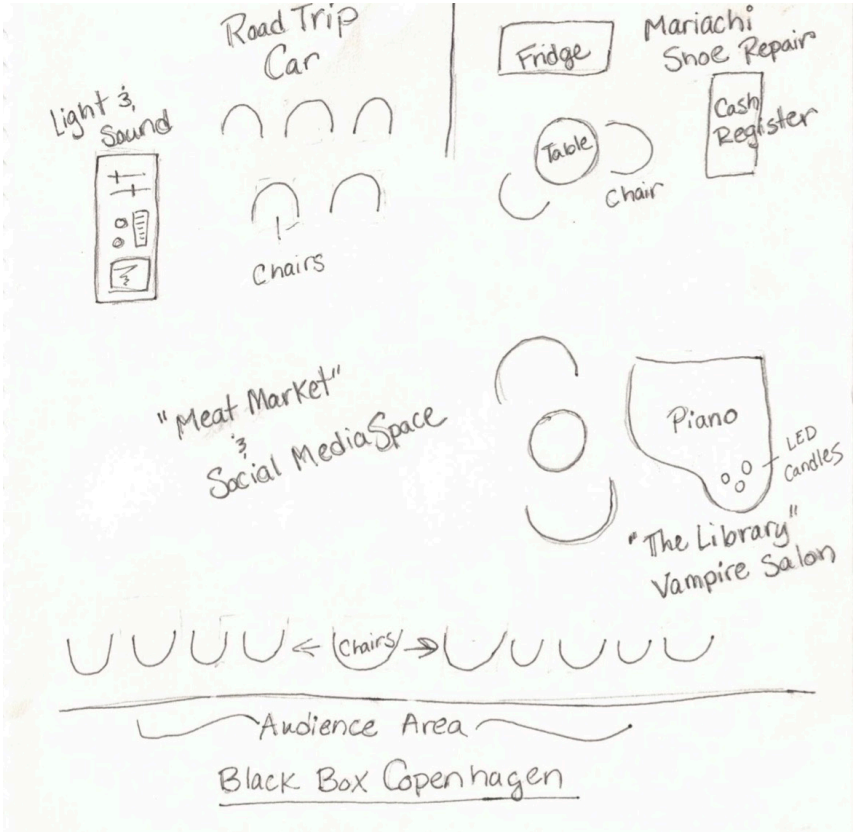

Image 5: Diagram of the blackbox space during the BlackBox Copenhagen run.

For the BlackBox CPH run there were ten participants in the audience. The audience was given a stack of 46 *emoji cards*, with two cards each of 23 unique emojis, which they could hold up as reactions to the players actions during both "real life" scenes and *social media interludes*. The prologue to the scenario took the form of choosing characters, introducing characters and relationships, and an AMA (ask me anything) where each character took the "hot seat" to answer questions from the social media audience. The AMA functioned to help player characters learn about their character, while also allowing the audience to practice using the emoji cards to react to the answers to the various questions.

Between each short *irl* scene there was a *social media interlude* where the audience had a chance to react using their emojis, but also to make comments or ask questions in response to the "social media" post. These interludes could take the form of simulated blog posts, youtube videos, or podcasts made by the player characters, some happening as flashbacks to before the *irl* action of the scenario.

In the feedback session after the BlackBox CPH run participants commented that the scenario sometimes felt chaotic, many participants felt the short scenes didn't allow players or audience members to get a feel for what was happening or build relationships. With ten audience members sharing the *emoji cards* there was a scramble to find appropriate emojis to use, and this also led to a feeling of chaos.

The participants in the audience felt that they often didn't have enough to do during scenes and wanted more participation. They also expressed confusion about what their role during the scenario should be. They were unsure when they should ask questions or make comments. It was clear that more workshopping was needed to make these interactions feel less awkward.

Players commented that they were often unsure of the distinction between what was being released through social media and what was happening *irl*. This distinction was made further confusing by the presence of the *emoji cards*. Players were unsure about how to react to the emojis in scenes that were taking place *irl.* Since the distinction between social media and "real life" was a core theme of the scenario, participants suggested that this distinction be made more concrete during subsequent runs of the game.

RUN TWO: INTERCON 2019

The next run of *#TheRealColdtown* was at Intercon 2019. Run by

New England Interactive Literature, Intercon is a multi-genre, all LARP convention that takes place in New England each spring (New England Interactive Literature). The convention takes place in a hotel and *#TheRealColdtown* was run in one of the larger convention rooms. For this convention we had much less control over the environment than in the blackbox, but we did have slightly more space.

Additionally, Intercon games have slightly different player expectations than the scenarios run at BlackBox CPH. One of the most important is that casting will take place *before* the game, characters will be pre-written, and that players will receive their casting and character sheets in advance of the game. Most games at Intercon have detailed pre-written characters, complex relationships, and expansive world-building. Players expect to be given information about the content of a scenario so they can select whether or not they want to engage with the stated themes. They also anticipate a heavy reading load, as some character sheets and game materials might be up to 20 pages or more. Additionally, popular games are often run multiple times during the convention, or in subsequent years. There is a heavy emphasis on secrets and surprises during games, as well as interesting and elaborate costumes. Games that include an audience are extremely rare at Intercon.

For this run of *#TheRealColdtown* we rewrote the character sheets giving each player a character sheet with their online persona, and a sheet with more private information. The online persona descriptions of each character were sent to both the player characters and the audience participants. During pre-game workshops we encouraged players to play on these distinctions during their "real life" and social media scenes, emphasizing that characters online personas were often heavily edited as opposed to how their character would appear or react in real life interactions.

For the Intercon run we integrated much of the feedback we received from BlackBox CPH. In order to clarify the role of the audience, we gave the social media audience limited "characters" by asking audience members to select 1-2 usernames to use during the scenario and to choose 1-3 characters for each user to "like" or "follow" on social media. This allowed the audience to construct a limited online persona, and the audience members used their different personas to shape their comments, questions, and responses. For example an audience member with the username VampFan gave enthusiastic comments and fawning questions to the vampire character Safiyya, while an audience member with a social justice-themed username critically interrogated the venture capitalist Milton Lloyd about his takeover of the public library for use as a vampire club.

Because interactive audiences are not a feature of most Intercon larps, we were unsure if participants would be willing to give up a game slot to take the role of audience in our scenario. We did have a smaller audience during Intercon, only five participants signed up to be in the audience during the scenario. To make the audience role less chaotic, we gave each audience member their own stack of emojis giving them each a range of emotions as well as some of the more tailored emojis as well. We kept the AMA prologue as a way to workshop "social media" interactions and made some additional changes to clarify the role of the social media audience.

We created a separate "social media" area of the play space. This is where *social media interludes* happened, and where players who were not having scenes could go to make additional posts, or have emergent social media interactions. For the Intercon run, the social media audience was not allowed to observe scenes, unless someone was recording the content to be posted on social media. We encouraged characters to make *social media summary posts* after these scenes: short, twitter-esque posts that gave a summary of events from the character's perspective and had a

table where participants could place these "posts" so everyone could read them.

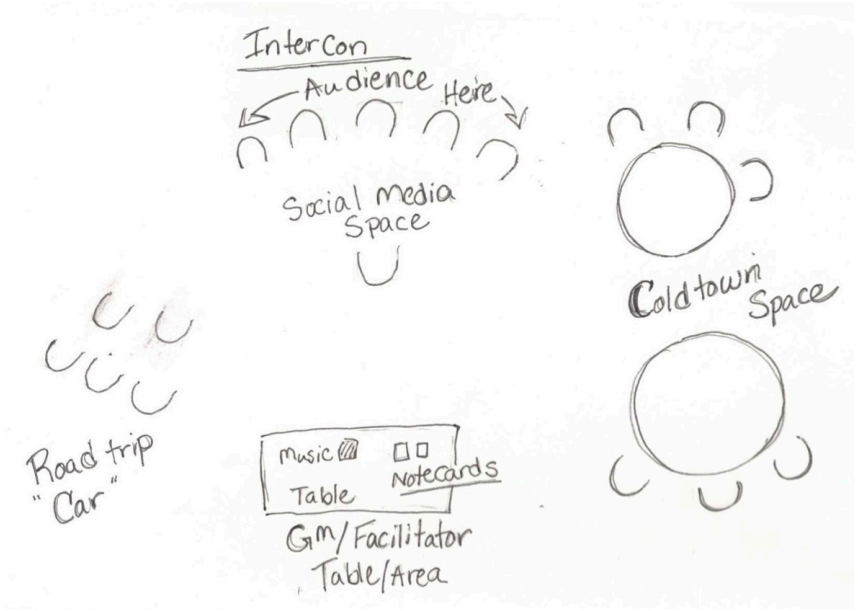

Image 6: Diagram of the space from the Intercon S run.

The final mechanic we included to give the social media audience more engagement, while still keeping their role limited to social media spaces, was the *Private Message* (*PM*) mechanic. Users who were following certain characters, or characters who were not playing scenes, could "private message" each other using hand written notes passed between participants by one of the facilitators.

Finally, we ran the scenes in Act One taking place on the "roadtrip," and those taking place in the Coldtown, simultaneously. This allowed the scenes to run for longer than 10 minutes. In between scenes we still included *social media interludes,* but these often took the form of several social media "posts" from different characters.

These changes really worked to highlight the distinction between "real life" and "social media" within the game, while also providing activities for further audience participation during downtime between *social media scenes*. One audience member remarked after the game that while it wasn't the same as playing in a larp, the experience provided low-key fun after a full day of intense games.

At times, the *PM* mechanic could be a bit distracting, as the pings from the messages (made verbally by the facilitators) would interrupt scenes (much like the ping of someone's phone in real life). But participants reported that they enjoyed the ability to respond to each other in this way. Audience members sent words of encouragement to specific characters, asked provocative questions, or asked about plot threads they were curious about with their *PM*'s. The *PM's* were therefore useful to the facilitators in communicating the plot threads the audience was interested in and allowed us to structure *social media interludes* to draw out these threads, answer audience questions, or provide counter-narratives about important events.

For example, during this run of the scenario, one of the player characters did not show up to play. None of the audience was interested in playing this character, so they simply did not appear during the game, while still having important pre-written relationships with many characters. This missing character soon received their own hashtag *#WhereisLeslie* during *social media scenes*. In *PM's* and *social media scenes* rumors circulated about their whereabouts and audience members questioned who was responsible for their disappearance. This emergent content felt like an accurate simulation of the way information gets disseminated and distorted by social media in real life.

RUN THREE: BIG BAD CON 2019

The final run of the scenario took place at Big Bad Con in 2019.

Big Bad Con is a tabletop and live action gaming convention that takes place in California each fall (Big Bad Con – Returning in 2021). Big Bad Con players have a much more consumer-based mentality. Players often sign up for many events, but often do not attend all the events they sign up for. Socializing and open gaming often compete with scheduled events. There is little communication with players in advance of the convention and no expectation that casting and costume suggestions will be provided by the facilitator. Additionally, there is much more emphasis on adapting scenarios to suit the players, rather than players selecting scenarios that have been carefully scripted by the designers. The safety technique "Lines & Veils," which denotes certain content as off the table, or "fade to black" is commonly used before most game sessions to calibrate player expectations.

Like Intercon, Big Bad Con takes place in a hotel. #TheRealColdtown was held in a large conference room, and was given curtains to divide the space. This meant that curtains separated the Coldtown space, roadtrip space, and the social media space from each other. Participants were unable to see actions taking place in the other areas of the game and sound was muffled between the different spaces. This spatial separation allowed for further development of the "social media" space as a separate play and narrative space that further enhanced the juxtaposition between *irl* and *social media scenes*.

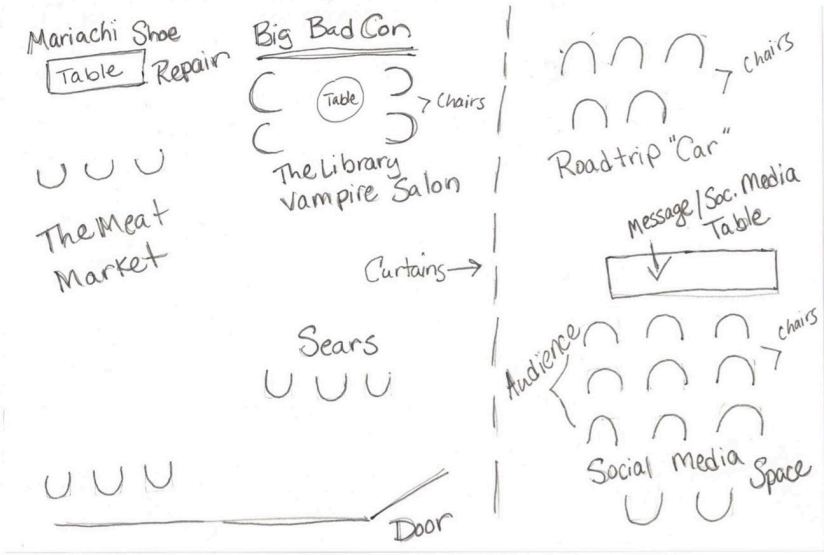

Image 7: Diagram of the space from Big Bad Con run.

For the Big Bad run we kept the new mechanics that had been introduced for the Intercon run. Audience members were instructed to create usernames and choose characters to follow, but this mechanic was less useful given that there were only two audience members for the Big Bad run. In order to provide more of an audience for *social media scenes*, players were instructed to create social media usernames for use during *social media scenes* and given *emoji cards* to use during *social media scenes.* This meant that the audience functioned less as a separate entity in this run, and more like an additional role that players could take on during the scenario.

We noticed more players in the Big Bad run using the social media space when they were not involved in playing *irl* scenes. For example, the venture capitalist character, Milton Lloyd, made several public relations "posts" encouraging investment in the Coldtown. And social media influencers Aubrey and Leslie both made tutorial "videos" about how to achieve different

makeup looks seen at Coldtown parties. We believe this was at least partially due to the availability of a separate social media space in this run.

Image 8: Run-time photo from Big Bad Con run.

The *social media summary posts* were once again set out on a table and made use of different colored notecards to delineate social media posts made by player characters, those made by a general social media user, and private messages. This board was so popular that we ended up having to flip all the notecards over to re-use during Act 2. While the *private message* mechanic was used during the Big Bad run, it was much less prevalent, and less distracting, than in the Intercon run.

DISCUSSION

Our experience developing #TheRealColdtown was initially shaped by the conventions of both our own play culture, and the expectations of BlackBox CPH. Our initial hesitancy to cut the social media audience off from observing the *irl* scenes during

the game stemmed from a worry that the audience would not have enough to do and become bored. But this meant that players and audience members were unclear about how to interact with each other outside the *social media interludes*. Our initial choice to play short scenes was also not well received, as both the audience members and players felt dissatisfied and wanted time to let the story and relationships develop. Running *irl* scenes of the "roadtrip" and in Coldtown simultaneously allowed more time for both *social media interludes* and the *irl* scenes themselves. This change was well received by both players and audience members in subsequent runs.

By more clearly delineating the separate game spaces, creating a separate "social media" area of the game space, we gave both players and audience members greater engagement with the social media themes of the scenario. The *private message* and social media post mechanics both gave audience members a connection to the scenes being played outside the "social media" space, while also preserving the feeling that the social media audience was not accessing the full story. These mechanics complimented the *social media interludes* and led to a stronger feeling of the distinction between "real life" and social media within the game. Allowing different characters to post about the same events further exposed the different narratives that existed in the "social media" space.

