Well Played: Radical Fun and the Game of Theatre

By

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## Abstract

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, American theatres experimented with audience engagement as a remedy for perceived challenges rising from meteoric societal and technological changes. This dissertation presents a case study of the *radical hospitality* program at Center Theatre Group as an example of this trend in the American theatre. Inspired by Jacques Derrida's articulation of hospitality, *radical hospitality* became the programmatic context for authoring ludic frame experiences (aka, lobby games) as a modality of audience engagement that facilitated a renegotiation of traditional audience roles. Frame experiences form distinct magic-circles bracketing the formal temporal, spatial, and social frame of the theatrical event; authoring procedures for audience interactivity in such experiences allows theatre makers to challenge theatre conventions that mitigate audience participation. To understand both the philosophical foundations of and practical approaches to developing frame experiences, my dissertation draws connections between games and theatre, using game studies theory, performance psychology, systems theory, and cognitive science to argue that *theatre is a game*, and to situate games and theatre in relation to the concept of fun. Building upon Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow my dissertation offers an understanding of the psychology of fun that pivots on a bifurcation of fun into the *promise of fun* and *radical fun,* demonstrating how theatre and theatre games can produce a feeling of fun that motivates practice, learning, and a growth mindset.

**Acknowledgements**

Between the many hours of researching, reflecting, and writing a dissertation about a theatre project that concluded for me in 2017, I must acknowledge that my most immediate and urgent project was creating engaging participatory experiences for my most important students — my children. While homeschooling in a time of plague, I discovered that the idea of *radical fun* developed during my work for Center Theatre Group is not a conceptual orphan, stranded on a siloed project in the receding past. *Radical fun* is the practical counterpart to radical hospitality and leverages the deep, healthy, and intrinsic drive to learn and grow in order to let go of outdated, sacrosanct modes of thinking. *Radical fun* is relevant to virtually every field of human knowledge and every human practice, for it shows a way to locate and let go of the invisible biases and blockages that hold us back in our journey towards our full potential.

On my own journey to complete this dissertation, I must acknowledge the work and support of many individuals and organizations. My experience design work at Center Theatre Group would not have been possible without Eric Sims, my creative partner at the Kirk Douglas Theatre and key collaborator for nearly a decade. The radical hospitality program and the concierge program persisted at the Kirk Douglas Theatre for over a decade due in large part to the trust, vision, and support of Nausica Stergio, Kelley Kirkpatrick, Neel Keller, Diane Rodgriguez, and Lindsay Allbaugh. The concierge team at the Kirk Douglas Theatre not only facilitated the many frame experiences I designed, they also served as beta-testers for the games and provided

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## Introduction

During the first two decades of the new century, the term “audience engagement” generated a degree of confusion and even controversy in the American theatre discourse, as many regional theatres experimented with engagement programing. According to arts think-tank WolfBrown, audience engagement programs prioritize “the creation and delivery of arts experiences in which the paramount concern is maximizing impact on the participant.”[1] Although audience engagement of one form or another has existed for as long as there has been an audience to engage, during the early twenty-first century, the “significant trend in audience engagement programming relates to the increased availability of interactive and participatory activities,”[2] and the implicit existential threat such activities pose to conventional modes of theatre. Rapid development of conditions in the broader cultural and technological landscapes that led to an acceleration of innovation[3] also produced a degree of Babylonian discord within the theatre field around the use of the term “audience engagement.” Subsequently, “engagement” has been used to describe “a somewhat bewildering array of programs and activities”[4] and organizational dispositions ranging from programs designed to “add value” to the overall experience at the theatre, to marketing practices geared towards accessing new communities, to

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[1] Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin, “Making Sense of Audience Engagement,” vol. 1 (The San Francisco Foundation, 2012), 5.
[2] Ibid., 6.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 2.

performance-adjacent experiences intended to provide “interpretive assistance” to audience members.

Since the beginning of the century, the impulse for audience engagement surfaced from a plurality of theatres facing the difficult and existential questions: How can the expensive and effortful event of conventional theatre compete for the interests of an inattentive generation against the compelling, responsive, effortless, and far more affordable options available — literally — at their fingertips? How can theatre continue to exist if it cannot compete in a cultural marketplace flush with high-affordance, low-cost experiences? How can a theatre steeped in the relatively uniform traditions of white America reach an increasingly diverse populace without alienating its traditional subscriber base? Naturally, these questions have been on the minds of theatre practitioners, scholars, and employees of theatre organizations for whom reliable audience attendance equates to career stability. Recognizing this, arts organizations around the country, including many theaters, have taken the burden of change upon themselves, and embraced the emerging practice of “audience engagement.”

In a clear sign that audience engagement was viewed as a significant development in the performance landscape of the United States, several nationally prominent performance organizations created new full time staff positions to attempt to direct these activities. Just a few examples of these include Woolly Mammoth’s Connectivity Director, the Director of Audience Engagement at Pacific Symphony, the Director of Community Engagement at the Guthrie Theatre and the Audience Experience Designer at Center Theatre Group. “Connectivity has been innovating

hyperlocal ways for Woolly Mammoth to engage, nourish, bolster, and knit our community together," remarks Woolly Mammoth artistic director Maria Manuela Goyanes. She continues, "we aim to walk this path with intentionality, openness, and reciprocity to become even more attuned to the people of DC, and what they desire from a cultural organization like Woolly Mammoth."[5]

Although the interest in audience engagement was clear and consistent across the industry, the range of activities considered under the umbrella of "engagement" was quite broad, and there was virtually no consistent approach to how these activities were imagined, designed, implemented, and measured for success. This dissertation presents and analyzes some of the findings of a practice-as-research project I conducted between 2009 and until 2017 in my role as the Audience Experience Designer at Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, California. Working at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in collaboration with then Theatre Manager Eric Sims and a rotating team of theatre professionals comprising the audience experience (XD) team, I sought to develop a *practical approach* to audience engagement. I aimed to coordinate and connect several diverse and inter-dependent modalities of engagement within a program of *radical hospitality*, inspired by Jacques Derrida's concept of Hospitality.

Arguably the most recognized and impactful innovations pioneered by the XD team were engagement activities known commonly as "lobby games" but internally referred to as *frame experiences* or *frame performances.* By producing frame

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[5] News Desk, "Woolly Mammoth Launches New Connectivity Core Partner Program," DC Metro Theater Arts, June 18, 2020, https://dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2020/06/18/woolly-mammoth-launches-new-connectivity-core-partner-program/.

experiences, I sought to deregulate implicit conventions of theatre that situated the audience as intransitive, passive receivers of culture by providing explicit procedures for audience interaction within the limen of the performance. The XD team drew heavily on game design principles and theories of play and games to develop interactive experiences immediately preceding the theatre event. As focus often turned to mapping the connective experiential fascia between the “lobby game” and the theatrical event, I regularly took up game design techniques and game studies theories to author interactive procedures and to map the intrinsically interactive and game-like structures inherent to conventional theatre.

Although I designed scores of interactive experiences at the Kirk Douglas Theatre beginning in 2009, until 2013 most of these experiences were relatively simple, charming, and in line with the interactive experiences that were cropping up across the American regional theatre scene. They consisted mostly of single mechanic experiences like the ubiquitous write-and-post, in which audience members are prompted with a question that encourages them to write a few words on a card or sticky note and post it in a designated area for others to read. That changed in 2013, during Center Theatre Group’s production of *The Royale* by Marco Ramirez, when I designed *The Incomparable Prize Fight* a complex larp-inspired lobby game that took audience-players through an interactive journey that paralleled the narrative of the protagonist of *The Royale.* The success of *The Incomparable Prize Fight* was evident in nightly anecdotal reports from front-of-house employees who noted that many audience members expressed having as much fun playing in the lobby as they did

watching the show.[6] Seeking to emulate this success, we used *The Incomparable Prize Fight* as a design template for a series of other complex, and richly interpretable lobby game experiences framing theatre productions at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Designed for Joe Iconis' rock musical *The Black Suits, Battle of the Bands* took audience-players on a nostalgic quest to assemble a garage band. Though a series of mini-games linked with a scavenger hunt mechanic, players improvised with distortion effects on an electric guitar in the game "Jam Lab," made audacious claims about their rock-star persona in the game "Fashion Statements" (see Figure 1), and collaborated with other audience-players to form a rock band in a social nostalgia game called "This is My Band" (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: An audience member plays electric guitar in the "Jam Lab" situated inside the historic box office (left), and another audience member reads "Fashion Statements" posted by players of *Battle of the Bands* (right). Photography by Tom Burmester

[6] Every concierge wrote a report at the end of each shift in which they conveyed a narrative of the audience experience for that particular show. These reports were distributed throughout the company so that various departments could keep a finger on the pulse of the audience experience.

Figure 2: Game pieces for “This is My Band” (left) and a group of four players that has successfully formed a band poses for a victory photo that gets hung on the “Wall of Fame” behind them (right). Photography by Tom Burmester

Less than a year later, I designed *Red Tape* starting with the same basic template as *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, and *Battle of the Bands.* Played in the lobby before the production of Rebecca Gilman’s *Luna Gale*, a play about the difficulties of navigating the bureaucracies enmeshing foster care and adoption, *Red Tape* (see Figure 3) took players through an intentionally complex and sometimes confusing scavenger hunt during which they found themselves discussing difficult questions with other players, digging through file-boxes to find paperwork, and debating moral dilemmas with game facilitators (see Figure 3).

Person 1:

Person 2:

| Complete all three sections to claim your reward. | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Complete one of the following tasks to complete this section. | | | Complete two of the following tasks to complete this section. | | | Complete one of the following tasks to complete this section. | | |
| ASSIGNED | A1 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | B1 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | C1 | COMPLETE |
| ASSIGNED | A2 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | B2 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | C2 | COMPLETE |
| ASSIGNED | A3 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | B3 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | C3 | COMPLETE |
| ASSIGNED | A4 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | B4 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | C4 | COMPLETE |
| ASSIGNED | A5 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | B5 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | C5 | COMPLETE |
| ASSIGNED | A6 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | B6 | COMPLETE | ASSIGNED | C6 | COMPLETE |
| **SECTION A:** | | COMPLETE | **SECTION B:** | | COMPLETE | **SECTION C:** | | COMPLETE |

| Reward Earnings | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| KDT VIP Package Raffle Tickets | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED |
| KDT Drink Voucher | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED |
| Cafe Vida Food Voucher | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED |
| CTG Theatre Ticket Voucher | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED |
| KDT VIP Drink Pin | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED | EARNED |

**TASK A3**

Present this card to a concierge. They will assign you and your partner the "Pandemic Problem." When you have completed the problem to the satisfaction of the concierge, you will earn a completed stamp.

**TASK B6**

Clip this card to your lanyard. Find a pair of players with a different B card. Exchange this card with their B card. While exchanging cards, you must all answer the questions on both cards. When you are done, retrun to the help desk with your new card to complete this task.

**Question: At what point should the state seize control of parental rights?**

**TASK C5**

Search through the "File Room" for files marked with red circles. Review at least one marked file and then report your findings - along with this card - to a concierge to complete this task.

Figure 3: The complex and confusing scavenger hunt score card for *Red Tape* (left), the artwork for the back of the *Red Tape* game cards (upper right), and three examples of the game text on these cards (lower right).

For the 2015 production of Culture Clash's *Chavez Ravine*, a play about the elimination of a Los Angeles neighborhood to make way for the construction of Dodger

Stadium, I designed *Home Game.* Evoking the play of baseball, *Home Game* took players “around the bases” with a series of mini-games designed to confront players with some of the difficult social and political dilemmas explored during the play. Players started the game at “Home Plate” where concierge “pitched” them rapid fire trivia questions based on Los Angeles and baseball lore (see Figure 4). Players then progressed to “first base” where they participated in “Play by Play” by adding to a crowd-sourced timeline of events pertinent to *Chavez Ravine*. After rounding first, players headed to second, located in the historic box office, where they played “Roar of the Crowd,” a hands-on game in which players use audio equipment to balance ten pre-recorded monologues arguing for different civic priorities (see Figure 5). Finally, players of *Home Game* headed over to “Going Home” where they played an interactive write-and-post game that they could only “win” by covering over (and negating) another player’s post (see Figure 6).

Figure 4: The game card for *Home Game* used to track player progress (left), and two concierge serve as game masters for “Home Plate” (right). Photography by Tom Burmester

Figure 5: The crowd-sourced timeline of “Play by Play” (left), and audience members playing “Roar of the Crowd” in the historic box office (right). Photography by Tom Burmester

Figure 6: The posting board for “Going Home” (left), and a close up on some of the posts (right). Players had to cover another player’s post but *could* show support for other ideas by “voting” for them with sticker dots. Photography by Tom Burmester

After designing lobby experiences at the Kirk Douglas Theatre for several years, I became interested in understanding how and why some audience members who played our lobby games appeared to have fun while others clearly did not. How do games transform an audience member into a *player*, and is it possible to play *without* having fun? Why did some audience members resist invitations to play while others seemed to seek them out? How does the invitation to play a game compare to the invitation to attend the theatre, and what makes a game fun? This dissertation

answers these questions by drawing on scholars of play studies and game studies — like Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, Jesper Juul, and Brian Sutton-Smith — along with gameful theatre practitioners like Viola Spolin, Augusto Boal, and Keith Johnstone, building off their theories to formulate a concept of theatre as a game, and *fun* as a phenomenon discrete from play.

While I draw heavily on theatre studies, game studies, and play studies, I connect these fields to concepts drawn from evolutionary psychology, performance psychology, systems theory, complexity theory, social movement theory, media studies, human movement science, improvisation studies, and sociology. I do not present myself as an expert-specialist in any of these individual fields. Rather, I position myself as an expert-generalist, drawing on unique intersections between these fields to formulate the concept of *radical fun* and to make a case that theatre is a game.

As performance studies examines the practice of doing, becoming, motion, and activity, I find it pertinent to briefly catalog the performance modalities through which I create. In doing so, I acknowledge that practicing particular modes of performances necessarily orients my perspective and bias towards the subject matter I take up in this work. The performance practices I identify with that are most relevant to this dissertation include: an experience designer, a theatre director, a playwright, an acting teacher, a certified personal trainer, a certified Behavior Change Specialist, a game designer and enthusiast, and a homeschooling parent.

The overlaps and tensions between these roles and practices are evident in my stylistic and methodological choices. Sections of this dissertation read as lengthy

narratives; sections as brief anecdotes. Some sections offer rich descriptions of specific case studies, and others provide a structural analysis of the processes of play and fun rather than the objects of fun themselves. There are places in this document where the narrative and analysis flow together, and other parts where they break apart and create jarring and disruptive discourse. Bertolt Brecht insisted that no matter how abrupt the transition between beats in a performance, the transitions ought not to be smoothed away, for such "disunity of action" is as important to the storytelling as the beats themselves.[7]

Chapter 1 of this dissertation focuses on trends in the American theatre during the first two decades of the twenty-first century that help to provide a context for the practice-as-research project at the Kirk Douglas Theatre and begin to situate an argument for understanding theatre as a game. I begin Chapter 1 with an introduction to the audience engagement movement in the American regional theatre, examining economic and technological pressures that drive audiences towards less expensive entertainment choices and provide greater attentional sovereignty. Referencing notable occurrences of outrage in the theatre community, I offer examples of the rising tension between traditional theatre practices and ubiquitous use of handheld technology, and I position these occurrences as the result of an unbridled expansion of the attention economy. Additionally, I draw on Derrida and Althusser to justify the foundation of "radical hospitality" as a philosophical approach to audience engagement that found purchase in the theatre community during this time. Chapter 1

[7] John Rouse, "Brecht and the Contradictory Actor," *Acting (Re)Considered*, 2005, pp. 248-259, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203991473-19.

concludes with a review of a well-established model for understanding audience engagement and introduces interactivity and participation as modalities of audience engagement that expand the audience engagement model and set the stage for an understanding of theatre as a game.

Following Chapter 1, the dissertation is structured into two parts, the first largely theoretical and the second an application of the theory. Part I (Chapters 2 and 3) theorizes the connection between games and theatre, using game studies theory, performance psychology, systems theory, and cognitive science to situate games and theatre in relation to the concept of fun. Chapter 2 establishes specific definitions of the two broad fields within which this study finds purchase: theatre and game. While cultural and academic disciplines have formed around these activities in ways that allow for discrete consideration of both terms, I seek to establish a concept that envelops both field and allows for the consideration of theatre as a game. Chapter 2 develops an understanding of conventional theatre as resulting from the sublimation of the play frame or "magic circle" of the game of theatre. I argue that this results from the enculturation of the rules of play that determine the temporal, spatial, and social boundaries of the game. Additionally, I set out a continuum of pervasive theatre events, locating conventional theatre at the "zero-point" of this socio-historically situated continuum, just as classical games are considered the zero-point for referencing the occurrence of a pervasive game experience. In Chapter 2 I present a perspective of the relationship between the game, play, and fun triad with fun as the central organizing phenomenon. Here, I define games as systems of rules designed to

facilitate play behavior and play as a behavior performed to experience fun. Within this context I begin to draw a connection between the narrative structure of theatre and game play and begin to lay out a definition for theatre as a game, highlighting the concepts of asymmetry, the magic circle, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow, as significant to the articulation of theatre as a game.

In Chapter 3 I isolate play as a behavior and examine its relationship to fun. Here I argue that fun is the motive force behind play behaviors, and an adaptive drive behind human innovation and creativity. I maintain that as a performed behavior, play is subject to failure, and thus, only *successful* play results in fun. Understanding well-performed entertainment as a reliable artifact for producing fun, I briefly dig into the history of suspicion associated with entertainment starting with Plato's idea that fiction made people lazy and brought out the worst in their character. This leads to a brief examination of the word "fun," situated relative to the bifurcation of human activity into work/leisure, and the development of an aesthetics system that differentiates "art" from "entertainment." Additionally, in Chapter 3 I conceptualize a bifurcation of fun into the *promise of fun* and *radical fun,* that parallels Barthes' concepts of Jouissance and Plaisir, and align these with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's definitions of Pleasure and Enjoyment. I expand upon this by showing that Barthes' concepts of punctum and studium also align with Csikszentmihalyi's framework for "optimal experience" of flow, before taking up Csikszentmihalyi's work on autotelic experience as a jumping off point for understanding the psychology of fun and draw on flow theory to help demonstrate how theatre and theatre games produce the feeling of fun.

Part II (Chapters 4 and 5) uses case studies from my practice-as-research work at the Kirk Douglas Theatre to demonstrate how interactive games in the theatre enhance audience engagement. This part of the dissertation examines the *frame experience* as a contemporary response to the perception that the durability of theatre conventions mitigate player participation by ossifying player role collations into distinct and asymmetric player experiences containing a steep agency gradient.

In Chapter 4, I present a case study of the development of the Radical Hospitality program at the Kirk Douglas Theatre from 2009 to 2017. I situate the Radical Hospitality program as the programmatic context for authoring frame experiences as a modality of audience engagement. I argue that frame experiences (aka, lobby games) form distinct but related magic-circles bracketing the formal temporal, spatial, and social frame of the theatrical event. Designers author frame experiences as an attempt to furnish audience-players with auxiliary symbolic capital to facilitate felicitous play within the embedded theatrical event. Additionally, Chapter 4 examines how frame experiences provide opportunities for explicit player choice, in which audience-players make choices that measurably impact the representational system of the frame experience. I argue that by placing the frame spatially and temporally adjacent to the theatrical event, and through additional narrative framing devices, experience designers seek to establish an event complex, within which experiences of explicit choice within the players conflate the frame with the predominantly receptive experience of the nested theatrical event.

I conclude the dissertation in Chapter 5 with an in-depth case study of *The*

*Incomparable Prize Fight*, an audience engagement activity performed during the Center Theatre Group production of *The Royale* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Los Angeles. As the first of a series of complex lobby games produced at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, *The Incomparable Prize Fight* is significant because it marked the ascendance of games as a modality for audience engagement at the Kirk Douglas Theatre and became the template for several successful lobby experiences in the years to follow. With this case study, I attempt to bring together the concepts presented in the dissertation to illustrate an innovative and gameful practice-as-research project during which I attempted to put into to practice the theory of *radical fun.*

## Chapter 1:  Audience Engagement

### 1.0 - The Problem with the Audience

American theatres enjoy a robust and supportive audience base of enthusiastic arts patrons. For several generations, a loyal, educated, mostly wealthy, and mostly white audience has championed conventional theatre in America with applause and the purchase of season subscriptions, supporting the flourishing regional theatre movement and the propagation of theatre training programs in institutions of higher education all across the country.[8]  This stalwart audience purchased an average of twenty-six thousand tickets per American non-profit theatre in 2018, and demonstrated loyalty when they paid an average ticket price of nearly $40[9] at a time when a ticket to the movies cost only $9.11[10]; when endless streaming on Netflix cost just eight dollars a month, and when billions of video content  could be viewed for free on YouTube. On top of this, many members of this loyal audience made it clear that they approved of their theatre's programming by offering additional monetary contributions by purchasing or renewing a subscription. This audience was the key factor in what Theatre Communications Group called the "robust growth" of income which provided

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[8] Simon David Murray and John Keefe, "Chapter 4," in *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2016), 123-123.
[9] Zannie Giraud Voss, et al, "Theatre Facts 2018" (Theatre Communications Group, n.d.).
[10] google search query "what was the average price of a movie ticket in 2018"

meaningful employment to theatre artists, technicians, and administrators in every state of the Union in 2018[11].

Nevertheless, American theatres face a significant problem with this very audience. The number of subscribers at the average American theatre hit a five year low in 2018, dropping over 15% during that time, while the ratio of single-ticket purchases to subscription tickets saw a significant increase, approaching two single tickets purchased for every subscription ticket.[12] While some artistic directors and producers may regard the pivot to single ticket buyers as a license to introduce "riskier" — or less conventional — programming, many regard the erosion of the subscriber base as a cause for alarm and a harbinger of financial and institutional instability within the field. In recent history, theatre subscribers have tended to be older patrons with disposable income, more settled in a community and more likely to identify attending the theatre as a life-long passion.[13] These subscribers, however are "aging out" of their role as active audience members, and — more to the point — their younger replacements do not seem nearly as enthusiastic about attending the theatre. "They don't want to go to the theatre any more," notes Diane Paulus, artistic director of American Repertory Theatre, "They don't have attention spans. They'd rather be in control with their personal handheld devices. There are too many entertainment

[11] Voss, et al.
[12] Ibid.
[13] The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2018-2019, 2019, The Broadway League.

choices."[14]

In the America of the mid-1800's lower and middle-class audiences who filled theatres considered a similar kind of control to be their sovereign right. During theatre performances in Jacksonian America, the working-class members that dominated the audience enacted the right of selective attention with a boisterous and playful enthusiasm that wealthy, elite theatre goers decried as "rowdiness" and marked as brutish unsophistication.[15] The cultural war between respectability and rowdiness that played out within the American theatre of that era was at its core a struggle for control of the production of cultural capital in a dominant entertainment center of American society with the working-class audience employing rowdiness as a repertoire of contention against the placating and hegemonic rules of "respectability."

The eventual and intentional repression of rowdiness led to the bifurcation of live entertainment in America, with "legitimate" theatre standing as the confirmed domain of "respectable" audiences, thus reducing audience agency within the event of theatre to attentive interpretation. "Respectability," writes audience scholar Richard Butsch, "meant an audience that was quiet, polite, and passive."[16] Upper and middle-class audiences performed their social status and deferred their sovereignty as audience members through both implicit and explicit enforcement of respectable behaviors,[17]

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[14] Craig Lambert, "The Future of Theater," Harvard Magazine, August 5, 2020, https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2012/01/the-future-of-theater.
[15] Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: from Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 3.
[16] Ibid., 6.
[17] Ibid., 9.

identifying “rowdy” behaviors as the mark of the lower class. Theatre entrepreneurs identified a significant financial advantage to supporting the respectability movement which not only catered to an audience with deep pockets and influence in the halls of power, but also allowed theatre managers to court the previously untapped female audience by mitigating the perception of impropriety that had been associated with the male dominated theatre of the “rowdy” working class. Theatre managers began to post rules dictating audience behavior at theatrical events, and ejected audience members who violated rules. The enforcement of these behaviors paved the way for the staff position known in contemporary American theatre as the House Manager, and encoded the passive receptivity associated with the “respectability” values deep into the fascia of conventional American theatre, ultimately making implicit the once explicitly posted rules of decorum and respectability.

The ascendence of passive receptivity in theatre primed audiences for the advent of broadcast media, which offered an intransitive consumable form of entertainment that reduced the primary social context for entertainment from the public space to the family space. Enforced respectability “privatized audience members’ experiences, as each experienced the event psychologically alone, without simultaneously sharing the experience with others.”[18] This, along with aesthetic adjustments such as dimming the house lights, obfuscated and reduced the broadly public community dimension of the theatre event, smoothing the transition between theatre as the dominant mode of cultural entertainment to radio and then television — both of which contracted the

[18] Ibid., 15.

social context for entertainment even further. As media technology advanced, the entertainment frame continued to contract until the present: with ubiquitous internet access, on-demand streaming entertainment, and the proliferation of handheld devices capable of delivering this media, the primary social context for the entertainment audience has reduced to the individual. Embodied by the young, digitally obsessed audiences referenced by Diane Paulus, the individual performs a new form of selective attention at odds with the demands of conventional theatre.

### 1.1 - Outrage and the Attention Economy

Recent discourse in theatre suggests that evolving technological and socio-historic conditions stress traditional theatre institutes opening fractures and fault lines that expose the limits of theatre conventions.[19] [20] [21] Critics and theatre makers complain that advancing technology has created a society with attention deficit, audiences that "tweet and text one another during plays,"[22] or that can use new technologies to get their "stage fix at your local movie theatre or hear a play while

[19] "Noises off: Is the Internet Killing the Theatre Show? | Chris Wilkinson," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 1, 2010), https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2010/mar/31/internet-theatre-twitter-texting.
[20] Lindsay Price, Written by Lindsay Price, and Lindsay Price, "Theatre and Technology," The Theatrefolk Blog, September 20, 2017, http://www.theatrefolk.com/blog/theatre-and-technology/.
[21] John Moore, "Will a High-Tech Revolution Bring Curtain down on Theater as We Know It?," The Denver Post (The Denver Post, May 5, 2016), https://www.denverpost.com/2010/10/28/will-a-high-tech-revolution-bring-curtain-down-on-theater-as-we-know-it/.
[22] Michiko Kakutani, "Texts without Context (Published 2010)," The New York Times (The New York Times, March 17, 2010), http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/21/books/21mash.html?pagewanted=1.

jogging."[23] Ubiquitous handheld technology, omnipresent social media discourse and the cultural drift towards on-demand, streaming entertainment have put the intransitive, temporally inflexible, attention-demanding conventional theatre at odds with the proclivities of emerging American generations. Laments for the death of theatre-as-we-know it accompany the pointed finger of accusation leveled at the advancing juggernaut of new technology.[24]

In 2015, the term "luponed" — appearing for the first time in the Urban Dictionary — means "The act of snatching (literally or figuratively) a cell phone from hands of an offensive theatergoer."[25] That summer, while performing in *Shows for Days* at the Lincoln Center in New York, Tony-Award-winning theatre actor Patti LuPone shattered the fourth wall by snatching a cell phone from the hands of an inattentive audience member who had been "glued to the texts on her cell phone"[26] during the performance. LuPone's actions were applauded by the local audience and lauded in the twitter-sphere and other social media. Echoing Diane Paulus' complaint about the personal device obsession of young theatergoers, LuPone lamented, "We work hard on stage to create a world that is being totally destroyed by a few, rude, self-absorbed and inconsiderate audience members who are controlled by their phones." The

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[23] Al Jazeera, "Technology Is Remaking the Theatre Experience," Arts and Culture | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, October 23, 2019), https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/10/23/technology-is-remaking-the-theatre-experience.

[24] "Spektrix US Blog," Spektrix US Blog, accessed May 5, 2022, https://www.spektrix.com/en-us/blog.

[25] "Luponed," Urban Dictionary, accessed May 5, 2022, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=luponed.

[26] Todd Leopold, "Broadway Legend Grabs Phone from Texter, Laments Future," CNN (Cable News Network, July 9, 2015), https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/09/entertainment/feat-patti-lupone-cell-phone/index.html.

noticeable shift towards this kind of interference was enough to cause the Broadway veteran to question whether she wanted to continue in the theatre. "I am so defeated by this issue" she confessed, "that I seriously question whether I want to work on stage anymore."[27]

Her defiant outrage came fast on the heels of another violation of the implicit rules of audience behavior that also went viral. Less than two weeks before Patti LuPone "luponed" her young audience member, 19-year-old Nick Silvestri — an audience member at the Broadway production of Robert Askins play *Hand to God* — jumped onto the stage before the start of the performance to plug his iPhone into a power outlet he spotted on the set. Unaware that the power outlet was a non-functional set dressing, Silvestri was eager to charge his device, which had been running low due to "girls…calling all day,"[28] and was not aware that his actions would cause an uproar.

But roar the theatre community did. One *Hand to God* audience member who was in the house for that performance posted a video to YouTube (shot on their mobile device) which they titled "Moron jumps on stage on Broadway to try and charge his phone in a fake outlet"[29]. The video captures a scene in which audience members laugh, jeer, and profess outrage at Silvestri climbing on stage, while cameras flash and

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[27] Ryan McPhee,
"Who Do You Think You Are?! Broadway Star Patti LuPone Takes on Audience Texting at Shows for Days," Broadway.com (Broadway.com, June 13, 2019), https://www.broadway.com/buzz/181412/who-do-you-think-you-are-broadway-star-patti-lupone-takes-on-audience-texting-at-shows-for-days/.
[28] Gersh Kuntzman, "'Hand to God' Phone Charge CAD Apologizes to Theater World," New York Daily News, April 9, 2018, https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/theater-arts/hand-god-phone-charge-cad-address-controversy-article-1.2287865.
[29] "Moron Jumps on Stage on Broadway to Try and Charge His Phone in a Fake Outlet," Newsflare, accessed May 5, 2022, https://www.newsflare.com/video/49300/entertainment-arts/moron-jumps-on-stage-on-broadway-to-try-and-charge-his-phone-in-a-fake-outlet?a=on.

the house staff rush Silvestri. The video — viewed nearly one million times — heralded a scourge of ridicule and outrage on theatre blogs and social media. As the collective American theatre community excoriated the young theatergoer with their righteous indignation, #ChargerGate was anointed on Hand to God's twitter feed[30], eliciting responses such as cast member Sarah Stiles' tweet in which she labeled Nick Silvestri "#idiot."[31] Other online articles included the headlines, "Moron Tries To Charge Phone in Stage Outlet At Broadway Play,"[32] and "The Bozo Who Charged His Phone on Hand to God's Stage Was Even Ruder Than You Thought."[33]

*Idiot. Moron. Bozo.* For a community that often regards itself as a progressive bastion of inclusivity — a safe space for people of all identities — the pillory of Silvestri was jarringly discordant. With "audience engagement" as the term du jour in the American theatre community, one might expect a bit more humility from members of an industry actively seeking to engage audience members like Silvestri. Those within the theatre community who criticized Nick Silvestri demonstrated a toxic bias towards preserving archaic conventions of audience behavior at the expense of alienating the very audience they may one day rely upon to fill their theatres.

Despite his public shaming by members of the theatre community — including by

[30] Twitter (Twitter), accessed May 5, 2022, https://twitter.com/HandtoGodBway.
[31] https://twitter.com/Lulubellestiles
See tweet on July 2, 2015
[32] Published by Interrobang Staff, "Moron Tries to Charge Phone in Stage Outlet at Broadway Play," The Interrobang, July 7, 2015, https://theinterrobang.com/moron-tries-to-charge-phone-in-stage-outlet-at-broadway-play/.
[33] Dloindustries, "The Bozo Who Charged His Phone on Hand to God's Stage Was Even Ruder than You Thought (There's Video Proof)," Tales From The Basement, July 8, 2015, https://dloindustries.tumblr.com/post/123504477944/the-bozo-who-charged-his-phone-on-hand-to-gods.

a cast member from *Hand to God* - Nick Silvestri apologized. Clearly having internalized the implicit rules of conventional theatre, he said, "I feel terrible if any of the amazing actors in this show felt at all disrespected by my actions." And, having learned his lesson, he demonstrated his newly acquired cultural capital by instructing others that during a theatre performance "you should give your complete attention to the actors on stage."[34]

Marc Prensky, author of *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, refers to Silvestri's generation as "digital natives," noting that people born and raised during the Digital Age grew up immersed in digital technology. "Today's average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading," Prensky writes, "but over 10,000 hours playing video games."[35] Their acquisition of interactive digital culture — and the behaviors and preferences inherent in that culture — is innate. Their lifelong immersion in digital culture has had such a profound impact on the digital natives' minds that "they think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors." The interactivity of video games generates a stronger attentional affordance, which has become increasingly relevant as the *attention economy* mushrooms. Economist and scholar Herbert Simon first identified the emergence of the *attention economy* as the result of an "information-rich" society:

> In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What

[34] Gersh Kuntzman, "'Hand to God' Phone Charge CAD Apologizes to Theater World," New York Daily News, April 9, 2018, https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/theater-arts/hand-god-phone-charge-cad-address-controversy-article-1.2287865.
[35] Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001): pp. 1-6, https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816.

> information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.[36]

Simon's concept of the *attention economy* hinges on an understanding of human attention that has been widely supported by cognitive psychologists: attention is a renewable but finite resource.[37] As information access, availability, and saturation continue to grow exponentially; people have adjusted behaviors and developed strategies for managing their finite resources of attention. Tech writer Linda Stone coined the term "continuous partial attention" (CPA) to describe an attentional strategy humans perform to optimize their social position within a persistently rich network of information. She theorizes that in an information-rich society, humans are "motivated by a desire to be a *live* node on the network…to effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment." With constant access to multiple streams of information, each of which may provide opportunities relevant to social position and wellbeing, individuals capable of performing adaptive attentional strategies increase the likelihood that they will key on relevant action opportunities and obtain valued objectives.

It is possible that young Nick Silvestri - with his need to stay connected to a network of paramours — and the young victim of Patti LuPone's cell phone heist were simply practicing continuous partial attention as an adaptive strategy. Stone's

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[36] H.A. Simon, "'Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World.,'" in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest.* , ed. M Greenberger (John Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 40-41.
[37] Klaus Oberauer, "Working Memory and Attention – A Conceptual Analysis and Review," *Journal of Cognition* 2, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.5334/joc.58.

research indicates that young Americans like Silvestri - Pensky's "digital natives" — are particularly adept at and prone to using continuous partial attention. She points to data that shows a strong preference in 18 to 22 year-olds for communication technologies that offer a "semi-sync" experience, which she describes as technologies that are neither fully synchronous or asynchronous. "Text messaging," for example, "is often used in a semi-sync way" which allows a greater degree of attentional flexibility than either email or phone communication.[38] The Information-glut of the digital age compels CPA and other selective attention strategies — particularly for young theatergoers who grew up as digital natives. However, these strategies seem at odds with theatre conventions — born in a quieter time — that demand an audience with a deep, steady, and undivided attention.

### 1.2 - A Call for Radical Hospitality

As the outrage of the Summer of 2015 played out across the national theatre community, Theatre Communications Group (TCG) — a national theatre network of over 700 theatres with a membership of over 12,000 theatre practitioners — announced that the theme for its upcoming national conference would be "Theatre Nation: A better world for theatre, a better world because of theatre." Without a whiff of irony, TCG asked, "Can we create a Theatre Nation that welcomes everyone," and

[38] "FAQ," Linda Stone, July 27, 2020, https://lindastone.net/faq/.

“How can our Theatre Nation model a more perfect union for our country and world?”[39] Against a national backdrop openly hostile to the digital proclivities of the emerging generation of potential theatre goers, theatre legend Anna Deavere Smith opened the TCG conference with a keynote speech during which she urged her colleagues to embrace a more hospitable theatre:

> We find ourselves in the midst of an economic, security, and moral crisis. In the arts, we cannot save the world…but we can prick and instigate the growth of a public moral imagination. Develop a spirit of hospitality. Of *radical hospitality*! Derrida gives the best definition: ‘let us say yes to who or what turns up before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor. Whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, an animal, or divine creature; a living or dead thing; male or female.’ Develop a *radical hospitality* towards one another — towards all of us in our wonderful profession. Toward the global public, on whose ground we stand.[40]

Recalling August Wilson’s now-famous keynote address, “The Ground on Which I Stand,”[41] presented at the opening of the TCG conference in 1996, Deavere Smith signaled a belief that theatre — as a field of artists and professionals — bears a particular moral responsibility to present the vanguard of progressive social justice. Invoking Jacques Derrida’s *Of Hospitality*, Deavere Smith reached past repudiating the theatre community for the lack of hospitality evinced the previous summer. In calling for *radical hospitality*, she advocated a philosophical revolution within the theatre that

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[39] “The 2016 TCG National Conference: Theatre Nation,” HowlRound Theatre Commons, accessed May 31, 2022, https://howlround.com/happenings/2016-tcg-national-conference-theatre-nation.
[40] HowlRoundTV, “Opening-Anna Deavere Smith-How We Show up-2016 TCG-Washington, DC-June 23, 2016,” YouTube (YouTube, June 29, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUybR_3a-TY.
[41] August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” AMERICAN THEATRE, January 6, 2017, https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/.

would disrupt sacrosanct practices.

At the time of Deavere Smith's remarks to the gathered national theatre community, the concept of *radical hospitality* had already found purchase within the field. For instance, Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis garnered national attention for its program of radical hospitality. Presenting at the TCG conference that same year, Mixed Blood Theatre's artistic director Jack Reuler described Radical Hospitality as the core tenet of Mixed Blood's statement of purpose, in which they declared their dedication "to removing any and every barrier to being part of the movement of Mixed Blood." Although in practice, Mixed Blood Theatre implemented radical hospitality by offering free tickets to theatregoers for whom financial constraints presented a barrier to attending the theatre, they profess that the mandate of radical hospitality goes "far beyond no-cost admission. Mixed Blood strives to eliminate all barriers to access."[42]

Like Mixed Blood Theatre, the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City (a part of the Los Angeles based Center Theatre Group) took up a Derridian inspired *radical hospitality* as a philosophical North Star guiding our audience engagement program. In my practice-as-research work as Audience Experience Designer at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, I also positioned radical hospitality as a process of eliminating barriers. Rather than focus on barriers to access, my team focused on identifying barriers within the assumptions, procedures, and conventions that shape an audience experience at the theatre. The Kirk Douglas XD team understood *radical hospitality* as the practical application of Derrida's *unconditional hospitality* which fundamentally challenged, problematized, and

[42] "Imagine a U.S without Racism," Mixed Blood, accessed May 5, 2022, https://mixedblood.com/.

at times erased the differential between host and guest — between theatre maker and audience — and sought to indict tacit practices that alienated or disempowered segments of the community. The call for radical hospitality in the theatre does not in itself articulate how to practice radical hospitality, and begs the question that became central to the project at the Kirk Douglas Theatre: given all the constraints of tradition and institutional inertia how does one *practice* radical hospitality in the American theatre?

Efforts like those at the Kirk Douglas and Mixed Blood Theatre respond to a deepening undercurrent in the American theatre that Deavere Smith implicitly underscored: anxiety rising out of a persistent and growing perception that theatre has become marginalized in the contemporary cultural landscape; that emerging technologies compete with and threaten the ability of theatre makers to captivate the attention of an audience weaned on the easy-access/low effort/high-reward entertainment those technologies afford. Deavere Smith's call for a practice of *radical hospitality* demanded a reckoning for the traditions that position younger audiences and other "new arrivals" to the customs and practices of theatre as foreigners to the "theatre nation" — as unwelcome immigrants. Deavere Smith positioned radical hospitality as an approach to audience engagement — already explicitly undertaken by some — that responds to a national mandate to root out the barriers that keep new arrivals from participating in the theatre.

For Derrida, the "new arrival" is characteristically *atechnos*: they are without

techne, "inexperienced, without technique, inept."[43] They are unfamiliar with the language, laws, and customs of the particular polity where they have just arrived. Inevitably, this puts them in danger of violating some law or custom — not out of malice or criminal intent, but simply because the rules that define and are defined by the polity may be as inscrutable to them as the taboo of crossing the fourth wall was to Nick Silvestri. Despite a new arrival's atechnos, the demands of hospitality compel a host to tolerate their ignorance — at least for a time. "Must we ask the foreigner to understand us," asks Derrida, "to speak our language, in all senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him to our country?"[44] Hospitality is an antinomy that serves simultaneously as the welcoming hand of nurturing generosity and as the cradle of violence and injustice. Derrida addresses this bifurcation by suggesting two perpetually bound "terms[45]" of hospitality which he calls *conditional hospitality* and *unconditional hospitality*.

Conditional hospitality — or the conditions of hospitality — are precisely those rules of which the new arrival possess little skill or knowledge. They constitute the "legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated." These laws (plural) of hospitality have been established as the contract that must be upheld — which behaviors may or may not be performed — by the new arrival to preserve their status within the polity as a protected guest. Derrida goes to some length to articulate the

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[43] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*(Stanford University Press, 2000).
[44] Ibid., 15.
[45] Ibid., 79.

plurality of the *laws* of conditional in contrast to the singular *law* of unconditional hospitality. Hospitality presumes that an inherent status differential *must* occur within groups of human beings — that the perception and performance of social status are endemic to our species, particularly when there is a perceived scarcity of resources. These laws demand that a dominant figure or authority protect their "at home" status within the polity which grants that figure the ability to perform as master of the house or host. When a new arrival — or indeed any guest — fails to perform according to the laws of hospitality, the host's "at home" status becomes threatened, which in turn threatens the sovereignty of the host *and* all those enjoying the protected status of guest.

Derrida insists that — in the classical sense — hospitality *requires* the sovereignty of the host, which is maintained through the ability to decide who does or does not possess a protected status, sorting guests from parasites. Which behaviors allow us to regard an arrival at the theatre as a guest and audience member as opposed to an unwanted intruder? Perhaps the possession of a ticket, the proper attire, and fluency in the conventions of respectability? Perhaps something more covert and insidious, like identity markers of race, age, or gender? The laws of hospitality are precisely the apparatus through which this sorting occurs, and while they extend a contract of inclusion and protection to those who perform the laws, these laws inevitably constitute an exclusionary sorting that acts as the antecedent to

violence towards those deemed “other.[46]”

Althusser addresses the host/guest status differential in terms of dominant and subjugated classes engaged in a struggle for the power to claim — as Derrida might put it — the “at home” status within a polity or state. Althusser’s “state” is the host or the master of the house, and those repressive apparatuses put in place to protect the state maintain the sovereignty of the host through violence and force. At the level of a civil polity or nation, we might expect such repressive state apparatus performed as a police force, border patrol, or military. In the theatre, the traditional house management apparatus perform this function. Individuals who break the laws that afford them protected status within the state (as citizens or protected guests) are swiftly engaged by these repressive state apparatuses through constraint, expulsion, or termination.

The nature of hospitality, however, is such that while it produces conditions and laws that bind subjects to a contract, it is also guided by the law (singular) of *unconditional hospitality*, which — as Deavere Smith reminded TCG convention attendees — demands that we welcome the new arrival without determination or precondition. This is not, in fact, a radical notion of hospitality, but rather it is a necessary exemption that must be extended to the new arrival. After all, how can the host expect the new arrival, ignorant of the laws of hospitality, to perform without blunder? The hospitable host does not exile the newly arrived foreigner for a few

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[46] Ibid., 55.

cultural missteps, just as children (who are, by definition, new arrivals) are punished less severely for breaking the law.

Hospitality demands an exemption for new arrivals, but it is not an unconditional exemption. Indeed the laws of hospitality demand that the new arrival acquire the skill to abide by the law, and the state produces the conditions for the acquisition of techne through the production of ideology. The need for this instruction fosters in the state both an initial tolerance of a new arrival's atechnos and the eventual repression of disruptive or contentious "guests." As all human learning requires time and effort, any institution responsible for the production of ideology must account for latency in the skill acquisition of the learner, and therefore a state that provides ideological apparatuses tacitly acknowledges the temporary protected status of the new arrival despite their unfamiliarity with the laws of hospitality. Additionally, this very provision places the burden of skill acquisition on the guest, effectively setting a limit of time and effort around the status of "new arrival." That is to say, hospitality mandates a stay of judgment for a duration considered reasonable to acquire "know-how" within a system: A child becomes an adult at age 18, until which time they are required to attend school; a prospective citizen either earns citizenship before a green card expires or becomes an "illegal."

Althusser categorizes the diverse institutes that deliver ideological production as *ideological state apparatuses* (ISA).[47] Such apparatuses protect the status of the host

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[47] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), p. 1335.

or dominant class by developing coherent ideology within subjects that amount to the technique, skills, or "know-how" needed to perform within the boundaries of the laws of hospitality. They work in tandem with repressive state apparatuses (RSA) towards the same end: maintain and stabilize a social order that secures the status of the dominant class or host. Unlike RSAs, which organize through centralized authority, ISAs are by nature diverse and decentralized, a plurality of institutes working in concert to deliver a dynamical system of ideology. Although Althusser divides ISAs into several distinct institutions — including education, religious, family, legal, political, and cultural (i.e., theatre) — they *all* serve the same core function which is to inculcate the subjective class with an ideology (re: techne) that preserves a social order favorable to the dominant class. That is to say, *all ISAs instruct subjects* (the newly arrived and the veteran citizen) on how to perform the laws of hospitality.

Althusser suggests these institutes work in "concert," and within this "concert," a society will produce a hierarchal ordering of status and dominance between ideological institutions. In Althusser's calculus, education was measurably the dominant ISA above all other institutes, including family, religion, and culture. As evidence, he points to the tendency for states to compel children — by law — to spend scores of hours each week, year in and year out, engaged in the activities of educational ISAs. While it may be unclear what specific variables determine dominance, it is possible to consider (as Althusser did) the time and effort participants spend *engaged* in the activities of the institute as a measure of the institute's value within a given society relative to other ISAs. We could ask, for example, how important

is the theatre as a cultural ISA relative to video games as a cultural ISA and find an answer by comparing the relative participant engagement of the respective fields. Not surprisingly, the more dominant an ISA institution within a state, the more likely that the polity will reward the institute with markers of value (money). Considering the vast differential between the capital value of the gaming industry and the theatre industry — both of which ought to be understood as ISAs working in concert within the cultural discourse — reveals the relatively lower position and influence of theatre within the cultural polity.

In this ecosystem of ISAs, institutions constitute their own rules and conditions of hospitality. They operate as dynamical subsystems of a larger dynamical system of ideology — as ideological superstructures resting upon the base of an ideological infrastructure. Responding to broad social evaluation, institutions that evaluate poorly compared to other institutions will self-correct by adjusting implicit and explicit rules to increase their instrumental value within a polity by producing more subject engagement.

If, as Althusser suggests, theatre operates as an ideological state apparatus, one might consider the "audience engagement" impulse evident in a plurality of American theatres as a movement "in concert" with the entire cultural institution in reaction to a tacit understanding that its status in the polity is diminishing. The premise of audience engagement as an activity presumes a challenge to which the activity responds — in this case, that the audience is somehow *not* engaged or not engaged *enough*. As such, the presence of an audience engagement program

supposes that there is something inherently lacking in the current model or practice of the theatre within which the program exists. Implicit in the naming of the practice of audience engagement is a sense that the performance itself somehow falls short or is insufficient in its efficacy — that without an engagement program in addition to the artistic exchange, some aspect of the event is deficient. Whether the perceived deficiency results from a deficit in the cultural capital of the audience, the demographic or ideological composition of the audience, the curatorial insight of the audience, or some other aspect of the cultural experience depends in part on the perspective and expertise of the department or organization articulating the need for engagement.

### 1.3 - Audience Participation as Engagement

For the XD team at the Douglas, the question of modality became central to our signature approach to audience engagement. After several conventional attempts to develop engagement experiences adjacent to the central performance (such as a live DJ, free food, and a full bar) failed to generate interest in the audience, it became clear to us that audience *participation* was central to engagement. Rather than simply coming up with a suite of new initiatives whose validity might be questioned, we sought to develop a process, ruleset, or procedure for participation that would facilitate discourse around the engagement program and would allow our unorthodox approach to establish footing as a reproducible engagement modality. While lobby experiences

like “under-30s nights” and simple “write-and-post” activities had already found purchase in a number of theatres, the Douglas XD team’s overtly ludic approach to audience engagement and radical hospitality stood out in the landscape of engagement programs that had already begun to generate discourse.

In developing our program, we, like many arts organizations, were informed by research from WolfBrown. The San Francisco Bay Area based research firm had generated a common lexicon for audience engagement initiatives, helping to codify certain principles useful in framing the audience experience. Their concepts of the Arc of Engagement, the Impact Echo, and their taxonomy for audience engagement typologies[48], although not explicitly ludic or focused on interactivity, provided a useful starting point for the Douglas XD team.

WolfBrown described the Arc of Engagement as a five-stage experiential arc covering the total experience of the theatre event that “begins from the moment an audience member makes a decision to attend.” The Arc of Engagement continues through the event itself — called the “Artistic Exchange,” and eventually produces an “Impact Echo” resonating “for days, months or even a lifetime” depending on the summative potency of the artistic exchange and all of the components of the Arc of Engagement that occur outside the artistic exchange. According to this model (see Figure 7), the implicit goal of audience engagement programs was to increase the potency and durability of the Impact Echo, which would in theory increase the potential

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[48] Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin, “Making Sense of Audience Engagement,” vol. 1 (The San Francisco Foundation, 2012).

for loyalty, word-of-mouth publicity, and other instrumental goals.

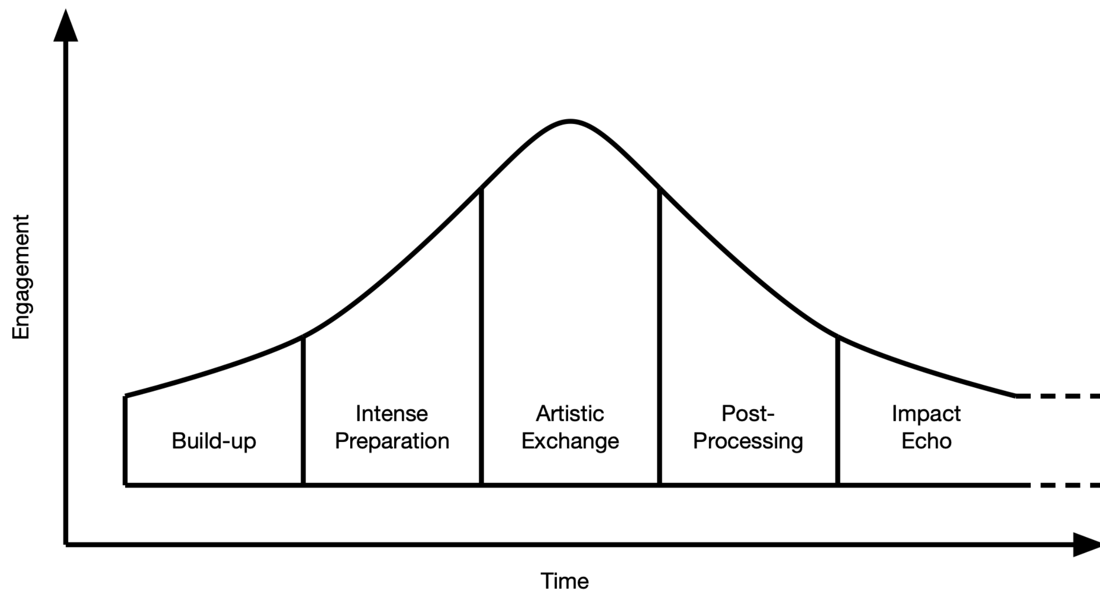


Figure 7: WolfBrown's "Arc of Engagement."

WolfBrown's Arc of Engagement effectively situated the central performance event within a broader complex of events, all of which — their research demonstrated[49] — contribute to the "summative impact" of the experience and point to opportunities to intervene in the audience's overall experience both in the pre-show and the post-show environments. Expanding on the Arc of Engagement in their 2012 study of 58 productions across 18 regional theatres, WolfBrown identified several experiential features occurring in the various stages of the Arc of Engagement that enhanced the summative impact of the event. In the pre-show environment, WolfBrown identified "Familiarity, Preparation, and Feeling Welcome" as correlative to "Anticipation" which has a direct causal relationship with the audience's ability to experience "Captivation"

[49] Ibid., 6-7.

during the artistic exchange.  When an audience experiences “Captivation” during the artistic exchange (the performance), the Arc of Engagement will deliver a more potent summative impact, leading — presumably — to a more potent impact echo (see figure 8).  It is worth noting here that WolfBrown’s concept of “Captivation” bears phenomenological similarity to aspects of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of *flow,* a concept critical to this dissertation and that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

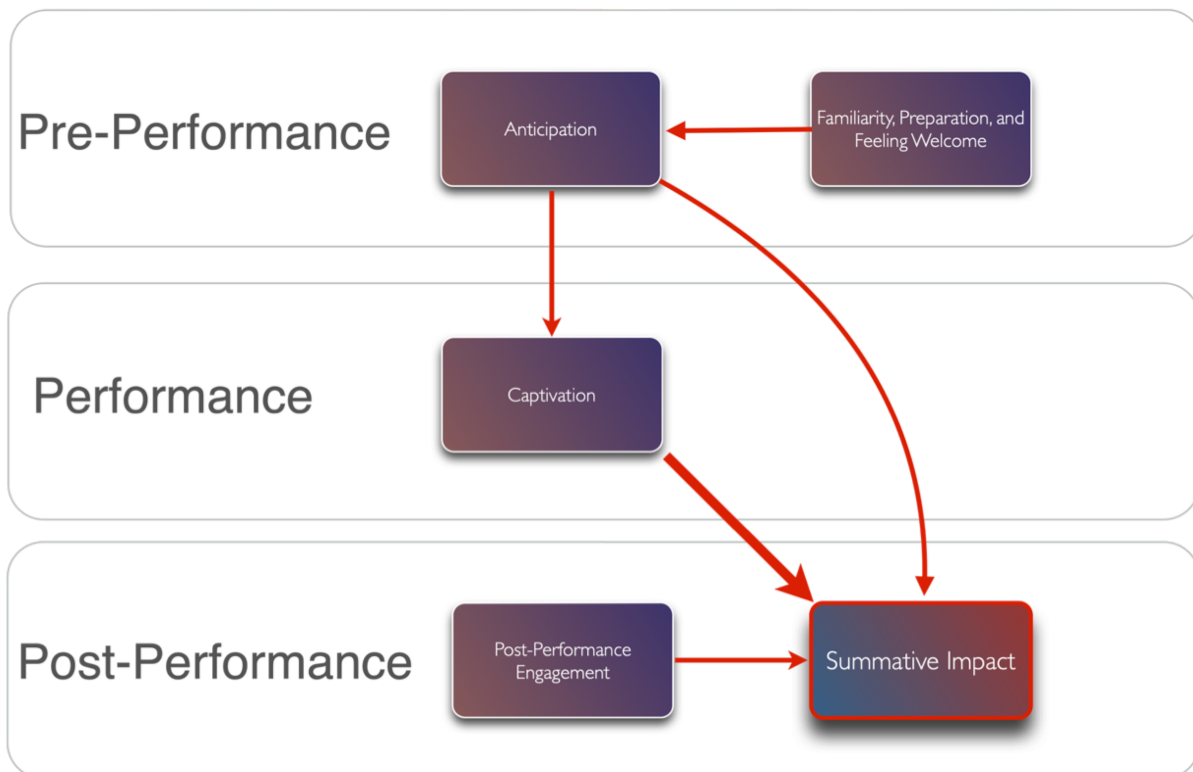


Figure 8:  Factors influencing the Summative Impact.

WolfBrown’s model helped the XD team at the Kirk Douglas identify potential *interactive* audience engagement experiences that would intervene in the arc of engagement, pre-performance, during the performance, and post-performance (see

figure 9). Given that significant institutional inertia dampened the potential to work interactive experiences directly into the central performance of the event (Captivation), the XT team decided to focus engagement interventions on the pre-performance and post-performance environments, and sought to author participatory procedures that would cultivate anticipation, foster a sense of feeling welcome, and prepare the audience for the performance.

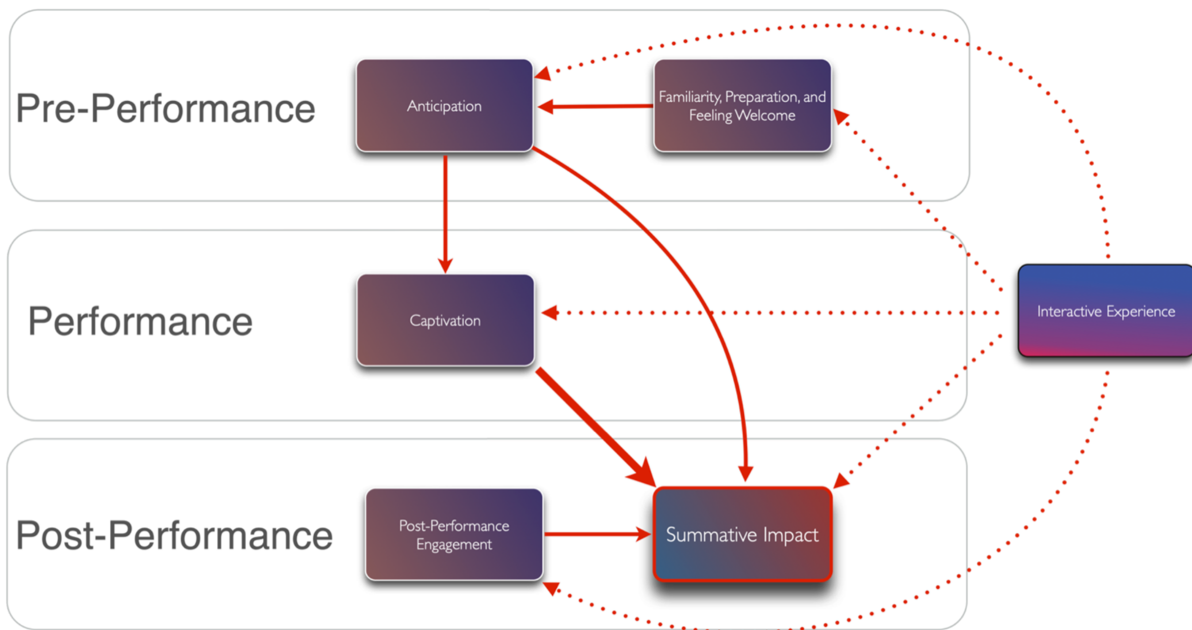


Figure 9: Adding Interactive Experience into the mix.

WolfBrown's efforts were geared mostly towards analyzing the broadest pattern of conventional audience behavior relative to engagement and framing expectations around how engagement can impact both an audience and an arts organization. They, for the most part, steered clear of developing concrete tools for the conceptualization and implementation of specific engagement activities — wisely leaving that to the

practitioners that they study — and their work mostly served to create meditative focal points for arts leaders intent on developing their own engagement programs.

One such focal point outlined in *Getting in on the Act*, a 2011 study funded by The James Irvine foundation and co-authored by WolfBrown and Shelly Gilbride, asserted the commonly held perspective that the degree of audience participation in an activity corresponds with the degree of engagement an audience experiences. The authors of the study put forward an "Audience Involvement Spectrum" to demonstrate how activities may be categorized by audience involvement (see Figure 10). The spectrum moves from "Receptive," meaning low involvement, to "Participatory" meaning high involvement. The receptive audience, according to the study's authors, is situated "outside the realm" of participation, as their activities are mostly limited to attending and observing.[50] The more participatory events, however, offer an audience more creative control. The "Audience Involvement Spectrum" designates those activities with the most audience participation as "Audience-as-Artist" experiences in which "audience members substantially take control of the artistic experience." Indeed, the study positions participatory audiences as "inventive" co-creators of the theatrical event.[51]

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[50] Alan Brown, Jennifer L Novak-Leonard, and Shelly Gilbride, "Getting in on the Act" (The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, 2011), pp. 4-5.
[51] Ibid., 4.

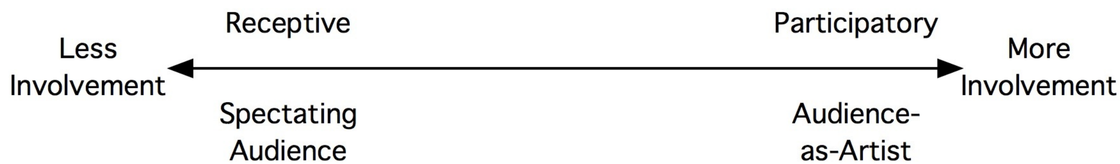


Figure 10: The Audience Involvement Spectrum[52]

If, as the study suggests, this emphasis on greater control is a response to the "seismic shift toward a participatory arts culture" that valorizes more open source, transitive, and interactive experiences[53], then perhaps creating and programing more participatory performances would encourage more digital natives to participate in theatre events. However, larger theater organizations face both a supply side and a demand side problem with this solution. The vast majority of productions on American stages cater to and necessitate a "Receptive" audience. One need only take a quick scan of a dozen or so seasons of the more attended American theatres to see this is true. "Audience as receiver" is the prevailing culture of the American theatre today. Audiences who currently love and attend theatre developed their preferences based on the traditional model of theatre, in which the audience has no expectation to engage in activities outside the implicit conventions of theatre and anticipates finding pleasure passively by observing the conventionally staged performance. Not only are they

[52] Alan Brown, Jennifer L Novak-Leonard, and Shelly Gilbride, "Getting in on the Act" (The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, 2011).
[53] Ibid., 2.

unlikely to perceive any need to change the form, but they may also react negatively to any perceived threat to the conventions they associate with an enjoyable theater-going experience.