While the BlackBox CPH run actively recruited audience members, we did not have the same experience of recruiting larpers as audience members in the subsequent runs. BlackBox CPH offered audience tickets at a discount from player tickets, but this pricing structure did not exist at the other conventions where we ran #TheRealColdtown. Additionally, the culture of many US gaming conventions may make larpers hesitant to give up a slot to sit as an audience rather than as a player in a game.

The Intercon sign-up system had been updated the year we ran

#TheRealColdtown, which allowed us to differentiate sign-ups for audience vs. player roles, however, given that Intercon sign-ups happen in a staggered fashion (participants are allowed to sign up for one game, then a week later for two games, until they can sign up for as many games at they want) and that popular games often fill up as soon as sign-ups open, participants may have been hesitant to give up a slot to play as an audience for an unknown game. Even categorizing the role as "audience" may have given mixed signals to a play community where audiences are not usually part of live-action role-play.

Audiences are, as far as we know, unknown in previous Intercon larps. Horde larps are a more common style in the Intercon community that introduces separate types of players. A horde larp is one in which the players are split into two groups. There is a small set of players called the "cast" who receive a character at the start of the game and play that character throughout. A second set of players, called the "horde," pick up tiny character sheets – usually one or two paragraphs – from a table, play that character for a short period of time, and then when they're done, go get another one repeatedly until the game is over. (Styles of larp) Perhaps we would have gotten a bigger turnout if we'd listed the game as a horde larp, however, the role of the social media audience as we've envisioned it for this game does seem distinct from the concept of the "horde" in a horde larp, as the role was less about cycling through a mass of different horde characters and more about witnessing the narrative of the game from a different perspective.

We had similar problems filling the interactive audience at Big Bad Con. Due to the the sign-up system, which operated on a similarly staggered sign-ups system, player roles for *#TheRealColdtown* were listed under larps (which counted towards a players game quota), while the audience roles were categorized as a panel in order to exclude it from the signup quota. However, the audience role in *#TheRealColdtown* is not the

same as a panel. The lack of a clear category exposes the lack of this type of interactive audience in the Big Bad Con play culture as well.

We speculate that had we initially developed #TheRealColdtown as an interactive theater, or improv, piece that we would have had different challenges and responses. Our own play cultures, based heavily in premiering our games at conventions, and as long time participants in Intercon, shaped our own ideas about player expectations and worries about what would and would not be accepted by larpers. Clearly, some of our ideas were wrong, as the initial run of the game did not integrate the audience as effectively as we'd hoped. The Intercon run benefited not only from being the second iteration of the game, but also from our own deeper knowledge of the play culture, player base, and space of this convention. As long time attendees we also have players who have participated in our other games who were willing to take a chance on this less conventional larp.

The experience of designing *#TheRealColdtown* highlights the importance of iteration, especially when experimenting in the playable theater realm. The second and third iterations of this scenario were more successful because we were able to provide interaction for the audience while still engaging with the core themes of the game. Changes to timing and mechanics were important, but the shaping of the distinct "social media" space was also a key difference that we were able to exploit more thoroughly in each iteration.

Designed initially for an experimental larp festival, *#TheRealColdtown* aimed to explore how the integration of a social media audience could help expand the themes of the game. While the game plays without the addition of the audience, as we witnessed in early play tests, having a distinct audience adds a dimension to the game that we feel is important and interesting. Having a true audience that can respond and interact with "social

media" posts during the game, helps enhance the feeling that Coldtown exists differently in "real life" than on "social media." We are currently working to adapt a virtual version of this scenario which will engage audience members in a different way. We have also considered running this scenario as an improv show. In this case the player characters could be played by improv actors, while the audience members could interact either using the emoji cards, or using a live social media platform such as Discord. Given our experience with distinguishing between *irl* and *social media* interactions, this adaptation might present some challenges. Would we rewrite scenes so that each of them was somehow posted on social media? Would we use the social media audience to shape future scenes? There are different options available. We have also considered running simultaneous versions of *Coldtown* live that would be linked through a social media platform. The live show would be *irl* for each location (potentially separate Coldtowns in different parts of the country) but would be able to share aspects of the live experience with others through an in-game social media platform. In each of these new spaces further iteration will be needed to most effectively meet audience expectations and create fruitful interactions.

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AR PLAYABLE THEATRE ROSENSTRASSE

We Choose Each Other

ERICA PRINCIPE CRUZ, MINGZHI CAI, DEREK CHAN, SALLY IM, QIYI TANG, RYAN ZHANG, & JESSICA HAMMER

ABSTRACT

To explore the future of storytelling in AR, Team MemoiAR iteratively designed an AR adaptation of the award-winning game *Rosenstrasse*, an analog immersive tabletop roleplaying game that explores Jewish-Aryan marriages in WWII Berlin. This AR adaptation, *Rosenstrasse: We Choose Each Other*, preserves major themes and one dyad's storyline of growing love and sustained personal resistance from the original game while AR extends the original live, interactive narrative experience, described in this paper as playable theatre. As a post-mortem and analysis of self-reflections on this playable theatre experience, this paper analyzes key moments of *R:WCEO* and presents autoethnographic descriptions of the first author's play experiences to illustrate design strategies developed by MemoiAR coauthors. These designs facilitate narrative immersion, foster player interpersonal connections, and support physical roleplay enactments to produce a compelling AR playable theatre experience. To conclude, this paper presents transferable insights, drawn from the presented design strategies, for the design of immersive, technologically-mediated playable theatre experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Team MemoiAR explored the future of storytelling in Augmented Reality by iteratively designing and playtesting an AR translation of the award-winning game *Rosenstrasse*[1], an analog immersive tabletop roleplaying game set in WWII Berlin. Designed for four players and a trained facilitator, the transformational game explores "mixed" marriages between Jewish men and Aryan women. The game culminates in the women-led Rosenstrasse Demonstrations that resulted in imprisoned Jewish men being released by the Third Reich back to their protesting Aryan loved ones. MemoiAR's AR adaptation, *Rosenstrasse: We Choose Each Other*, preserves major themes and the dyad narrative of Max and Annaliese, the Jewish violinist and Aryan florist who fall in love and struggle together, from the original game. The adaptation uses AR to build upon the immersive qualities of the live, interactive narrative experience, described in this paper as playable theatre. As a post-mortem and analysis of self-reflections on this playable theatre experience, this paper analyzes key moments from Max and Annaliese's storyline in *R:WCEO* and presents autoethnographic descriptions of the first author's play experiences of these key moments to illustrate design strategies developed by the MemoiAR coauthors. These designs function together to produce a compelling AR playable theatre experience of love and survival in Nazi Germany. Strategies to use physical and digital elements such as diegetic markers, set pieces, and devices facilitate roleplay identity and world-building to produce this meaningful, immersive experience. Additionally, user interface prompts foster interpersonal connections of the dyad within the playable theatre narrative, and embodied game mechanics support increased immersion in physical roleplay enactments to create this technology-mediated playable theatre experience.

1. Full details and associated media can be found on the *Rosenstrasse* webpage.

Rosenstrasse: A Story of Love and Survival

Rosenstrasse, the historical roleplaying tabletop game designed by Moyra Turkington and Jessica Hammer, is based on the Rosenstrasse protests during which non-Jewish German women demanded the return of their Jewish family members by the Nazi Regime in 1943. Structured roleplay enabled by a facilitator casts players as both a Jewish man and Aryan woman as the civil liberties of Jewish-Aryan couples are eroded by the Third Reich from 1933 to 1943 in Berlin. Culminating in the Rosenstrasse Demonstration, each player roleplays as one half of two different intimate dyads, experiencing everyday moments of love, fear, and bravery in their relationships. Dyads engage in roleplay conversation as the core mechanic to share intimate experiences ranging from romantic moments to dangerous, frightening scenarios. For example, in Max and Annaliese's storyline, this includes scenes of their budding romance, building their lives together after marriage, and responding to the powerful external pressures that would see them separated. *Rosenstrasse* exemplifies the following key themes:

Anti-heroism

Rosenstrasse places players in the everyday relationships of its characters, impacting their available choices and actions, with smaller scale narrative stakes as opposed to epic heroism; e.g. when Max is attacked for being Jewish, he cannot epically battle the Brownshirts[2], as this could result in serious injury or death.

Relationship-centric Play

Players connect with other players by roleplaying key yet everyday conversations as dyads, developing these core relationships throughout *Rosenstrasse*; e.g. Max and Annaliese

2. See the US Holocaust Memorial Museum Holocaust Encyclopedia *Sturmabteilung* entry for more on Brownshirts.

discuss their feelings, from flirting when they first meet to coping together during Kristallnacht.

External Relationship Pressure

Characters may want to separate from their partner given civil rights erosion, and *Rosenstrasse* prompts reflections on how a character's Jewish identity contributes to their partner's suffering; e.g. Max is banned from air raid shelters because he is Jewish and is encouraged to reflect on how this danger extends to Annaliese as his wife.

Multiple Perspectives

Players roleplay as multiple characters who are impacted differently by the historical events leading to the Rosenstrasse Demonstrations; e.g. a roleplayer who is Annaliese might also be Josef, a Jewish editor and publisher married to an Aryan woman and father of two children, enabling two very different roleplaying experiences within the same playthrough.

Rosenstrasse: We Choose Each Other

R:WCEO is an AR adaptation of Max and Annaliese's storyline; it includes a tutorial, or Part 0, and three major parts connected by transitions. In Part 1, Max and Annaliese meet, and in the following transition they get married and move in together. In Part 2, the couple experiences Kristallnacht, and in the following transition they suffer harassment and are separated when Max is imprisoned. Part 3 is the Rosenstrasse Demonstration and a short follow-up after they are reunited.

Played in a dedicated physical space by two roleplayers using iPads, *R:WCEO* includes diegetic street signs as AR markers in real-world space, seen in **Figure 1**, and period-appropriate costume accessories at the Setup Table for roleplay preparation, shown in **Figure 2**. Using UI prompts, the iPads function mainly

as dyad roleplay conversation facilitators and guide players' physical movement and interaction within the layout of AR-generated spaces that can be considered stages for roleplay improvisations, shown in **Figure 3**. The physical space is organized so that Max's home and Annaliese's flower shop are opposite each other and closest to the setup table, with Monbijou Park and Rosenstrasse about 15 feet away (also opposite each other) and furthest from the setup table. These locations are denoted by the street sign AR markers and players use the iPads to register markers to see and interact with the AR environment of the playable theatre game.

Figure 1: Diegetic street sign markers for where Max and Annaliese first meet, Annaliese's Flower Shop, and Max's Home

Figure 2: Setup Table of costume accessories and character markers for Max and Annaliese

Figure 3: Layout of Setup Table and AR roleplay stages marked by street signs, ~15 feet apart

This translation to AR-enabled playable theatre preserved

Rosenstrasse's original key themes of *anti-heroism*, *relationship-centric play*, *external relationship pressure*, and *multiple perspectives*. Extending players' enactments of *anti-heroism* and *relationship-centric play*, *R:WCEO* immerses them in everyday relationships with corresponding narrative stakes and choices which are purposely limited throughout play. Players' experiences of *external relationship pressure* and *multiple perspectives* are similarly extended in *R:WCEO* via its design pillars "*We choose each other*" and "*Our world is getting smaller.*"

"We choose each other"

This is the core narrative theme of Max and Annaliese's story, and *R:WCEO* structures roleplaying so that two people share emotional and historical moments by rapidly building, stressing, and supporting intimate bonds between them.

"Our world is getting smaller"

This theme applies to both the AR spaces of *R:WCEO* and the freedom of movement of Jewish people and its effects on Jewish-Aryan couples during WWII. Max and Annaliese's movement is increasingly limited over time during the experience to reflect this.

These pillars are intertwined with three design strategies generated by MemoiAR iteratively designing and playtesting *R:WCEO* with twenty-eight playtesters over six sessions: 1) *Augmenting identity and world-building via diegetic elements and devices,* 2) *Cultivating intimate bonds via AR-facilitated roleplaying,* and 3) *Intensifying experiences via AR-facilitated embodied actions and feedback.* This paper analyzes key moments of *R:WCEO* and presents autoethnographic descriptions of the first author's play experiences to illustrate these design strategies. Such design strategies and pillars coalesce to structure AR playable theatre enactments in what can be considered a play in which players, as

actors, do not yet know their characters nor what they would do or say on the varied stages created by Augmented Reality.

AUGMENTING IDENTITY AND WORLD-BUILDING VIA DIEGETIC ELEMENTS AND DEVICES

R:WCEO's colocated, structured roleplay is complemented by diegetic markers and devices that meld with AR assets and mechanics to create stages for improvisation. Illustrated in **Figure 1** above, the physical street sign markers are designed to match digital assets in the experience. They enable player navigation between AR stages via an iPad shape-matching mechanic. Crafting physical markers to match overarching visual themes of *R:WCEO*'s AR spaces firmly grounds the digital roleplay stages in physical reality. Players assume a different identity through enacting the intimate dyad narrative on these AR stages. The introduction of diegetic markers, set pieces, devices, and their uses in Parts 0 and 1 (the tutorial and the couple's first meeting) are specially crafted to augment the sense of becoming a different self that inhabits a different world: players learn who they are becoming, what world they will inhabit, and how they can navigate and interact with others and objects within it.

In these earliest moments, the UI provides key details for a player's new identity, e.g. "You are Max…Your happiness comes from your music, your freedom, and your family." The UI also prompts them to choose a favorite accessory from the Setup Table. From there, they physically compose their new persona by donning costume pieces. The iPad acts as a mirror, reflecting their identity-building using the front-facing camera, a period-appropriate frame overlay, and a 1940s camera filter, depicted in **Figure 4**. Following this, the AR stages of the *R:WCEO* world are built around the players as they learn how to use the iPad shape-matching mechanic on the character name markers, also depicted in **Figure 2**, and the diegetic street sign markers. The

street signs manifest key narrative locations within the screens of the iPads that serve as windows into the AR stages for roleplay. As players settle into their new diegetic costume set pieces and identities and construct their new world through exploring diegetic street sign markers, music specific to their new self plays from the iPad. The diegetic street sign markers, costume set pieces, and iPads acting as mirrors and windows facilitate identity and world-building so players can enact different personas and experience new perspectives in *R:WCEO*.