In *Understanding Intrinsic Impact in Live Theatre*, an extensive study of theatre audiences, authors Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin demonstrate this paradigm with data collected from audiences at 18 participating regional theatres across a recent season. They discovered that "the desire to revisit familiar work rises dramatically with age" and that for the older age cohorts, it represents a top motivation to attend the performance alongside a desire "to relax or escape" and "to be emotionally moved."[54] "High-Frequency Attendees" make up 79% of the elder audience cohort as opposed to just 20% of the young audience cohort, who are far more likely than their elders to attend performances "for work or educational purposes" or because they were invited by someone else.[55]

Without a clear indication of a demand for participatory performance, it is no surprise that artistic directors are disinclined to change the core of their programming from the bread and butter of more traditional fare. Season curators likely recognize that for many audience members, comfortable "participatory" behavior is limited to conventional responses such as applause, laughter, and similar "kinetic, paralingual and verbal contributions that make up the audience's repertoire of actions."[56] Theatre

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[54] Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin, "Making Sense of Audience Engagement," vol. 1 (The San Francisco Foundation, 2012), 17.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2016), 28.

productions that position the audience in a more explicitly participatory role by re-scripting an audience member's repertoire of actions also bring with them the potential for discomfort and risk that could alienate audience members comfortable with the rules of conventional theatre.

Even were there a will to program more participatory work into a season, supply forces are at play, preventing the entrance of participatory theatre into the mainstream. Although there are examples of participatory theatre entering mainstream theatre discourse — Punch Drunk's *Sleep No More* being the most obvious example — there is no vast canon of existing participatory work that can be drawn on to fill the season of the typical American regional theatre, practiced in delivering a rehearsal and production environment honed to the needs of traditional audiences. Similarly, there has yet to develop a deep pool of actors, directors or theatre creators practiced in integrating unique techniques and addressing the production needs of theatre events that include audience participation.

Any effort to transform the entrenched culture to allow for more participatory work would require a holistic change and buy-in across most departments within an organization, including a clear vision for change articulated by people in leadership positions. As such discursive sea changes do not often occur without seismic socio-historic events, a more progressive, incremental shift could be facilitated by the articulation of procedures and tools for developing participatory experience in the frame around the performance. Taking an oblique approach to intervention by playing in the frame around the performance provides an opportunity to work within a margin

of acceptability that does not produce as much institutional resistance as attempting to intervene in the central performance, but still operates in close enough proximity to the event of theatre to fundamentally change the audience experience.

While a number of studies, including *Getting in on the Act,* have taken early steps towards developing this methodology and have even created a small number of interesting taxonomies, they have stopped short of creating practical tools that would serve creators of new participatory audience projects, focusing instead on creating models to help analyze existing work. As a result, some of the theories of participation presented by *Getting in on the Act* need refinement. For instance, the report conflates two very different ideas into one hybrid notion of "participation": *involvement* and *choice*. Creative control comes from an audience member's ability to make a *meaningful choice*, not necessarily from their involvement in a performance. Audience members participating in The Border Project's production of *Trouble on Planet Earth*, for example, were given wireless controllers that allowed them to vote on key decisions in the narrative, resulting in 24 possible endings to a "choose your own adventure" style of theatre.[57] While the scope of creativity was certainly limited in this instance, audience participation resulted from their ability to *choose* and not from their direct physical *involvement* in the performance.

On the other hand, it is entirely possible and not entirely uncommon for audiences to be incorporated into performances without any recourse for meaningful

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[57] "Trouble on Planet Earth," The Border Project, June 20, 2013, http://www.theborderproject.com/project/trouble-on-planet-earth/.

creative control. In Tim Crouch's production of *The Author*, for example, audience members were intentionally seated across from one another in separate banks of auditorium-style seating, mixed in with actors who performed from within the audience as if they themselves were members of the audience. In this instance, the bodies of the audience were used as aesthetic material for making meaning within the context of the play and audience members were directly and physically involved in the production but with no opportunity for meaningful choice.[58] Audience involvement in productions such as *The Author,* in which the body of the audience is utilized as aesthetic material without the affordance of choice, could scarcely be considered *creative* or *inventive* as articulated by the Audience Involvement Spectrum.

Suppose the goal of the Audience Involvement Spectrum is purely analytical. In that case, making this distinction might seem like splitting hairs; however, considered from the perspective of a designer seeking *tools* to engage audiences through participation, the "participation" conflation obfuscates the critical dimension of *choice,* which is at the very heart of the sought-after "creative control."[59] Choices are the very molecules that make up interactive experiences and designing an audience experience without considering the dimension of choice as a distinct component of participation makes it difficult — if not impossible — to mindfully integrate interactivity into the artistic marrow of a performance.

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[58] David Chadderton, "Theatre Review: The Author at the Studio, Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester," British Theatre Guide (British Theatre Guide, February 16, 2022), https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/authorDC-rev.

[59] Alan Brown, Jennifer L Novak-Leonard, and Shelly Gilbride, "Getting in on the Act" (The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, 2011), 4.

Theatre engagement specialists can effectively borrow from the growing field of experience design, which establishes as a basic premise the need for what interactive experience designer Doug Church calls a set of "formal abstract design tools"[60] or a system for using a common vocabulary to clearly convey the underlying abstract ideas and meanings of specific tools used to design interactive experience. This, Church argues, would allow designers to have a more sophisticated response to their analysis of interactive experiences. "Instead of just saying, 'That was fun,' or 'I don't know, that wasn't much fun,' we could dissect [an interactive experience] into its components and attempt to understand how these parts balance and fit together."[61] Ultimately, this would result in a greater understanding of the process and help facilitate the creation of interactive audience experiences. Additionally, tools like these would help justify the inclusion of interactive experiences — and the theatre staff needed to run them — to the decision-makers who run theatres.

The existence of such tools would not only help to understand and design more effective interactive experiences for the theatre. They could also begin to provide solutions to the supply-side problem of participatory performances by discursively intervening in conventional theatre to normalize participatory practices. If such tools become more accessible to existing artists, perhaps directors and theatre creators would be more likely to utilize interactivity in their own performances. Additionally, such tools could be used by the arts professionals who currently lead engagement initiatives

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[60] 1999 Doug ChurchBloggerJuly 16, "Formal Abstract Design Tools," Game Developer, July 16, 1999, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/formal-abstract-design-tools.
[61] Ibid.

to bring a greater degree of sophistication and mindfulness to their own design processes, providing them with tools for developing and dissecting what worked and what did not work about their experiences. These tools would allow for a transitive conversation between organizations about interactive experiences, making it easier for organizations to learn from each other's successes and missteps. While certainly not a panacea for all of the difficulties faced by American theatres, the establishment of a formal abstract design platform for interactive audience experiences would be a tangible step towards moving participatory performance experiences closer to the mainstream, aligning theatre more closely with the aesthetic values — or attentional practices — of the emerging "digital native" audience.

## 1.4 - Conclusion

From 2009 to 2017, the XD team at the Kirk Douglas Theatre developed a repertoire of tools for designing interactive experiences that played a significant role in our radical hospitality program. Through these interactive experiences, we sought to encourage audience participation as a means to explore the invisible assumptions that constitute the conventions of theatre. As part of a much broader, industry-wide movement towards audience engagement, the Kirk Douglas Theatre team marked out its unique approach to audience engagement by situating theatre as a game and developing interactive games in the preparatory stage of the "Arc of Engagement" that interfaced with the performance to enhance the prospect of audience "captivation"

during the artistic exchange.

By situating theatre as a game, we attempted to appropriate many of the core principles, mechanics, and taxonomies of game design, believing that by making subtle and elegant cross-genre interpretations, it would be possible to reconstitute game design elements into a robust and practical platform for the creation and analysis of interactive audience experiences for live theatre. Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation will examine some of these interactive experiences in detail, but in order to understand how and why we used the principles of game design, the following two chapters will theorize the intersection of theatre and games, situating both in relation to the concept of fun.

# Part I - Theory

## Chapter 2: The Game of Theatre

### 2.0 - Game, not Gamification

“Games are ancient. Like making music, telling stories, and creating images, playing games is part of what it means to be human. Games are perhaps the first designed interactive systems our species invented.”

- Eric Zimmerman, from “Manifesto for a Ludic Century”

“Theater is a good model for games because it is one of the earliest media technologies for interactive play.”

- Gina Bloom, from “Gaming the Stage”

During the March 2015 episode of CBS morning talk show, “The Talk," an estimated 2.29 million viewers[62] tuned in to watch celebrity actor Ed Harris excoriate Actors’ Equity Association for attempting to gut the artistic “breeding ground” for the Los Angeles theatre community. Responding to Harris, the studio audience jeered and booed as if the union were a dastardly villain in a melodrama chaining a hapless

[62] “'The Talk' Delivers Its Highest Women 25-54 Rating since February,” 'The Talk' Delivers Its Highest Women 25-54 Rating Since February - Ratings | TVbytheNumbers, accessed May 5, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20120615211358/http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2012/06/14/the-talk-delivers-its-highest-women-25-54-rating-since-february/138168/.

intimate theatre to the railroad tracks of late-stage capitalism. Looking directly out into the audience, Harris continued, “I urge all Equity members to vote no on this.” As the audience applauded, he shook his head and announced, “The New York Equity people don’t understand how LA theatre works.”[63]

As the hospitality scandals of 2015, discussed in the prior chapter, played out on the national stage, a separate conflict in the theatre community came to a head in Los Angeles in the form of a revelatory showdown between Los Angeles based theatre actors and the actors’ union to which they belonged, Actors Equity Association (AEA). Central to the conflict was a decision by the New York based AEA to rescind an agreement negotiated between Equity and its members at the conclusion of a 1980s legal dispute. The agreement, known as the “99-seat plan” stipulated that actors may work outside the strict obligations and protections of an AEA contract, forgoing payment in lieu of a token stipend (about $10 per performance), provided that the production fall within certain guidelines. Most notable among these was that the AEA actors could enter into the 99-seat plan only if the venue hosting the production contained 99 or fewer seats for the audience. The result of the 99-seat plan played out over decades, as scores of small theatres opened across Los Angeles, eventually maturing into one of the most robust, experimental, and diverse theatre communities in the nation. Producers could afford to take risks; actors could afford to be producers.

When AEA made the announcement that they were throwing out the 99-seat plan in order to fight for fair pay for actors, one might expect that — given conventional

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[63] “For #ilove99 - Ed Harris on the Talk, CBS,” YouTube (YouTube, March 13, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KE1XyfJF660.

wisdom — the Los Angeles actors would be pleased and relieved to finally receive fair compensation for their work. In fact, the AEA actors revolted, initiating a significant and sustained social action against their own union. In an unprecedented referendum, over two-thirds of Los Angeles based actors belonging to the Actors Equity Association voted to reject AEA's efforts to lock in new contractual obligations that were purportedly designed to increase paid acting opportunities for Los Angeles Equity members. AEA offered the referendum as an attempt to demonstrate that a silent majority of its members were in favor of their proposed withdrawal from the "99-Seat Plan," but when members overwhelmingly voted to reject the change, Equity ignored the results of the referendum and proceeded to dismantle the 99-seat plan. It is only mild hyperbole to equate the 99-Seat Conflict of the early 2010s' with civil war in the Los Angeles theatre community. Theatre companies that had been thriving under the 99-Seat plan fell apart, friendships were strained and artistic relationships torn apart. Battle lines became entrenched and social media lit up with outraged screeds on both sides of the conflict.

At stake in this conflict was the very definition of theatre: is theatre work, or play? When an actor's body performs is it laboring in exchange for commodity, or is it moving and performing a game, intrinsically motivated by pleasure (just for the fun of it)? More to the point, should an actor be contractually denied the opportunity to play if they are not also — in doing so — laboring in exchange for commodity. In other words, must an actor only perform as a commodity for exchange? By removing the 99-seat plan, Equity was effectively blocking actors from performing in a 99-seat

theatre by mandating that they receive compensation at a rate that a 99-seat production simply could not sustain.  These actors argued that this would prevent them from pursuing their passion.  The choice to perform in a 99-seat theatre was never *only* about getting paid.[64]  By rejecting the AEA's plan, actors signaled that they practiced theatre because they are passionate about it, because it gives them a chance to play, and because, like a game, theatre is fun to play.

For decades, influential theatre practitioners and game scholars have suggested a close relationship between theatre and game-play.  In their examination of live action role playing games, Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros argue that Augusto Boal's Forum theatre presents a structural similarity to role-playing games; both position the audience as active players (Boal's spect-actors) who observe and *participate* in the imagined reality of the game.  Unlike the presumably passive spectator of more intransitive modes of entertainment, active players possess an agency that impacts the outcome of the performance.[65]

In *Games for Actors and non-actors,* Boal uses the word "game" to situate both the practice *and performance* of Forum theatre. For Boal, the actor's practice for Forum theatre consisted of exercises and games, with games articulated as exercises that "deal with the expressivity of the body as emitter and receiver of messages."[66]  In

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[64] You can find countless examples of this on the Pro99 Facebook group which also serves as an archive of the entire conflict.  Pro99 currently has 6798 members, and remains a very active social media hub. https://www.facebook.com/groups/348992575287472/

[65] Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*(Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004), 57.

[66] Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (Routledge, 2010), 49.

fact, Boal called Forum theatre “the performance game,”[67] which, he insists “is an artistic and intellectual game played between the actor and spect-actors.”[68] His breakdown of Forum theatre consists of ten rules that read like the rulebook for a board game. “Forum theatre is a sort of fight or game,” he wrote, “and like all forms of game or fight there are rules.”

Boal was certainly not alone in taking up game-play as an approach to practice or training for dramatic events. Like Boal, improv master and founder of “Theatresports” Keith Johnstone uses the term “game” to describe both the practice *and performance* of improvisational theatre. In his iconic improv manifesto *Impro for Storytellers,* Johnstone, rarely uses the term performance, referring to improvisational activities as games, regardless of the context in which they are enacted. Johnstone’s “games,” like Boal’s, are defined by particular sets of rules, which when taken up by the player will result in various types of improvisational storytelling, whether or not a conventional audience is present.

Johnstone’s use of games as performance frameworks evokes the commedia dell’Arte, in which an actor’s skill may be measured, in part, by the breadth of their repertoire of games, masks, lazzi, or canovacci. Indeed, contemporary commedia scholar-practitioners John Rudlin and Barry Grantham both use a similar approach to training the actor for the commedia dell’Arte. In *Playing Commedia* Grantham presents a series of sixty games that progressively build towards a fully rendered commedia

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[67] Ibid., 243.
[68] Ibid., 243-245.

performance. Like Boal, Grantham articulates explicit rules for the performance of each game, which — when taken as a whole — creates a particular type of theatre — in this case a commedia performance. Rudlin takes a similar approach to practice and performance in *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actors Handbook*. He presents training exercises as games that eventually culminate in performances. In these instances, the implied — if not articulated — difference between game and performance is limited to keying the frame to differentiate rehearsal from performance that occurs in the presence of the spectator or audience.

Viola Spolin sets up a similar dynamic in her influential handbook *Improvisation for Theater.* For Spolin, the key to preparing the actor for performance is to cultivate a technique that evokes spontaneous and intuitive creative expression. Spolin defined "Games" as the principle of seven aspects of spontaneity. For Spolin, the rules of a game offer structures within which the player may move freely according to their intuition. "As long as he abides by the rules of the game," she writes, "he may swing, stand on his head, or fly through the air." Such freedom is requisite to creativity, and necessary aspect of a "talented" performer, which Spolin describes as a person possessing the ability to experience deeply and at a more granular resolution. She argues that the imperative of spontaneity makes gameplay useful in "formal theatre" (a term she uses to describe the conventional mode of theatre), rather than simply a template for improvisational theatre. Invoking Neva L. Boyd's, *Play, a Unique Discipline,* Spolin reiterates that "playing a game is psychologically different in degree but not in kind from dramatic acting." Spolin's considerable work in *Improvisation for Theater*,

deconstructs the conventional modalities of theatre by offering a comminuted series of theatre games designed to facilitate playful spontaneity within the context of a progressive reconstruction of a formal or conventional theatrical performance.

These few examples of theatre practitioners using game as a vehicle for theatre making are by no means exhaustive, but they serve to underscore a familiar pattern in the relationship between theatre and game. Theatre is situated as proximal to game, yet somehow held apart. As a concept, game is useful in service of the performance as a practice or training modality. The body and mind of the player is prepared for the performance through gameplay, and as such the activities of the body of the player (actor) *in preparation for the performance* are considered game-play.

In spite of this, all of these practitioners — and others like them — fall short of explicitly proclaiming conventional (formal, or traditional) theatre to be a game itself, equivocating that theatre may be game-like or theatre may involve games. Even in those instances where practitioners have described the performance itself as a game — Boal and Johnstone for example — such claims are not supported with concrete, explicit examples of game concepts and mechanics functioning within that particular modality of game. These theatre makers, like others working in fields that have not made games a focus “treat games as black boxes ignoring their inner workings,”[69] and while they may intuit that theatre is a game, we are left to wonder *how* it is a game, *what makes it* a game, or even what it means for theatre to be a game. Without such

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[69] Jaakko Stenros, “Playfulnees, Play, and Games: A Constructionist Ludology Approach. ”(dissertation, Tampere University Press, 2015), 98.

clarifying explanations, the event of theatre remains ambiguously discrete from a game, so much so that game scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman - while frequently citing theatre for examples of *play* — explicitly place theatre outside their "narrow definition of game."[70]

Nevertheless, a new generation of theatre scholars have begun to make powerful claims positioning theatre as a game. In *Gaming the Stage* Gina Bloom notes the ubiquitous rhetoric of interactivity within contemporary theatre discourse and makes a significant gesture towards reconciling the debt this discourse owes to the gaming culture.[71] Her close read of the material traces from the early modern commercial theatre in England demonstrates a parallel history between game and theatre. Bloom claims that "sitting pastimes" such as theatre constitute a subset of games, and she employs a game studies methodology to understand theatre as a game of imperfect information which she backs up with a rich historical archive of early modern games, theatre, and specifically of instances of staged games.

Taking a cue from Bloom, this dissertation extends the argument that theatre is a subset of games, making the explicit claim that theatre is a game, and therefore it may be played, analyzed, and designed as any game may. If we understand the territory shared by theatre and games, we can better understand the deeply ludic structures within the theatre, and how those structures facilitate play that may lead to fun. This

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[70] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (The MIT Press, 2010), 22:8.

[71] Gina Bloom, *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

chapter examines those ludic structures within the theatre event. I will begin this examination by contrasting theatre with non-ludic artifacts that result from attempts at "gamification." By establishing a definition for games as systems of rules, I point to a dramaturgy of theatre based on game mechanics and design processes and move on to examine the significance of the *magic circle* concept for providing a "ludic" lens through which to understand theatre. I expand on the concept of the *magic circle* as a discursive tool for situating theatre events within a continuum between conventional theatre and pervasive theatre which helps isolate important game qualities — such as *asymmetry* and *on-rails* — that define conventional theatre. Ultimately, my aim is to demonstrate how a gameful approach to theatre potentiates a more robust understanding of theatre narrative as a game mechanic and reveals how theatre narratives initiate flow that players experience as fun.

Understandably, some may resist the application of game mechanics or game design principles to theatre, seeing it as an attempt at "gamification." Game scholars Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding describe gamification as the process by which "non-game objects and experiences that use design elements from games and/or are designed to afford gameful experiences."[72] The concept of gamification extends a lineage of game-adjacent concepts that saw a surge in popularity at the start of the new century.

The recent popularity of games has led to a "*ludic turn*"[73] within post-industrial

[72] Sebastian Deterding and Steffen P. Walz, *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 7.
[73] Joost Raessens (Utrecht, Netherlands, n.d.).

societies, typified by the gamification of traditionally non-leisure sectors. Some within the game community have pushed back against the conceptual diaspora of game design into other industries or academic fields. They claim that — under the banner of "serious games,"[74] "gameful design,"[75] or "gamification," non-ludic industries and fields enter an ethical grey-zone when they exploit the efficacy of powerful, behavior-modifying game mechanics to influence subjects (users, customers, students, etc.). Others have claimed that the so-called "gamification" of other fields at best misappropriates the aspects "least essential to games"[76] while ignoring the deep complexity that emerges from interacting within complete game systems, and that the "-ification" of games produces a rhetoric that trivializes games by subordinating them to industries that are broadly considered more instrumental. This intentional instrumentalization of game mechanics to gamify non-ludic objects amounts to naught but calculated and manipulative marketing schemes, or, as game scholar Ian Bogost put it, "bull shit."[77]

The application of game concepts and design principles to the study and practice of theatre should not be confused with the "gamification" of theatre, however. As Deterding noted, gamification specifically refers to instances in which game principles are applied to *non-game* objects. It is a redundancy to gamify that which is

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[74] Ben Sawyer and Peter Smith, "Serious Games for Health - Jff.de," Serious Games Taxonomy, 2008, https://jff.de/fileadmin/user_upload/merz/PDFs/infokasten-serious-games-for-health.pdf.
[75] Jane McGonigal, "Jane McGonigal," TED, accessed May 5, 2022, https://www.ted.com/speakers/jane_mcgonigal.
[76] Margaret Robertson, "Can't Play, Won't Play," Kotaku (Kotaku, June 20, 2013), https://kotaku.com/cant-play-wont-play-5686393.
[77] Steffen P. Walz, Sebastian Deterding, and Ian Bogost, "Why Gamification Is Bullshit," in *The Gameful World Approaches, Issues, Applications* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 65 - 79.

already a game. Regardless of whether dominant discourses articulate theatre as a game, theatre nevertheless contains a system of ludic structures, that cleave it conceptually to what most people may reasonably regard as a "game."

The influence of the gamification movement on contemporary American theatre has been felt most within the traditionally non-ludic temporal and spatial frame around the theatrical event, such as the gamification of theatre lobbies I discussed in Chapter 1. Rudimentary lobby games we used at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, such as simple "write-and-post" games and games using simple voting mechanics, have cropped up at a range of theatres across the country, including Signature Theatre in New York, Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, and Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington DC[78]. While the gameful turn that manifest in the lobby of the Kirk Douglas Theatre and other theatre lobbies during the pre-pandemic era of this century marked an effort to "gamify" non-ludic spaces and procedures in the preparatory frame of the theatre event, the KDT XD team sought to design lobby games that responded to — and helped disclose — the underlying ludic structures of the theatrical event itself. By situating audience members as players that make explicit choices, it was my (perhaps naive) aim to unsettle the traditional role of the theatre audience. By creating a jarring status transition between active player and passive receiver as the audience player moved from the frame into the central performance, I sought to defamiliarize the conventional audience experience and form a new basis for evaluative meaning making

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[78] Russell M. Dembin, "Where the Show Begins in the Lobby," AMERICAN THEATRE, September 8, 2016, https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/01/02/where-the-show-begins-in-the-lobby/.

that utilizes audience agency as an aesthetic material.

## 2.1 - The Definition Game

Before examining the intersections between games and theatre in more detail, it is helpful to define what this dissertation means by “game,” a term whose definition has been debated extensively. Several game scholars, including Bernard Suits[79] and Jaakko Stenros[80] have pointed to Ludwig Wittgenstein as one of the first scholars of the modern era to wade into what would eventually become a robust debate over the implication of naming something a game. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein wrestled with the ambiguous boundaries of games, cobbling together his own definition of games related to language as systems of play. Wittgenstein’s significant contribution to the definition debate was not his definition of game but his argument about the complexity and nuance involved in the *process* of making such a definition. In fact, Wittgenstein considered the process of defining and naming a “language-game” that itself mirrored the ludic structures inherent in more identifiable cultural artifacts such as “board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so

[79] Bernard Suits, Thomas Hurka, and Frank Newfeld, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Broadview Press, 2014).
[80] Jaakko Stenros, “Playfulnees, Play, and Games: A Constructionist Ludology Approach. ”(dissertation, Tampere University Press, 2015), 98.

on."[81] Each of these games, he argued, could be defined by a specific, narrow definition that would fall off and fail to accurately describe other games. Nevertheless, as a variety of games are examined, and the similarities between games "crop up and disappear," it eventually becomes evident that all games are networked by "overlapping and criss-crossing"[82] similarities that allow us to organize them into a conceptual family. The introduction of every new game technology (whether digital, embodied, or social) produces new nodes in the network, new vertices of similarity and difference, and therefore room for new definitions. Drifting somewhere within that network of similarities some essential aspect of "game" hovers like a willow-the-wisp, luring game scholars into the mire of what Jaakko Stenros referenced in the witty title of his review "The Game Definition Game." "So I am inclined to distinguish between the essential and the inessential in a game," Wittgenstein wrote, "the game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a *point."*[83]

It ought to come as no surprise that when game studies emerged as an academic field, a recurring subject for discourse came to be the very meaning of "game." Over the last two decades academics in the field have discussed to near death the definition of "game." These debates have persisted to the extent that some now regard such conversations as an endemic feature of game studies[84] and regard the mutability of the definition as important to the understanding of games as

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[81] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Anscombe G E M., and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations; Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. 3rd Ed. Reprinted with Index* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), para 66.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., para 564.
[84] Jonne Arjoranta, "How to Define Games and Why We Need To," *The Computer Games Journal* 8, no. 3-4 (2019): pp. 109-120, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40869-019-00080-6.

dynamical systems that exist only when embodied by human players[85], who — by their nature — are persistently mutable themselves.

As Jaakko Stenros demonstrated in his comprehensive review of game definitions articulated between the 1930s to 2017, scholars in game studies, and adjacent, or antecedent fields have produced over 60 published definitions for "games" that have entered the discourse.[86] Despite this, over the past couple of decades, two "canonical, yet contested" game definitions are "grudgingly being accepted"[87] by most scholars contributing to game studies. These two quasi-canonical definitions — produced by important game studies scholars Jesper Juul (2005), and Salen and Zimmerman (2004) — both demonstrate attempts to synthesize the many diverse and nuanced definitions for "game" into a sort of hybrid offering that captures the "best of" these definitions.[88] Given the continued vibrant conversation around game definition[89], Juul and Salen and Zimmerman's definitions did not settle the debate, but rather served as a jumping off point for others to align or depart from within their own definitions. Game studies is an inherently multidisciplinary field, therefore as one might expect, scholars tend to craft a definition as a lens for approaching and understanding the field in a way that serves their particular discipline or scholarly

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[85] Jaakko Stenros and Annika Waern, "Games as Activity: Correcting the Digital Fallacy," *Videogames Studies: Concepts, Cultures, and Communication*, August 2011, pp. 11-22, https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848880597_003.
[86] Jaakko Stenros, "The Game Definition Game," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2016): pp. 499-520, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016655679.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Jonne Arjoranta, "How to Define Games and Why We Need To," *The Computer Games Journal* 8, no. 3-4 (2019): pp. 109-120, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40869-019-00080-6.

undertaking.

Nevertheless, as the debate matures, it has become abundantly evident that there exists a set of ideas common across almost all definitions that form into a familiar and recognizable conceptual constellation. These ideas include (but are not limited to) five concepts that help articulate the spine of the definition for “games” taken up in this dissertation: *A game is a system of rules designed to promote play behaviors that facilitate participants’ experience of fun*. Additionally, in this dissertation games are understood as both an *activity* and the *potential or blueprint* for such activity, thereby acknowledging that while games exist in potential as material and informational systems, they are only potentiated through the embodied activity of the players. That is to say, for example, that a game of Settlers of Catan that sits on the shelf unplayed is only a game in *potential* — it is the diagram or system of a game already played or yet to be played. The definition for game articulated in this dissertation understands a game as a system of rules occurring as what Stenros calls a “second order design”[90] that does not come into full existence until it is played.

While the play experience is central to the actualization of a game, many in the field of game design tend to define games not in terms of their potential for play but as the systems that produce play behavior. Annika Waern and Jaakko Stenros note that taking up the concept of *system* in a definition of game is mostly a recent occurrence that points to the dominance of digital games within the field. Older definitions of

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[90] Jaakko Stenros and Annika Waern, “Games as Activity: Correcting the Digital Fallacy,” *Videogames Studies: Concepts, Cultures, and Communication*, August 2011, pp. 11-22, https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848880597_003.

games, they argue, tended to focus on the activity of play as central to the game rather than the system, but as digital games have come to dominate the gaming market the emphasis has shifted towards understanding games as systems. A system — in this sense — is held together by material technology. Digital games are mediated by hardware systems, operating systems and software code, all of which are manipulatable and commodifiable systems that generate traceable affordances far more quantifiable than the relatively hard to track player experience.

Understandably, scholars are drawn to innovations within their field, and in game studies, game designers drive innovation. According to GDC's annual report *The State of the Game Industry 2022*, only 2% of game designers describe a strong interest in designing in non-digital mediums. The other 98% are interested in designing for digital platforms like iOS, Playstation, Oculus, and PC.[91] These, after all, are the platforms that account for almost all of the nearly $200 billion[92] in annual revenue the industry produces that accounts for the livelihood for many of these designers. Tabletop games account for only a nugatory fraction of this fortune, and embodied games, such as New Games, Group Juggle or improv games, account for no traceable revenue at all.

Such a steep differential between the commodification of digital versus non-digital

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[91] Game Developers Conference, 2022, *State of the Game Industry 2022*, https://reg.gdconf.com/LP=3493. Accessed 2022.

[92] Tom Wijman, "The Games Market and beyond in 2021: The Year in Numbers," Newzoo, January 13, 2022, https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-games-market-in-2021-the-year-in-numbers-esports-cloud-gaming/.

games has led scholars like Stenros, Emri and Mäyrä[93], Staffan Björk[94] and others to push back against definitions of games that overly rely on a systems concept of games. They identify such definitions as a product of the "digital fallacy"[95] which mistakenly positions digital games as the standard against which all games ought to be defined, studied, and analyzed. Nevertheless, others like Juul, and Salen and Zimmerman have argued convincingly that games are systems, and despite the "intellectual dishonesty"[96] of taking up systems analysis as a means of privileging digital games, they maintain that to ignore the efficacy of such arguments would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Conceptualizing designed game systems as *technologies* that include but are not limited to material technologies allows for a broader, more inclusive understanding of games as systems. Gina Bloom's *Gaming the Stage* and Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* both position games (including for Bloom the game of theatre) as a *technology* challenging the more ubiquitous notion of technology as simply the necessary medium through which we play the game (the console or the operating system, for example). Bloom identifies theatre as "one of the earliest media technologies for interactive play,"[97] and Flanagan situates games as a *social technology* with significant power to

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[93] in *Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion* (Digital Games Research Association, 2005).

[94] Staffan Björk, "Games, Gamers, and Gaming," *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Entertainment and Media in the Ubiquitous Era - MindTrek '08*, 2008, https://doi.org/10.1145/1457199.1457213.