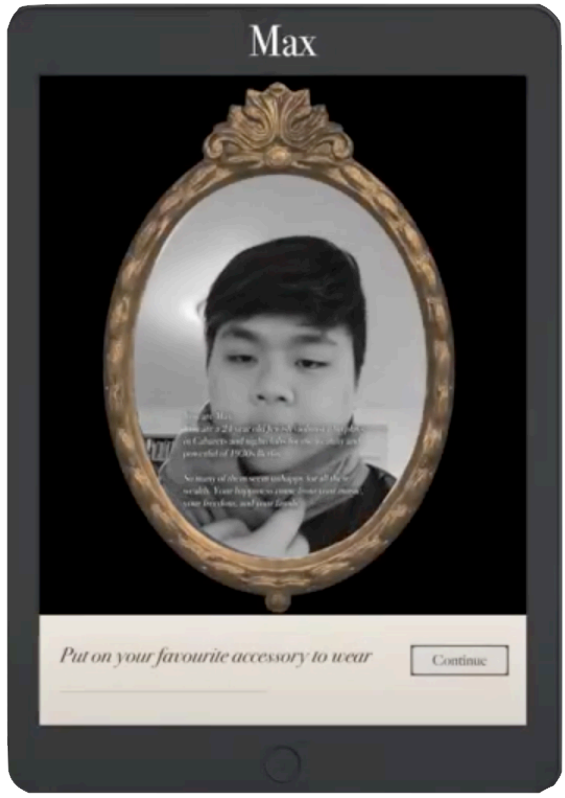

Figure 4: Details about the character Max are displayed on the iPad that also acts as a mirror the player uses to put on a scarf costume piece as he physically constructs his new self

Autoethnographic Play Perspective: Becoming a Different Self in a Different World

Throughout this paper, autoethnography as self-reflection is used to explore personal play experiences towards deriving insights about the playable theatre experience design. The first author's play experience of Part 0 illustrates the construction of identity and world building augmented by diegetic elements and the iPad:

> *These moments felt like careful, deliberate steps for me to become someone else. The UI prompt "You are Annaliese" suspended my everyday self, and further UI descriptions taught me who I was becoming and what was important to me. When I picked a costume accessory, I picked what I thought Annaliese would like–I didn't pick* my *favorite: I picked hers. Watching myself in the mirror-iPad while wrapping her favorite scarf around my new self aided in constructing my new identity, being built directly on my body. Doing all this and seeing the scarf wrapped around my neck as* her *scarf pushed me fully into thinking of my body, myself as* her*, and I felt like I was Annaliese, at least so long as I was playing R:WCEO.*
>
> *Next, I peered through the window-iPad at AR stages manifested by street sign markers. They were like physical frames for the colocated AR spaces, elements that existed across planes of reality, both in the AR stages for improvisation and the space I physically inhabited in reality. I learned the shape of R:WCEO's WWII Berlin and the tone and historical setting of my enactments from the UI descriptions and digital assets. The music playing from the iPad served as my new theme song, binding the pieces of my newly constructed self and world together.*
>
> *In retrospect I can see how these moments set the AR stages for the design pillars "We choose each other" and "Our world is getting smaller." I had not yet met the other half of my dyad, but in becoming Annaliese and inhabiting her world, I recognized my significant other, Max. He was attached to my new identity and was to be central to my experience. I was beginning to become the person who could choose him. In the same way,*

my movement in the physical and AR space was uninhibited, but I learned the shape and extent of Annaliese's world. This enabled me to feel the sharp contrast brought on by later limitations on my character's civil liberties. With all of this, I felt ready to move forward as Annaliese.

Cultivating Intimate Bonds via AR-Facilitated Roleplaying

R:WCEO's AR UI and mechanics are designed to facilitate connections between players in the absence of a human facilitator. This AR experience, like the original game, is designed so that player-to-player conversation is the heart of the experience. AR goes beyond visualizing 3D assets, and instead functions as the primary way the game makes storytelling a playable, immersive activity. Throughout *R:WCEO*, Max and Annaliese's relationship is built, tested, and cultivated, all accomplished and augmented by the use of AR UI to structure and facilitate roleplaying interactions. These interactions are supported by *narrative text, internal thoughts, game instructions, conversation starters,* and *full roleplay conversation* prompts, some of which are depicted in **Figure 5**. Facilitating roleplay via UI presents the danger of players focusing on the iPad during roleplay scenarios when they should be directly engaging with each other, so the UI dynamically directs focus as called for by the playable theatre experience. To manage player focus between the UI, the real world, the digital AR world, and their partner, the screen disables certain features when they might be distracting, and uses audio to draw player attention back to the screen when needed. For example, all UI updates are accompanied by a page turn sound, and all chapters end with camera-blocking UI to signal the end of digital interactions and draw focus back to the other player.

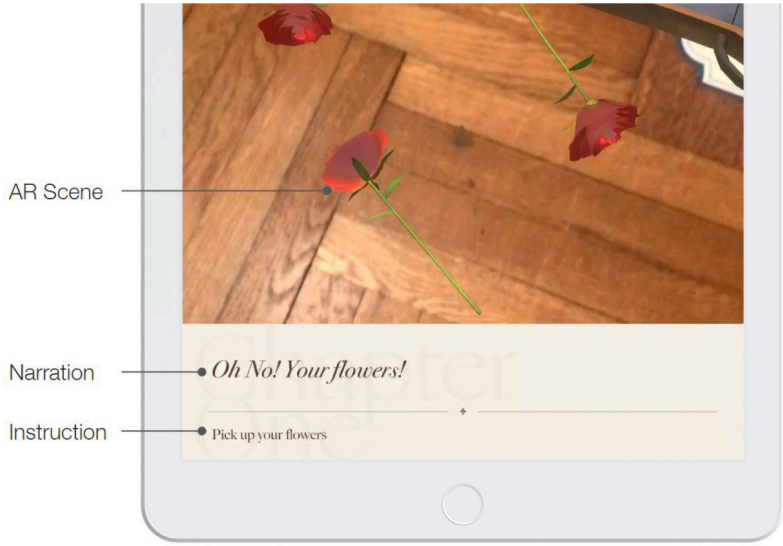

Figure 5: UI narrative text and game instructions prompts facilitate structured roleplay of Annaliese meeting Max for the first time

AR-facilitated roleplay cultivates the intimate bond between Max and Annaliese during especially harrowing moments in Part 2, when their relationship is strained by external forces during Kristallnacht. After being harassed in the park, the couple tries to head home, but intimidating crowds block the quickest route. Unable to discern friend from foe, the couple cautiously returns to the AR stage of their shared apartment. The pair attempt to have tea together to cope with their shared negative experiences and the escalating tension outside their home. However, their peaceful moment is violently interrupted when a thrown rock shatters their window, toppling a vase holding a rose and physically marking the moment the chaos of Kristallnacht invades their home. In these moments of fear and helplessness, roleplaying is facilitated via AR UI prompts to cultivate Max and Annaliese's bond as it is tested in the face of violence. *Internal*

thoughts prompts guide the dyad's reflection and shared expression of their anxiety and uncertainty while *conversation starters* helpfully nudge players to check in with their partner. *Full roleplay conversation* is facilitated by prompts and conversation topics that provoke extended conversation between the dyad. Guided by the AR UI prompts, Max and Annaliese clean up the shattered glass together and press the fallen rose into their album of memories. The UI encourages them to reflect on their relationship in the aftermath of the danger and fear of Kristallnacht invading their home. In these moments, AR-facilitated roleplay cultivates their tested connection by prompting Max and Annaliese to respond to the strain exerted on their bond by fear and violence with small moments of love, as shown in **Figures 6 and** 7.

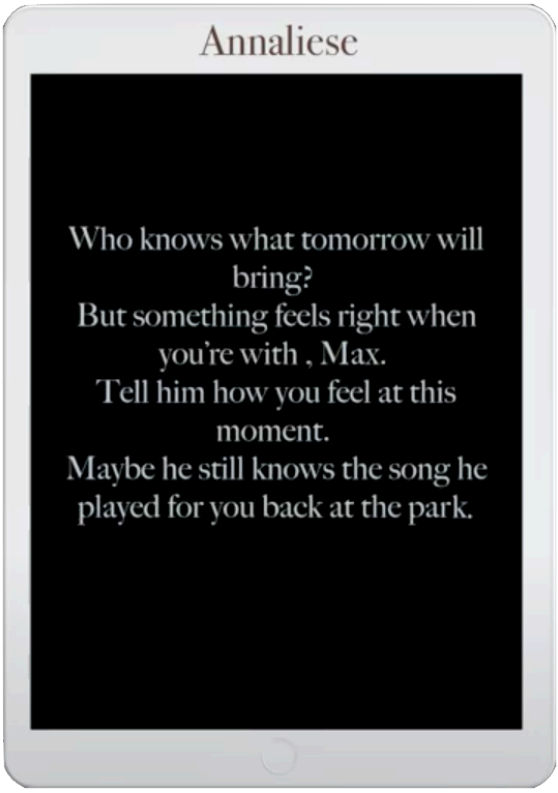

Figure 6: Full roleplay conversation prompts guide Annaliese to reflect and communicate her feelings to Max and initiate a small moment of love amidst the chaos and fear of Kristallnacht

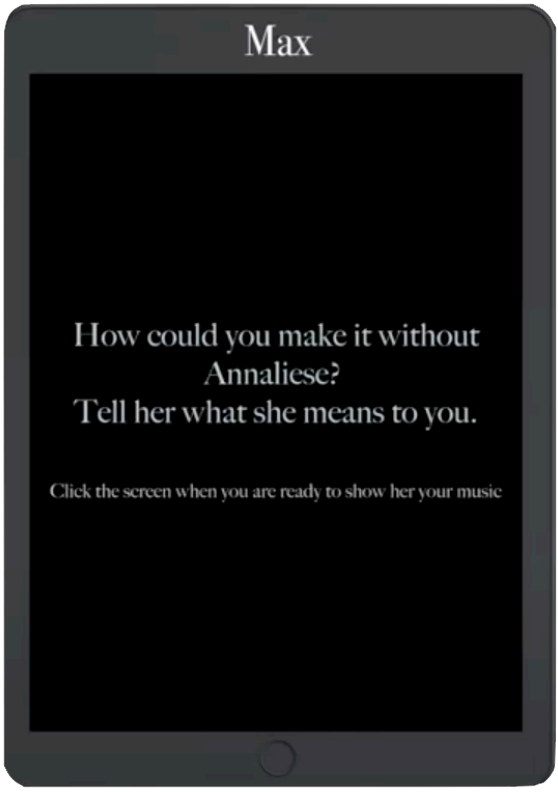

Figure 7: Full roleplay conversation and game instructions prompts guide Max to think about and share how he is feeling with Annaliese before playing his violin for her

Autoethnographic Play Perspective: Picking Up the Pieces, Together

To illustrate AR-facilitated roleplay cultivating player-to-player connections, the first author describes her play experience of Part 2:

> *As Annaliese, I felt like my connection with Max had been attacked repeatedly. It was a dark turn in what had previously been a playable theatre experience full of light, love, and laughter. Together, we tried to cautiously move through masses of strangers who made me uncomfortable*

and fearful that they might see that Max was Jewish and act upon that. Their dark forms, audible negative remarks, and the AR visual effects indicating likely hostility (shown in **Figure 8)** *kept me on edge. I even heard some discriminatory statements against Jewish people, and I found myself hoping Max hadn't heard them too–I felt we were both worried enough. Because of the harassment we endured in the park and how unsafe it felt to be outside, the feeling "Our world is getting smaller" built within me, and I felt compelled to go home and stay there.*

I felt the same strain even within the relative safety of the AR stage of our shared home, feeling powerless when I realized we could not even comfort each other by having tea together–and feeling scared in the moment that our window was broken and Kristallnacht physically breached our safe haven. But, during the careful, quiet enactment of cleaning up the glass with Max and pressing the rose into our album so that he could preserve the memory of this moment, I felt less fear and uncertainty because I realized we had, and were continuing to, meet these challenges together. To me, the action of adding this negative memory to our album was a small but significant decision that exemplified Max and I continuously choosing each other despite the external pressures on our marriage. It was like a page in our album of happiness that showed they tried to scare us for loving each other, but we still loved and chose each other. This feeling got stronger when we shared our affection, gratefulness, and intent to stand by each other. Our bond was tempered instead of weakened by Kristallnacht. When Max played our song, even after that fear and violence, I felt hope. Despite how terrible things were, we were still together.

Figure 8: Silhouettes on the streets during Kristallnacht communicate tension and hostility through threatening crowd audio and emanating red vectors

INTENSIFYING EXPERIENCES VIA AR-FACILITATED EMBODIED ACTIONS AND FEEDBACK

R:WCEO uses AR to facilitate physical enactments of embodied actions during roleplay to intensify the dyad's experiences. To do so, this AR playable theatre experience carries over interactive mechanics from Virtual Reality and infuses them in the dyad's AR-facilitated actions within AR stages, producing a versatile set of AR roleplayer performance abilities. This set includes: *picking up digital objects* by physically moving the iPad closer to touch or pick up interactive digital objects visible on the iPad screen; *passing objects between players* by using on-screen markers and

aligning one iPad over the other to exchange interactive digital objects; *playing the violin* by dragging a finger over a digital violin on-screen depicted in **Figure 9**; *drawing or writing* by dragging a fingertip on the iPad screen to write messages into the photo album or a letter, seen in **Figure 10**; and *verbally participating* by speaking and using the iPad's speech recognition mechanic. Through the above, the iPad functions not only as a mirror and a window as observed in Parts 0 and 1, and as a roleplay facilitator observed in Part 2, but also as a controller (e.g. picking up flowers) and prop (e.g. playing the violin) that roleplayers can use to physically enact embodied actions. Drawing from theatrical performance, AR-facilitated enactments are designed so that roleplayers must assume a physical gesture in the real world in addition to imagining it when engaging in this AR playable theatre experience, intensifying the quality and immersion of their roleplaying by facilitating embodied actions through use of the multifunctional iPad. Furthermore, *R:WCEO* rewards players for physically enacting embodied performances via AR; e.g. playing the violin causes the iPad to emanate pleasing music, and speaking up during the Rosenstrasse Protests in Part 3 causes AR-generated voices to rally with the player, essentially encouraging them to continue in a positive feedback loop.

Figure 9: Player acts as Max, performing the embodied action of playing his violin on the iPad

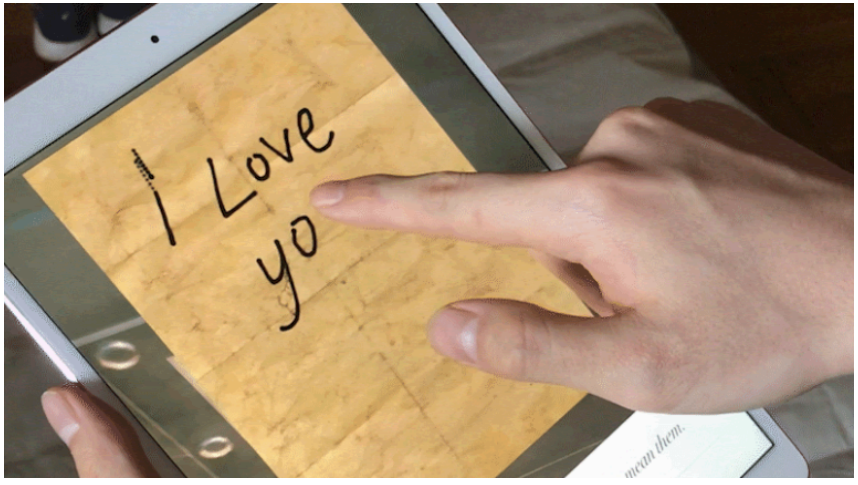

Figure 10: Max writes a letter to Annaliese by dragging his finger across the iPad screen

R:WCEO's AR-facilitated embodied actions for roleplay intensify the most emotional moments for Max and Annaliese within Part

3, which portrays the eponymous Rosenstrasse protests and concludes the AR experience. During this time, Max is taken from his workplace and imprisoned at Rosenstrasse. Once Annaliese realizes where he is, she joins the crowd of Aryan women in similar situations to hers outside of his prison. Separated, uncertain, and fearing the worst, the couple cannot perform some epic act of heroism, as they are regular people whose civil liberties have been diminished by the Third Reich. Like in the original game *Rosenstrasse*, the dyad can engage in acts of *anti-heroism*: Max and Annaliese do what is reasonably within their power. For Max, imprisoned with highly limited movement, this means writing a letter to Annaliese that he is not even sure she will see. For Annaliese, uncertain of what will happen to her husband and limited to the environment outside at Rosenstrasse, this means joining the verbal protest starting among the women around her. For both, these emotional experiences are intensified by *R:WCEO* requiring them to physically enact writing the letter and joining the protest respectively. Shown in **Figure 10**, Max must use his fingertip on the iPad interface to scrawl out what he believes his last words to Annaliese will be, and Annaliese must muster strength and courage to use her voice to generate the emboldened chorus of demands for the imprisoned Jewish men to be returned, depicted in **Figure 11**. These intensified emotional experiences, enabled by the AR adaptation's digital interface spurring embodied actions and rewarding them with AR-generated positive feedback, result in the government releasing the Jewish men in response to the sustained protests of a few hundred brave Aryan women. Concluding Max and Annaliese's playable storyline is the final embodied action of their reunited embrace, prompted by the UI in **Figure 12** and followed by Annaliese being able to read Max's letter.

Figure 11: The iPad recognizes speech input from Annaliese during the Rosenstrasse Protests to generate a positive feedback loop of protesting voices

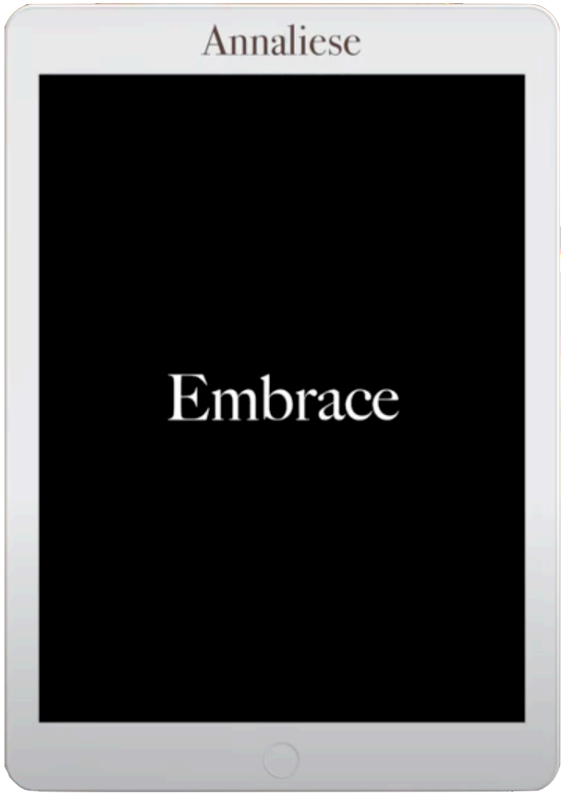

Figure 12: The final UI roleplay prompt in R:WCEO, initiating embodied reunion

Autoethnographic Play Perspective: Reaching Out to Each Other

The first author shares her play experience of Part 3, intensified by AR-facilitated embodied action and an AR-generated positive feedback loop:

> *As Annaliese, the protest that made me raise my voice felt especially emotionally charged. Even more than Kristallnacht, "Our world is getting smaller" manifested here, as I knew that Max could not move from Rosenstrasse and I couldn't physically reach him. My partner was trapped, and I felt helpless. In retrospect, the design pillar "We choose each other"*

informed my course of action in response to this helplessness. Like every moment before, I chose Max again–to do anything I could to help him. Still, just the thought of speaking aloud on my own made me uncomfortable. Previously accustomed to engaging in epic acts of heroism in other interactive roleplaying games via button presses, the necessity for me to perform a smaller-scale yet brave act of anti-heroism by not only speaking aloud but also doing so loudly and with emotion intensified the experience as a whole for me.

Despite my worry that chanting "Give us our husbands back!" loud enough so that both the iPad, as roleplay facilitator, and Max could hear me (and understand that I was protesting) would embarrass me enough to pull me outside of my role as Annaliese, it instead emboldened me because suddenly a crowd of voices joined me. It came from the iPad, and their voices added to my own. After that, every chant became easier than the last. My worry and uncertainty about Max's well-being shifted to bravery, indignation, and determination: I was doing the only thing I could do in the face of our unwilling separation. I was reaching out to Max in the only way I saw possible, and it felt like it was working. For me, the protest moments were the most emotionally charged, even more so than being reunited with Max and reading his letter after. I felt as though through the iPad's nudges, I was pushed into an intense and very embodied roleplay situation and that my participation in that intense moment was met with the narrative matching my energy.

INSIGHTS FOR DESIGNING TECHNOLOGICALLY-AUGMENTED PLAYABLE THEATRE

We draw insights for designing immersive, technologically-augmented playable theatre experiences from our design and play of *R:WCEO*.

Diegetic Mixed Reality Elements Can Augment Playable Theatre Immersion

AR technologies can augment immersion in playable theatre experiences by linking physical and digital set pieces. Mixing these realities can support environment design, playable actions,

and improvisational roleplay. Shared physical-digital assets, such as the street sign markers in *R:WCEO*, bind the physical to the virtual space. Mixed Reality mechanics create connections between a player's physical agency and the digital assets they affect, exemplified in Max and Annaliese enacting the physical movements required to pick up the digital shards of glass in Part 2 as a demonstration of coping with Kristallnacht together. In both of these cases, diegetic Mixed Reality elements act as magnets, clamping the physical and AR stages together and drawing player interactions to them. This firmly roots player activity in the Mixed Reality stages of playable theatre. Furthermore, *R:WCEO* demonstrates that reality-mixing can be accomplished with simple props, such as printable signs, and everyday items like hats.

A Digital System Can Independently and Effectively Facilitate Playable Theatre

A digital interface and underlying system can be designed to effectively structure playable theatre experiences. UI prompts, game-state tracking, and harnessing different input modalities are just some methods for a digital system to independently facilitate an entire multiplayer playable theatre experience. System attention to multiple roleplayer activity, relative location, and various inputs makes *R:WCEO* run well. This is illustrated in Part 3 wherein despite the chaos, the digital system smoothly guides Max and Annaliese through different overlapping roleplay activities during the Rosenstrasse Demonstrations. The same digital system can be configured to manage roleplayer focus, as it is likely players will pay more attention to a screen than their roleplay partner. *R:WCEO* demonstrates successful focus-management system designs. Every Part ends with the iPad turning off its camera view and displaying a simple UI *full roleplay conversation* prompt to redirect players' focus away from the screens to initiate key roleplay conversations with their

partner. *R:WCEO* also shows a digital facilitator can manage a multipart and emotionally potent historical narrative.

Technology Can Create Positive Feedback Loops to Drive Playable Theatre

Technologically-mediated playable theatre can tackle more involved roleplay scenarios by crafting technology-generated positive feedback loops. Involved roleplay scenarios might require unusual modes of participation from players, similar to the requirement for Annaliese's character to join the Rosenstrasse protests by loudly and emotionally chanting "Give us our husbands back!" In the same way *R:WCEO* facilitates player participation by creating a positive feedback loop of other protesters' voices to join Annaliese's efforts in her Part 3 experience. Other technologically-mediated playable theatre experiences can reward players for doing what can be considered advanced roleplay labor. Such rewards are more impactful than those roleplayers might receive in analog playable theatre experiences; e.g. laughter in response to a roleplayer's clever pun is not as empowering as AR voices rallying to join a character's cause. *R:WCEO* illustrates that technologically-generated positive feedback loops can drive more advanced, embodied roleplay actions and narratively-adventurous playable theatre experiences.

LEARNING FROM ROSENSTRASSE: WE CHOOSE EACH OTHER

Our team's struggles can guide future iterations of *R:WCEO* and other roleplaying game AR adaptations. Playtesting, crucial to the project's success, was complicated by COVID-19-neccessitated social distancing and hardware access. As a co-located playable theatre AR experience, *R:WCEO*'s playtesting was limited in later stages to playtesters who lived together and had two iPads. This can be addressed by reconfiguring *R:WCEO* so that mobile phones act as AR roleplay

facilitators and props, enabling co-located dyads to play using devices they are more likely to already have. Additionally, translating powerful narratives into AR elements requires extensive attention to text-based detail. Translation and refinement of AR adaptation texts to drive roleplay narratives were responsibilities shared by all team members, but the importance of crafting narratives without a human facilitator calls for these responsibilities to define a singular, dedicated role. Consistent focus on narrative translation can better facilitate roleplaying as well as do compelling narratives more justice in AR adaptations.

R:WCEO reveals how AR can enhance existing playable theatre, and these insights and lessons point to immersive technologies as tools for composing completely new playable theatre experiences. This warrants further exploration of the affordances of technologically-mediated playable theatre as an emerging genre, with special attention to the myriad of ways it might generate immersive, emotional play and meaningful roleplay.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTERACTIVE THEATRE

Audience and meaningful agency in live theatre

HEALTHY MOEUNG, TIANTIAN HAN, SAYLEE BHIDE, NAIJIA JIN, BRENDA BAKKER HARGER, & CHRIS KLUG

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." (Breel, 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.

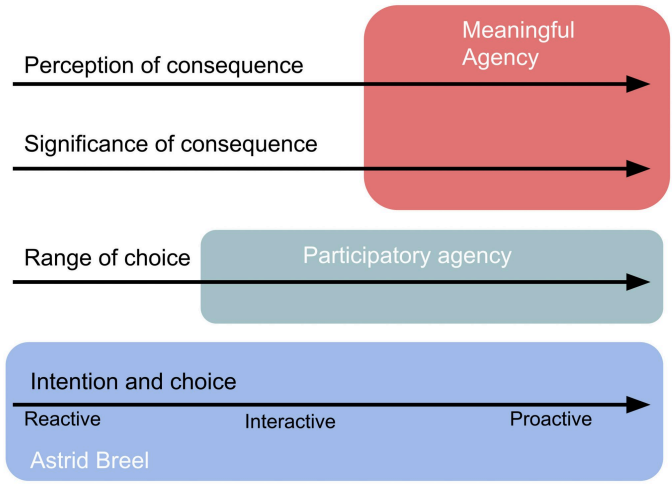

Image 1: Different types of agency that we have encountered and the aspects of agency they are concerned with.

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.

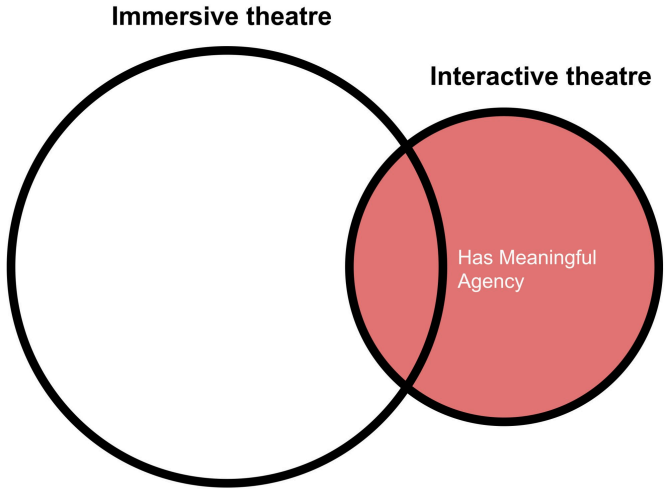

Image 2: Immersive vs interactive theatre. Interactive theatre does not necessarily have to be immersive, and immersive theatre could be but does not have to be interactive. The main difference is that interactive theatre should have meaningful agency.

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.

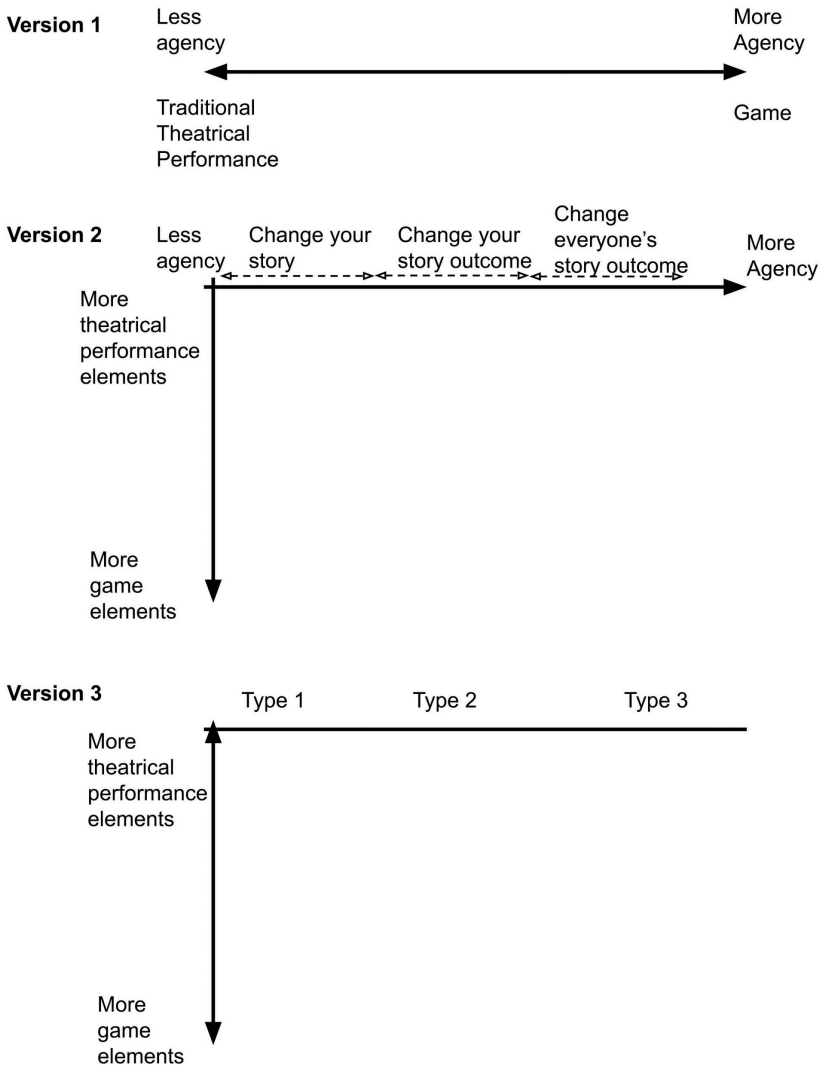

Image 3: The iteration of our visualization of game elements and agency in theatrical performance.

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.

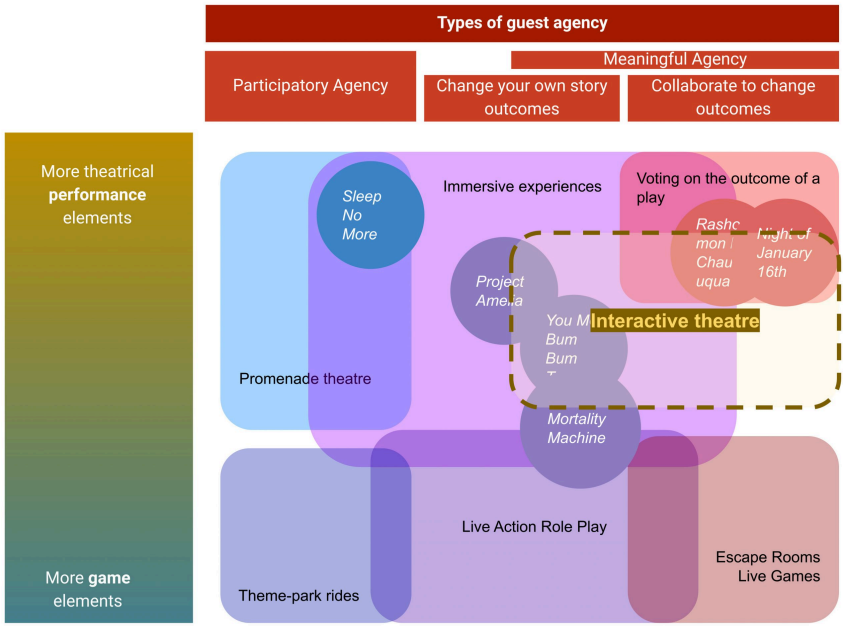

Image 4: Our visualization shows where interactive theatre could fall and the types of works it would include.