[95] Jaakko Stenros and Annika Waern, "Games as Activity: Correcting the Digital Fallacy," *Videogames Studies: Concepts, Cultures, and Communication*, August 2011, pp. 11-22, https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848880597_003.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Gina Bloom, *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

subvert or reinforce dominant social transcripts. These scholars point to a definition of technology that is not dependent on material systems but form out of socially inscribed systems of rules. Flanagan argues that artists and game designers ought to utilize this *social technology* not only to design impactful games, but to re-think the traditional design process itself, which, she argues, is embedded within hierarchic and hegemonic structures which do not open space for a diversity of players. Her particularly power-centric rhetoric brings a sharp focus to the play between rules and culture and the rhetoric implicit within the *technology* itself that cannot be ignored.[98]

Such an understanding may draw on the theory of systems articulated by Russian philosopher Alexander Bogdanov. His concept of *tektology*[99] organizes living and non-living structures and extends a classical notion of systems theory to include material and immaterial structures as well. In this sense, a system is a technology that organizes material or informational structures. The constitution of the technology itself may be material and informational, giving rise to the possibility of social technologies as a form of informational system of language that utilizes human bodies as the material conduit for storing, interpreting, and communicating the structures of the system. This understanding of technology slips the narrow and hardwired constraints of digital systems and includes human mediated technologies like the unspoken rules of most board games that compel players to place the board in the center of a play space with relatively equitable access to all players, or the creation of explicit but

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[98] Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).
[99] Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2019), 99.

unwritten house rules that emerge within groups of players who regularly play together. Such social technologies are far more mutable than their hard-wired comparators, and constantly respond to feedback loops inherent in such systems that — as an expression of autopoiesis — correct for internal or environmental stresses or pressures to optimize performance of agents acting on/within the system.

Such feedback loops were formulated as a key principle for Norbert Weiner's cybernetics movement which takes its name from the Greek *kybernetes* which translates to "steersman." Weiner's Steersman uses as a metaphor the story of a steersman on a boat who notices whenever the current pulls his boat slightly off-course. The steersman responds by making frequent — if not constant — corrections to keep his vessel pointed towards his intended destination. In a sense, the steersman keeps the second law of thermodynamics at bay, providing the information needed to adjust a system to its changing environment rather than fall to the arrow of time. Given that environmental change is a persistent inevitability, a system without a feedback loop will inexorably decay — or drift off course — until it lacks even the modicum of organization necessary to discriminate it from the background chaos against which it emerged.

The systems feedback loop is the course corrector which becomes the force that holds together a mutable pattern of sub-systems or parts. The pattern is in fact the system and is defined by the so called "course," or as Wittgenstein suggested the "point" of the game. The course might be seen as a performance of expectation — in accordance with a diagram or a blue-print. The performer or agent compares what

actually occurs with the diagram and determines either that an error must be corrected or a course must be modified. Such a course is the "goal" of a game; it is what the game designer[100] intended as the outcome. Games use nested hierarchies of goals to encourage play behavior. For example, it may be that the rules of a game explicitly articulate that the goal of the game is to win. Having this kind of explicit goal helps to organize and motivate certain types of behaviors that will increase the likelihood for a player to reach that explicit goal. However, it would seem to elide something significant to suggest that a player engages in a game initially because they are intrinsically motivated to achieve a particular in-game goal that has out-game value. The explicit goal of the game, therefore, is nested within a larger meta-goal for the game, which has to do with the felicitous play of the game — or playing the game well.

All of the material or information organized within a system either is itself a rule or is circumscribed by rules. The rule or "mechanic" forms the basic organ within a game system, and from this important perspective it is possible to understand that a system is a summative arrangement of a particular set of rules, providing for an emergent property, behavior, or experience that does not result from individual rules or other combinations of mechanics.

After noting that *rules* are just about the only characteristic of games that nearly all game scholars agree upon, Salen and Zimmerman unpack the characteristics of rules in an extensive and truly excellent analysis. They organize game rules according to

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[100] In instances where players "mod" a game, or create "house-rules" that explicitly articulate a new goal, as is clearly demonstrated in speed-running events, then the players effectively become adjunct designers.

three “kinds”: *operational rules* (the explicit rules which define to the players the specific play duties that the game requires), *constitutive rules* (the formal, algorithmic rules that determine *how* the system operates), and *implicit rules* (the “unwritten rules” or conventions). Using a similar categorization of rules, game designers Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek developed a methodology with which they hoped “to bridge the gap between game design and development, game criticism, and technical game research.”[101] They created the Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics tool — or MDA for short — to present and develop at the Game Developers Conference in 2001, and have since continued to research and refine their system which has been taken up by a number of designers in the field. The utility of MDA hinges on the framework it provides designers or scholars to consider a game artifact through three discrete but interacting levels of abstraction: the mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics of the game.

According to Hunicke, et al., games may be thought of as consumables, produced by the designer for the consumption of the player. Unlike other cultural artifacts, games rely on a nuanced play between predictability and unpredictability. There is an assumption, for example, that a book or a movie will deliver a precise and predictable product based on the conventional understanding that cultural artifacts such as these do not intentionally involve the explicit choice of the consumer. A game, on the other hand, must involve the explicit choice of its consumer (player), and as

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[101] Robin Hunicke, Marc Leblanc, and Robert Zubec, “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research,” *AAAI Workshop - Technical Report* 1 (January 1, 2004).

such, there is a degree of uncertainty surrounding the specific nature of the product delivered. Jesse Schell, game designer, scholar and author of *The Art of Game Design* offers a design tool that maps the inherent uncertainty that comes with player choice. He references an "interest curve" as a tool for designing player experience in a somewhat predictable manner. An interest curve visually represents the actual or intended degree of player interest along a timeline which represents the temporal boundary of the game experience. A typical interest curve, according to Schell, looks like the profile of a rollercoaster, with a series of ascending peaks of interest reaching an apex near the end of the experience which is followed by a rapid plunge (see Figure 11).

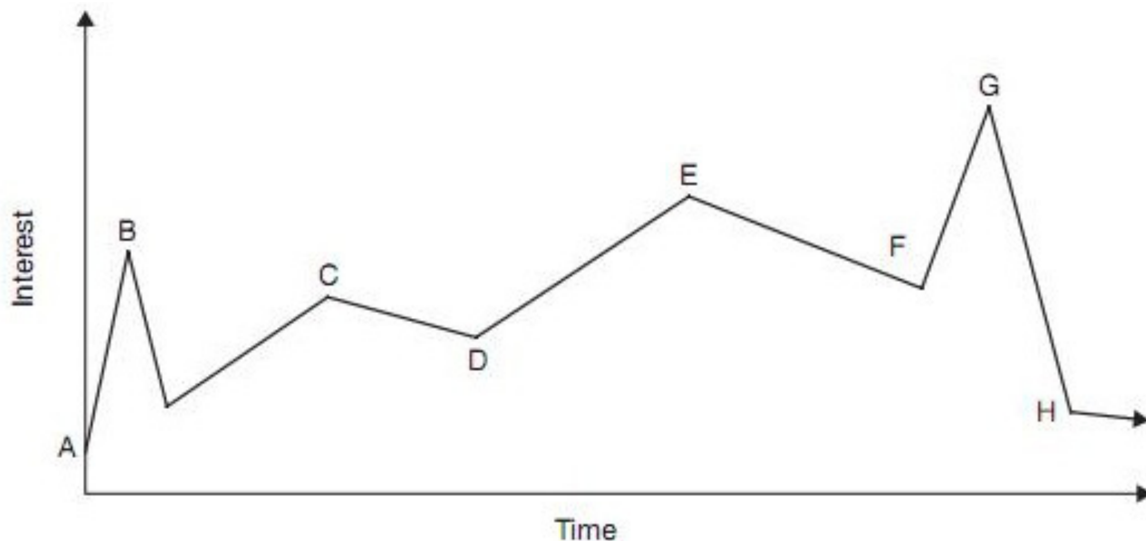


Figure 11, Interest Curve, from *The Art of Game Design*[102]

Not coincidentally, the interest curve bears striking resemblance to Freytag's Pyramid which represents the plot structure of narratives with a similar rollercoaster

[102] Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design* (Morgan Kaufman, 2008).

graph of rising and falling action, the peak of which represents the "climax" of the narrative. The interest curve reveals the experiential intent of game design and that for many designers, the intention is to reproduce a similar effect in its consumers — the assumption being that an engaged reader will experience the rising and falling action of the narrative with a degree of empathy which will translate into interest. The interest curve of an engaged reader ought to overlay the narrative curve of rising and falling action with discernible similarity.

The inherent design challenge for the game designer rises out of the desire to produce a particular, predictable interest curve without sacrificing player agency, or at least the perception of player agency. If you tell the consumer of a movie that the entire movie will be the same regardless of any action they take during the course of the movie, they'd probably just give you a blank stare and wonder why you were bothering to make that statement. But tell the consumer of a game that the game would unfold predictably regardless of any action they take during the game, and you might expect the player to become disengaged. Much of game design, therefore, involves the intentional balancing between the interest curve and its conceptual opposite, the "space of possibility" which has to do with player perception of agency.

Hunicke, et al., proposed MDA as a systemic approach to designing predictably unpredictable experiences, first by understanding the nature of the game "product" as composed of three components - Rules, System, and "Fun" (their quotes around fun). The design counterparts for those components, they argue, are Mechanics (counterpart to Rules), Dynamics (counterpart to System), and Aesthetic (counterpart to

“Fun”).  MDA provides a framework which allows designers to consider three discrete abstractions of the experience of their game, and to consider the game not as inert media but as an artifact designed to elicit *behavior* from its consumers.

In the MDA model, the rules (M) generate a particular repertoire of behaviors (D) which generate particular experiences within players (A).  These experiences are presumed to be pleasurable or enjoyable but may — in fact — not be.  It is possible for a game to not be fun.  It is possible that a game, for example, may set out to generate the experience of "fantasy" but that this particular experience of fantasy may not be experienced as fun by players of the game.  The concept of play *aesthetic* suggests that there are a variety of types of fun that share certain phenomenological qualities but that are categorically different in other ways. For example, although fun might be the common result of playing different games, a player playing an improv game experiences a type of fun that is categorically different from the fun a player experiences when they play chess.

Like “game” the word and concept of “theatre” elicits debate among scholars, and a very broad scope of definitions.  This dissertation will not attempt to provide a conclusive definition of theatre, as that is taken up in many other places by other scholars.  Rather I will discuss aspects of theatre that are relevant to understanding theatre as a game in an effort to situate theatre in relation to other cultural artifacts more commonly understood as games.  The intention of this study is not necessarily to permanently deconstruct the conceptual boundaries that separate the fields of game studies and theatre studies — certainly we acknowledge that there is a particular

cultural specificity to the experience of theatre that traces back thousands of years that identifiably differentiates it from other games. The goal is to relocate the boundary, regarding theatre and game as contributive fields rather than adjacent fields. One corollary of this approach is to resist the intense gravity that *digital* games exert on the field of game studies.

This dissertation situates theatre within two distinct but overlapping registers each of which encompasses an additional set of distinctions generally accepted by the field of theatre studies. The first register positions theatre as either an *event* that brings together two or more separate player groups (i.e., audience and actor) or as the practice in *preparation* for this event. The second register positions theatre as either conventional or as pervasive, understanding that such a distinction is historically and culturally situated. Conventional theatre refers to the dominant discursive mode of theatre, while pervasive theatre describes those modes of theatre which deviate from the conventional along one or more of three indices: spatial, temporal, and social. To understand the distinctions within each register, as well as the relations between the registers, I argue that it is useful to take up Huizinga's "magic circle," a concept that can be used to mark differentiating activities occurring within theatrical event from theatrical activities in preparation for the event in addition to the boundaries defining the spatial, temporal, and social rules of theatre. In this way, the "magic circle" yokes the Conventional/Pervasive register to the Event/Preparation register for when the convention boundaries become indistinct; so too does the boundary between event and preparation for the game.

Working from the definition of game established in the previous sections, we understand the game of theatre as a system of rules designed to promote play behaviors that facilitate the participants' experience of fun. More specifically, I propose that we consider *theatre as an asymmetrical, on-rails, synchronous, live action, narrative alter-ego game of cultural skill.* Each of the terms "*synchronous,* asymmetrical, on-rails, live action, narrative, and alter-ego" situate theatre as a game within design continuums that articulate specific aggregations of explicit and implicit rules to compel behaviors generating very different gameplay experiences. Each of these rule continua drill down on the specific qualities that mark theatre as a cultural artifact discrete from other genres of game.

As an analytical tool or a point of departure, the continua function and serve a similar purpose to theatre "Viewpoints" approach popularized by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. Bogart and Landau were inspired by choreographer Mary Overlie's "Six Viewpoints" which included space, shape, time, emotion, and story. Overlie used her viewpoints as a choreographic tool and as an approach to teaching movement. Bogart and Landau expanded on Overlie's six viewpoints, eventually developing a total of nine physical viewpoints and five vocal viewpoints. Using viewpoints, one may analyze any performance — indeed any human behavior — from multiple overlapping perspectives in order to arrive at a rich understanding of the complex dynamics at work in that particular movement. Bogart and Landau suggest that within these viewpoints, an individual performer intrinsically expresses a "medium" value for each enacted behavior. "Medium" exists at the center of each viewpoint's continuum — at the "zero-

point" — where behaviors may be expressed at values that depart along qualitatively different trajectories. The viewpoint "Tempo" — for example — refers to the speed at which a behavior is performed. A movement may be slow, medium, or fast. One will regard a behavior performed at a medium tempo as unexceptional and happening according to expectations — at least as far as the tempo is concerned. When an actor moves at a medium tempo, the tempo will not evoke a feeling or generate meaning other than "this is normal, this is expected." However, as an actor moves away from zero along a viewpoint continuum, the behavior begins to suggest an emotion or tell a story. "The fast tempo makes me feel desperate," Bogart and Landau write, "the slow makes me feel scared, and the medium makes me feel . . . well, nothing at all."[103]

As an example, I often use when conducting Viewpoints workshops, after setting my cellphone on a table or rehearsal block, I ask students to pay attention to the tempo of my actions as I reach down to pick up my cellphone and look at the screen before putting the phone to my ear — all using a medium tempo. When I ask them to tell me what they noticed happening, students will inevitably respond with obvious and general statements like "you're taking a call" or "you got a phone call." Their answers tend to focus on the instrumentality of the action — on *what* was happening rather than *how* or *why*. I then perform the exact same motions with the exact same neutral face but use a fast tempo. When asked to analyze the behavior, students tend to respond with answers that suggest they have begun to construct a narrative justifying the unexpected tempo — things like "you've been waiting for a call

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[103] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: a Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (Nick Hern Books, 2014), 37.

from the hospital," or "you've been waiting for your mom to call back to give her the good news." The exact same movements appear urgent or excited compared to the when they were performed at a medium tempo. Similarly, when asked to respond to the same actions performed at a slow tempo, students will usually respond with something along the lines of "you're expecting really bad news," or "you're terrified by what you might hear on the phone."

With each viewpoint, there is a range of activity within which one might be regarded as performing "medium" — with "zero" situated within the center of this range — and there is an often a blurred threshold that one approaches as their movement departs from zero. This threshold marks an awareness of something extra-ordinary about the movement along that particular viewpoint continuum. You might not notice if someone is only moving at a marginally faster tempo than normal, but as the tempo approaches and crosses into that threshold, the movement is noticed as fast. Similarly, a movement may progress within a Viewpoint to an extreme position where someone observing the extreme movement may not be able to justify the behavior within a normative spectrum at all and will instead rationalize the behavior as happening outside of normative reality — maybe the person portrayed is suffering a mental break or the behavior is meant to be expressive rather than literal. For example, when I perform the phone pick-up at an ultra-slow speed — moving at such a slow tempo that it takes a full minute for my hand to reach the phone — students report that it has a dreamlike quality, that there is something wrong with the character, or that I am depicting something other than a human. The tempo is so far outside their

understanding of medium or normal for that particular human behavior, that it no longer tolerates a “realistic” interpretation and is understood as a gesture that stands in for something other.

The concept of medium extends to all of the viewpoints, and when aggregated and applied across all human behavior locates a range of behaviors within which humans perform “as expected.” At the center of “medium,” “zero” marks the apex of performed expectivity — a quality of behavior that matches a sort of platonic notion of an ideal form of that behavior. However, far from Plato’s form, a “zero” is fluid and resists fixity. While a “zero” may be durable and relatively stable, that it remains contingent for its articulation upon a dancing landscape of variables, within every human behavior the zero can be said to float or drift. As something in the landscape of variables shifts, so too does the floating zero.

We arrive at our concept of “medium” through an inherent understanding of the limits of human performance when we situate humans within spatial, temporal, and social frameworks. For example, if we notice an able, fit 20-year-old wearing athletic attire running at about ten miles an hour down the street at 6 am, we would likely regard that behavior as well within the boundaries of expectations and therefore “medium.” That same exact behavior performed by the same person in the same location at the same time but wearing a wedding dress, or a suit and tie, or wearing nothing at all, shifts the behavior well outside medium, because the attire suggests a change of social frame. Within the Viewpoints every behavior is necessarily situated within a culture and a set of social expectations.

Like Viewpoints, the rule continua situate a floating zero for theatre that may serve as a social technology for analyzing and designing theatre as a game, and to locate it relative to other game artifacts. Before delving into the particular aspects that define theatre as a genre of game, it is useful to examine *conventional* theatre as a concept that encompasses all of the qualities of the theatre event, including the temporal and spatial rules alongside the social and cultural rules.

For the purposes of this dissertation, conventional theatre refers to a mode of performance which takes up the dominant ideology of the time and culture within which it takes place and for whom it is meant to be performed. The term "conventional theatre" does not assert a fixed objective form or mode of theatre which may be pin-pointed separate from time, space, and culture. Rather, conventional theatre refers to a status or a relational state based on the cultural practices and assumptions particular to its participants. It may also refer to a set of tactics or design approaches that *theatre makers* deploy intentionally or — more commonly — unintentionally. Far from fixing conventional theatre as an objective reality, the purpose of articulating and locating conventional theatre is to dislodge fixed notions of theatre by understanding it as necessarily situational.

An understanding of conventional theatre rises from an examination of the socio-economic context in which it is situated in temporally, spatially, and culturally. What may appear to be conventional at one moment in time may appear unconventional in another. Theatre becomes conventional when its participants take up the implicit rules and accepted norms of that particular instance. Conventions include the "invisible

rules" surrounding the event of theatre. They make up the performed assumptions of the art form and include everything from the way an audience member enters the theatre space, to the way an actor speaks a line of dialogue, to the very architecture of the theatre and even the fact that theatre is performed within a venue.

The very nature of conventions tend to be taken for granted in the same way that one takes for granted the highly complex skill of walking or driving a car. The invisible rules that make up conventions become the very measure of whether a culture regards a particular event as a theatrical event rather than something other. However, these rules are not ubiquitous across time, space or culture. The conventions of theatre define it as "mainstream" or discursive. They are taken for granted as being essential elements or rules governing the behavior of theatre participants. Conventions are the unwritten rules of the game, and those who violate conventions without authority or context will likely be disdained for their behavior — possibly regarded as a spoilsport, cheater, or (as discussed in Chapter 1) uncultured and ignorant.

Conventions may apply to certain players within the game or to the overall event. For example, theatre is assumed to take place within a theatre venue, typically performed upon a stage before an audience that is separated from the performance area by a feature of architecture — commonly the proscenium. This area is referred to as the "House." Since the advent of electric lighting technologies, theatrical events typically mark the beginning of the performance with a dimming of the lights in the House and stage, followed by lights illuminating the stage area and the entrance of one or more actors. Similarly, the end of performances tend to be marked by a reverse of

this process:  the dimming of the lights on stage, followed by a “curtain call” and eventually the illumination of the House.

The curtain call compels the audience to signal approval of the performance through applause, which is performed by repeatedly clapping the hands.  Additional approval may be signaled by rising to ones’ feet — called a “standing ovation” —and in some cases vocally cheering or even whistling.  During the curtain call, audiences may indicate disapproval by electing not to applaud or by applauding quietly, un-energetically, or for a short duration.  In exceptional cases of extreme disapproval, audience members may vocally “boo” the performance, but these instances are made rare in-part through the social pressure of the dominant “respectfulness” audience modality that arose in American Theatre in the later half of the nineteenth century.  Other conventions allow audiences to leave a performance before the curtain-call.  Audience members who disapprove of the performance may utilize the intermission as an opportunity to exit the performance with minimal social risk.  Strong disapproval may be signaled by exiting the House while the performance is underway, and to a lesser degree, during a transition or scene change.

Although it may seem exceedingly mundane to call out these practices, it is — in fact — important to understanding how theatre is performed in this moment.  The very conventions that are taken for granted today could appear bizarre or even scandalous were they enacted in the New York City of 1840.  The very fact that they are so taken for granted is astounding when one considers how such simple conventions impact the very essence of the theatrical event.  Perhaps the most obvious example of this is how

the rule of audience receptivity and silence impacts the body and voice of the actor. A quiet, attentive audience allows for more subtle or “realistic” performances by actors who need not worry about contending with a “rowdy” audience to be heard. Contrast this — for example — with the audience of the Bowery B’Hoys of the mid nineteenth century, when selective in-attention in the audience was the convention.[104] It is no coincident that actors of that era engaged a rhetorical style of acting, facing out to the audience and often addressing the audience directly without evoking the imaginary fourth wall that is so ubiquitous in conventional theatre today. The convention of silence has direct implication on actor training, and ultimately will be inscribed upon the bodies of actors aspiring to a “professional” career in theatre.

The conventions of theatre form a contract of sorts between all of the players within the game of theatre, and while there is some room for breaking the rules, there are also unwritten rules for how this may happen. The conventions are inscribed not by one party or another, but through an organic negotiation between all players. Nevertheless, across periods of history certain player-groups have possessed more “sovereignty” than others, and this has — ultimately — been a reflection of the dominant social class structure of the socio-historic moment. By mapping conventions, it is possible to identify not only the individual rules governing actors and audiences, but also to understand how convention both rises out of and gives rise to the particular relationship between actor and audience — or as this dissertation would term them — between “players”. If players are in equilibrium with each other within the closed

[104] Butsch, 45-52

system of the theatrical event, then conventions express imbalances between player groups within the closed system or "magic circle" of the theatre event.

## 2.2 - Defending and Expanding the Magic Circle

The term "magic circle" originates from Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* in which he uses the phrase to describe a frame or border that physically, temporally, or socially encloses a play activity, separating it from "ordinary" life:

> All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course…The arena, the card-table, the ***magic circle***, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[105]

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman then popularized the concept within the game studies field when they used the term "as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game"[106] in their widely quoted *The Rules of Play.* The magic circle is useful for thinking about the ways in which players enter into and exit a game spatially and temporally, and also socially or psychologically. Players constitute a magic circle by performing the rules of a game with a "lusory attitude" — a willingness to regard the rule-bound activities of the game *as play*. "To play a game is

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[105] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), 10.
[106] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (The MIT Press, 2010), 9:3.

in many ways an act of ‘faith’ that invests the game with its special meaning,” note Salen and Zimmerman, “without willing players, the game is a formal system waiting to be inhabited, like a piece of sheet music waiting to be played.”[107] This may resonate with theatre scholars who recognize the idea of a designated space and time in which special rules apply as redolent of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge attempted to explain how and why an audience might accept the premise of a fictional story about supernatural subjects, by suggesting that they procure from within themselves a "willing suspension of disbelief for a moment which constitutes poetic faith." Today, “suspension of disbelief” is a term used to explain how an audience sets aside the knowledge that the play is a fiction performed by actors in a simulated imaginary space in favor of the enjoyment of temporary belief. In the context of performance, the Magic Circle defines the boundary inside which the special rules of the representational system — such as the willing suspension of disbelief — apply. One might consider the magic circle as either — or both — a border surrounding the event of the game, or the event of the game itself. The moment of crossing over or into the magic circle occurs when a player acts upon the rules governing the game.

Salen and Zimmerman refer to these as *operational rules* which account for the explicit rules players interpret to apprehend sanctioned play activities, or *constitutive rules* which act as the algorithmic mechanisms directing play behaviors within the game. Additionally, and significantly, game rules include *implicit rules*[108]*,* or what game

[107] Ibid., 9:6.
[108] Ibid., 12:4.

scholar Steven Sniderman refers to in as the *unwritten rules.* Scholars have also written about the implicit rules as the institution of the game[109], or the *conventions*, both of which refer to the rules that players take up and perform — usually without explicit knowledge — from the broader cultural context in which the game is played. These implicit rules or conventions include player activities performed in preparation for — or reflection upon — the performance of the operational rules of the game. While the preparatory or reflective implicit play activities do not necessarily occur within the tidy magic circle of time and place articulated by the operational rules, they *may* nevertheless be considered a part of the experience of the game[110], and therefore within the magic circle of the game. This complicates the notion that there is a clear-cut beginning and end of the game by "blurring" the edges of the magic circle as Markus Montola acknowledges in *Pervasive Games* "bleeding from the domain of the game to the domain of the ordinary."

Nevertheless, "the reality of a game," Montola writes, "is different only if both the participants of play and the society outside recognize the playground as something belonging outside of ordinary rules."[111] Although in most instances, both players and non-players must recognize that the playground is separate from ordinary life, games are still bound and influenced by non-ludic rules and social contracts of the "ordinary world." Rules of law, ethical or cultural norms, and laws of nature persist within a magic circle, although the meaning of such laws may be transmogrified by a game.

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[109] Suits, 128

[110] Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (OReilly Media Inc., 2014), 122.

[111] Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern, *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (Elsevier/ Morgan Kaufmann, 2009).

A magic circle cannot — for example — alter laws of nature, although such laws may be explicitly reinterpreted. In César Alvarez' participatory musical, "The Universe is a Small Hat," audience-players are asked to believe that the New York City basement-home of the digital media artist collective Babycastles[112] is actually a refurbished spacecraft called *The Pendulum*, crewed by a fugitive android collective known as "Futuremagic."[113] As players participate in the spaceflight of *The Pendulum* during the performance, gravity as the ubiquitous and inevitable law of nature is reinterpreted as a precariously maintained artificial condition facilitating comfort and ease of movement for The Pendulums passengers.

Nordic larp studies provides the concept of *alibi* as another type of reinterpretation for understanding how the magic circle equips players to engage in culturally risky or taboo behaviors with minimal "out-game" consequence. While an "alibi" may be acquired within the magic circle from a number of different sources, it often constitutes as a construct that allows players to assume an alter-ego while inside the magic circle. This alter ego affords players characteristics that allow them to re-negotiate the boundary of social acceptability. Players may then perform behaviors that would be too risky to perform outside the circle, but which have become legitimized within the provisional reality of the magic circle.[114]

In other instances, the magic circle may generate an alibi for players simply by

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[112] "About," Babycastles, accessed May 31, 2022, https://www.babycastles.com/about.
[113] César Alvarez, "The Universe Is a Small Hat," César Alvarez, accessed May 31, 2022, https://cesaralvarez.net/the-universe-is-a-small-hat#development.
[114] Markus Montola "Social Reality in Roleplaying Games" from *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*, 109-110.

providing a ludic context in the form of explicit rules for performing socially risky behaviors. Such rules may have nothing to do with character or alter ego, but still legitimize play behavior that would not be acceptable outside the magic circle. The New Game "Hug Tag" — for example — sanctions sweaty, full-body hugs, and the family games "Twister" and "Funny Bones" mandate that players place their bodies in close and awkward proximity to each other — frequently touching body parts that may have no acceptable reason to be in contact outside the magic circle.

Arguably, the permission to touch in socially risky ways is much of what makes games like these engaging, and an awareness that the magic circle is *in effect* helps ameliorate risk and embarrassment associated with such activities. Nordic larp practitioners have developed a number of social technologies to allow players to engage in legitimized and "safe" intimate or violent interactions with other players. "Ars Amandi" was developed to allow players to engage in a series of sanctioned touch behaviors that evoke a sense of intense intimacy within a strict set of guidelines.[115] These guidelines provide for multiple "check-points" and feedback loops designed to protect player safety and comfort. Many of the concepts at work in Ars Amandi have become popular techne in the recently trending intimacy training movement in the American Theatre landscape. "Ars Marte" offers a similar solution for players wishing to engage in symbolic and improvised violence.[116] Whether performing Ars Amadi, Ars Marte, staged intimacy or any other risky social behavior, it is absolutely

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[115] Lizzie Stark et al., "Intro to Ars Amandi," Leaving Mundania, August 14, 2014, https://leavingmundania.com/2011/11/09/intro-to-ars-amandi/.

[116] Larphouse.tumblr.com, "Larp House Presents: Beyond Boffers Workshop," Larp House, July 24, 2018, https://www.larphouse.org/2015/09/larp-house-presents-beyond-boffers-workshop/#more-264.

critical that all engaged players are "contractually bound" — so to say — by the magic circle, and if, as noted by Montola, not all players "recognize the playground" the ludic contract is breached, raising the potential for a violation of ethical norms.

We see a clear example of this potential ethical violation with Augusto Boal's "invisible theatre," in which players who are "in-the-know" enact a socially volatile dramatic scene in a public space without signaling to onlookers that the game is a fictional performance.[117] In this way, the players hope to elicit "out-game" responses from unwitting onlookers who are unable to legitimize the actors' unacceptable behaviors utilizing the alibi, because these onlookers do not recognize the magic circle. To them, the actors' unacceptable behaviors are "real," and thus must be reacted to in a non-ludic, non-imaginary manner. The viability of invisible theatre is contingent upon a *differential* of awareness between two distinct groups of people — those who recognize the magic circle and those who do not. Invisible theatre simply does not work as intended if all parties are aware of the magic circle.

The implicit and explicit rules of a game that articulate the magic circle allows players, non-players, and designers to consider where a game begins, where it ends, and whether or how it persists. While each of these aspects of the magic circle may be regarded as discrete demarcations of time, or place, or social rules, a magic circle is the integral whole of all its particular aspects. Focusing on the *temporal* aspect of the magic circle allows a player to recognize when a game begins and ends. It gives rise to concepts like endgame, time-out, intermission, game-clock, two-minute warning,

[117] Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (Routledge, 2010).

and curtain call, and informs important aesthetic choices relevant to game design, like whether play is turn-based or simultaneous, what the tempo of play is, and how time can be a token of status. Contemplating the *spatial* element of the magic circle enables players to recognize the physical boundaries of the play space, and when a player is "out-of-bounds." Spatial awareness of the magic circle instantiates ideas like the stage, house, and lobby of a theatre, or the board of a board game, the end zone of a football game, or the ring in a boxing bout.