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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(FORE)CASTING THE PRESENT AS THE FUTURE

Environment Design for the Environmental Game Aquanesia

KIMBERLY LONG LOKEN

Mega-game. The very name of the genre suggests the epic. Leaving the confined dimensions and controlled lighting of a soundstage, a theatre, or an escape room, immersion in the magic circle of the game world is an ever-larger challenge for designers to fulfill audience expectations for immersive experiences.

Aquanesia (2018) is a location-based game and performance set 100 years in the future in which players test their skills at different watershed-based activities to decipher a set of clues, which will help them unlock the mystery of how and why people are losing their memories of the past century.

The goal of *Aquanesia* is to create a fun-filled adventure that gets people outside to play and connect with their city and local watershed on bicycle or on foot. During the process of solving the game, they become familiar with specific aspects of the local environment as well as general principles about a watershed and clean water. The intended result of the game is that players are encouraged to become ever-better stewards of their watershed.

Written by the game's mechanics and scenic designer, Kimberly Long Loken, this post-mortem will examine the interplay of narrative, game mechanics, visual design and fabrication,

production management and environmental science in the development of *Aquanesia*.

A SERIES OF PLAYABLE THEATERS

In small teams with pre-registered start times, several hundred people can play Aquanesia over the course of a weekend, with each team's experience taking 2-3 hours (not unlike a round of golf). The target audience is casual players, inclusive of school-age children; prior knowledge of watershed issues is not needed. It is a prosocial, cooperative experience. Registration is interwoven with prologue, after which players choose-their-own-adventure. Strategically sited in park- and water- adjacent civic locations, every station is anchored by a costumed actor whose lines reveal narrative and facilitate gameplay activities, each in service of sharing watershed knowledge. Each station is a 10-minute scene structured around: a call to action, an inclusive physical activity, and an incremental win (physically, a clue; conceptually, more narrative and more knowledge). Among these incremental wins, one character reveals the secret location at which the game actually ends – a station just out of sightline from the starting area wherein game narrative and watershed knowledge are synthesized. Thus, players are equipped to translate knowledge gained from this cautionary tale into real "wins" for their community.

Location	Check In (pre-game)	Citizen Cleanup Brigade HQ	School Science Lab	Sinking Dock	Fish Rapids	Water Reserve	Sunset Sands	BestWay Plant	City Hall	People's Basin	The Source (post-game)
Watershed Issue	n/a	Flooding Human Health	Emerging contaminants	Eutrophication	Invasive Species	Infrastructure; privatization, maintenance	Erosion	Pollutants	Permeability	Stewardship	n/a
Character	n/a	Cleanup Captain	Science Teacher	Taxi Boat Driver	Carp Hunter	H2Ope Activist	Beachcomber	Spill Monitor	Intern	Librarian	n/a
Activity	Pre-Survey Waiver AQ Test	Prep for mission; collect water sample	Use centrifuge to separate particles in water sample	Clean up	Catch as many as you can	Siphon water	Goal-tend to stop the runoff	Try to mitigate cascading failure	Land Use puzzle and conversation	Discuss clues Deposit vials Build aquifer	Reflection Post-Survey Education
Earn	Code Name	Protective Gear	Vial: Unidentified contaminant	Vial: Algae	Vial: Compost	Vial: Clean Water	Vial: Sand	Vial: Hazardous Waste	Vial: Gravel	Healthy Watershed	

Image 1: Summary matrix of watershed issues and game stations/scenes.

THE INVITATION TO PLAY

The story, and the immersion, begin with this text on event advertising and web registration:

> Years into the future, the city is hot, humid, and stormy. Temperatures have risen – and so have the flood waters. Public infrastructure has been overwhelmed by storms, which are frequent and extreme. Water, while abundant, is often not clean enough to drink or swim in. Despite all of this (or perhaps because of it) the city residents remain active and optimistic. With disaster as their common bond, they rise to the challenge of keeping their cherished city above water. Lately, however, residents have been having trouble with their memory. After each storm, murmurs of "aquanesia" circulate as more folks seem dazed, disoriented, and forgetful. What is this mysterious aquanesia? Can you find a cure before you, too, forget?

Players are cast as their best selves: citizen volunteers helping to clean up after a hundred-year flood (which now come at a rate of every 87.3 days). After acing an "AQ" test (the fun form that accompanies other registration protocols), your team is identified for a special mission: collecting samples, stories and experiences that function as clues for restoring the watershed – and, in turn, human – health.

Actors tell stories that integrate gameplay at each station; the players use a map to choose the order of their investigation and travel to each station, usually by bicycle.

The players join the cast by "suiting up": SPF300 sunscreen (face paint), bandoliers, ankle bands, and code name badges for their mission. What might seem like flair and swag is, in fact, multi-functioning.

- Conceptually, they have entered Huizinga's magic circle.
- Pragmatically, they are displaying a proof-of-payment/ registration that is highly visible to both actors and crew

dispersed at other stations and to the general public who are occupying the same civic space.

- Educationally, their code names allow our team to match pre- and post-game surveys while protecting players' privacy.
- Narratively, they can be engaged by the actors: "pssst… Red Pine… over here… I need your help."
- Functionally, they are wearing – and keeping as swag – additional bicycle safety gear. (And their own bike helmets will be referenced as hard hats several times in the script).

Image 2: Players "suit up" for protection against flood waters and the illness they may carry. Photos by the author.

Sample Scene: The Sinking Dock

Character: Water Taxi Driver

Premise: Players encounter character next to boat (named the Pearly Muscle) on waterfront.

Personality: Clever and opportunistic with a touch of melodrama, a little sleazy in an endearing way.

Pre-activity

Excuse me! Yes, you! I couldn't help but notice you getting off those bicycles over there – so sorry. It must be so difficult to ride one of those rusty things after a storm like yesterday's! So many flooded roadways, not to mention all the mud – must be nearly impossible to peddle, am I right?

Tell you what – I'll give you a little break. Just hop into my water taxi and let me do the work for you!

Gesture two Players into boat

In today's climate chaos, water taxi is the most reliable transportation in town. Storms can't stop us – they only create better shortcuts! *(Laughs)* Take a look for yourself – my luxury vessel – *The Pearly Muscle* – is 100% shaded with fully enclosed monster-squito netting – if you get a bite the next ride is on me!

(*Looking at codename badge)* Wait… are you with the Citizen Clean Up Brigade? I don't know how a small business owner like myself would survive without your selfless efforts! There are so many challenges out here… and now with (*whispers)* *aquanesia*… I can hardly even remember where I'm going!

Say… do you have a spare moment to do me a favor? You see, after the storm there's even more of this long, slimy green… stuff in the water. I don't know… or remember… what it is… but it's sure making it harder to row! Can you help me by getting all of the green stuff out of the water? *(To Players in boat)* Here, I'll even lend you my own paddles!

Hands each Player in boat a paddle.

(*To Players onshore)* And you onshore can help with these useful tools.

Hands one player a green rake, 1-2 others garbage bags.

Alright, go for it! But please, in all your heroics, make sure that

you don't touch the green stuff! It's very toxic and I still don't have liability insurance!

Activity

Players commence with an activity similar to a large and wobbly game of pickup sticks.

Post-activity

Thank you, what marvelous public servants!

I remember what the green stuff is now! It's algae. Been here since before I was taxi-ing. Years ago, when I was first learning how to drive *Pearly*, I paddled out onto the water and saw thousands of fish floating on the surface – dead! I didn't know what had killed them, thought maybe there'd been a spill up at the BestWay Industries plant – no offense to BestWay! Maybe it's something else from uphill instead?

Gazes at set dressing of residential and agricultural fertilizer bags.

But it occurs to me now it could have also been this stuff – algae – choking the oxygen out of the water and making it impossible for those poor fish to breath. Shame too, because it wasn't all zebra mussels and carp back then — still had native species like bass, sturgeon, walleye. Didn't see anyone fishing on the river after that.

Here, as a token of my deep appreciation I'll offer you a discount your next ride – a whopping 5% off! I don't have a coupon, but here, just flash me this.

Hands vial of algae to Player.

Thanks again for the favor – come back for a ride anytime!

RULES FOR DESIGN

"Red herrings set up players with an expectation of a reward that does not pay off. Players feel tricked, and often see this type of gameplay as unfair or wasteful," says Mark Larson, a puzzle and escape room designer. Mega-games and alternate reality games must further mind the clarity of their constructs. Ideally, any

given object in *Aquanesia* is: gameplay logical, aesthetically cohesive, narratively significant, lightweight, durable, modular, and affordable to maintain or replace with ease. *Aquanesia* also requires accurate and accessible science. With sandbox navigation, the siting and spacing of playable theatre stations must also minimize waiting time and maximize suspense before activities.

Visual design and narrative work together to establish the setting: a flooded, overheated, plastic- and mold- saturated, health-compromised future version of the actual community in which the game is being played.

Functionally, we were inspired by Brenda Romero's *The Mechanic is the Message* (2008 – present) series. In *Aquanesia*, every activity demonstrates the movement of water, showing both problems and solutions. Touching water in the gameplay, or siting the activity adjacent to water, reinforce the mechanics.

Image 3: Water's presence in the game: siphoning clean, privatized water (left) and an always-unsuccessful attempt to mitigate cascading failure (right). Photos by the author.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Designing for play in, and at the scale of, a watershed, begged the question: wet or dry? The cinematic imagination quickly travels to dystopian extremes – *Waterworld* (1995) or *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). But how could we set dress, or reconcile, an expansive, verdant Midwestern park into ruins?

We didn't.

Instead, our team chose to amplify the parallels between the present and a possible future. Hemlines and technology may shift frequently, but 1920, 2020 and 2120 are likely to have more in common than not; we will still be spending more time on Main Street than Mars. As such, the game takes place exactly 100 years in the future from the date on which it is played, in precisely the same location. The players are not time-travelers; they are effectively living the future of their own grandchildren.

The conceptual affordance of an Every Town neatly supports the modular design requirements of this meant-to-travel game. First staged in Grand Rapids, MN (gateway to wilderness recreation, population 11,222) and Rochester, MN (destination medical center, population 116,961) in 2018, the riverside parks and civic centers in both locations presented coincident settings for the school, library, water tower and other stations of the game.

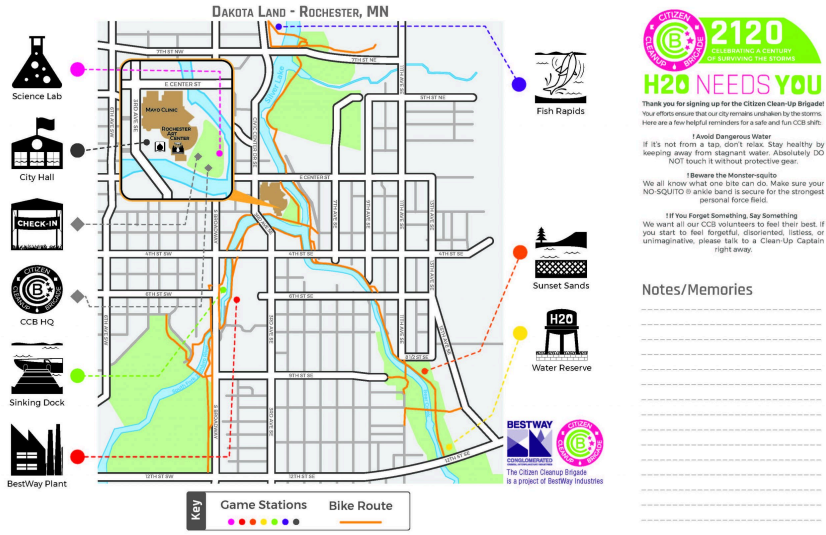

Image 4: Map of Rochester game course. Graphic design by Donald Thomas.

Further, their locations on the Mississippi River and Zumbro River, respectively, provided a variety of natural and man-made conditions by which to site relevant game stations exploring water and watershed issues such as erosion, eutrophication, invasive species/ecosystem services, infrastructure maintenance and privatization, cascading failure, and emerging contaminants.

Image 5: The Beach Comber's station is always sited by the water's edge (left). The Spill Monitor's station is enhanced by an industrial setting (right). Photos by the author.

Casting the player as a volunteer in their own present/future community also leverages the Moral Obligation Model of Environmental Behavior (Davenport et al., 2011), which builds upon previous research to assert that environmental issues can be framed as moral issues; larger than self-interest, the moral obligation increases the likelihood of a subsequent [positive] behavior.

MULTI-FUNCTIONAL

Just as the light costuming of players serves many functions, the scenic elements must also satisfy multiple criteria. Simple flood markers are spaced prior to arrival at each station. They clearly communicate both story and science, are as cheap and easy to lift or plant as a yard sign, and act as the "lobby" for each station/tent/theater. Players advance past the dangerously high invisible flood waters only when invited by the actor, thus remaining out of earshot (and ideally, sightline) for their next activity. Measurement motifs also appear throughout the game in Nalgene bottles as props, illustrated mold stains on backdrops and in the many operable gauges players are tasked with at the BestWay plant.

Image 6: A player approaches the BestWay plant. Photo by the author.

Logically, but sadly, plastic is prominent in the game as it, too, satisfies many production considerations. A future choked with plastic is a dystopic condition that we will see in far too many climates and locations, wet or dry. But we upcycled the materials for many of our game components, thus both practicing and suggesting a maker ethos that characters of our fictional future might engage in. Plastic also satisfies the durable and lightweight production requirements.

Housing each station with a 10×10 folding canopy tent not only enhanced player navigation, but also acted a bit like a black box theatre – concentrating the fiction to a small area with a costumed actor, key props, game equipment and relevant set dressing. An illustrated backdrop affirms the location, orients the stage, and provides a bit of a storage area on the opposite side. Beyond, Mother Nature plays herself.

The compressed space gave us latitude in manipulating the scale

of game equipment and exaggerating the characters and their dialog; the goofiness appeals to our younger players and sidesteps finger-wagging at older players. For example: particles of eroding sand and dirt are realized in a cascade of bouncing kickballs that players must prevent from entering the (close, but not too close) real-life river. The character at this station is a doddering, orange-plastic-poncho-clad beachcomber collecting orange plastic treasures who solicits your help in fighting erosion with dust pans and flimsy orange plastic snow fencing. Their aquanesia is so severe that they have forgotten how the roots of a forest and a wetland could do this job naturally; they have also forgotten their own job – we soon learn that they are the missing Mayor.

Image 7: Orange unifies the costumes, props, scenery, and clues at the eroding beaches of Sunset Sands. Photos by the author.

Giving each station a key color was another exaggeration, but also an easy method for instant visual cohesion among scenery, props, costume, and the takeaway clue (sample vial) earned at

each station. And it helps to keep the game organized for packing and unpacking. (While this effect may be muted for color-blind players, it does not reduce usability of the vials, which are labeled and have visually distinct samples within – see image 1.3.)

WHICH FUTURE?

It would have been fascinating to design far-future tech, but the cost, detail, maintenance, and narrative-specificity of those items are best realized in cinema, or among the most devoted of LARPers. LARPing may build on a collective knowledge of a genre, but interactive theatre needs to invite, host, and continuously engage novel audiences. The experience should be complex, but not complicated, for both players and producers.