Much of the recent criticism of the magic circle concept coming from the game studies community finds fault in the concept for its rigidity and its failure to account fully for the messy blurring of the edges between a game and its social context. In her book *Gaming the Stage,* Gina Bloom takes up Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux's concept of metagame and accompanying critique of the magic circle — the notion that "players enter a space geographically, temporally, psychologically, and psychically cut off from mundane life, subjecting themselves to a set of artificial rules" — to argue for an understanding of past histories that is not "isolated from our own contemporary practices and perspectives."[118] Boluk and Lemieux, for their part, offer a much more extensive critique in their book *Metagaming,* which they lead off by noting that Eric Zimmerman, for whom much credit is due for the initial use of the term, has become one of the most scathing critics of the magic circle, arguing that the "magic circle has been replaced by the myth of the 'magic circle jerk.'"[119]

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[118] Gina Bloom, *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
[119] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming. Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

Similar criticism from the game community has been focused on the limitations of the bordered event; the idea that the bleed between in-game and out-game is porous and permeable, and that the magic circle concept does not take this messy blurring into consideration. In her article, “There is No Magic Circle,” Mia Consalvo pushes back against the magic circle concept, arguing that it confines games to a structuralist epistemology. Consalvo takes up Gary Fine’s interpretation of Erving Goffman’s frame analysis to suggest the magic circle is no longer a viable concept for game studies because, “the ‘real world’ will always intrude, for the gaming structure is not impermeable to its outside events.”[120]

I would maintain that Consalvo’s argument is fundamentally flawed for it implies that a magic circle must be a static, singular, impermeable barrier that somehow enforces total separation between what is within and what is without. This is simply not the case, and even Consalvo seems unable to avoid engaging the concept, as when she reiterates that the real world “intrudes” on a game, for without a magic circle differentiating game (provisional reality) from non-game (actuality), there would be nothing to “intrude” and nothing to intrude upon. The most succinct response to this criticism from within the game studies community comes from game theorist Jesper Juul who writes:

> This idea of a separate space of game playing has been criticized on the grounds that there is no perfect separation between what happens inside a

[120] Mia Consalvo, “There Is No Magic Circle,” *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009): pp. 408-417, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343575.

> game, and what happens outside a game. That is obviously true but misses the point: the circumstances of your game playing, personality, mood, and time investment will influence how you feel…but we nevertheless treat games differently from nongames, and we have ways of initiating play.[121]

Juul acknowledges that however much scholars attempt to erase the bordered event, there remains an awareness of a phenomenon discrete from the background of everyday life.[122] There is nothing in the concept of the magic circle which explicitly requires that the border be impermeable nor that it be of a particular size or duration. In fact, the magic circle concept shares theoretical territory not only with Goffman's *frames*, but also with Pierre Bourdieux's *fields*, and Brian Massumi's *diagrams,* all of which are conceived as situated markers. The utility of the concept comes from the fact that it makes the mark; that it inscribes a "circle" — however blurry — around an event differentiating an artifact/event from a background.

The magic circle registers a limitation; it is a marker which allows us to negotiate an object of inquiry. Even if we regard the marker as vague, permeable, problematic,

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[121] Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 13.

[122] Furthermore, much of the criticism related to the magic circle disregards the intent of the designer. Once could consider the magic circle in terms of the experience intended by the designer of the game. There is a distinction made between games of emergence and games of progression which pivots on the degree to which the game designer exerts control over the experence of the game. Games of progression (also known as games of information or games of data) are those which proceed as though "on-rails" from one scripted moment to the next (much like we are used to seeing in the conventional theatre), and in which the intent of the game designer becomes an object of interpretation for the players. Games of emergence, on the other hand, balance designer intent with player agency, relying less on information and more on clever procedural design. In either case, the designer marks the operational, constituative, and to some extent even the implict rules which define the formal magic circle of the game.

or insufficient, it nevertheless potentiates discourse, and situates the cultural artifact *against* the broader background. It allows us to regard the space in which a game is played and differentiate it from a space where the game is not played: we expect the play to perform on the stage, we move the game figure over the board. It allows us to understand *when* play begins and ends: the curtain rises, or the actors take a bow; we press "start game" or we lose our final life. And the magic circle also constitutes social rules and behaviors for in-game performance and differentiates them from out-game norms. When we enter the discursive boundary of a magic circle, all of these vectors come into play, regardless of whether we are explicitly aware of them. We enter the circle in both time, space, and behavior or social rules, and along each of these indices the special conditions of the game are powered by the *difference* or departure from a discursive norm that exists in the background against which the border of the magic circle foregrounds an alternative discourse.

In his book *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts,* Brian Massumi likens the border of an event to a fractal, noting that to enter an event, one must cross into the event, and the crossing is itself an event — the occasion which *differentiates* from the background, becomes itself a background for an embedded event. What we see as the boundary is the annulment of process, but in fact the annulment is due to our own limited capacity to organize and inscribe all that we perceive at any given moment leading to a "double articulation between levels: of emergent proto-figural activity and its resulting figurative annulment." This leads to a flickering of perception between "the figurative stability and seeing the imperceptible

float of figural potential" ultimately stabilizing in habitual oversight.[123] Evolutionary psychologists refer to "habitual oversight" as a blind spot or "instinct blindness."[124] From this perspective, instincts constitute our "human nature" that is composed of our most common place behaviors. "Instinct blindness" refers to our tendency to regard our most common behaviors as unexceptional and therefore not worthy of careful examination, when in fact so called "common" human behaviors such as walking on two legs and using language to communicate are not only incredibly complex neuro-motor skills but are often the very characteristics that differentiate humans from other animals. "Thus we may be sure," noted William James, "that, however mysterious some animals instincts may appear to us, our instincts will appear no less mysterious to them."[125] What we have to learn from ourselves and our behaviors is most telling not in the fringe or exceptional behaviors but in those common place skills and attributes that we take for granted.

Much of Bertolt Brecht's theory and practice of theatre responded to instinct blindness writ large across swaths of society. Brecht's verfremdungseffekt — often referred to as the "alienation effect" — relies for its efficacy upon the human tendency to form social blind spots. Brecht formulated the v-effekt as a social technology leveraging habitual oversight to enact social change through participation in ludic events (theatre). At its core, the v-effekt relies on a revelation that the audience-player

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[123] Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (MIT Press, 2011), 93.
[124] Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology Primer," Evolutionary psychology primer by Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, 1997, https://www.cep.ucsb.edu/primer.html.
[125] William James, "Principles of Psychology," Classics in the History of Psychology -- James (1890) Chapter 24, accessed May 31, 2022, https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/prin24.htm.

has conceptualized a magic circle using an incorrect implicit social contract for that particular performance/game and it is the phenomenon of habitual oversight that potentiates such fortuitous errors.

Arguably, the implicit rules for the conventional theatre of the twenty-first century in America have not changed much from the conventional theatre Brecht railed against in his time. In his treatise "On the Theatre" Brecht argues for the need to cast off the "existing theatre" and embrace a new theatre. Central to Brecht's argument was that the existing theatre was failing to *engage* its audience *because it was not fun.* "A theatre which fails to engage with its audience is nonsensical" he wrote. "In these days not one of those well-heated, attractively lit, imposing buildings with their exorbitant running costs, and not one of the performances staged inside of them, offers you any *fun*…there is no *fun* to be had here, no wind to fill anyone's sails."[126] What's more, Brecht argues that this is not only in the writing and the culture of the existing theatre but in the actors' approach to the event. "A man who is not having fun himself," he writes, "cannot expect anyone to have fun watching him." Brecht's references to fun are sprinkled throughout his treatise on theatre; however, the underlying phenomenon he gestures towards with "fun" is the essential thesis providing the spine for nearly all of his theories on theatre and performance. The new theatre, by his reasoning, will challenge the existing conventional theatre because it will be fun. Verfremdungseffekt functions as a practice for achieving this transformation by revealing underlying assumptions that serve as implicit rules for the theatre and in doing so, reconstitute the

[126] Bertolt Brecht et al., *Brecht on Theatre* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 26.

ludic framework of the theatre.

We take up this understanding of conventional theatre despite the possible perception that we are dealing with the obvious. In fact, conventional theatre is taken up *because of* such a perception. It is often within such assumptions that one may locate the procedures that make up the *implicit rules* — or invisible rules — of a game and give rise to the *metagame.* Understanding the assumptions of a culture that aggregate into conventions helps to explain how training or preparing for the event both forms and is formed by convention and how violating convention makes meaning. In examining these assumptions, one may recognize a powerful ideological gravity that is responsible not only for the kind of performances one is likely to encounter on the stage at any given moment, but also for the procedures taken up by theatre makers to prepare for such events.

Game theorist Ian Bogost notes that procedures make up the code or rules marking the boundary of social behavior within a particular system[127] and that these procedures require a medium through which the procedures may be enacted[128]. He notes in instances where humans provide the medium through which procedures are enacted, that the players may willingly ignore or violate procedure, but that this is not in fact "breaking procedure" but rather it is re-inscribing procedure to address a broader frame: re-negotiating the inherently fluid border of the magic circle. However, when the procedural medium is digital, such recoding[129] becomes far less accessible and

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[127] Prof Ian. Bogost, *Persuasive Games - the Expressive Power of Videogames* (Mit Press Ltd, 2010), 2.
[128] Ibid., 9.
[129] Ibid., 14.

therefore the magic circle it inscribes is far more rigid.

This may perhaps offer some insight into the turn against the concept of the magic circle within the digital-dominated game studies field. The game studies community has developed a dominant transcript with the *digital* game as the central object of inquiry, and the resistance to the magic circle could well come from the rigidity of the computer mediated procedures (aka, rules) used to describe the magic circle in such instances. Such rigidity has a disempowering effect on players which, when coupled with the extreme commodification of the play experience opens many avenues for criticism (including the "standard metagame"[130] behaviors that spring up around the game, leading players to want to develop metagames that resist the commodification of their play experience). Theatre studies, on the other hand, deals in game events wherein human beings are almost always a principal medium through which the procedures of the game are enacted. Although not widely taken up as a theoretical concept, the magic circle not only helps to form a conceptual framework for understanding the v-effekt, but it also brings a utility to the study and practice of theatre identical to the utility it provides game studies — and inevitably some of the same criticisms.

The initial gesture of taking up the magic circle concept as an analytical tool for marking the event of theatre acknowledges the significance that theories of play have within both fields and aligning game studies methodologies with theatre phenomena

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[130] A term used by Boluk and Lemieux to describe a particular notion of metagame which derives exclusively from out-game activities ideologically aligned with the formal "magic circle" inscribed game commodity.

both as a means to open new ways to understand theatre, and to establish a broader definition for theatre by locating theatre on a continuum of “pervasive” experiences. Markus Montola’s larp-inspired treatise *Pervasive Games - Theory and Design* develops a familiar concept of the *magic circle* as an *implicit* contract between players that defines clear boundaries of time, space, and social rules marking the division between the provisional reality of the in-game world and the ordinary reality of the out-game world.

Montola identifies the *classical game* as the model for this implicit contract and notes that the terms of the implicit game contract began to blur as the era of classical games came to an end in the 1960s. The blurring of the *magic circle* marking the occurrence of a game result in merging or overlapping of provisional and ordinary reality which gives rise to a slew of alternative game experiences (many of which might just as easily be considered alternative or avant-garde theatre experiences) known collectively as *pervasive games* for their tendency to spread across traditionally rigid rules governing the temporal, spatial, and social boundaries of the event. Montola locates non-traditional game experiences in relation to the commonly understood temporal, spatial, and social rules of the *classic game* (see Figure 12).

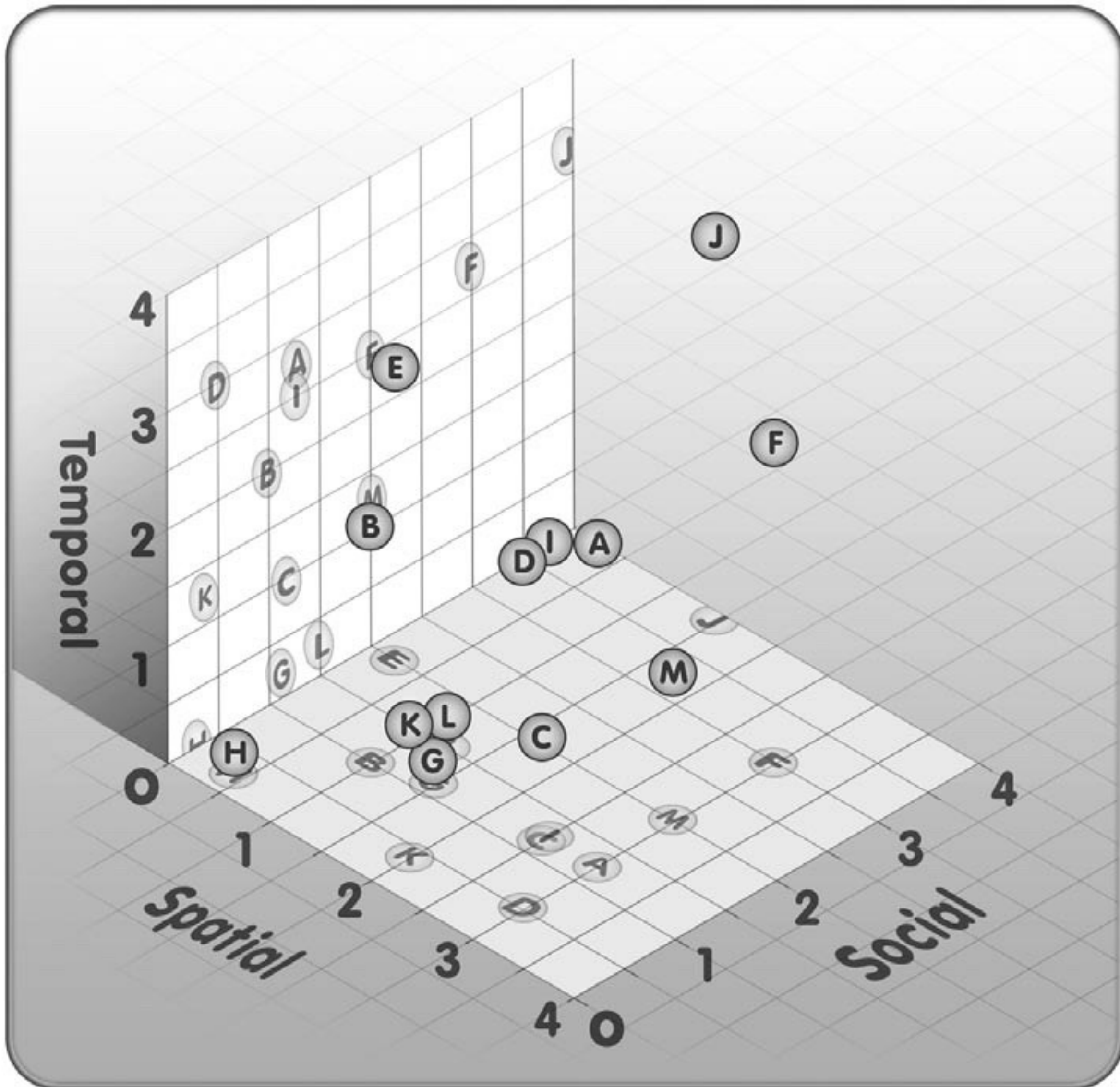


Figure 12: From *Pervasive Games*[131].

Understanding theatre as a genre of game, where Montola locates the *classic game* as the zero-point in his schema, this dissertation substitutes c*lassical games* with *conventional theatre* as the zero-point in a *pervasive theatre matrix.* I depart from

[131] Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern, *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (Elsevier/ Morgan Kaufmann, 2009).

Montola, however, in that I do not fix *this zero-point* to a specific history but acknowledge that while a particular tradition of theatre may situate the contract of conventional theatre within a certain history, conventional theatre is necessarily a situated experience whose implicit contract is a direct performance of the dominant social transcript within its community of players.

The rigor of locating the magic circle in theatre results in the revelation of theatre conventions as the *implicit rules* or *procedures* enacted through the medium of theatre players which includes actors and audience members. As with any implicit game rules, these conventions are situated in the specific time and culture of its players who perform the conventions as symbolic capital. Taking up Bordieux's concept of symbolic capital to consider the event of theatre, the magic circle locates the border of the field in which players must develop material and dispositional fluency in order first to discriminate genre and rules of the game and then to perform their fluency within the game. Players demonstrate the density of their habitus through their virtuosity and/or their cultivated gaze as a form of status-oriented social play. This understanding of the game of theatre necessarily orients theatre as a performance of class dynamics and suggests the inherently ideological nature of the art form. However, the extent to which a particular theatrical event will be perceived by its players as ideological relates to the extent to which the symbolic capital required for a felicitous performance lies outside the dominant transcript of the culture in which it is situated.

Additionally, as the boundaries between the provisional reality of theatre and the ordinary reality of everyday life become blurred some ethical concerns emerge,

including the involvement of pure spectators (those observing the game without the inferred contractual arrangement between players), and bleed between in-game and out-game realities and personas. This blurring also opens a space within which the demarcated event of theatre and the preparation for the event may become conflated.

Critically, examples of pervasive theatre demonstrate player role fluidity. Discrete duties which must be performed by players to uphold the provisional reality of a game are called player roles. In conventional theatre, these roles are consolidated and mostly fixed within the *asymmetrical* player positions of audience and actor. In pervasive theatre, not only might the collation of roles present differently, but the roles may even flow between players within the temporal boundary of the event. The fixity or fluidity of player roles and whether player roles are symmetrical or asymmetrical determine much about the type of play experience created, and its efficacy in the promotion of the experience of fun.

## 2.3 - Asymmetrical, On-Rails, and Narrative Game Structures of Theatre

In game design, symmetry refers to a degree to which the game facilitates similar gameplay between players or groups of players.[132] *Symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* are relativistic terms describing the distribution of player roles within the game, and how those roles provoke differing play experiences. In games that are mostly symmetrical, roles will be distributed evenly between players with little or no

[132] Wendy Despain, *100 Principles of Game Design* (New Riders, 2013), 4.

difference in the designed play experience. Asymmetrical games, on the other hand, will have an obviously uneven distribution of player roles resulting in markedly different experiences between players.

This sense of the word "role" refers to a set of expectations and may be regarded as player "responsibilities," as these roles determine all of the behaviors the player must perform felicitously in order to uphold the provisional reality of the game. A game encodes roles through implicit and explicit operational rules and provides legible models against which players may receive and discern feedback. Most player roles must be performed in order for the game to function as a system, and failure to do so may spoil the game or mark the player as either unskilled (if they are unable to perform the role) or a cheater or "spoilsport" (if they are unwilling to perform the role).

Most games are at least slightly asymmetrical and locate along a continuum between perfect asymmetry and perfect symmetry. The degree of symmetry between games varies to such an extent that a relativistic comparison between games yields a meaningful degree of difference between game types. For example, while it is in most regards a symmetrical game, the game of chess is asynchronous — meaning players do not make moves simultaneously but rather by exchanging turns. Turn based games like chess are necessarily asymmetrical since one player must make the first move. Nevertheless, although this does create a slight differential between the play experience of both players, virtually every other rule in chess applies to both players equally. The preponderance of roles collate equally among each player of chess, therefore the game locates towards the symmetrical end of the continuum.

Many board games locate with chess on the symmetry continuum. For example, the collation of roles in a board game like *Risk* is almost entirely symmetrical. That is to say all players are assigned the same roles with the only "in-game" differences having to do with starting position on the game map and perhaps order of play. The spatial asymmetry of the game board and random player starting position introduce a nugatory difference in symmetry between it and games like chess that have spatially symmetrical play spaces. Other minor role differentials may crop up either as a sanctioned explicit rule or as a house rule in some board games that are otherwise considered to have symmetrical collations. The rules of *Monopoly*, for example, assign one player the role of "Banker." While the Banker has discrete player responsibilities, and these responsibilities will slightly alter the play experience of that player, the Banker has no impact on the explicit choice structure of play — there is not anything a Banker could do to effect gameplay within the context of the rules. They cannot withhold funds or grant extra loans to players, for example. The Banker simply manages the play currency to reduce play complexity and the possibility for cheating. Generally speaking, while games like these contain asymmetrical aspects, they are still principally symmetrical. In terms of rules impacting player responsibilities, the roles are collated into one uniform "player" type — or group — in which all participants assume similar roles.

A game like soccer demonstrates a more complex symmetry profile, with play registering as symmetrical between contesting play groups (between teams), but asymmetrical between players within discrete groups (within a team). In this instance,

the play behaviors generated by rules that stipulate two or more groups of players engaged in a dialectic contest within the magic circle of a game, must be considered alongside the play experience of individual players *within* such groups to determine the symmetry of the game.   For example, a player in the goalie position who changes teams but retains their position will not necessarily experience a difference in rule dynamics and game play (team culture and player personalities not withstanding). However, a player repositioning *within* a team from goalie to forward will have a very different play experience.

Although among the most symmetrical of games, even the ancient[133] and former Olympic[134] game of tug of war contains some asymmetry within the team structure. The official rules of tug of war, as articulated in the Tug of War International Federation rules book, specify that among the eight “pullers” on each team, one puller is designated the “anchor.”  The anchor takes up the position at the end of the rope and is required to grip the rope in a manner different from the rest of the pullers by wrapping the rope over their shoulder.  Despite this slight asymmetry *within* each of the play groups, role collation within the teams remains relatively symmetrical, mostly resisting the need for player specialization.  Furthermore, the rules of tug of war — and certainly a competitive game of tug of war — relies on balance and symmetry *between* engaged groups of players.

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[133] According to TWIF, evidence can be found showing that tug of war has been played for thousands of years within many different cultures, including ancient Egypt, Burma, India, Borneo, Japan, Korea, Hawaii and South America.

[134] Tug of war was an Olympic Game between 1900 - 1920.

The New Games Movement, which was inaugurated in 1966 during a public anti-Vietnam War event called World War IV, included the first major appearance of the iconic Earth Ball in a game that leveraged fluid asymmetry between teams not only as a game mechanic but as a ludic tool for challenging normative culture. Commissioned by the War Resisters League of San Francisco State, and designed by Stewart Brand[135], World War IV set out to create an experiential "convergence of people and play" that generated an embodied understanding of systems of violence and repression and — more to the point — demonstrated ludic systems for recoding dominant social transcripts. The New Games claim started as nothing less than a revolution of the mind — a disconnection from the Debordian Spectacle. George Leonard later observed that he "was struck by the happy abandon on the faces" of a valley full of players at the First New Games Tournament that contrasted with "bodies slumped before TV sets."[136]

World War IV featured a game which involved the now legendary six-foot canvas ball known as an Earth Ball. Everyone at the event was invited to participate in the Earth Ball game to play fully embodied combat. "There are two types of people in the world," Brand declared to the players, "those who want to push the Earth over the row of flags at that end of the field, and those who want to push it over the fence at the other end."[137] Brand resisted assigning players to groups and simply allowed players to identify with whatever group they wished, even allowing players to defect or change

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[135] Andrew Fluegelman, *The New Games Book* (Dolphin Books, 1976), 7-8.
[136] Ibid., 13.
[137] Ibid., 9.

sides at will during gameplay. The preceding melee lasted over an hour before either side scored a single point, and the revelation resulting from the game was that when the ball would get close to one side, players from the winning side would defect to the other side in order to keep the game going. Asymmetry between groups, therefore, was taken up as a means for rebalancing and extending the game of Earth Ball, complicating the conventional “us versus them” ludic structures common in most team contests.

Sport games like soccer or gridiron football, on the other hand, illustrate how fixed asymmetry in a game design generally goes hand in hand with player specialization: the consolidation of decidedly different role collations between players. There are 24 different positions in gridiron football and 11 different positions in soccer, each subject to unique patterns of player roles that are significantly different in skill requirements and play experience. Most players involved in these sports train and practice exclusively for their specialized role. By focusing exclusively on the narrower range of roles afforded by specialization, players train for mastery within their position, facilitating a greater likelihood for virtuosic play. Conversely, within games that allow for more fluid exchange between roles, player specialization adds to the “replayability” of the game by offering intrinsic opportunities for players to move between specializations in order to generate a novel play experience within a familiar game, but perhaps less opportunity for virtuosic play.

Specialization encourages cooperation with other players when achieving a common goal relies on felicitous performance of skills across multiple player positions.

Cooperative games like the popular board game *Pandemic* utilize asymmetry to add complexity to the gameplay and encourage collaboration by assigning players' game avatars with decidedly different strengths that work optimally when coordinated with other player strengths. Similar to other board games, cooperative tabletop games like *Pandemic* organize players into a single group with asymmetry between players within the group.

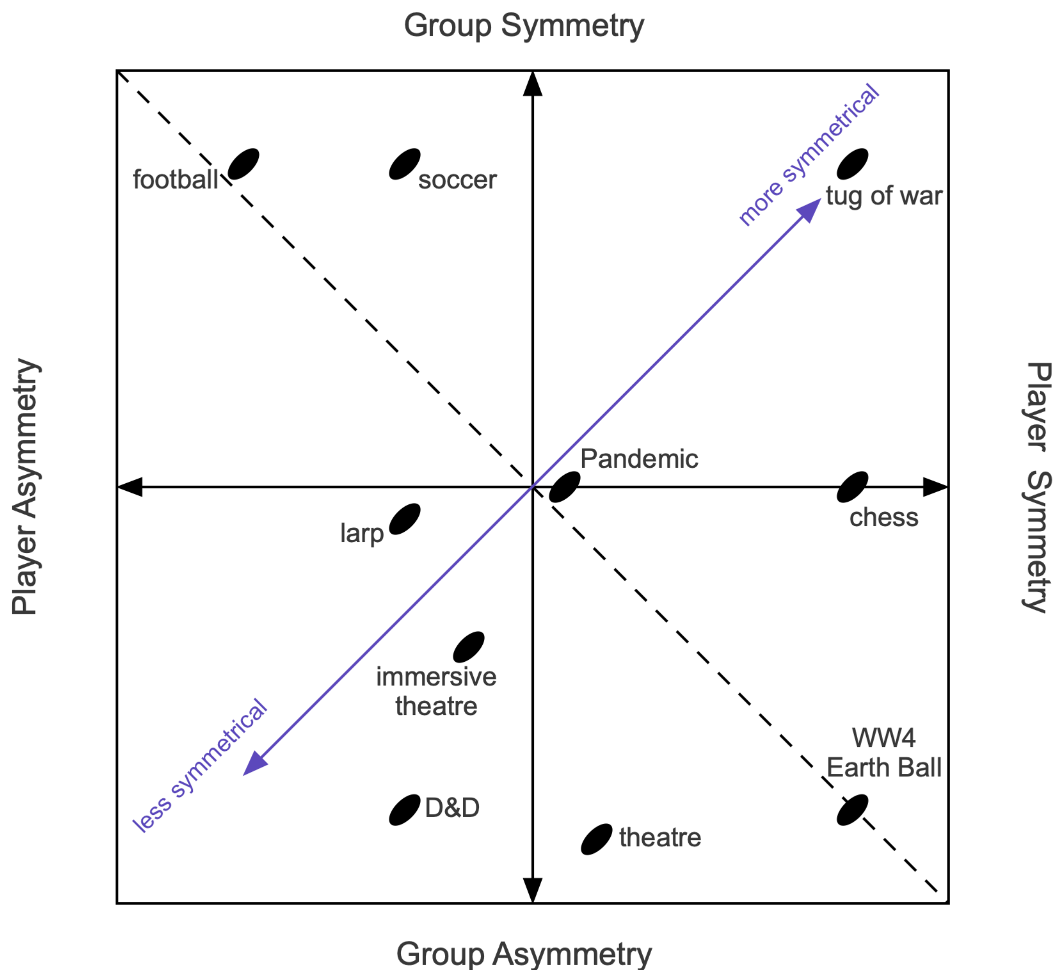


Figure 13: Game Symmetry Index

On the other hand, most tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs) — like the classic RPG Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) — demonstrate asymmetrical collation of roles *between* two very distinct player groups as well as a degree of asymmetry *within* one of the player groups.  Roleplaying games typically collate players into two groups:  the "Players," and the Dungeon Master (DM) or Game Master (GM).  Although it is possible for there to be more than one DM player within a given game session, the typical tabletop roleplaying experience mandates one DM per "campaign.[138]" The remaining players are referred to simply as "Players."  Roles within the Player group have a somewhat asymmetrical distribution.  Much like an actor in the theatre, the role of each Player is to perform one "character" — also less commonly referred to as the "player character."  The character becomes the Player's avatar within the imagined reality of the game.  The player controls the actions taken by the character and will often enact a performance of their character, taking on the persona, vocal characteristics, speech pattern, and even gesticulations of their character (imagine the Player playing a mage wriggling their fingers as they cast a spell, or the Player playing the warrior swinging their imaginary sword as they attack an orc).  While all Player activities are bound by the same rules, each Player's character is unique, and most RPGs encourage Players to form into "parties" of characters with specialized skill sets giving each character unique responsibilities within the party.  For example, in D&D a so called "balanced" party should have a "Tank/Front-line Fighter, Healer/Support, Explorer/Investigator,

[138] A tabletop roleplaying game is often played over the course of several game "sessions" which taken as a whole, constitute a "campaign."  Campaigns may be open-ended or may have clear end-goals.

and a Magic-User/Glass Cannon."[139] Like the players specialization in *Pandemic*, this allows the Players to leverage diversified character strengths to overcome more complex and diverse in-game challenges, and it encourages social coordination and cooperative problem solving between players.

The DM has the responsibility for telling the story around the players and for adjudicating the rules (of which there are many). They play all of the "non-player characters" (NPCs). Unlike player characters, NPCs are necessarily less "rendered" as one player (the DM) has a responsibility for performing dozens or even hundreds of NPCs as part of the campaign. Because the responsibilities of the DM are categorically different from the Players, the DM and Players may be regarded as two separate groups of players. Just as in soccer or football, gameplay depends on — and cannot occur without — the dialectic exchange between two discreet teams or groups of players, RPGs require the dialectic exchange between the Player group and the Dungeon Master group. D&D must be played with at least one "Player" and one DM, and there must be an exchange between these two groups for the game to actualize. Without one or the other group players may gather for training or practice but the event of the game simply cannot occur. The same is true for any game oriented around a dialectic exchange between discrete player groups.

Like tabletop RPGs, most modes of theatre require discrete player groups with two (or more) very divergent play experiences based on significantly different collation of roles between the player groups. As Jerzy Grotowski forcefully argued in *Towards a*

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[139] Logan Hanley, "Creating a Balanced Party for D&D 5E," The D&D Coalition (The D&D Coalition, May 15, 2020), https://www.thedndcoalition.com/dnd-blog/creating-a-balanced-party.

*Poor Theatre*, theatre can exist without costumes, sets, music, lighting effects, and even without text or a script, but it cannot exist without dialectic exchange between actor and spectator. Thus, Grotowski wrote, theatre can be defined as "what takes place between the spectator and the actor."[140]

Within the spectator group — or audience — play roles are distributed symmetrically, with all audience players subject to more or less identical rules. The most obvious asymmetry that exists within the audience group in the conventional theatre has to do with the physical location of each audience member, and the degree to which an audience-player's position within the House impacts their experience of the play. While not as stratified as theatre from other times and cultures — such as the Elizabethan with its groundlings or the pit and gallery of Jacksonian era American theatre — the physical architecture and ticketing pay structure of contemporary American theatres often serve as de-facto status markers sorting audience players into regions of the House according to proximity to the stage and "sight-lines." Nevertheless, while in some instances audience position can have a significant impact on player experience, virtually every other expectation of the theatre applies equally to audience-players, resulting in a symmetrical play experience *within* the audience group.

Although within a given performance, all actors in a cast tend to respond to the same expectations mandated by conventions and by the stylistic "language" of a particular play, individual actors specialize by playing discrete characters (with,

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[140] Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1969), 15.

perhaps, the exception of entities like a Greek chorus). Similar to tabletop RPGs, cooperative boardgames like *Pandemic*, sports like soccer and football, and other games with intra-group asymmetry, player specialization in theatre allows for actors to limit and focus their training regime based on their position (role) within the cast. This specialization allows actor-players to achieve virtuosic performances, which include — but are certainly not limited to — memorizing significant amounts of text and stage movement. As with other games featuring team specialization, asymmetry and specialization within a cast fosters community and esprit de corps through interdependence between cast members, and a need to cooperate and collaborate to achieve the shared goal: a successful performance.

Taken as a whole, intra-group gameplay in theatre would be located slightly towards the symmetrical end of the continuum. Strong symmetry among audience players, and weak asymmetry between actors (beholden to the same conventions or "language" of theatre despite character specialization) would suggest that within the two player groups, the play experience is more similar than dissimilar. However, like tabletop RPGs, gameplay *between* player groups in conventional theatre is significantly asymmetrical. The asymmetry in play between actors and audience is so extreme that the perceived difference between actor and audience experience likely accounts for much of the scholarly resistance to categorizing theatre as a game.

The contemporary audience — as we have come to understand it in the twenty-first century — is, in fact, a *convention* of conventional theatre. "What we're dealing with today when we think of conventions is not only the specific practices of history,

the ways of seeing and knowing that accrue to this time, that place, in actual living relationships, but the reification of a major practice of history"[141] writes theatre scholar Herbert Blau, who then notes that "history is audience, and the audience, history."[142] When Blau suggests that "we pretty much proceed in the theatre as if there were such an entity as a public,"[143] calling into question the very existence of the audience as an entity, he points to the notion that the audience exists as an idea that has been taken up as a matter of course, or tradition. This argument suggests that the *audience* is a role to be played, or rather a *collation of roles and responsibilities* — mostly relating to observation and interpretation — embodied in a particular type of theatre player. Responsibility mandates a relationship between the entity which holds responsibility and a thing to which the entity owes a duty. In the case of theatre players, both groups — actors and audience — are articulated by roles responsible for the playing or *making* of theatre, and maintaining the provisional reality circumscribed by the magic circle of the game.

Theatre players maintain the perception of difference or *distance* between the "theatre maker" as an actor or creative with agency and the exclusively receptive audience as an artifact of the implicit rules of conventional theatre. Nevertheless, both *actor* and *audience* perform roles required to make theatre.

It is difficult to proceed in an analysis of player asymmetry in theatre without first addressing the potentially controversial notion of *agency* as it forms a critical pivot

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[141] Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 3.
[142] Ibid., 16.
[143] Ibid., 4.

around which different ideas of participation have formed. In the context of a game, "participation" equates to *play,* which accounts — to some extent — for the misperception that audience members do not play or are not players. Setting aside the notion that agency may be a hegemonic spectacle, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Ranciére offers a critique which effectively parses the perceived *problem* of agency as it applies to participation in the theatre. He cites what he calls the "paradox of the spectator"[144] as the source of a dire diagnosis that arises from within the field of theatre, about the theatre. This paradox, Ranciére suggests, comes from a presupposition that "there is no theatre without a spectator," but that "being a spectator is a bad thing"[145] which suggests that theatre itself is a bad thing (as Plato suggested[146]) and ought to be done away with altogether, or that we need a *new theatre;* a *different theatre* — that we should find a *new term* for "what is produced on the stage: drama. Drama means action," Ranciére mildly satirizes, "theatre is the place where an action is taken to its conclusion by bodies in motion in front of living bodies that are to be mobilized."

Ranciére implicates Brecht and Artaud as the two champions of the theatre who take up the two most iconic (and quite different) approaches to "mobilizing" bodies. Brecht's approach, he argues, attempts to shake the spectator out of their empathy induced stupor, and rouse them from the enthralling hypnotism of the *spectacle*, and thus "exchange the position of passive spectator for that of scientific investigator or

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[144] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Verso, 2011), 6.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to ModernisM* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 193.

experimenter."[147] By contrast, Artaud, Ranciére reasons, proclaims the *distance* between actor and spectator to be the root of the problem and thus a thing to be abolished. The spectator must be "drawn into the magic circle of theatrical action where she will exchange the privilege of rational observer for that of the being in possession of all her vital energies."[148] Brecht's *Epic Theatre* and Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* capture different responses to a notion that "theatre accuses itself of rendering spectators passive [and] it consequently assigns itself the mission of reversing its effects and expiating its sins by restoring to spectators ownership of their consciousness and their activity." Designing for audience *agency*, in this formulation, has to do with the emancipation of the subjugated spectator through the restoration of their awareness and activity.

The problem with this formulation is that it situates the spectator in a position of ignorance — in a position of needing to be *fixed* or made better by the master theatre creator, the game designer who occupies a privileged position of cultural and intellectual superiority over the spectator. These formulations cleave to conventional, hegemonic ideas situating the player actions of *observation and interpretation* as purely receptive and make rigid a hierarchy of cultural status in which the spectator is trapped. True emancipation, Ranciére argues,

> begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and

[147] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Verso, 2011), 7.
[148] Ibid.

subjection.[149]

Ranciére goes on to suggest that the spectator practices their *agency* by maintaining a critical distance between themselves and that which they observe — that the maintenance of distance equates to participation by virtue of the fact that it constitutes the roles and responsibilities the audience-player must perform felicitously to uphold their responsibility to the provisional reality of the game. Ranciére's argument casts the players according to their *roles* and gives equal footing to those roles, and while Ranciére's notion of *agency* requires the maintenance of *distance,* it is a *critical* distance meant to challenge the cultural authority implicit to particular alternative modes of theatre as a resistance to conventional theatre. This notion of agency extends to all players of the theatre, not just the spectators, and is compatible with — but different from — what I term the *roles of agency*.

*Roles of agency* refer to specific functions relative to the representational system of the play. To be precise, *roles of agency* are defined here as those player duties which contain a mandate to perform *explicit actions* within the provisional reality of the play. Although the actor will memorize movement patterns through blocking and choreography to limit non-relevant movements, the execution of this movement is not automated and requires their explicit interaction with the conditions of the provisional reality as they exist at that particular moment. This understanding of agency coincides with an understanding of theatre as a system of interaction in which the human body serve as both the medium for, and executive of, interaction.

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[149] Ibid., 13.

Salen and Zimmerman write that the most basic unit of every explicitly interactive system is the "action>outcome unit," or the action-to-outcome relationship, in which a players's explicit action results in an *outcome* within the system. While the roles of *observation* and *interpretation* are active roles which may inform or influence explicit actions, they are not themselves explicitly active. They do not directly result in an outcome within the system, because they produce homeostatic behaviors which do not transform the environment of the game.

Whether *literal* distance between actor and audience should be abolished or maintained ought not to be a question of ethics. Provided Ranciére's *critical* distance is maintained, then whether or not to abolish *literal* distance becomes a question of aesthetics rather than of emancipation or subjugation. To suggest that theatre ought to do one or the other is to impose an ideology over the bodies of the players into which the roles of agency may collate as aesthetic material. There is nothing inherently wrong or unethical about the way that these roles are collated in conventional theatre, however, if the material is left unexamined then the dominant ideological framework will be the default for a particular production. This does not make for "bad" or even unpolitical theatre, it simply positions the *players* as a conventional or "neutral" aesthetic choice, with the audience performing very few roles of agency compared to the actor.

The unquestioned ubiquity of the audience/actor role assignments in conventional theatre coupled with a rhetorical understanding which equates *activity* with *work* accounts for a perception that the actor carries the *burden* of agency. Actor-player

specialization requires them to memorize and recite text, develop and portray characters, training body mind and voice to achieve a virtuosity resulting from hours of *work or effort*. Audience roles — because they do not frequently manifest explicit actions — are regarded as effortless; a leisure activity. Fun. Or, if not fun, then at least pleasurable. As evident in the Los Angeles 99-Seat theatre conflict, there is a perception that actors *work* and audience *play*, and the entire industry supports this convention. The asymmetrical collation of the roles of agency creates the impression of an unequal distribution of labor related to the act of creating theatre which is rectified through an exchange of currency.

Alternative modes of theatre or theatre-adjacent events such as immersive theatre and Nordic larp demonstrate a reduction of asymmetry between groups of players by leveling the distribution of the roles of agency. In fact, one of the principal differences between conventional theatre and a larp (live action role play) rises out of a flattening of the differential between actor and spectator player groups. Larps seek to eliminate the distinction between actor and spectator, essentially shifting the core dialectic gameplay exchange to the intra-play between players in a single group. Juhana Pettersson and Mike Pohjola's 2004 larp *Luminescence* radically flattened asymmetry, making specialization arbitrary by focusing on the ludic structures of the game and de-emphasizing the narrative structure. Not only did this eliminate the inherent asymmetry of character construction, but it also placed all players on equal footing within a clearly defined set of "rules" particular to that game. The players' collective complicity took on greater significance than the need to construct individual alter-egos and perform a

character. Indeed, by the end of the performance, most players — who were "costumed" only in their undergarments, were uniformly covered with a thick dusting of flour — a visual display of the symmetrical gameplay within a singular group of *player*.

Although larps succeed to varying degrees at the erasure of distance between player groups, there often remains a subtle — or at times not so subtle — differentiation between the players who *designed* the larp, and those *invited* to play the larp. Martin Ericsson's iconic 2002 Nordic larp production of *Hamlet* in Stockholm cast actor-players in the key roles from the familiar Shakespeare play. These players required a different degree of preparation, character development, and even scripting, that other players *invited* to play the larp did not. Larps with this degree of asymmetry constitute distinctly different player role collations not unlike those of conventional theatre. Understanding that events like larps and theatre exist on a smooth continuum between conventional and pervasive, it might be accurate to consider larps like *Hamlet* more akin to the recently popular mode of theatre known as immersive theatre.

Breakout pervasive theatre productions like Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (SNM) have stoked curiosity and scholarly writing around a perceived "new" genre of so called "immersive theatre." A textless, dance-theatre adaptation of Shakespeare's Macbeth set in a 1930s noir milieu; *Sleep No More* was the undisputed icon of immersive theatre during the early twenty-first century. The play is performed in an enclosed space lacking the formal architectural boundaries that typically separate performer from audience in the theatre and audience members move and interact (mostly) freely within a meticulously designed performance space.

In 2003, Punchdrunk premiered SNM in London at the dilapidated Victorian Beaufoy Building, which had a prior life as a school for boys. After the successful London run, Punchdrunk partnered with American Repertory Theatre in Boston for a limited 2009 staging before resetting for a 2011 New York premiere in a warehouse space where it continues to run as of the writing of this dissertation.[150] Punchdrunk, along with newly partnered collaborators Emursive Productions, converted the sprawling six-story warehouse "into the fictional hotel known as the McKittrick, referencing Hitchcock's Vertigo."[151] The Sleep No More creative team designed and maintain the McKittrick with scrupulous detail to facilitate a performance space that allowed dancers to move through and among audience-participants, and to provide a rich environment of details, clues, and atmosphere for audience members to discover as they interacted with the space. Most significantly, although SNM deployed "stewards" in black masks to perform as a kind of referee/guide that would occasionally close off sections of the building to traffic, the entire space was available to both the audience and the performers.

While SNM may have reached a level of popularity, scale, and sophistication that afford it few — if any — contemporaries, the underlying performance modality of SNM is not particularly innovative within the scope of history. The phenomena that undergird immersive theatre — as it is currently articulated in discourse — trace back centuries, showing up in medieval passion plays, commedia street performances, carnival, and

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[150] Julia M. Ritter, "Fandom and Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*: Audience Ethnography of Immersive Dance," *TDR/The Drama Review* 61, no. 4 (2017): pp. 59-77, https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00692.
[151] Ibid., 62.

many other performance traditions. While performance scholar/practitioners like Richard Schechner and Allan Kaprow might situate the origins of this particular mode of pervasive theatre with the Cubists[152] or Bauhaus[153] movements, the most impactful example of immersive theatre in recent American culture came from Schechner himself and his work with the Performance Group in the late 1960s and 70s, particularly with productions like *Dionysus in 69* in which audiences were surrounded by the action, frequently confronted by actors, and brought into the performance. Or like Schechner's production of Brecht's *Mother Courage* in which the actors served supper to the audience following the death of the character Swiss Cheese. Although nearly half a century separates Schechner's work in environmental theatre from the recent immersive theatre movement, it is clear that the emergence in the twenty-first century of immersive theatre groups like Punchdrunk and artists like Felix Barrett and Cesar Alvarez fill a performance space articulated by mid-late twentieth century practitioners like Schechner and Allan Kaprow.

Schechner began his treatise on immersive theatre (AKA "environmental theatre") by suggesting that theatre articulates along a spectrum of performance events with "Pure, art" at one end of the spectrum and "impure, life" at the other. He locates "orthodox theatre" — which he classifies as that which is "conventionally theatrical" — at the "pure, art" extreme of the spectrum, and at the other end he places public events and demonstrations (see Figure 14).

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[152] Allan Kaprow and Jean-Jacques Lebel, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York, NY: Abrams, 1968).
[153] Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater: An Expanded New Edition Including 'Six Axioms for Environmental Theater'*(New York, NY: Applause, 1994).

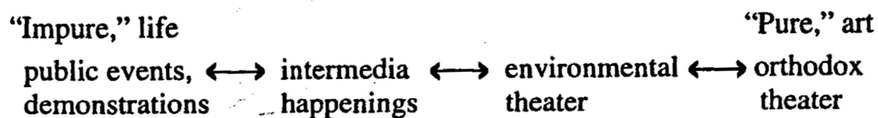


Figure 14. From *Environmental Theatre*[154]

Nested between these extremes, Schechner identifies two other categories of performance event: "environmental theatre" and "intermedia happenings." While acknowledging that there is a utility to organizing events into categories, the spectrum actually represents "a continuum of theatrical events [that] blends one form into the next."[155]

Like the pervasive theatre matrix, and individual Viewpoints, one might consider locating the so-called orthodox theatre at the "zero point" of the spectrum, with an understanding that as performance events move away from the zero point, they take on more aspects of a collective action that challenges the dominant transcript. "The theatrical event is a complex social interweave, a network of expectations and obligations"[156] and when events adjust or defy the expectations and obligations for participant behaviors, this generates either a potential for social contention or innovation — sometimes both.

Schechner locates "environmental theatre" — a term he used to describe what most scholars would today identify as immersive theatre, or at least a very recent

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[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid., ix.
[156] Ibid., xx.

antecedent of immersive theatre — distal to orthodox theatre along his continuum of theatrical experiences. As such, immersive theatre might be regarded as "unorthodox" or pervasive. In *Environmental Theater,* Schechner proposes six axioms for producing and analyzing environmental theatre. Schechner's axioms are reiterated in more recent rulesets for immersive theatre such as Josephine Machon's five aspects of Immersive theatre, Andrew Eglinton's observation of the developmental stages of immersive theatre, and J.M. Ritter's concept of "insider dynamics" to describe attitudes and tactics taken up by participatory audiences of immersive theatre.

It is significant that "theatre" is not abandoned in the term of "immersive theatre." The latter has not been held up as a form of larp (although certainly an argument could be made that larp is immersive theatre or vice versa), or as a "happening" or as a game, but as a form of *theatre*. As such, Immersive Theatre claims its place within the theatre polity. By conjoining the immersive event to theatre, differences in rules (expectations and obligations) of time, space, and social behavior between the performed immersive theatre event and a conventional theatre event constitute a collective movement within the polity of theatre that asserts social pressure within the polity to shift or adjust its "zero."

Scholars studying immersive theatre in the early twenty-first century have argued that the movement owes much of its success to an underlying dissatisfaction with conventional theatre and the perceived constraints that conventional theatre places on its audience. The term "immersive" is juxtaposed with "theatre" in a manner that highlights a departure from the conventional contract of theatre, which is understood

as failing to offer an engaging experience to the audience. The notion of "immersive" suggests a critique of conventional theatre by valorizing "cultural forms that offer the chance to do more than 'just' observe or study."[157] Writing for *International Theatre Journal* about the origins of the recent immersive theatre movement, Andrew Eglinton argued that the motivating energy for the movement "came from a sense of dissatisfaction with the dominant proscenium configuration of theatre, characterized by the spatial separation of audience and performer, physical stasis in the auditorium, and a sensory experience of theatre largely confined to sight and sound."[158]

Like the audience engagement movement that took root in American regional theatres during the same timeframe, the immersive theatre movement identified a problem with the conventional mode of theatre rooted in the inherent asymmetry between player groups and centered on a perceived lack of the audience agency or sovereignty resulting from this asymmetry. And like audience engagement programs, immersive theatre proposes to solve the problem that it identifies by adjusting player roles with the intention of flattening the agency differential between player groups.

While it is likely that both movements responded to changes and pressures in the broader social frame such as the emergence of the attention economy and the shrinking of the primary entertainment frame (as discussed in Chapter 1), it is also possible that the audience engagement movement may have been responding — in

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[157] James Frieze, "Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance," *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, 2016, pp. 1-25, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-36604-7_1.

[158] Andrew Eglinton, "Reflections on a Decade of Punchdrunk Theatre." *TheatreForum - International Theatre Journal*, 2010, pp. 46-55. *ProQuest*, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reflections-on-decade-punchdrunk-theatre/docview/821048697/se-2?accountid=14505.

part — to the success of the immersive theatre movement. Arguably, the popularity of productions like *Sleep No More* may have resulted in a subtle shift within what Schechner refers to as the "network of expectations and obligations" that constitutes the zero point of the theatre polity. It is reasonable to assume that a significant portion of the immersive theatre audience also participates as an audience in conventional theatre events, and that an audience that practices roles of agency in immersive theatre might be primed to expect — or even desire — to retain some aspects of such obligations when they attend conventional theatre. Indeed, Josephine Machon - whose scholarly work on immersive theatre is often cited — echoes Schechner, arguing that what makes immersive theatre a powerful movement rises from its departure from the expected norms of conventional theatre. "'With immersive theatre," she writes, "the audience is removed from the 'usual' set of rules and conventions expected from 'traditional' theatrical performances."[159] In the second of Schechner's six axioms for environmental theatre, he notes that "all the space is used for the performance" implying that the formal divide between stage and house is dissolved allowing for audience and performer to occupy the same space. This facilitates "the exploration of the total space by both groups," and engenders a player dynamic in which "no one is 'just watching.'" [160] Josephine Machon notes that such detailed attention to the performance space is endemic to immersive theatre because it "must establish a unique 'in its own world'-ness, which is created through a deft handling of

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[159] Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 26.
[160] Schechner, xxix.

space, scenography, sound, duration and action."[161] Both Schechner and Machon point out that the key difference between conventional theatre and immersive (environmental) theatre is that while both typically maintain a clear spatial boundary that forms a magic circle around the entire event — marked by the stage/house complex for conventional theatre, and by marked out and contained space such as the SNM's McKittrick — immersive theatre dissolves the internal boundaries that mark formal separations between performer and audience.

By analyzing an immersive theatre event along the three indices of the pervasive theatre matrix (PTX) (see Figure 15), it becomes evident how immersive theatre deviates from the floating zero of conventional theatre (where an audience would encounter rules in accordance with expectations), and that it is within those deviations that immersive theatre makers design explicit rules and tactics to adjust for a deficit of cultural capital in their audience-players. Additionally, it is such a difference that articulates how immersive theatre performs as a collective movement within the theatre polity by re-scripting underlying ludic structures of the event. It ought to be noted that while the PTX describes three discrete indices that locate boundaries of time, space, and social behavior, these serve as analytical markers parsing out phenomena that are not discrete and whose "magic circles" flow and blend together. For example, rules of space often overlap with rules of social behavior, such as rules that dictate that an audience *sit* in a space separated from the space in which performers *play*. Similarly,

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[161] Josephine Machon, "On Being Immersed: The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding," in *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

the beginning and end of a performance mark out the temporal boundaries of a game, and they also set forth rules of social behavior instructing players when to arrive at and depart from the designated play space. Nevertheless, the pervasive theatre matrix serves as an effective "jumping off point" for locating meaningful differences and interrogating how such differences both grow from and necessitate explicit rule changes and, also, where the pervasive event makes contentious claims within the polity.

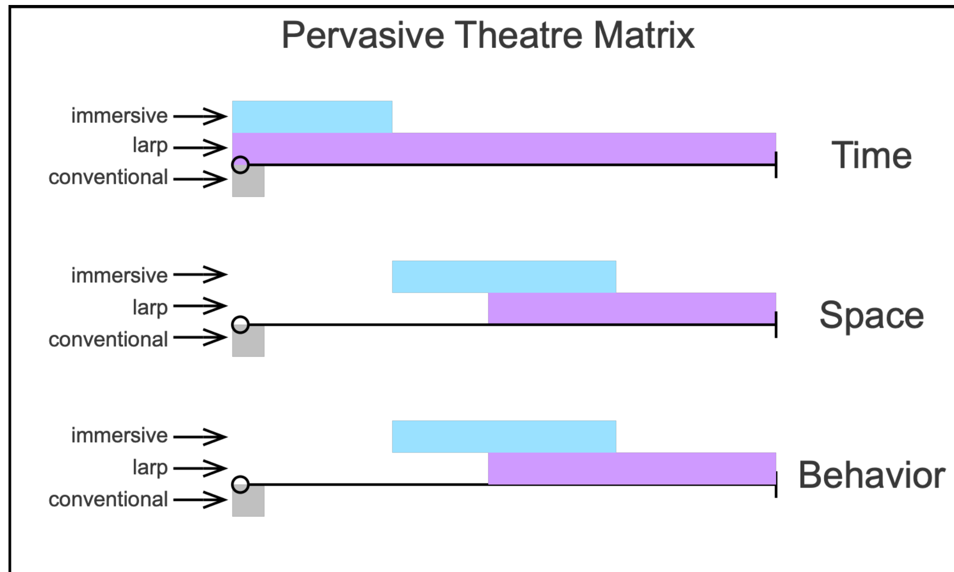


Figure 15: Pervasive Theatre Matrix

Whether for immersive theatre, larp, or conventional theatre, spatial rules are used to signal the boundaries within which the behavioral rules of the event apply, and in all types of events, space is used to reinforce relational rules between player types. In the case of conventional theatre, the space helps to codify existing asymmetry in player obligations between actors and audience through several architectural features. Actors enter through Stage Door, prepare backstage, and then emerge for the performance

onto a typically elevated stage space from which they enact their performance roles. Audience enter through lobby doors, and wait in the lobby until just before the show when they enter the “House” which is a space adjacent to — but separated from — the stage. All of these spatial features and the implicit rules that accompany them reinforce the audience as spectator and the actor as performer. By dissolving the traditional spatial architecture of the theatre, the asymmetrical social rules that the architecture enforces become unmoored, and mutable — potentially flattening and becoming more symmetrical. This leveling of player roles becomes the aesthetic material for immersive theatre, and a site of contention within the theatre polity.

In addition to bringing greater symmetry between player groups, the deconstruction of traditional theatre space may also impact player focus by removing physical cues directing audience attention to specific locations at specific moments. Schechner notes that “single-focus is the trademark of orthodox theatre.” Regardless of where the action takes place on a traditional proscenium-framed stage, the audience typically views the action with the same coordinate facing. Theatre directors use tools like Gestalt theory, tableau, and stage composition to push or pull audience focus towards important action on stage. When an actor is said to be “upstaging” another actor, for example, this is a theatre idiom that suggests the actor is pulling focus from another actor at an inappropriate moment. The saying derives from the compositional tactic utilizing the upstage position which tends to be more efficacious at pulling audience focus than the downstage position. It is also typical for the theater director to conduct audience focus using the full suite of design tools like lighting, sound, and

costume and scenic elements.

The constraint of audience focus in conventional theatre responds to a core game mechanic — the acquisition and successful interpretation of narrative capital — and results in an "On-Rails" play experience for all players of conventional theatre. Like theatre, all games may be positioned on a continuum that articulates player experience based on the type of attentional focus it facilitates. Games that sequence play experiences to promote single focus locate at the "On-Rails" end of the continuum while games that promote what Schechner calls "multi-focus[162]" events locate at the "Sandbox" end of the continuum.

Every game system produces a network of experience nodes, connected by edges of causation. Experience nodes form around instances of agency for players, or at least points at which a player takes an action or acquires a game token. Whether gameplay facilitates an "on rail" or "sandbox"experience responds in part to the degree to which experience nodes branch as the game progresses. Mapping the nodes of a game on the On-Rails end of the continuum produces a diagram that resembles a pathway with limited "forks in the road." Play though an on-rails experience will tend to progress from one node to the next on a unidirectional trajectory as if mimicking or in response to the arrow of time. Experience nodes may not be revisited as the game relies on a progression of the environment of play conditions. For example, in chess once a player makes a move the play environment will rarely reiterate the exact same conditions. Pieces will be in different locations on the board, or there will be fewer

[162] Schechner, xxxvii.

pieces on the board, constituting a new experience node for the players. Play progresses from one state to the next, and within each state, the play environment produces a finite number of relevant trajectories, until the game arrives as the end state.

Sandbox experiences, on the other hand, connect nodes of experience that allow players to move from node to node without explicit direction, according to player interest or whim. Since all games — including sandbox experiences — are subject to the arrow of time, a sandbox experience will progress in a linear fashion from one experience node to the next, however, it will allow for players to return to past nodes, linger in current nodes, or move between nodes without necessarily adhering to any in-game logic.

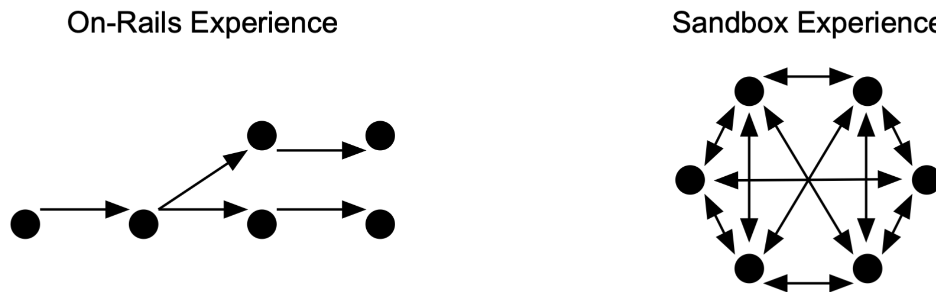


Figure 16: On-Rails v. Sandbox

Much of what makes a game an “On Rails” experience may become accepted as an ubiquitous background feature, like the inevitable progression of side scrolling games like the popular Apple Arcade games *Gibbon: Beyond the Trees* and *Alto’s Odyssey* in which the player controls an avatar in the foreground that affords micro-agency within the unavoidable progression of the environment from the left side to the right side of the screen. The avatars can jump, speed up, or slow down, but they always move to

the right. It does not take long for the player to accept the inevitability of progression, allowing it to drop into the background of their awareness as a convention of that particular game. The player's interest and attention then focuses on the micro choices available within and despite the background progression, and only in those instances when the progression complicates the performance of a micro-action will it seem pertinent to player agency. Furthermore, it becomes irrelevant to assume or even consider that avatar movement would cause the background environment to regress.

Like a side-scroller, in theatre the play experience progresses on-rails. Both the audience and the actors perform actions tightly constrained and focused by conventions. In much the same way that the side scroller progresses the background, the narrative of the play moves forward, progressing the action towards the inevitable conclusion of the event. Actors often create the illusion of character movement that is motivated spontaneously but, typically, actors are bound by strict and rehearsed blocking. Certainly, within their blocking an actor has a degree of freedom to move and respond to novel changes in the environment or novel or whimsical internal motivations, but significant deviation from the scripted and blocked action may disrupt the play of other actors who rely upon precise reiterations of relevant and expected physical and vocal cues or may fail to successfully deliver in-game information to the audience necessary to progress the game.

A narrative structure is monotonic, progressing through narrative time like the side scrolling videogame. In theatre, the essential and progressing in-game information is contained in the narrative structure, which is made up of significant units of narrative

data or “narremes.”  The term “narreme” was originally proposed by Eugene Dorfman[163] as a way of understanding the basic unit of a narrative analogous to the phoneme in phonology.  Roland Barthes also proposed similar fundamental units composing narrative structure, but according to narratologists Alok Baikadi and Rogelio E. Cardona-Rivera, Barthes’ concept conflated two distinct aspects of narratives:  the *fabula* and the *discourse*. [164]

“Everything depends on the fable,” Brecht wrote, “it is the heart of the theatrical production.”[165]  Similar to Brecht’s concept of the fable, the *fabula* represents the story that exists outside or beneath the *telling* of the story, and the *discourse* of a narrative refers to the way in which the story is told.  According to Baikadi and Cardona-Rivera, the fundamental unit of the narrative, the narreme, “operates at the level of the fabula.” Brecht scholar John Rouse suggests that Brecht understand the playwright as the original interpreter of the fable, generating the first *discourse* of the story in the form of a script.  Felicitous performances of subsequent interpreters — such as the director and the actors — will add to the discourse without straying from or obfuscating the fable, and in doing so will communicate the narremes of the fable to the final interpreter in the theatre — the audience.  The audience, in turn, provides feedback on the efficacy of the antecedent interpretations of the playwright, director, and actors.  At its essence an efficacious theatre event will have communicated to the audience a

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[163] Eugene Dorfman, “The Narreme in the Medieval Romance Epic,” 1969, https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442653887.

[164] Alok Baikadi and Rogelio Enrique Cardona-Rivera, “Towards Finding the Fundamental Unit of Narrative: A Proposal for the Narreme.,” 2012.

[165] John Rouse, “Brecht and the Contradictory Actor,” *Theatre Journal* 36, no. 1 (1984): p. 25, https://doi.org/10.2307/3207358.

sequence of connected narreme nodes delivered through the discourse of the actors' play.

The narreme or the individual occurrence of the theatre event is a game node that "encodes the state of the narrative"[166] at a particular moment. A Stanislavsky based approach to theatre identifies discrete narremes as "beats" which are fundamentally equivalent to Brecht's "*Einzelgeschehnis*" or "individual occurrence."[167] Discrete narremes within a narrative mark differences in the state of the narrative, and the edges that connect the nodes instantiate changes that occur within the narrative as the story progresses from one narreme to the next. Brecht insisted that theatre makers should not attempt to "smooth over" the transitions between narremes even if they seemed abrupt or discordant because the disunity between individual occurrences must be considered the dialectic exchange that develops the fable. Similarly, Baikadi and Cortona-Rivera state:

> The narrative structure is made up of connections between narremes. These connections form a graph structure with the narremes as nodes. An edge exists between two nodes, exactly when there is a change along at least one narrative axis.[168]

A graph of narrative structure will resemble the graph of a typical on-rails game, and narremes are the basic game nodes that enable progression in "narrative time." Distinct from narrative time, *world time* denotes "the true total ordering of events" or the clock time of the world in which the narrative occurs. [169] In stories that sequence

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[166] Baikadi and Cordona-Rivera, 45.
[167] Rouse, 298.
[168] Baikadi and Cordona-Rivera, 45.
[169] Ibid.

narrative with scenes jumping back and forth along the progression of world time (i.e., a story with flashbacks) the progression of world time and narrative time will be dis-unified. Nevertheless, narrative time progresses sequentially from node to node — narreme to narreme — as it engages the point-of-view of the audience-player who necessarily encounters the narrative in real time, thus narrative time is bound to the arrow of time.