Novel technology in the story-world of the game could have worked against our thesis. In much speculative fiction, the more distant the future, the more omnipotent the technology – we do not want our players to abdicate their own critical, present responsibility. Far-future concepts, lingo, and objects were also likely to require more contextual monologue from actors, taking time away from learning-by-playing. Prop and costume maintenance over time would likely suffer, too.

Think of the simple staging of George and Emily on ladders in *Our Town*. Or that Viola Spolin referred to her improv exercises and techniques as theater games. A familiar context and the power of suggestion, delivered with a charming script, eye-to-eye contact, and cooperative challenges, allowed the designers, actors, and players to easily make and accept the invitation to play. Theater, like a tabletop game, assumes that when it says, "let's pretend", you will say "yes".

And when you say yes, it becomes personal.

CASTING THE PLAYERS

In *The Political Brain* (2005), Drew Westen argues that "in politics,

when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins". Our producers wanted to create a persuasive, emotional experience – a game – for climate action. Our watershed partners wanted a less-didactic way of engaging the public. By building the story around an illness, Elle Thoni's script explores the connections between human health and environmental health, leveraging both selfish fears and selfless actions for the greater good. By setting the game in a future near-enough that our grandchildren will live in it also raises the stakes. We can be both emotionally and factually persuaded to do right by them.

Codename Red Pine and the other players agree.

By partnering with local watershed groups and local arts groups, as well as advertising through posters and community press, a large and diverse audience was sought. A $10 pre-registration per team was useful for event logistics, but surely created a barrier to some participants. Alternative funding or reservation systems should be explored; public school partnerships are an opportunity for equitable engagement. While groups of adult friends and families with elementary school age children were common among our 2018 players, the game is designed for a broad and casual audience who may have no previous experience with immersive theater, alternate reality games or watershed issues.

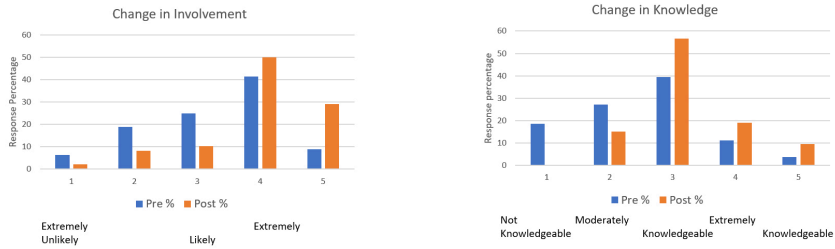

Image 8: The two figures show how participants involvement and knowledge increased after playing Aquanesia. The vertical axis on the graph represents the percentage level of respondents at each point of the scale for the item in question (1-5 on the horizontal axis). Analysis by Jhon Wlaschin.

Social psychologist Jhon Wlaschin, an adjunct professor at the University of St. Thomas, developed pre- and post- surveys of *Aquanesia* players.

An excerpt from his analysis:

> These results show that playing *Aquanesia* appeared to have the greatest impact on boosting participants' knowledge about their local watershed and increasing their likelihood that they would get involved with cleaning up the creeks and streams in their community. Before participating in the game, only a small proportion of participants (15%) reported possessing more than a moderate amount of knowledge about their local watershed. After playing the game, knowledge about watersheds increased 33% overall with 57% of participants reporting they were moderately knowledgeable. 30% felt they had above average knowledge after playing *Aquanesia*.
>
> Similar positive shifts occurred with intentions to get involved in cleaning up watersheds. Prior to playing *Aquanesia*, half the respondents reported that they had not intended to participate in any watershed clean-up activities in the past (reporting 3 or lower on the response scale). After playing the game, willingness to participate in future watershed clean-up activities increased substantially, 29% overall, resulting in nearly 80% of participants

claiming that they were either somewhat likely or extremely likely to get involved.

Given that playing *Aquanesia* seemed to increase participants' general knowledge about watersheds and perhaps motivate them to take part in keeping their local watersheds clean, it also was not surprising that our post-game survey revealed a significant increase in their willingness to discuss this issue with others. Playing *Aquanesia* likely increased general awareness about an important topic that many had not given much consideration in the past. Playing *Aquanesia* provided participants with meaningful concepts and consequences to consider that could be shared with others. These three variables – involvement, knowledge, and public discussion – were, on average, at the low- to mid-range of the response scale prior to playing the game and therefore represented greater potential for increases at the post test assessment.

No red herrings here. But with our players' present and future work, perhaps a reversal in the second decline of Lake Superior herring? After all, we can cast ourselves as the best version of ourselves in more than theater and games.

POSTSCRIPT

Aquanesia went on hiatus during the pandemic but is now exploring partnerships with upper Midwest watershed districts, health organizations, community theaters and schools/universities. The script, props and costumes can also be rented akin to traditional theatrical licensing.

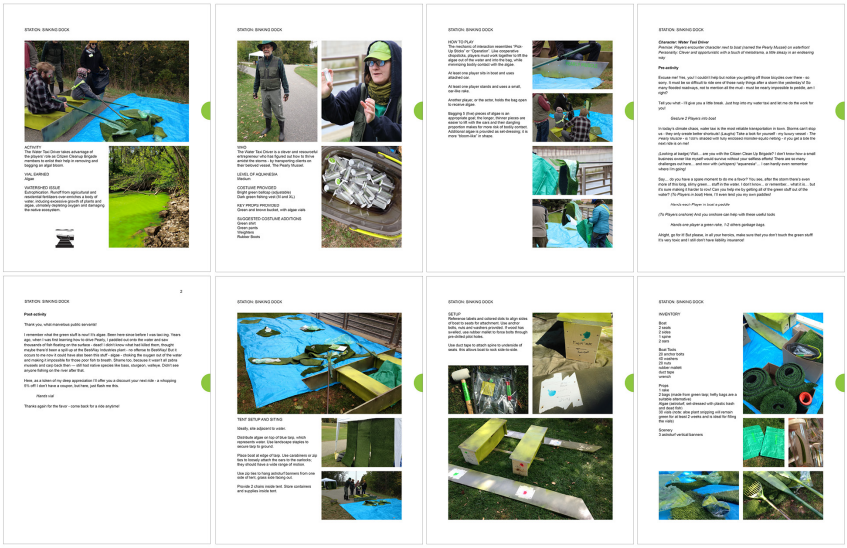

Image 9: Playbook pages related to the Sinking Dock scene.

An illustration-heavy playbook supports continued deployment of the game – inventory, setup and re-packaging instruction, script, etc. Initial video documentation took care not to interfere with player experience, but further instructional video content would enhance the playbook, enticing and empowering future partners or licensees. Similarly, the creative team would like to observe a crew running the experience as if on their own, to further identify any gaps in instruction. While any community partner enhances the potential reach and impact of the game, a local theatre partner is strongly recommended. The script is short enough to be memorized (or referenced from an in-game clipboard prop) by any exuberant person, but the plucky attitude and general production knowledge afforded by community theatre cast and crew are invaluable.

The *Aquanesia* design team took care that the essential structure easily fits many ecosystems and civic locations, but further

localization is possible within its modular design approach. Similarly, layering of additional content is made ever easier with smart phones: schematics for geo-caching, augmented reality viewfinder moments, and poetic audio interludes were considered and remain enticing. Ultimately, focusing on physical logistics only – playable theatre – best served the conceptual and emotional goals of the game.

BIO

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CITATIONS

Davenport, M.A., Pradhananga, A. & Sames, A. (2011). The influence of local governance on watershed management in Minnesota: Capacities, constraints, and catalysts of change. Presentation at *The International Symposium on Society and Resource Management*, June 4-8, 2011, Madison, WI.

DESIGNING AN ADVENTURE

University of Southern California's Experiment in Using Playable Theatre to Educate Students and Inspire Change

ANAHITA DALMIA

ABSTRACT

There has been a recent rise in 'audience-centric' and immersive storytelling. This indicates audiences are gaining interest in experiencing real adventure and everything it encompasses: the struggle, the new friendships, the skill development, and the growth. This paper examines two playable theatre experiences created by a group of students, including the author, at the University of Southern California as an experiment in how to design an adventure and to evaluate its impact on participants. The experiences combined immersive improvisational theatre and live-action role-playing to create socially aware, one-night experiences, using Harry Potter and mythology as themes. In each experiment, over 500 players simultaneously embarked on quests — a series of challenges including puzzles, scavenger hunts, and character interactions. Participants were asked to choose faction alignments based on the characters they interacted with, as well as their own backgrounds and moral values. During the narrative finale, the impact of individual choices on the larger story and game was revealed. After the conclusion of each experience, participants filled out questionnaires and were interviewed. Through this, it was discovered that participants developed transferable problem-

solving, team-work, and persuasion skills. The realization that their actions had consequences caused participants to reflect on their own moral values and judgement-making abilities, inspiring some to make changes outside of the experience. This reveals that playable theatre experiences can lead to socialization, educational development, and real-world change in a variety of contexts when implemented correctly. This experiment has begun to discover the value of playable theatre experiences in a real-world context and to develop a reproducible format to continue to create such an impact.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, immersive, 'audience- centric' storytelling, has been on a rise indicating a growing interest in experiencing adventure first-hand through entertainment. This paper aims to evaluate an experiment we conducted at the University of Southern California to design adventures using playable theatre experiences by analysing impact on participants. Adventures appeal to people in different ways: **using personal skills to overcome challenges, the resulting sense of gratification, forging and strengthening relationships, exploring, discovering and growing.** Humans largely experience adventures through the characters in books, television and movies. However, it seems that we now want more.

New immersive companies offering Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Alternative Reality, Live Action Role Playing and Immersive Theatre experiences have doubled since 2015 (Brigante & Nelson, 2019). These companies have various focuses including medical, promotional, educational and recreational services. Immersive experiences can serve all of the above purposes by putting the audience in the middle of the action. This paper, however, focuses on their educational value and ability to change participants by creating adventure.

The Theatre of the Oppressed by Augusto Boal, arguably the

forefather of playable theatre, is one of the earliest identifiable forms of "immersive." For him, the "dual meaning of the word 'act', to perform and to take action, is at the heart of the work" (Drennan & Boal, 1994). This shows how the genre was intended to create change. Two sub-genres are amongst the very first forms of 'Immersive Theatre': Invisible Theatre and Forum Theatre. In Invisible theatre, public audiences are "participants in the action without their knowing it. They are the 'spect-actors'" (Drennan & Boal, 1994) who are unaware the performance is theatre rather than 'real life.' For example, two actors will go and publicly start a fight on the ethics of tipping in a restaurant and encourage passersby to participate. Considering the spectators don't know this is staged, Invisible Theatre is further pitched as" 'real-life', because it is "actually happening, the people are real, the incidents are real, the reactions are real." (Drennan & Boal, 1994). On the other hand, Forum Theatre allows audience members of a formal theatre show to interrupt a performance and change it by deciding the actions of the actor in a situation, often performing themselves to illustrate their ideas. Boal said this resulted in "a pooling of knowledge, tactics and experience," in what Boal calls a 'rehearsal for reality." The intention was to enable people "to become the protagonists of their own lives" (Drennan & Boal, 1994).

Even though Forum Theatre participants knew their situation wasn't real, their emotions and reactions still were. This is because "knowing and feeling are separate functions under the control of separate brain systems. Emotions are unconscious and instantaneous, bypassing consciousness" (Paradiso, 1998). Therefore, despite the conscious knowledge of participants that this wasn't real, they felt the actor's experience as if it was. Melanie Green describes this as an evolutionary mechanism that "sweetens death and banishes it's terror so that one can live a life replete with real and imaginary risk-taking in the tranquil certainty that death is neither real nor permanent" (Green,

Strange, & Brock, 2002). Freud understood this writing, "One's own death is beyond imagining, and whenever we try to imagine it, we really survive as spectators …. At bottom, nobody believes in his own death" (Freud, Brill, & Kuttner, 1918). Still, "adventure, whether indoor or outdoor, **requires an element of real or perceived risk to which the participant is exposed through their engagement in an activity. This risk can be physical, emotional, intellectual or material. To be an adventure an experience must have an element of uncertainty about it. Either the outcome should be unknown or the setting unfamiliar**" (Priest & Baillie, 1987).Overall, these statements highlight the importance of creating stakes through uncertainty and risk to get buy-in—but it is also a reminder that, despite the perceived risk, humans are unable to imagine real risk, making simulated risk a credible way of making a point.

The 'venture' part of the word 'adventure' "implies the element of travel, with or without a purpose" (Overland, 2017). Experiential thinkers such as the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen suggest we should take adventures "to see the **'land beyond', explore what is hidden, and to respond to the call of the unknown including the nature life or the like**" (Overland, 2017). This emphasizes the importance of discovery in adventure, both internal and external. Some adventures also "tend to be completely set in a fantasy world, or they might involve moving from the real world to the fantasy world and back again. This often requires some form of **trigger between the fantasy world and the real world;** for example, in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, people walk into the wardrobe and into the land of Narnia (Lewis, 1950). A secret code might be hidden in a cave, and there might be a 'quest'. Many of the characters in children's fantasy go through rites of passage, with helpers 'guiding them' into maturity: they learn to believe in themselves, and their lives are enriched from the experience of the quest" (Overland, 2017).

Alternative Reality Games (ARGs), arguably the most compelling genres when viewed as adventure, serve as inspiration for the design. They create extraordinary circumstances for people to discover and participate in—transporting people much like travel does, and hopefully transforming them as a result. Corin Overland defined ARGs as "an immersive mixed reality experience that uses a low-cost mixture of live actors, social media and other forms of communication that allow people to mirror reality more closely than the point and click interface" (Beard, 2013). It also emphasizes that "ARGs establish an extended work of comprehensive narrative fiction in which outcomes and storylines adapt dynamically according to the actions participants take (or do not take)" (Beard, 2013). Participation in an ARG "superimposes a mythos over the everyday reality of the participants" (Beard, 2013). It encourages immersion by "blurring lines between the fictional environments and that of the real world" , allowing people to act in a natural way (Beard, 2013).

Consequently, ARGs are the epitome of experiential learning, which inevitably "involves the 'whole person', through thoughts, feelings and physical activity. The recognition of this 'whole environment', both internally and externally, is important" (Overland, 2017). Since ARG's are so purpose-driven and based off of real-world dynamics, they require engaging the whole person on a visceral level.

It is also suggested that there are many ways of taking a role and ARG's can organically involve them all (Table 1).

ROLES IN AN ALTERNATIVE REALITY GAME	
Role	Description
Theatrical	"[A]n actor plays a role as defined by the playwright and the director. The actor repeats over and over certain words and actions in a predetermined manner"
Sociological	"[T]he usual behaviour of a people in particular societies and how they act under circumstances in a formal way; it had been used in the sense that all social behaviour represents a playing of culturally determined patterns"
Dissimulative	"[P]eople play roles with the intention of deceiving or creating an impression contrary to their real feelings"
Educational	"[T]he subject roleplaying is an action of spontaneity procedure which takes place under contrived circumstances"

Table 1: Adapted from (Corsini, 1961)

Effectively designed, ARG's incorporate all of these elements, as (1) there are real actors, (2) people are put in sociological situations where they end up taking real, functioning roles as they interact with actors and other participants, (3) sometimes players can be asked to be deceptive as a part of the game, and (4) the entire experience can have educational goals and results. Furthermore, they have not just the potential, but the necessity to include all elements of an adventure – a trigger to transition from reality to the adventure, real or perceived risk, uncertainty, using personal skills to overcome challenges, forging and strengthening relationships, traveling, exploring, discovering and consequently, growing.