In conventional theatre, the actors' actions — as they move from narreme to narreme — instantiate the fable through inter-narreme changes along a directed path with nodes that do not "self-loop" or even loop back to previous nodes. This begs the question: at what point does an action constitute a narreme or a game node? And, how fine is the resolution of the narreme? In his dramaturgy, Brecht articulates the individual occurrence as the relevant or meaning-making narrative node. The director's discourse of these nodes — using blocking and interpretation during table work — provides a map for actors who then perform within the framework at a more granular level. As the actor is present during the event, their every movement may invite interpretation — performing as a constituent of a narreme — and the degree to which the actor holds fidelity to the context of the fabula is seen as their ability to remain "in-character." Indeed, Spolin argues that a "talented" actor articulates character choices with a high level of granularity due to their propensity for high-density experiencing of relevant phenomena. During table work and rehearsal, how the director formulates a discourse impacts the degree to which the responsibility for rendering discourse within the beat passes to the actor. For example, a director that offers little discourse —

perhaps only setting a “feel” for a production or giving broad scene objectives — essentially entrusts most of the discourse to the actors. By contrast, a more auteur style or “puppet master” director might articulate the discourse with such specificity that few constituents of the beat remain for the actor to interpret.

In his analysis of Brecht’s approach to dramaturgy, John Rouse suggests that the constituent parts of the individual occurrence — or narreme — must all respond to the historical determinants within which the “contradictions in people and their relationships” develop.[170] How those contradictions are articulated and at what degree of resolution will be determined by where and how change occurs. “The personal and social forces that determine these relationships can change in respect to each other, bringing about an alteration in the situation,” Rouse notes, “this change is marked by the evolving of one beat into another.” While it is certainly possible to regard *any* actor movement on stage (including speech) as a change, in the context of a narreme, the change must be relevant to the historical determinants that govern relationships between characters onstage or between characters onstage and players in the audience. The beat, individual occurrence, or narreme, therefore will contain continuous fluent movements that persistently change the environment. However, these movements may not themselves constitute the entirety of the narreme but perform as constituents that describe a particular status — or state of the narrative — inviting comparisons with other narrative states or nodes. That is to say, although the narreme may constitute the foundational narrative unit, it must still be composed of

[170] Rouse, 298.

smaller informational units performed within the temporal boundary of — and organized by — the narreme.

Players do not usually experience theatre or other narrative games as lurching from one beat to the next. Certainly, there are instances when a scene may come to an abrupt ending, marking a clear transition to a new narreme, but more often narrative play is experienced as a *flow* — a kind of braiding of narremes, flowing from one to the next without marking stark boundaries between occurrences. Indeed, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who popularized the theory flow psychology, characterized *flow* as an experiential aspect of play. "Play is action generating action" Csikszentmihalyi writes, "a unified experience flowing from one moment to the next in contradistinction to our otherwise disjoint 'everyday' experience." [171]

What defines the "moments" in Csikszentmihalyi's play flow? The unity of the experience he describes does not completely negate the demarcations of the nodes within the experience. The more fluent the play experience, the less these demarcations enter into the awareness of the player. The experience of fluency often rises from the player's ability to perform actions relevant to the current game node (or narreme) with minimal friction or interference and depends upon the player's skill and competency to discern and perform the action. When a player lacks the ability to discern the relevant cues and constraints necessary to perform the action within a time frame determined by the rate at which progression between nodes occurs, fluency is interrupted. The line of dialogue is botched, the ball is dropped, the skill is not

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[171] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett, "An Exploratory Model of Play," *American Anthropologist* 73, no. 1 (1971): pp. 45-58, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1971.73.1.02a00040.

performed because the relevant cues directing the action are not detected and therefore not responded to by the player.

Asynchronous turn-based games account for the need to discern complicated cues, allowing players the time to "study the board" as you might expect a chess player to do after their opponent makes an unexpected move. This begs the question of whether players of asynchronous games are engaged in a flowing unity of experience as Csikszentmihalyi describes play, despite the intentional disruption of the moment-to-moment flow of the game. Does a chess player stop playing as the other player makes a move, or do they remain in the flow of play? Asynchronous games played in the "hot seat" or "play by mail" style like *Axis and Allies 1942 Online* or *Civ VI*, embrace the interruption of flow by allowing players to return to "ordinary life" for hours or days between turns. However, in asynchronous games played as *live action* — in which all players are present for each player's turn — it is possible that the perception of *future* agency and the process of *discernment* of relevant cues hold enough interest and sense of agency to sustain a player's perception of play, even when it is not their 'turn.' A player's *observation* of the other player making a move — even if it does not perform as an explicit action within the game — is still experienced as game play, provided the player remains engaged and interested.[172] During off-turn play, players

[172] Attentional Stock and Flow in gameplay: Turn-based games allow time for the inactive player to read the board and the actions of other players. Presumably, there are relevant cues present during this time, and it may be that the order in which these cues are taken up is less important than the fact that they are taken up and held in attention together. Off-turn play relies heavily on deductive reasoning, with the inactive player deducing an optimal move based on discernment of cues. Often those cues exist side-by-side in the environment of the game, and the order in which they may be perceived is not particularly scripted or determined by intentional design. Between "moves" there is an attentional space-of-possibility within which the attention of the player is free to take in the game environment with relatively little constraint.

not only receive feedback from their previous actions by observing how the other player's move relates to an earlier action, but they begin to do the work necessary to execute a skillful move of their own. The process of discerning relevant cues is inherent to the performance of a skill, as are pre-visualizing — or planning — the performance of the skill. Therefore, the fluidity of play in a turn-based game persists to the extent that the experiential hand-off between performing, and observing, and planning allows for a continuity of ludic attention and a perception of interactivity.

Although, theatre is a synchronous experience — with all players performing simultaneously — it nevertheless contains phenomenological aspects similar to asynchronous or turn-based games. The audience-player does not perform scripted acts of agency in a predictable or expected manner other than those actions existing primarily in the conventional frame of the game such as applauding during curtain call. Instead, they make their first "move" simply by showing up to the theatre and taking a seat. After that, the play proceeds largely as though it were a turn-based game in which all the audience players turns are "skipped." The engaged audience player moves from moment to moment in the playful flow — like the chess player during their opponents turn — discerning cues for action, and evaluating the moves of the other players (actors). Occasionally, informal opportunities for limited "turns" present themselves to the engaged and skillful audience members, as Caroline Heim points out in her book *Audience as Performer.* She notes that audiences produce a fairly robust repertoire of behaviors that may be played during a performance, including laughter, crying, applauding, fidgeting, walking out, muttering, and even using personal

technology, although — as discussed in Chapter 1 — it is possible that an audience may perform these "moves" infelicitously. [173]

The most common and obvious among the audience repertoire of behaviors are laughter cues. To consider laughter as an audience "turn" might conjure the image of the studio audience being encouraged by cue-cards reading "laughter" at moments, and although this would be a crude example of the audience "turn" it is at its essence the same dynamic that occurs in more sophisticated narratives that do not require such blunt-force cuing. The "cue cards," in those instances, are embedded (seamlessly one would hope) into the narrative which the skillful actor then interprets with gesture and vocal tone, so that the skillful and engaged audience member may discern these cues and perform accordingly. Heim points out that experienced theatre actors report that they find it unnerving to expect audience laughter and then not get it, or to receive unexpected laughter when it seems inappropriate. Heim argues that laughter marks the most engaging aspects of the dynamic between audience and actor because of its "spontaneity and unpredictability."[174] Nevertheless — although virtually never scripted — the fact that laughter *is* anticipated demonstrates an expectation that the audience will occasionally take a "turn."

It may be that the dynamic of appropriate laughter makes comedy easier to describe as "fun" than it does drama or tragedy. The cued response for audience action in a comedy is laughter. Laughter is loud, expressive, social, and — with some

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[173] Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2016).
[174] Ibid., 30.

exceptions (like scorn) — easily associated with positive affect.  Because it is so perceivable, it is easier to receive immediate feedback that a performance of laughter was skillful, because presumably others would laugh as well.  Not only does this affirm an audience player's self-concept of skill and social capital, it performs for the community, demonstrating skill and value within the cultural frame in which the immediate community has implicitly agreed to share a common gaze (to play together). They "get it," and as in all games, the feedback loop is important to the playability of the game.  That said, the actual dynamic of "getting it" — commonly associated with humor and a joke ("get it?") — as the experiential phenomenon that generates the feeling of fun is not exclusive to comedy or a joke, but it is the basic affective experience for all successful narrative play.

In his book *Affective Narratology,* Patrick Hogan argues that narratives produce salient incidents composed of "minimal units of emotional temporality"[175] that constitute the nucleus of events in the narrative, and that audiences respond to affective changes that the narrative produces in their "mood."  An audience might laugh, therefore, in response to a narrative incident that cues a particular affective levity, and in doing so, demonstrate *comprehension*.  Baikadi and Cardona-Rivera view Hogan's observations as an example of one of "several dimensions that narremes describe,"[176]  and that these dimensions converge to fulfill the inherent tasks' narrative, "including comprehension, generation and inclusion in an interactive system."

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[175] Patrick Colm Hogan, *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2011).
[176] Baikadi and Cordona-Rivera, 45.

Comprehension, they suggest, is "the mental process of creating a graph between the various narremes described in the discourse."[177]

Successful comprehension of narrative results when an audience interacts with a narrative, producing a match between the cultural and symbolic content of the discourse and the audience player's knowledge and skill in decoding the discourse without introducing irrelevant cues from the environment or gating out relevant cues. Although narrative play like theatre depends upon the interaction between audience skill and narrative challenge, it might be difficult for some to reconcile the inherently passive behavior of the conventional theatre audience with the concept of interactivity. Salen and Zimmerman note that while there exists a broad range of theories for what interactivity could mean, most theorists agree that interactions take place within a *representational context*, and that they involve participants making *explicit actions* within that context.[178] Interactivity happens when people "participate as agents within a representational context" according to Brenda Laurel, author of *Computers as Theatre.*[179] The representational context (AKA, representational world, subjective reality, or provisional reality) is an invented or designed system of meaning. Affordance cues, whether symbolic, cultural, or narrative, articulate the ecology of the interactive system, and the intentional design of the representational world lends meaning to actions taken within the context it provides.

The representational systems are at the root of game design, and are also

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[177] Ibid.

[178] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (The MIT Press, 2010), 6:3.

[179] Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Addison-Wesley, 2014), Kindle location 828.

clearly expressed in theatre. In fact, "the cultural conventions of theatre, film, and narrative are the most profound and intimate sources of knowledge about interactive representations,"[180]and when examining the dynamic relationship between audience and actor, theatre provides a perfect example of a representational world as an interactive system. The actor interacts directly with representations of character, language, narrative, and the culture and conventions of theatre to form a sequential visual and linguistic narrative with which an audience engages in synchronous interaction. To an audience member, however, the representational world of the play may be viewed as something that acts upon them, not allowing for *explicit* interaction. The audience is aware of — and witness to — the same representational world as the actor, but unlike the actor, the audience takes little explicit action within the representational world. While audience members are limited to actions that acknowledge and validate the narrative, the action of the narrative provides the audience with "stimulation of imagination and emotion that is created by carefully crafted uncertainty," and, what Brenda Laurel calls, "the satisfaction provided by closure when the action is complete."[181] In theatre, the phenomenon of *closure* that Laurel describes occurs when an audience successfully "reads" the visual and linguistic information performed within the beat or narreme. Bloom argues in *Gaming the Stage* that the audience interacts with the information they encounter during the theatrical event, bringing with them a "gamers mind-set" when they attend the theatre,

[180] Ibid., 841-843.

[181] Ibid., 1735-1736 .

and expect to encounter the revelation of new knowledge. Bloom notes that when the narrative performance of a "play is at all successful, it will encourage audiences both to relish and to seek to overcome their lack of knowledge, whether through interpretive effort or through less deliberate forms of recollection."[182]

Salen and Zimmerman identified two structural approaches to integrating narrative play into games. "Players can experience a game narrative as a crafted story interactively told" or "players can engage with narrative as an emergent experience that happens while the game is played."[183] The former, or *embedded* narrative structure exists prior to the player's interaction within the game system — much like the written rules of a game — and does not change. Embedded narrative is pre-scripted, and in video game design is often used as cut scenes, offering context for ludic interactions in other parts of the game experience. Such embedded game experiences are regarded as interruptions in play — as short film interludes within the broader game framework. Like cinema and literature, the embedded narrative does not stand alone as a game because there is no opportunity within the embedded narrative for true player interaction. Given that embedded narratives do not provide an opportunity for players to intervene with an explicit choice, to take a turn, it is easy to understand why play and game scholars could treat such linear narratives as non-ludic objects. By extension, it is easy to understand how one might lump theatre in with static, linear art

[182] Gina Bloom, *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 68.
[183] Salen and Zimmerman, 26:7

forms like cinema and literature.

However, while the event of theatre *contains* an embedded narrative (a script, for example) the performance of theatre is not an embedded narrative. The event of theatre produces a narrative that requires the dialectic exchange between groups of players and is not static. The script provides a context for interaction between the actors' actions and serves as a rubric against which an audience can evaluate those actions. The stability and durability of the script rubric makes individual interpretations meaningful and, in theatre, the audience-player performs the evaluative function of the game by comprehending actor-player moves. The audience instantiates part of the feedback system that creates "stakes" for the actor-player's moves by evaluating the effects of such moves against the embedded narrative and other social/cultural information. An audience-player's ability to perform this role depends on their ability to make accurate interpretations of the actor-player's moves. The narrative produced during a theatre performance *emerges* from the actor-player and audience-player's interaction with the embedded narrative of the script, and resembles Salen and Zimmerman's second structural narrative form, the *emergent* narrative. In games, the emergent narrative "arises from the set of rules governing interaction with the game system. Unlike embedded narrative, emergent narrative elements arise during play from the complex system of the game, often in unexpected ways."[184] Emergent narrative erupts from the moment-to-moment, node-to-node juxtaposition of unpredictable events, driven by actions taken by players. Indeed, player choice is seen

[184] Ibid.

as the central determinant of emergent play.

Because the narrative in performed theatre is emergent, to play *successfully*, an audience must interpret a rising volume of information and accurately decode successive narremes as the play progresses. Comprehension, as Baikadi and Cordona-Rivera note, results from successfully performing the mental process of connecting "the various narremes described in the discourse."[185] Such *successful* play generates the satisfying experience of *closure* Laurel references and is the *outcome* and reward for the comprehension that Bloom suggests audiences "relish" and that motivates their interpretive efforts.

Game designers carefully craft these desirable outcomes by mapping the intended emotional result of their games on something called an "interest curve." An interest curve is a representation of a player's emotional progress through an experience expressed in terms of the player's interest level at any given moment during the game. Ideal interest curves follow a familiar pattern of peaks and valleys that steadily rise towards a climactic peak near the end of the experience (see Figure 11). The pattern of the ideal interest curve is not only common and familiar within game design genre, it is immediately recognizable across other storytelling media as a visual representation of plot progression, as described by Aristotle in *Poetics*, and Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des Dramas*: exposition, inciting incident, rising action, conflict, climax, falling action. Although they do not generally think of their craft as designing

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[185] Baikadi and Cordona-Rivera, 45.

"interest curves," as game designers do, playwrights and directors hinge their success on their ability to move an audience along an expected emotional and intellectual path that is analogous to the interest curve.

According to interactivity theorist Andy Cameron, theatre artists in conventional theatre, unlike other game designers, typically create experiences in which "the audience is given a space for interpretation and a space for reaction, but not of interaction."[186] In his view, for theatre to function as a system that facilitates explicit interactivity for all players, the audience must be able to participate in a "direct intervention" of the narrative that results in a meaningful change to the representational world. Salen and Zimmerman call this kind of interactivity "explicit action" — an action that directly impacts and changes the representational system of the game. In games explicit interactivity includes "overt participation like clicking the non-linear links of a hypertext novel, following the rules of a board game, rearranging the clothing on a set of paper dolls, using the joystick to maneuver Ms. Pac-Man."[187]

Salen and Zimmerman describe three other modes of interactivity all of which may also be present in designed experiences: Cognitive Interactivity, Functional Interactivity, and Beyond-the-Object interactivity. [188] Cognitive Interactivity, which is "the psychological, emotional, and intellectual participation between a person and a

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[186] Andy Cameron, "D I S S I m u l a T I O N S," Dissimulations, 1996, http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ28/Dissimulations.html.
[187] Salen and Zimmerman, 6:4
[188] Ibid.

system"[189] is the predominant mode of interactivity experienced by an audience member observing a traditional theatrical production. While such interactions may not change the embedded narrative of a game, they nevertheless constitute the interactive molecule of theatre that gives rise to emergent gameplay. Theatre audiences also engage in Functional Interactivity, which describes the way a participant interacts with the material components of a system. In a board game this might be seen in how a player might pick up a game piece. In conventional theatre, it might be seen in how an audience member enters the House and takes a seat or uses other physical components of the space. Functional Interactivity gives form to explicit player choice, and such interactivity is evident in the embodied material performance of the audience expressed as laughter, applause, muttering, and other “sanctioned” audience behaviors, as Hiem reports.[190] Finally, Beyond-the-Object Interactivity describes participation within a culture created by the representational world and includes instances where participants continue to interact outside the prescribed boundaries of the experience. In the video game milieu, this might manifest as fan culture and in theatre it is expressed during such events as formal post-performance talkbacks. While these three modes of interaction are worth consideration with respect to their application to an audience member's overall experience, according to Zimmerman, these modes of interaction "occur universally in human experience," and are not what defines a designed interactive experience. Only through utilizing *explicit interactivity*

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[189] Ibid.

[190] Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2016), 28.

can designers create experiences which will allow an audience to intervene in the narrative.[191]

The inherent unpredictability that accompanies player choice creates an incompatibility between traditional forms of narrative in theatre — in which a playwright or director leads a homogenous audience along an interest curve of expected emotional outcomes — and performances which incorporate explicit audience choice leading to potentially uncertain outcomes. When an experience designer (i.e., director or playwright) of an immersive theatre or other pervasive theatre creates an experience which allows an audience to make explicit choices within the world of the play, the central issue for the design of the experience must shift from crafting an "Interest Curve" or expected audience response to designing an experience that explores the limits of what is possible. Zimmerman calls this creating a "Space of Possibility." The more explicit actions an audience may take within a system, the greater the focus must be on designing a Space of Possibility open and flexible enough to accommodate the unpredictability of choice.

The Space of Possibility "is the space of all possible actions that might take place in a game, the space of all possible meanings which can emerge from game design."[192] Not only does this concept suggest that that such a performance results in variable narrative outcomes, but that variability extends to the very meaning of the event. How variable the narrative and meaning of a performance may be depends on

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[191] Salen and Zimmerman, 6:4
[192] Ibid.

the "size" of its Space of Possibility, with "larger" spaces resulting in highly variable experience, and "small" Spaces of Possibility lending themselves to far less variability. Inherently, smaller spaces facilitate complex narratives more adroitly than larger spaces since a playwright or director can control more aspects of the interest curve. Additionally, an experience is likely to take on a characteristic "feeling" inherent to the size of a Space of Possibility. Generally, larger spaces such as the McKittrick Hotel set for *Sleep No More*, tend to create a feeling that the game or theatrical production is a Sandbox experience — a sense of exploration, curiosity, discovery, and the feeling of freedom.  Players will experience games with a limited Space of Possibility as an On-rails experience with high and low rollercoasters of emotions, tracking the interest curve.

Designers for theatre and games must not only consider the Space of Possibility but also the audience *perception* of possibility. In fact, how much possibility an audience *perceives* is far more important to the crafting of an experience than actual possibility. Although an audience at *Sleep No More* will likely *feel* a vast Space of Possibility, the performers move from moment to moment according to tightly choreographed movements and deploy "strategies to manage the spaces in which they need to perform" that carefully mitigate audience disruptions.[193]  Regardless of how dependent upon audience choice the outcome of the performance may be, the audience will not leave the performance feeling as though they have made many

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[193] Julia M. Ritter, "Fandom and Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*: Audience Ethnography of Immersive Dance," *TDR/The Drama Review* 61, no. 4 (2017): pp. 59-77, https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00692.

explicit choices if they do not notice their choices. On the other hand, consider a performance with a relatively small space of possibility, but which gives the illusion of choice throughout. The audience may leave the experience feeling as though they dictated the entire outcome of the performance after making only one or two explicit choices.

Game designers have figured out that the interest curve and a space of possibility are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they have developed a set of tools for reconciling complex narrative goals with a desire to create (at least an illusion of) a Space of Possibility. Jesse Schell, author of *The Art of Game Design* sums up this idea:

> We don't always have to give the player true freedom — we only have to give the player the feeling of freedom. For, as we've discussed, all that's real is what you feel — if a clever designer can make a player feel free, when really the player has very few choices, or even no choice at all, then suddenly we have the best of both worlds — the player has the wonderful feeling of freedom, and the designer has managed to economically create an experience with an ideal interest curve.[194]

Schell instructs designers to exert "indirect control" over experiences by utilizing tools which increase the predictability of participant choices without impinging on the "feeling of freedom." The more indirect control a designer integrates into their performance, the more they are able to articulate predictable, complex emotional outcomes while preserving at least the illusion of possibility and interactivity.

Ultimately, in narrative games like theatre, if the audience is to experience these

[194] Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design* (Morgan Kaufman, 2008), Kindle location 5383.

complex emotional outcomes, they must successfully comprehend narremes that become increasingly complex as the narrative progresses. Although narrative nodes graph along a monotonic sequence, the information required to decode each narreme accumulates, often remaining significant and relevant to all subsequent narremes, so that successful decoding and comprehension of endgame narremes may depend upon the player successfully decoding antecedent narremes. Bower and Morrow, authors of *Mental Models in Narrative Comprehension*, suggest that when a story begins, audiences construct a mental model of the narrative which they then must update as the story progresses, constantly "changing the state of the hypothetical story world." They argue that the audience will build and maintain a "network of causal connections among the events of the story." This network of connections initiates with and grows from "the various goals, subgoals, and actions" of the characters "overcoming obstacles…[and] arriving at some final resolution."[195] Although narratives progress from one node to the next in a sequential manner, the network of causal connections becomes more rich, complex, and dense as the narrative advances, requiring an analogous progression of a player's skill and ability to decode the narreme. Much of this skill and ability results from successfully comprehending antecedent narremes that contain information relevant to decoding the current narreme.

Not coincidentally, mapping the rising complexity of a narrative over time tracks along the same familiar graph as the Interest Curve and Freytag's Pyramid. Perhaps

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[195] Gordon H. Bower and Daniel G. Morrow, "Mental Models in Narrative Comprehension," *Science* 247, no. 4938 (May 1990): pp. 44-48, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.2403694.

more telling — and relevant to the satisfying experience of “closure” — graphing the rising complexity of a narrative tracks the Flow Channel proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (Figure 17). “Flow,” according to Csikszentmihalyi, “is the kind of feeling after which one nostalgically says: ‘that was fun,’ or ‘that was enjoyable.’”[196] Jesse Schell considers flow a critical concern for game designers, noting “it pays for game designers to make a careful study of flow, because this is exactly the feeling we want players of our games to enjoy.”[197] After all, “the most typical kind of flow experience is play,” writes Csikszentmihalyi, “and games are the most common forms of play activities.”[198]

A player experiences flow when engaged in activity for which they have a skill to match the challenge the activity presents. If the player does not possess enough skill to meet the challenge, they will not experience flow and are more likely to experience anxiety (or apathy). If the challenge is too easy for the player, then they are likely to experience boredom (or apathy).

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[196] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 136.

[197] Schell, 2671.

[198] Csikszentmihalyi, 137.

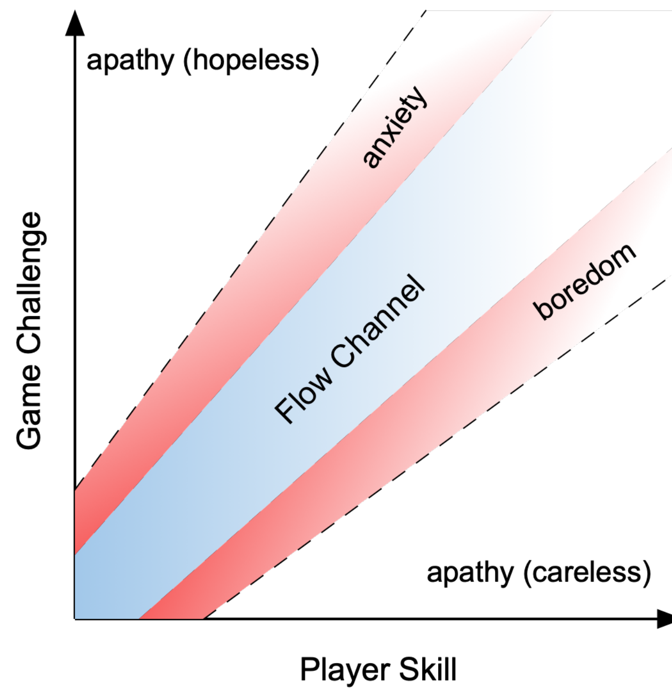


Figure 17:  Flow Channel

In the narrative game of theatre, for example, the player skill is determined in large part by the social and cultural capital they possess that is relevant to the performance.  This will include familiarity with the script, the genre or mode of theatre, conventions of theatre, and familiarity with the work of specific theatre makers involved in the performance.  This category of cultural capital will be acquired prior to — or in preparation for — the performance event, and establishes a baseline skill for the audience-player entering the event.  However, that skill does not remain static once the performance begins.   When the audience successfully "reads" and comprehends the performance, they develop "in-game" cultural capital that is specific to that particular occurrence of theatre.  The acquisition of in-game capital adds to the audience-

player's baseline skill, so that as the game progresses, the attentive and successful audience-player will become more skillful at playing (interpreting) the occurrent narrative but the inattentive or unsuccessful audience-player will struggle to perform as the story becomes more complex. Imagine, for example, an audience member with no familiarity of Ibsen's plays walking in on a performance of *A Doll's House* just as Torvald reads Krogstad's letter. Having missed the opportunity to develop in-game capital, they would be lost, and a likely candidate for boredom or anxiety. It is almost inconceivable that such an audience member would be able to achieve closure — and the accompanying feeling of satisfaction — during that narreme or any subsequent narreme. They will lack the skills, and most importantly the situational knowledge acquired in-game, to decode the very complex network of causality marking the climax of that narrative. On the other hand, if the narrative game does not provide a progressively complex challenge to match the attentive and successful player's progressive in-game skill mastery, the player may lose interest in the performance as it becomes boring to them. "As their skill increases," Schell writes, "you must present them with commensurate challenges."[199]

[199] Schell, 2705.

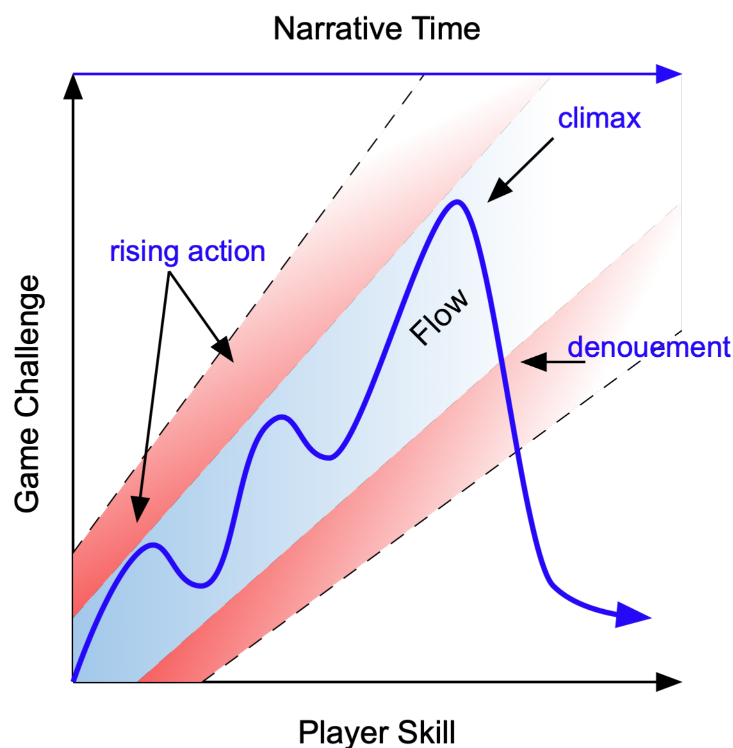


Figure 18: Narrative Flow Channel

Graphing a narrative “interest curve” atop a flow channel (see Figure 18) illustrates how narratives structure rising action and climax, by paralleling rising narrative complexity with a successful player’s acquisition of in-game skill (in-game capital) to marshal players through the flow channel as the performance progresses. It is not a coincidence that scholars since Aristotle have recognized a ubiquitous experiential pattern in temporally bound cultural artifacts like narratives and ludic events. We remember, reflect upon, and study those stories and experiences that managed to keep us in the flow. It follows that if adaptive human traits express themselves in patterns of behavior, and if narrative and play are adaptive traits (which will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter), then patterns of adaptive behaviors

will express themselves in the cultural artifacts like stories and games. The Interest Curve and Freytag's Pyramid are simple diagrams representing the expression of human adaptive behavior through the cultural artifacts of games and narrative. The experience of closure that theatre players relish when they solve the puzzle of each progressing narreme not only tracks along the interest curve but becomes more intense and rewarding as the experience progresses. This is the experience that games, including the game of theatre, promise their players, and as Csikszentmihalyi reminds us, is most often the result of play. This is "fun."

# Chapter 3: An Anatomy of Radical Fun

## 3.0 - Group Juggle

"Since time immemorial, the theatre's business has been to entertain people, just like all the other arts. This business always gives it its particular dignity; it needs no other passport than fun, though this it must have."
- Bertolt Brecht, *Short Organon for the Theatre*

"First teach a person to develop to the point of his limitation and then-pfft!-break the limitation."
- Viola Spolin

Since I first started directing for the theatre in the mid-1990s, the ensemble game *Group Juggle* has been a staple in my repertoire of instructional, coaching, and directing techniques used in college classrooms, for corporate team building workshops, and rehearsal halls. A go-to game for building trust and collaboration in the early stages of rehearsal, a versatile director can deploy *Group Juggle* to develop ensemble focus and flow in the middle to late stages of rehearsal. This can help keep ensembles in a zone of optimal performance despite the demands of tech, previews, and press openings. The game's core mechanics are effortless to learn for most players, and a director facilitating the game can easily fine-tune its difficulty, incrementally increasing or decreasing the challenge level to accommodate a range of player skills and deliver experiences appropriate to the needs of the ensemble. Additionally, *Group Juggle* provides a conveniently simple blueprint for understanding

how players — in the game of theatre as in all games —enter flow and experience fun.