However, ARGs can be very inaccessible because they are typically accessed through digital means. ARGs also typically run across several platforms and spaces in a single work. To create an adventure, those elements could be useful but are unnecessary. Therefore, we determined that playable theatre, described as "live performance that engages audiences through active, meaningful participation," would be an equally effective medium of encapsulating all necessary ARG elements while decreasing barrier to entry and offering us more control over the experience.

This paper examines our efforts in investigating the possibility of incubating an adventure—with everything that entails. How do such experiences impact a person's sense of power outside the immediate adventure? Do the participants learn something? Do they feel like they grew? To evaluate the value of this kind of experience, we deliberately created an adventure through playable theatre techniques and used participant feedback to analyze its effectiveness.

DESIGN

Experience

We adapted the concept of alternative reality games into an example of playable theatre to create a realistic simulation of reality as an adventure that we could evaluate.We considered each element of an adventure: a trigger to transition from reality to the adventure, real or perceived risk, uncertainty, using personal skills to overcome challenges, the resulting sense of gratification, forging and strengthening relationships, traveling, exploring, discovering and growing.

ARGs are typically long and niche, with a high barrier to entry. To serve the purposes of the study, we effectively converted ARGs into playable theatre by designing for larger audiences in physically contained and timed experiences. They were

publicized as themed parties to increase accessibility. The unfolding of action was meant to be as realistic as possible, in that each narrative development appeared as a consequence of the actions of the participants. As suggested by Beard, we used a portal trigger to transition between the real world and the fantastical. Neither of our experiences was based in reality and each experience took place in a 1000sqft ballroom that had been transformed, giving participants plenty of space to 'venture' and discover their physical surroundings along with the story. Both events were a three-tier experience where on the surface it was a party, then there was a competitive element and, finally, there was a participatory narrative element which people could access through 'quests'. Quests were a series of challenges—including character interactions, games and puzzles—that each player overcame using their own skills and determination, which revealed the narrative background of the event and allowed people to establish a role within the story. These encouraged the participants to both explore and discover the space and story. The narrative outcomes were to be determined by the end of the night through actions of the guest and were consequently unknown to them in advance, adding a level of perceived risk and uncertainty.

The first event, *Alohomora*, was based on the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. On the surface, *Alohomora* was a "Tri-Wizard" tournament and Yule Ball, complete with food, live music, and games, all facilitated by live actors. As they headed towards the food, a participant could embark on one of our 6 quests by solving a puzzle on a napkin. This led them to our character, William the Puckwudgie (a puppet) who would challenge them to prove their strength by winning our duelling game—a reskin of rock, paper scissors. Once they brought proof of victory, he would direct them to our MACUSA (magical police) characters to defend the Wizarding World with their strength. Through such quests, participants would either join the Light Army to

serve the Government or support the immortal Salem Witch Survivor by joining the Dark Army to right the wrongs of the past.

The second event, *Ascend*, used mythology to bring together Greek, Egyptian, Maya and Chinese pantheons. To accommodate other cultures, three trickster figures —Anansi, Loki and Krishna—were included as well. The skeletal structure of *Ascend* was much like that of *Alohomora*. Participants, called demigods, were sorted into pantheons before the event and invited to attend a "family reunion". There were 12 "family games" such as themed versions of Set, Archery, and Werewolf as well as 10 quests for participants to discover and influence the narrative through. If they won Athena's oversized Battleship game, perhaps she would pull them aside to discuss gender discrimination and highlight how, despite her expertise, she is never taken seriously because of her sex. By taking her quest, participants would join 'the Revolution' to overthrow the current administration and save the world from war, poverty, discrimination, and environmental damage,even if it was at the cost of human free will. Or, they could choose to protect free will and trust humans to get themselves out of this mess by supporting Zeus and joining 'the Order' instead. Both sides had strong arguments and participants fought for causes they could not clearly claim were superior. This was designed to prompt the internal exploration and growth adventures cause as a result of seeing the choices one intentionally makes.

To increase agency in the adventure, there were also moments integrated where the participants made choices on which quest path to follow depending on their interests; these choices, then, would lead them to different sides. For example, they could choose to talk to either Hunahpu or Xbalanque from the Maya twins but they were warned that the twins had different political beliefs. Including such branching moments gave participants an increased sense of ownership over their experience which

resulted in investment and, consequently, emotional risk which paid off in the finales. To increase impact in the story-world and the risk of the emotionally invested players, specific quest lines were designed to impact the finale based on the number of people who played them. For example, certain quests involved demigods poisoning and healing gods. The player count affected the number of lives Gods of each side had for the final confrontation.

Feedback

To test the effectiveness of the design in incubating an adventure, data was gathered from the participants of the experience through feedback forms, interviews, and following the event. Questions that are focused on while examining the feedback are as follows:

1. Did people realize they had *agency*? How did that make them feel? (This question was chosen because agency gives participants control and consequently is a prerequisite to exploring and

discovering, and increases perceived risk as the participants' actions have consequences.)

1. Do these experiences build *empathy* and how do they compare to other forms of narrative form that perspective such as books or movies? (This question was chosen to give insight into the forging and strengthening of relationships that often come out of adventures)
2. Do people feel like they themselves had an *adventure*? Is that valuable? (Very direct.)
3. Did this prompt any *action*? (The result of the educational impact.)

DISCUSSION

To examine how successfully the goal was achieved, we examined the criteria of what elements made an adventure using the responses.

Several participants called the ballroom was 'beautifully decorated' and 'very aesthetic' (Marissa DuBois) and even though certain participants in Ascend helped 'open a portal' (projection mapping special effects) nobody specifically commented upon the 'transition from reality.' Despite that, several people admitted to buying into the world. They attributed this investment to several things – the actors, the set, the characters, the quests. Michelle Pax even said "It really felt like I was playing a video game. At times, I would forget that this is real life and not some VR simulation." This shows how the participants experienced a transition from the 'real' world they started in which signifies the experiment accomplished the first step of creating an adventure.

The point of real/ perceived risk, uncertainty and using personal skills to overcome challenges are closely tied together. In the Short Alohomora Feedback Form (Appendix A), 50% of people found the quests challenging but 39.3% found it simple (Fig. 1). Adriana said that the challenge of the quests "made it even more fun." The Ascend Short Feedback Form (Appendix C) revealed an experience that was simplified even further, resulting in a decreased reward: 24.2% thought the quests were averagely difficult and 62.1% thought they were easy (Fig. 2). Viola said, "Overall gameplay mechanism is pretty brilliant! I think if players (us) could be more at risk, it would've been more exciting and engaging." This showcases how risk increases challenge which creates uncertainty – and that uncertainty is actually rewarding in an adventure.We had only accomplished that in a limited capacity. As such, simplifying the event was ineffective, as it's necessary to feel challenged to have an adventure. This goes back to the idea of an adventure, because if the path was too easy

it would not be rewarding to go through it; it would take the thrill of achievement out of it. Participant Garrett explicitly said that it was the thrill of achievement and "levelling up" that caused more immersion for him, which is a narrative mechanism stolen from gaming and recognizes that certain people need to be doing things and be validated to deeply commit. And in an adventure, each protagonist faces small victories that prevent them from giving up.

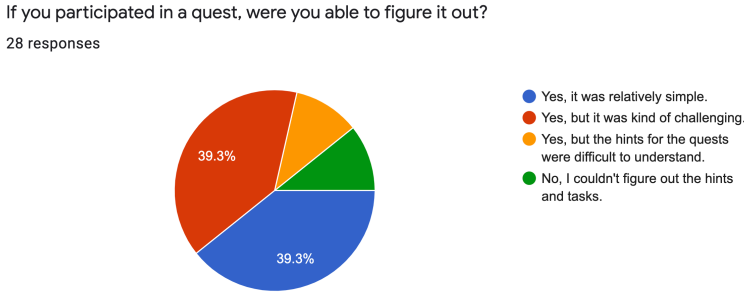

Chart 1: Alohomora Feedback

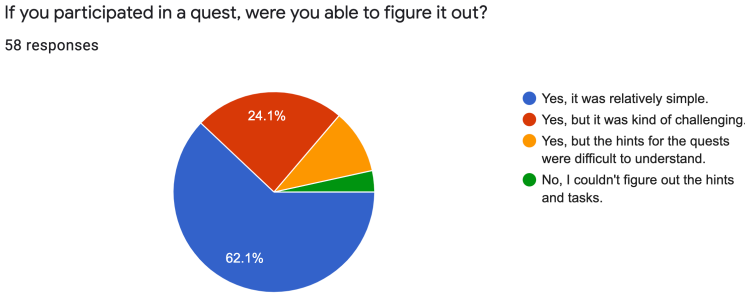

Chart 2: Ascend Feedback

It was also discussed that the immersive, task-oriented approach was effective as it facilitated exploration, discovery and socialization: all essential elements of an adventure. This was

substantiated by Adriana, who said about Alohomora, "I loved how creative it was! From searching for clues, duelling, collecting dragots, meeting new people, etc." In Ascend, instead of trying to infer the degree the event felt like an adventure, the question was directly posed in the feedback forms (Fig. 3). 92.1% participants who responded said that it felt like an adventure (they rated it over 4 on a scale of 7) This distribution is as per design, since not everyone is equally important in a story and not everyone has an equally exciting, adventurous journey. 7 on the scale was labelled "I was a hero." which reveals a lot about how certain people felt: important. The words adventure and hero came up repeatedly in the feedback too. Julia Menchav said, "I had great expectations after joining the similar Harry Potter-themed event last year. I expected an adventure with an overarching quest that featured lots of mini-games," while Mary Jab said, " I felt like I was playing as one of the heroes in my video games." This shows that people felt like they themselves were relevant to the story in a way they found thrilling and described as an adventure.

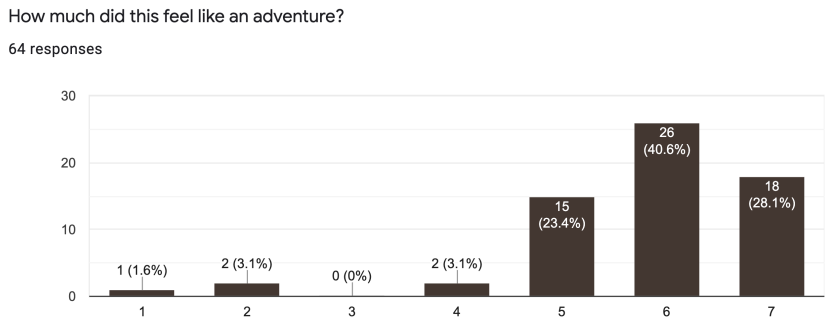

Chart 3: Ascend Feedback

Even though participants were the centre of their own stories, no story and no adventure is complete without other characters. Participants felt connected to and invested in the characters

which led to a very strong emotional impact at the conclusion. In *Alohomora*, Julia, who was on the dark side, said the characters' "motivations and backstories were clear and upon learning more, it really blurred the lines between what was good and what wasn't. It was easy to empathize with the characters we interacted with." This emphasizes the educational point of empathy and ambiguity because she genuinely felt for the characters and was conflicted because of it – there was emotional risk and uncertainty involved. Through the quests, Garrett developed a personal relationship with characters too and this caused him to say "Miao Shen's death or "loss of free will" really wrenched my stomach. I'd never been so impacted by a death scene in my life; though partly due to my emotional investment in this character, my reaction to the death scene was compounded by my physical proximity to the actors (which is usually absent)." By creating physical closeness and repeated interaction with the characters, it seemed to feel more like someone you know was hurt than someone you only know of. As such, playable theatre allowed participants to build a very intimate form of empathy, especially with characters they might have dismissed in more passive forms of story. Here, their interactions establish that connection—as the participants are not exposed to all the characters and they choose the extent that they interact with each one.

It also increases their 'buy-in' to the world, investment in the cause of the story and their personal sense of self-worth which directly relates to exploration and growth. Someone said Kai, a character from *Alohomora*, "did a very good job of instigating the mission of the Dark Army and making me and my friend feel like we were a valuable asset to the team." Furthermore, an actress shared that a participant informed her he wanted to join the Revolution because "he was abused as a child and he wanted to take away free will so nobody else could abuse their children." By asking personal questions, the actors created a connection

between the participants and themselves. Credit to playable theatre, the actors weren't just being heard by the audience member: they were also listening to them. And this made the conflict all the more real for all of our participants, showing how personal resonance causes narrative investment and increases perceived risk. Leveraging that in interactive live experiences increases pay off, which is more likely to result in growth. Because participants connected this experience to their real-life and past, it is more likely that it'll impact their 'out of universe' future.

People also navigated the world they had been presented with in very interesting ways. This was neither a video game where their options could be limited nor a theme park where the large focus is to get through the rides. Instead, the world was somewhere in between— they were allowed to explore a landscape but there was a larger narrative with characters trying to influence their decisions and actions. Some people were aware of the sides and made deliberate decisions to seek a side out. For Alohomora, Jess O'Connor said "As soon as I walked in, I walked up to an actor I knew, and was immediately given the impression that she was playing a bad person, as she was telling me about all the poor wizards who were killed by Muggles," therefore she took control of her story by going around to find characters whose ideas resonated with her more and ended up in the Light Army instead of the Dark Army. That didn't always work out for everyone as Janine Zhu said she, " wanted to get into the Dark army, but couldn't find where to start so (she) just did the Light quest." There were several ways to navigate this situation from a game design standpoint; the easiest would be to ask a character that seemed "dark." This led to an important revelation which was reinforced going through the feedback for both years: the immediacy of the experience disorients people into a false sense of helplessness. Despite understanding their journey was a result of their choices, they felt under-equipped to solve larger

problems due to lack of information. So some participants complacently went along with whichever situation they were thrown into, showcasing a key difference between our use of playable theatre and and passive narrative: in what we were doing there is no guarantee that one will ever learn everything, just like real life, whereas in forms such as books, movies and theatre all will be revealed if the audience waits. Steve Hutchinson says that in his role-playing exercises, there is a facilitator and "The skill of the facilitator here is in extracting real learning from artificial situations." (Hutchinson, 2012). It is worthwhile for the designers to consider such mediation techniques for educational reasons, so that people's ignorance within the game world doesn't prevent them from learning outside of it. But within the game world player limitations seem to aid the goal of creating an adventure as they contribute to perceived risk and uncertainty while enabling exploration and discovery.

As intended, *Ascend* impacted some participant lives outside the fictional world through the process of developing transferable knowledge and skills. People said that they learned more about mythology, and several people said they felt like a part of the show/game. A few people, however, had more life changing breakthroughs. Garrett said that "I didn't become a character through the course of the event. Instead, I became myself—and what happened during Ascend has now become raw material to see what potentialities lie dormant in my own personality when it's allowed to run without (or at least with less of, or a different kind of) a filter." Due to his importance in this experience he felt empowered to be more social. On a less transformative level, several people were inspired to research the lore. Max Lu said he "felt inclined to talk about it and research the world outside the event, I saw many people were so engaged that they still consider themselves as the character in the game after the whole game is finished, and I'm one of them."

Furthermore, for each participant the other participants functionally became a character that they had to interact and journey with. A participant said that they wouldn't be able to succeed alone and "asked around multiple times in order to complete the quests. " This compulsion resulted in meeting new people and making new friends, thus making the story more interesting by causing more interactions, intersections and opportunities. This demonstrates the unique community aspects of this format: unlike many other narrative formats, you *cannot* progress alone. Because now they automatically have an element—a friend who will stay past the magic of the night—this is key to making our experiences the participants' story and adventure rather than the story participants are witnessing. This also encourages collaboration, an important transferable skill that will serve them out of the experience and that sparks discussion. For Julia, her experience spurred "lots of outside conversation." They discussed "the pivotal moment where (their) choice, which seemed natural to all 3 of (them), led (them) to the dark side and how sometimes there is no clear "dark" or "light" side, not only in this story, but in other situations as well." By having other participants who shared the experience with them, it becomes more likely a reflection and learning process will be catalysed. While other narrative mediums encourage similar conversation, they only pose questions that you can only answer in hypotheticals since you are not personally going through the experience detailed in the book or movie. Unlike passive story forms which aim to replicate the best of reality, we designed a fantastic reality. We created a world where we were able to hold up a mirror and tell our participants "this is what you did. These were the consequences. Now you can think about why." This enabled people to consider their own values and potential instead of just considering through other people's perspective of 'what they would have done in a situation.' And this, as previously mentioned, is highly conducive to personal growth – the ultimate ending of an epic adventure.

Overall, it's not only apparent that there's a growing thirst for people to participate and make a difference in the stories they consume and to have an adventure but also that there's undeniable value in this activity. There are a multitude of works that use playable theatre techniques, frequently for social change. One that closely aligns with the experience we designed is Knott's Berry Farm's annual Ghost Town Alive that capitalises on similar techniques to create an adventure at an even larger scale than our experiences. Ken Parks, The VP of Creative, reported that it helped children with social anxiety. However, the accessibility of such events is one of our major concerns. Since they are site specific and inherently draw a more extroverted, artistic crowd, many who may be interested in and benefit from such entertainment never find it. Furthermore, some players—especially newer ones—have trouble taking a story forward and contributing without guidance and encouragement. On that front, playable theatre, despite being labour intensive is a great force of personalisation as actors are able to assess people's knowledge, abilities, perspective, values and biases to propel their engagement.

This experiment will help other creators determine direction to reliably build such value, which the industry is reportedly struggling with. The Immersive Entertainment Industry Report 2020 describes there to be 4 levels of interaction in immersive experiences. Level 0 events are completely passive experiences such as traditional plays, Level 1 having optional but meaningless interactions such as triggered special effects in theme parks, Level 2 having 'participation encouraged' such as what our show was and level 3 requiring interaction to further the experience such as Dungeons and Dragons. The report says "A Level 2 experience is not fully a game nor a show, but a combination of both. It is trying to deliver impactful moments through interactivity. Arguably, this is the most challenging level for creators to achieve because it requires a careful balance of

meaningful interactions and show elements. Currently, the most experimentation in the Immersive Entertainment Industry is happening on this level, finding a way to create an interactive experience that is fulfilling for those who love to feel in control while not leaving behind those who are timid about interacting." (Brigante and Elger) Recognizing this challenge the industry faces in developing level 2 experience, we have offered the beginning of a framework which can be more easily replicated.. While further development, testing and iteration is necessary, this framework can be applied to different themes and spaces when developed further. And in doing so, it starts to address the question of how to build a story where each person can contribute and matter, even if they choose not to. This is a huge step forward in the development of playable theater experiences that are scalable, replicable and consequently (socio-economic factors aside) more accessible. Furthermore, this experiment can give ideas on different ways to academically study the impact of educational playable theatre experiences, so that creators can corroborate the impact of their work in a directed manner and academics can find more reliable methods of reaching their educational goal.

Though it's difficult to assess the tangible impact these experiences have had on players' educational levels, with such a small sample it is possible to record participants for longer periods of time to discern whether this made a difference and to do more such experiments in future. However, it's important to note that internal differences are difficult to measure—and it is even more difficult to attribute credit of a particular shift in perspective, behaviour, or skill to one particular experience. Often, these experiences build on top of one another, like bricks, until there is a sudden, measurable difference and a wall is now a house. These experiences will always have impacts that will never be discovered, just as stories always have a ripple effect. This industry and research are both very nascent and

rudimentary, but hopefully, the preceding experiments will help guide others in making impactful experiences and have provided suggestions on how their impacts can be measured as we enter a new era where entertainment and education converge.

APPENDIX A: SHORT FEEDBACK FORM ALOHOMORA

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1h_Z46MTnaxWbr0xFRLbKmApBiipIhNbxbU2gFSaqtjs/edit#gid=219424014

APPENDIX B: LONG FEEDBACK FROM ALOHOMORA

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Sd2oOrkpeM2qfKkK_w1jsoOfUHfUXEp-kxMDLiUqjNA/edit

APPENDIX C: SHORT FEEDBACK FORM ASCEND

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/17v3idWe0btc0IajzUyf9owfMYA4xH2JN2DkH5sPxYlg/edit#gid=2104157771

APPENDIX D: LONG FEEDBACK FROM ASCEND

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1j5ETTheUR_9eFAbjFG-eldsxFgreRww9GHYNX56YlB4/edit

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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

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

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)

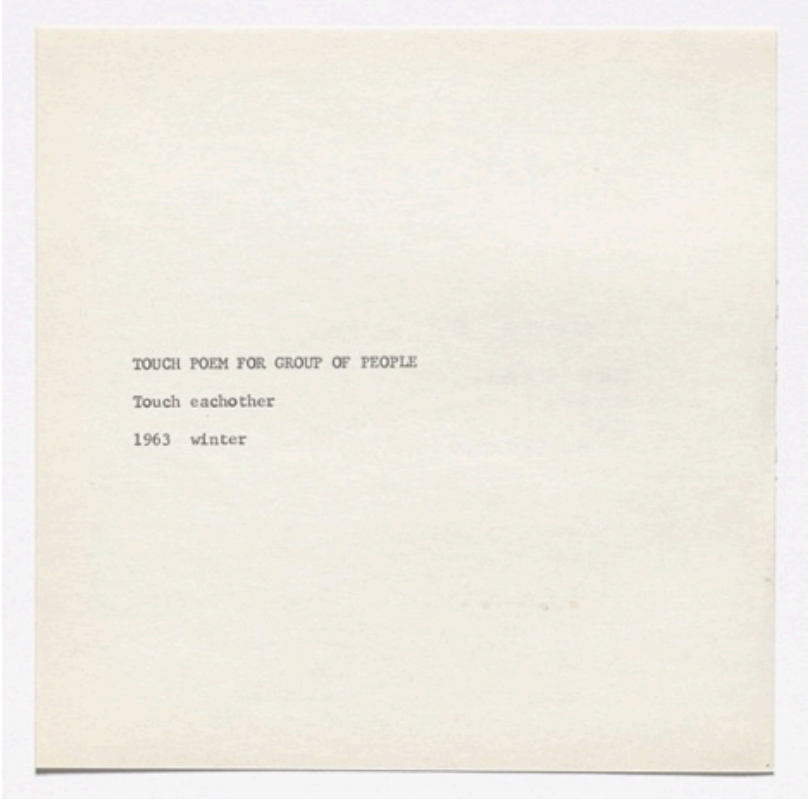

Fig. 2: Yoko Ono, Touch Poem, 1963. (via MoMA https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/15/372)

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

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.

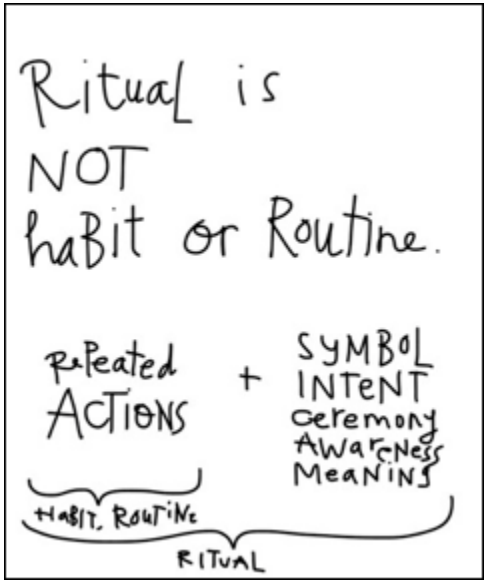

Fig. 4: What is ritual? (Ozenc and Hagan 2016)

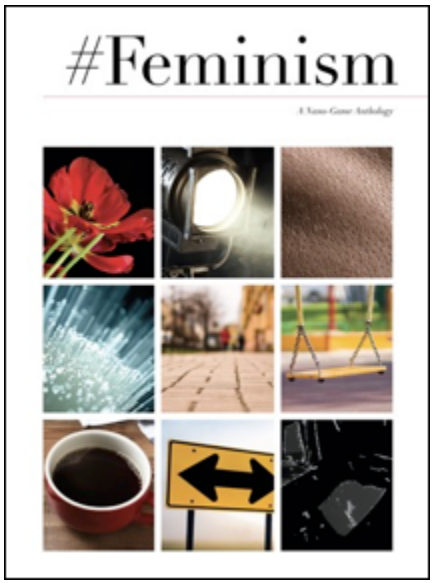

Fig. 5: Cover of the #Feminism nano-larp anthology (Stark et al, 2016) containing So Mom I Made This Sex Tape by Susanne Vejdemo; played in Episode 2 of the course

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

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

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.

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

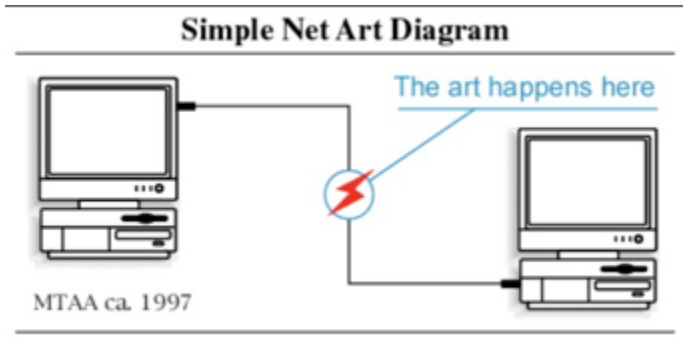

Fig. 6: MTAA, Simple Net Art Diagram, 1997 (via Rhizome https://anthology.rhizome.org/simple-net-art-diagram)

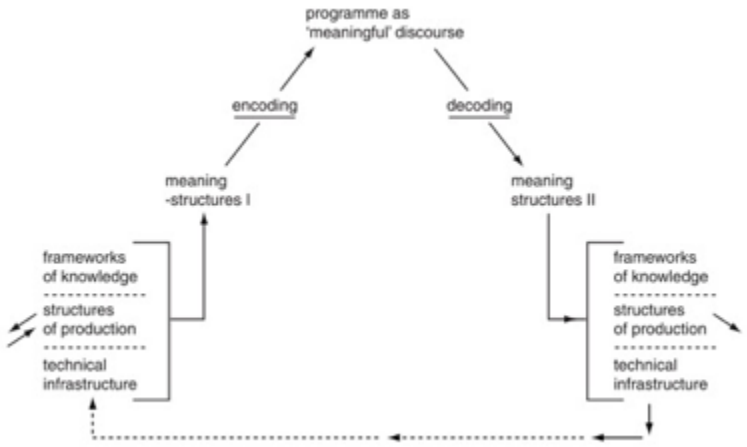

Fig. 7: Encoding and decoding media. Diagram from Hall 2007 [1973], p. 388

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

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.

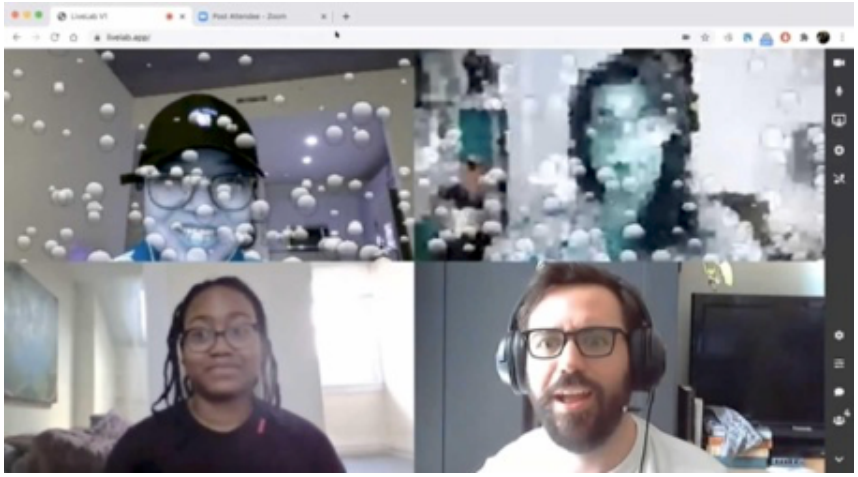

Fig. 8: A student group tests out the affordances of a new streaming platform

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

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?

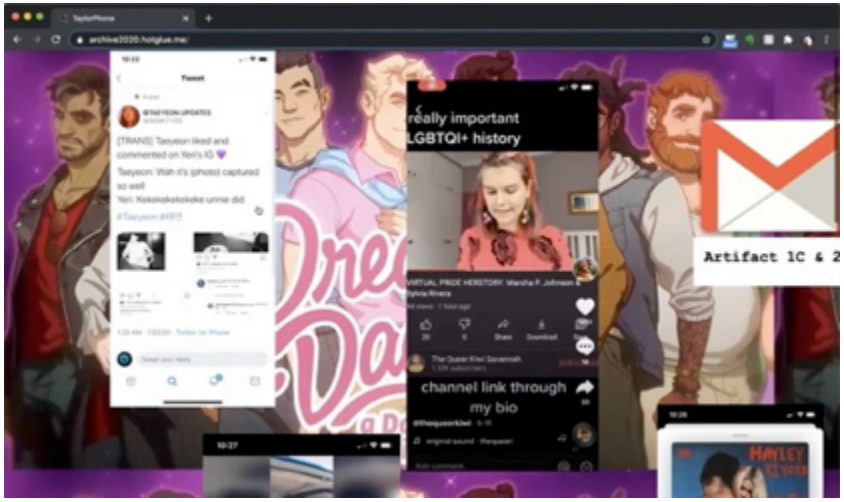

Fig. 9: Screengrab from the user-navigated mixed media production Queerantine 2020

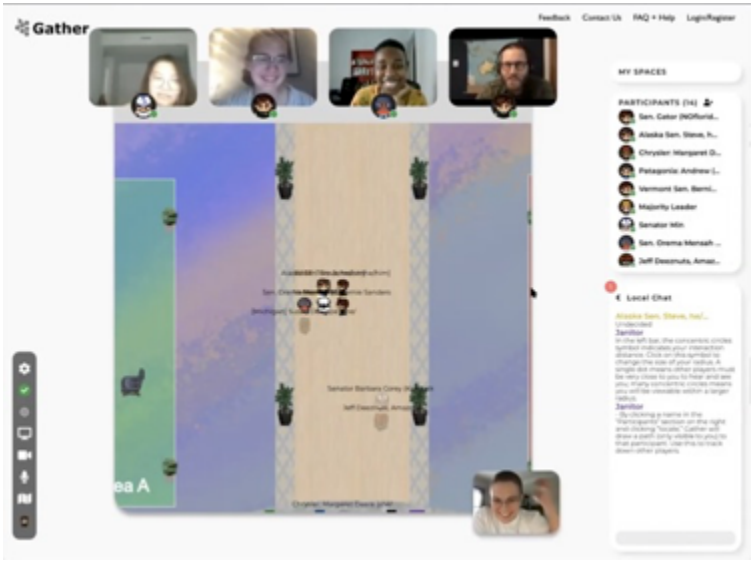

Fig. 10: Mid-game during the Green New Deal-themed online larp S.99520

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

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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