For six academic quarters from 2017 to 2019, I led a directed group study of between nine to twelve undergraduate theatre students at the University of California Davis, focused on the practice and analysis of theatre games, with *Group Juggle* as the central focus of the study. In 2019, I partnered with the research group Group Improvisation Lab Labs (GILLs) in collaboration with ModLab at UC Davis. Within this collaboration, I introduced *Group Juggle* as a platform for understanding and investigating modifiable collective experiences for human interaction and collaboration[200], focusing on understanding how groups and individuals enter flow as they play. While the play behaviors in most theatre games — including *Group Juggle* — are significantly different from the play behaviors that actors and audience perform during a theatre performance, *Group Juggle* nevertheless serves as an illustrative analog for examining the production of fun in the game of theatre.

The game begins with a group of players standing in a circle, facing center. One player (or the director) initiates play by throwing a small ball (like a juggling ball) or a small bean bag (like a cornhole bag) to another player next to whom they do not stand. The player who receives the throw then throws to another player, being careful to throw to a player who has not yet received the ball and (if possible) next to whom they do not stand while taking pains to remember whom they received the ball from and to whom they threw the ball. This process repeats until all players have received the ball, at which point the last player to receive the ball throws the ball back to the first player,

[200] Some of this work is documented on the GILLs website at https://tinyurl.com/393f3z83

completing the “pattern,” which is then repeated indefinitely. Once the players establish a throw pattern, a director may increase the challenge to players in several ways that produce different play experiences. For example, gradually adding more balls to the same throw pattern, a director compels players to narrow their focus to a limited visual field, gating out irrelevant cues by practicing “hard focus.” On the other hand, a director can gradually introduce one or more different colored balls that players throw in a new pattern that “overlap” the first pattern. Overlapping patterns oblige players to release hard focus, attend to a broader visual field, and exercise “soft focus.” The example in Figure 19 illustrates both a single throw pattern for a group of seven players, and a group with two simultaneous throw patterns.

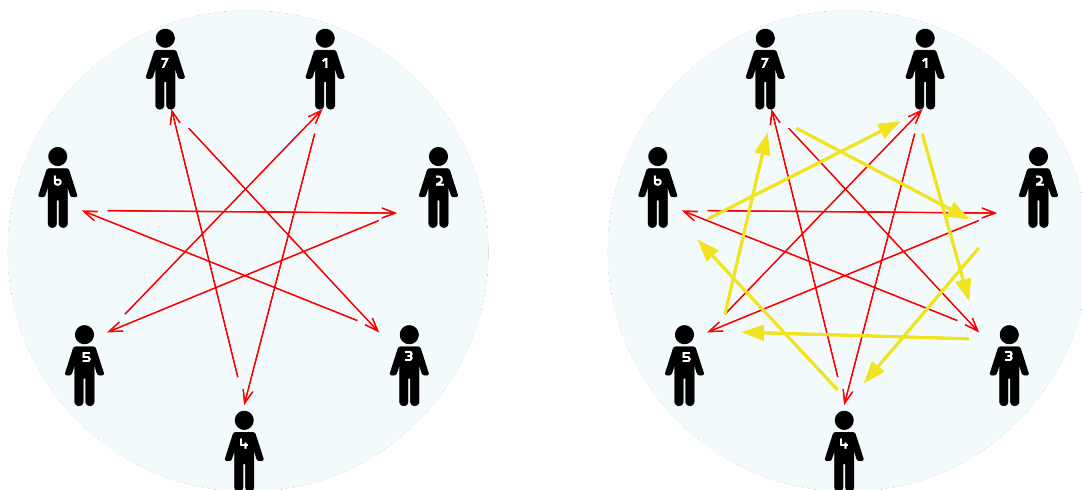


Figure 19: *Group Juggle* - 1 pattern (left) and 2 patterns (right)

Beyond these very simple modifications to the core gameplay of patterned throws,

*Group Juggle* is open to a vast potential for modification. Modifications include reversing the throw direction, players "breaking-out" of the circle, "throwing" words instead of balls, playing the game while running lines, throwing odd-shaped objects instead of balls, dancing while playing, and more. Such modifications ought not to be arbitrary, but rather taken on as additional rules intended to facilitate the experience of fun by calibrating the game so that the challenge it presents to players is relative to the group's skill level.

*Group Juggle* thus offers a valuable template for understanding how and why fun occurs in all games, including theatre. If, as the previous chapter suggested, we define a game as a cultural artifact consisting of a *system* of *rules designed to promote play*, then why do people follow the rules? What draws humans to engage in play? This chapter drills down on play as behavior and explores its relationship to fun, arguing that fun is the motive force behind play behaviors, not to mention being an adaptive drive responsible for critical human traits of innovation and creativity.

### 3.1 - A Driving Force

To understand how fun drives play behaviors, it helps to consider the human body as a structured organizational system in unstable equilibrium within social and physical environments. In this context, one may regard the human organism as a self-organizing (cybernetic), autopoietic living system with a dissipative material structure

that operates in a persistent state of disequilibrium within its environment.[201] The human brain has developed cognitive processes such as learning and executive behaviors that allow the body to interact with environmental constraints, working against the dissipative force of disequilibrium to achieve an unstable balance within the environment.[202] Such behaviors require driving forces to motivate. These driving forces may originate in response to perceived imperative constraints (extrinsic motivation) or a function of the internal processes expressed within a context of perceived non-imperative constraints (intrinsic motivation). Drives are adaptive neurophysiological subsystems that respond to particular internal and external environmental cues, articulate additional cues, script relevant behaviors, and identify desirable outcomes (aka, goals).

Additionally, humans form networks of communication, producing social autopoietic units (cultural or social systems) that constitute social environments within which human bodies interact. While behavior in the physical domain is governed by the 'laws of nature," write systems theorists Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, "behavior in the social domain is governed by rules generated by the social system itself." Social dynamical systems provide necessary lenses through and within which the human mind prioritizes relevant cues in the environment, including the generation and interpretation of cues relating to adaptable behaviors regarding coordination with *other* bodies for individual and species-based survival. This has led to the development of

[201] Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2019), 350.
[202] Ibid., 158.

complex and discrete hereditary social systems, which include all aspects of culture, including language, economy, religion, ideology, art, and other cultural systems, like theatre. These cultural systems, many of which have become what Althusser identified as *ideological state apparatuses,*[203] produce "inter-subjective realities" that "exist only in our collective imagination."[204] They are not "actual." However, they leave material traces and have measurable impacts on the physical environment and systems within which they are nested. Theatre, for example, leaves architectural buildings, archives of scripts, and imprints skills on the bodies of theatre practitioners who train for optimal performance evaluated against virtues derived from a collectively imagined inter-subjective reality.

The performance of skills within the context of an inter-subjective reality — like all human behavior — requires an internal or external "driving force." Like the physical environment, the social environment will produce intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The value discrimination between social skills will often be determined by the degree to which social skills are conflated with physical survival. For example, those skills which enable an actor to earn money will become valorized within a social group which has taken up a subjective dynamical system that uses currency as a means of resource exchange. Therefore, the mastery of that particular social skill will have a tangible positive impact on the survivability of that particular organism within that particular social environment. Conversely, skills taken up in a monetized social environment that

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[203] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1335.
[204] Yuval N. Harari, John Purcell, and Haim Watzman, *Sapiens: a Brief History of Mankind* (Vintage Books, 2015), Kindle location 363.

do not directly lead to the acquisition of currency will not be valorized in this way.

In the presence of such a distinction, it is natural that a social environment will develop symbolic responses differentiating these broad categories of skills: the designation of "work" activities and "play" or "leisure" activities, for example. "Work" produces an expectation that a person performing such behaviors will earn resources, whereas "play" or "leisure" produces an expectation that the player will exhaust resources (work for pay; pay to play). This designation may be seen as the social "frame" placed around particular activities. It must also be recognized that particular embodied activities may switch designations depending on the frame in which the activity is perceived. That is to say, a body may perform the exact same movement within the same physical environment, but the activity will be socially marked in different ways depending on the social frame within which the activity is performed. Activities performed within a socially valorized context (work) *may* be extrinsically motivated, whereas activities performed within a non-valorized context (leisure/play) allow performers to reach their optimal potential when sustained by an internally sourced "driving force," or intrinsic motivation.

If the behavior is not inherent to the species, it must be *learned*, which implies a level of complexity that exceeds the current "phase space"[205] of the body's behavioral repertoire. The body must perform activities at the fractal edge of the phase space — the balance point between reiterative and inventive, but to do so requires an effort of physical and cognitive resources. This effort does not arise randomly and sporadically

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[205] In *A Systems View of Life,* Capra and Luisi use the mathematical concept of Phase Space as a way to hold space for every possible variation or outcome within the current state of a dynamical system.

but must be sustained and, for it to be sustained, it must be motivated. The body provides a neurological system for motivating behaviors that move the body to criticality (that point of balance between iterative and inventive), and the *experience* of this system is flow. Within a non-valorized social context such as play, the experience of flow is often described as "fun."

"An organism at play" writes Csikszentmihalyi "can use the full range of its genetic potential."[206] Games — including theatre games like *Group Juggle* and theatre itself — are inter-subjective social environments that encourage the non-valorized behavior of play. Of course, skilled behavior is socially valorized for those paid to *work* in the theatre. Although this arguably complicates the source of the motive force for actors, actors being paid to work at theatre may, as discussed in chapter two, still be motivated quite strongly by their desire to play. Games that unlock our "full potential" must provoke our motive drive to *play* with enough force to overcome the intense experience of discomfort that accompanies behaviors that approach the limits of our potential. The drive for play is the drive to learn, grow, and adapt, and while "fun" is the motive force of play, *radical fun* motivates us to reach — and occurs at — the limit of human potential.

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[206] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 135.

## 3.2 - The Limits of Play and the Scope of Fun

If, as many have argued, fun is but an aspect of play, then why bother attempting to isolate fun from play? By separating the experience of fun from the behavior of play, one may regard *play* and *fun* as bound by a causal relationship rather than a qualitative relationship. Fun is not merely a quality of play but the affective result of well-performed play behavior. The *behavior* of play is motivated to generate an *experience* of fun, and the *rules* of a game encourage particular play behaviors. This causal chain of *rule*, *behavior*, and *experience* becomes practical when considering how the rules of a game encourage play behaviors that will reward players with the experience of fun should they perform felicitously. Understanding what constitutes fun, and how fun happens, lends itself to a particular understanding of procedural design for theatre, as for any type of game. Superseding all these extrinsic motivations for the practical applications of fun, it is worth considering whether a more epicurean and hedonistic view of *fun as the ultimate human goal*, might not be a more sustainable and ethical approach to the production of fun than the near ubiquitous tendency to justify the experience of play — and by extension, fun — in service to a particular ideology.

In *The Ambiguity of Play* Brian Sutton-Smith examines how rhetorics form around play as a result of dominant cultural transcripts, and how these rhetorics not only reveal implicit value systems but directly impact the practice of play activities within those systems. In fact, while acknowledging his excellent groundbreaking work,

Sutton-Smith critiques Huizinga by calling out his “machismo” laden rhetoric of play as conflict oriented and valorizing the exercise of power.[207] Sutton-Smith’s close read of play rhetoric demonstrates the persistent tendency for academics to generate an exchange value for the perceived intrinsic value of play. He illustrates how the discourses that form around play either valorize play for its efficacy in *motivating* a particular desirable activity (building community, learning skills, consolidating power, gaining social status, etc.) or by condemning play for *motivating* particularly undesirable activities (frivolity, addiction, violence, gambling, etc.). In either case, how scholars exchange the intrinsic value of play reveals a system of values.

Like many other play scholars, Sutton-Smith conflates the *experience of fun* with the *behavior of play*, producing an idealized and reductive concept of play by eliding the possibility of an infelicitous performance of play. Many other foundational thinkers from play studies, including Huizinga, Caillois, and Sutton-Smith, overlook fun by conflating it with play, so that fun becomes merely the *intrinsic value* that is but one among many characteristics of play. In the process, these play scholars have produced theories based on an idealized and reductive concept of play which overlooks the possibility of an *infelicitous* performance of play in which play behaviors always perform as expected.

Overlooking the possibility of *infelicitous play,* elides what scholars working in a range of fields like Csikszentmihalyi (psychology), Alan McKee (media studies), and

[207] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 78.

Ralph Koster (game studies) regard as a discrete and significant embodied phenomenon separate from but related to play. The experience of fun results from felicitous play but is not a *certainty* of play. Fun is the desired *outcome* or *goal* of play behavior. Dominant discourse has conflated fun with play, reducing fun to a characteristic of play, based on an assumption of a felicitous performance of play.

To his credit, Sutton-Smith identifies discrete "play functions" as part of his framing for rhetorical contentions, among which are *play experiences, intrinsic play functions,* and *extrinsic play functions.* These three functions point indirectly to the intended *outcome* of play behavior and more directly to the notion that there is both a function of play linked intrinsically to the behavior of play and a function that the play is supposed to serve in a larger context. Nevertheless, these concepts still presume a *felicitous performance*, and the experiences of felicitous and *infelicitous* play are not examined as discrete objects of inquiry.

However, Sutton-Smith does mention that the intrinsic function of play connects to a player's motivation and that this motivation is a response to a "secondary emotion" originating in the cerebral cortex rather than the limbic system from whence "primary emotions" (like fight or flight) originate. Not only does this theory point directly to a physiological and psychological explanation for the experience of felicitous play, but it forms a synergistic connection with Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory, and Self-Determination Theory which will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter.

Huizinga also hints at an *essential* aspect of play that underpins the entire phenomenon. Asking: "what actually is the *fun* of playing?" Huizinga equates fun with

the phenomenon that causes a baby to "crow with pleasure," a "gambler to lose himself in passion," and "a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match." In each of his examples, Huizinga isolates a *moment of experience* in which the active party is presumably *fully engaged* in their activity. "Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play," he writes. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which a gambler pulls at the slot machine not out of passion but of boredom, and the football fan watches with relative disinterest during a series of less-than-spectacular plays. It seems complicated to imagine a sporting event where the crowd is "roused to frenzy" from start to finish. Does this mean that play only occurs during the frenzy and that something different is happening the rest of the time?

Huizinga touches on these conflicting tendencies[208] as he introduces the significance of a playful *attitude* in the act of play, hinting not only at player agency but at a particular mental or emotional state that accompanies play. He suggests that play behavior without a playful attitude may no longer be play, but rather what is left when tradition strips an activity of its play frame: culture. Huizinga's assertion that the *play frame* is vital to the *play experience* forms an important conceptual node in understanding the relationship between conventional theatre and pervasive games like Nordic Larp. As discussed in Chapter 2, the rules and procedures enacted by *conventional* theatre players are mostly *implicit* or invisible rules, which has the effect of obfuscating the play frame around the game of theatre and contributing to the

[208] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), 21.

perception of theatre as principally *cultural* rather than *ludic*. Huizinga asserts that much of what we think of as *culture* is — in essence — merely the ossified remains of a playful event that has lost its explicit *play frame*. For example, pervasive theatre — like immersive theatre and larp — unearths the play frame by rescripting the implicit rules of theatre, making the rules explicit and more obviously ludic. Huizinga defends this perspective with a lengthy examination of the inextricable relationship between serious and playful behavior, resisting Marxist/Hegelian conflations of play and leisure as hegemonic productions of spectacle and controlled illusions of agency. His description of play as a totally "*absorbing"*[209] activity in which the provisional reality of play overtakes the "ordinary world" precedes Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow, and points to an awareness of the phenomenon of fun as the *result* of playful activities.

Where Huizinga, Sutton-Smith and others focus most attention on the behavior and consequence of play, in their staggeringly comprehensive guide *The Rules of Play - Game Design Fundamentals* Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman examine games through three nested conceptual frameworks: the Primary Schema (see Figure 20). At the center of the framework complex is the *formal schema* which is composed of the rules of the game. Through the formal schema, one examines the system of rules and the implicit meaning they generate. The *experiential schema* is the play schema. Through this frame, one considers a game based on the experience of playing the game. These schemas operate within the *contextual schema* where a reciprocal impact plays between a game and the broader culture within which it is played. Salen

[209] Ibid., 13.

and Zimmerman shorthand the schema, referring to the schema as simply “Rules, Play, and Culture” throughout the book. Like others in their field, Salen and Zimmerman conflate play and fun, lumping them both into the experiential schema.

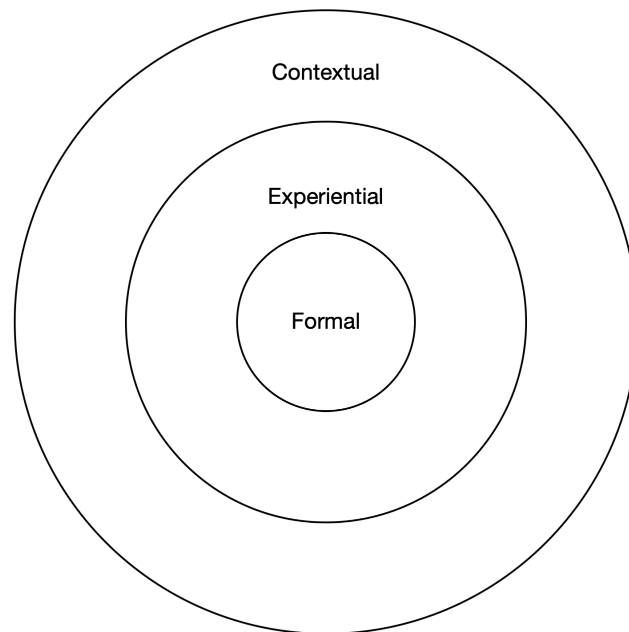


Figure 20: Salen and Zimmerman’s *Primary Schema*.

Fun is an imperative *quality* of play in the experiential schema, making play *necessarily* fun. Therefore, behaviors that resemble play in every way except that the player does not experience fun are not, strictly speaking, play. Instead, this schema strands such orphaned behavior in a limbo of ambiguity and amotivation. Understanding play as a *performed* behavior that an actor may engage in with the *intention or expectation* of experiencing fun does away with this ambiguity. It allows one to consider play relative to a variety of possible outcomes. This dissertation

intervenes in Salen and Zimmerman's otherwise instrumental model — and by extension, other models and concepts that conflate play and fun — by articulating a fourth Primary Schema (see Figure 21). Here we propose the *formal schema* as the system of rules (game), the *behavioral schema* as the subsequent behaviors performed by bodies responding to the rules (play), and the *experiential schema* as the players' affective response to performing these behaviors (fun), further understanding that these three primary schema remain unavoidably enmeshed within the fourth schema, the contextual frame or *cultural schema*. Play, therefore, is regarded as a *behavior* performed with the *intention* or *expectation* of experiencing *fun*. As a performed behavior, play is subject to the possibility of failure, and one may regard play behavior that does not produce fun as *infelicitous play*. The experience of fun produces the intrinsic motivation for actors to perform play behavior, both in the moment it occurs *and* in anticipation of its occurrence.

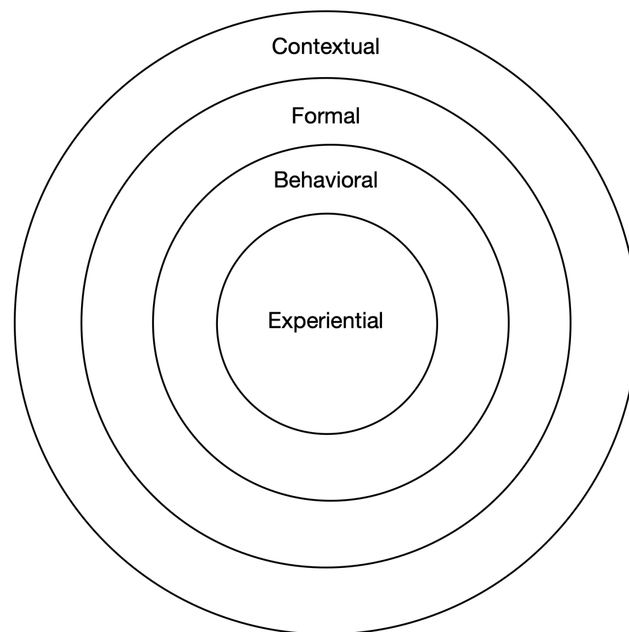

Figure 21: The Fourth Schema

Bifurcating play and fun considers play-like behaviors that outwardly resemble play behavior but lack the actor's intention or expectation of fun. In these instances, the play-like behavior is extrinsically motivated and is not felicitous play. Quoting Hippolytus, JL Austin wrote, "'my tongue swore to, but my heart (or mind or other backstage artiste) did not'.' Thus 'I promise to . . . ' obliges me —puts on record — my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle."[210] If the action of the "tongue" is the behavior, and the "heart" is the motivation for the behavior, then it is possible — as Austin points out — to perform a behavior without the engagement of the "heart" or intrinsic motivation. It is not difficult to imagine situations in which a person might engage in play behavior without intrinsic motivation. Perhaps they are at a social gathering centered around playing a game or attending a theatre performance and only perform the play behavior to access the out-game social interaction. They may have no intrinsic motivation to play the game but perform play behaviors because it provides them the access to an opportunity they value (social engagement).

This kind of play is "failed" play, or — to stay with Austin's articulation of performed behaviors — it might be considered "unhappy" play, or *infelicitous play*. Austin proposed six conditions for a felicitous performative, and although writing about utterances, Austin's conditions appertain to other performed behaviors, including play. The first four of Austin's conditions for felicitous performance require that the performance accord with an "accepted conventional procedure," that the person

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[210] John Langshaw. Austin, James Opie. Urmson, and Marina Sbisà, *How to Do Things with Words: the William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 9-10.

performing the act must be the appropriate person to perform the act, and that all participants needed to perform the act must execute the procedures "both correctly and completely."

Having satisfied the first four of Austin's conditions, a failed play behavior in which the player has not engaged in play with a play mindset may nevertheless appear to perform play. The player may perform all of the play procedures correctly and completely, but if their *inward disposition* is not lusory, the play will still fail. Austin claims in his fifth condition for felicitous performance that when a procedure for a performance "is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings…then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings". The player who lacks the appropriate inward disposition to evoke a performed procedure performs a type of failure that Austin calls a *dissimulation* or an "act professed but hollow."[211] In theatre, the inward disposition of the failed player would be disengaged or extrinsically motivated to perform the behavior. A player that is not intrinsically motivated will *not* experience fun as a result of playing the game, even if they otherwise perform all of the procedures of play correctly and completely. As Austin puts it, the "thoughts and feelings" must also be accompanied by an intention. A player must *intend to play*, taking up what Salen and Zimmerman would call a lusory attitude or what Coleridge called "willing suspension of disbelief."

It is certainly possible that a professional actor, bound by contract to perform in a play may enter their performance with a lusory attitude and have fun while they play.

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[211] Ibid., 18.

However, viewed through the lens of infelicitous play, the legal contract that binds an actor to perform and the monetary compensation they receive for their performance act as powerful extrinsic motivators.  Any number of situational factors could potentially strip the actor of their lusory attitude, causing them to go through the motions of play in a way that might not be evident to an audience but would cause the actor to experience the performance behavior as non-ludic work.  They could be late in the run and sick of the repetition of performing the role over and over, or they could just be having a bad day.  However, it is also possible that they could have an internal disposition that makes it more difficult for them to develop intrinsic motivation toward behaviors.

Csikszentmihalyi theorized that certain individuals may have an *autotelic personality* due to the development of "several metaskills or competencies that enable the individual to enter flow and stay in it."[212]  His research demonstrated that individuals with autotelic personalities were motivated to engage in high-challenge, high-skill activities regardless of whether the activities were socially framed as "work" or "play."  However, for *nonautotelic* individuals, "motivation in experiences characterized as 'work' (academic classes and, later, paid jobs) was lower than in experiences characterized as 'play' (e.g., passive activities like TV viewing)." Csikszentmihalyi's research found that *Nonautotelic* individuals were not motivated by high-challenge, high-skill activities, and "did not find the apathy condition aversive."[213]

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[212] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 245.
[213] Ibid., 254.

Csikszentmihalyi's studies found that the population split into roughly 40% *autotelic* personalities and 40% *nonautotelic* personalities (he does not account for the remaining 20%).

Although it may be nearly impossible to prove a connection, it is nevertheless interesting to consider the Los Angeles 99-Seat conflict — discussed in Chapter 2 — through the lenses of infelicitous play and (non)autotelic personalities. Those Actors' Equity Association (AEA) members who supported the actions of their union to dismantle the 99-Seat plan often made the case that actors deserved to be compensated for their work. In contrast, most Los Angeles based AEA members expressed outrage over the AEA's attempt to dismantle the production vehicle that allowed them to play. In an interview for a Pro99 PSA, long time AEA member and Pro99 leader Rebecca Metz said, "I do 99-seat theatre because that's the only place I get to do the kind of theatre that I love."[214] Advocating for the 99-seat community, Academy Award-winning actor Tim Robbins — who happens to be the artistic director of the 99-seat theatre company The Actor's Gang — said in an interview with *The New York Times* "You want to be up onstage, you want to work out the acting muscles, not sitting on your couch waiting for an audition."[215] Actors like Robbins and Metz — and two-thirds of AEA members[216] — are not extrinsically motivated to act on a 99-seat stage. They do not do it for the money but because it is something they are passionate

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[214] YouTube (YouTube), accessed May 31, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKFHonSSF5M.
[215] Michael Paulson, "Actors' Equity Pushes for Minimum Wage, but Not All Members Want It," The New York Times (The New York Times, April 20, 2015), https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/theater/actors-equity-pushes-for-a-minimum-wage-but-not-all-its-members-want-it.html.
[216] In a referendum held by AEA, approximately 2/3 of all participating AEA members voted to oppose AEA's proposed changes to the 99-seat plan.

about; something they love to do and a challenge they want to embrace in order to hone a skill they love: performance. It stands to reason that these actors may possess autotelic personalities and that nonautotelics might sample at a higher rate in the group who stood ardently in support of AEA.

Recognizing that players may engage in play behaviors without experiencing fun reveals fun to be a subset phenomenon of play, and the measure of a felicitous performance of play. When considered alongside the established concept that games are systems of rules designed to facilitate play, and having already established theatre as a game, it should follow that theatre is a system of rules designed to promote the experience of fun.

While it is not hard to find scholarly writing about games and play, one must dig quite a bit to find academic writing on "fun." Desire, pleasure, enjoyment, and happiness have all developed canon over the centuries, but not so the homologous term, "fun." As Alan McKee points out in his book *Fun! What Entertainment Tells Us about Living a Good Life*, most of the canonical critical theory lexicons skip "directly from Frankfurt School to Games" ignoring the role the phenomenon of *fun* has played in centuries-old philosophical conversations. He laments the lack of critical or philosophical definition for fun, turning to a dictionary for at least an etymology. "'Fun' derives from the Old English verb 'befon,' to make a fool of someone." "The second meaning listed in the OED, however, is closer to entertainment's idea of fun: 'diversion, amusement, sport.'" [217] Blythe and Hassenzahl also fall back on the OED, tracing the

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[217] Alan McKee, *Fun!: What Entertainment Tells Us about Living a Good Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 31.

evolution of the English Language word from an action associated with pranking or fooling someone.

The industrial revolution marked a significant pivot in the rhetoric of fun when the everyday use of the word fun transitioned from its verb form (to trick or to cheat) to the noun or adjective form. While the underlying phenomena must certainly have impacted human behavior for tens of thousands of years, Blythe and Hassenzahl find the contemporary idea of fun as a positive affect resulting from leisure activity entered the discourse as “a response to enclosure, the mechanisation of time and industrialisation.”[218] Marxist rhetoric positions fun as structured to meet the demand of the workday, either in resistance to the rigid work/leisure dichotomy or, as Debord[219] and the Situationists assert, the placating opiate intrinsic to entertainment spectacles designed to subvert the contentious behavior of the working class. Arguing that the working class of the industrial revolution engendered fun as a political, class-based framing of the experience, Blythe and Hassenzahl note that “fun" came to be seen as a low-cant word "which signified the absence of seriousness, work, labour.” [220] The “low cant" association remains evident despite the basic experiential aspects that fun shares with virtuous concepts like delight, enthusiasm, joy, pleasure, passion, and inspiration. Even as fun-producing entertainment industries see exponential growth and efforts to gamify non-ludic work activities collapse the rigid differential between

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[218] Mark A. Blythe et al., *Funology: from Usability to Enjoyment* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 376.
[219] Guy Debord, Guy Debord, and Ken Knabb, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014).
[220] Blythe, 376.

work and play, the discriminatory history of fun may account for the resistance to consider *serious cultural* artifacts, like theatre, as systems for producing fun.

McKee highlights a history of suspicion among academics towards entertainment and its potential influence and impact on the human mind and personality. He cites Plato's screed against poetry as the first of many attacks positioning entertainment as a "low" or corrupting influence on the human mind. Much of Book X of *The Republic* is dedicated to excoriating poetry, theatre, and the imitative arts, placing them at odds with — and inferior to — philosophy. Whereas philosophy clarifies the mind and reveals the truth, according to Plato, fictions "are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers,"[221] implanting lies in the mind and stirring irrational passions and lust in the audience. Plato depicted theatre as an escape from productive reasoning; a lazy person's retreat from responsibility. For Plato, fictional narrative "both represents and satisfies the worst part of human nature the irrational and the emotional."[222] This rhetorical bias became common in western academic traditions and relates to Hegelian critiques of leisure and agency and appears in the scholarly propensity to prefer the term "aesthetics" to the term "fun."

Aesthetics have been used as a system for measuring the artistic value of a cultural artifact to differentiate (and mark as superior) "high art" from mere entertainment. The ancient Greeks had no word for art as we think of it today. They

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[221] Plato, "The Republic," The Internet Classics Archive: 441 searchable works of classical literature, accessed May 31, 2022, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.mb.txt.
[222] Alan McKee, *Fun!: What Entertainment Tells Us about Living a Good Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

had poetry, and they had “techne,” which emphasizes skill and technique. More recently, Shakespeare — which is undoubtedly now viewed as “high” art — was performed alongside other forms of entertainment, like games, which we would today consider “low.” The distinction between art and entertainment did not occur until the late nineteenth century. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, however, cultural elites sought to differentiate art from entertainment as a way to consolidate sovereignty over the public space of theatre. Critics and other arbiters of elite culture “worked explicitly to separate their cultural consumption from that of the masses and the binary of ‘art’ versus ‘entertainment’ was introduced.”[223] In the late eighteenth century American theatre tradition, we see this with the bifurcation of "respectable" theatre catering to the cultural elite from the "lower" forms of theatre like burlesque and variety shows. Such shows were considered to be unsophisticated entertainment for the working class. “Rowdy audiences continued in minstrel shows, variety halls, and cheap theaters,” writes Richard Butsch, author of *The Making of American Audiences*, “but ‘legitimate’ theater would be reserved for the ‘respectable.’”[224]

Entertainment performs poorly within the traditional aesthetic system because critics never calibrated aesthetics to measure the values and traits specific to entertainment. Even if an audience experienced a show as a fully engaging and fun experience, if that production was a variety show or some other form of "low" theatre it would be unlikely to satisfy the traditional aesthetic system that assign value based on

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[223] Ibid., 12.
[224] Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: from Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

beauty or a particular literary sophistication or concept of "art." However, the recent growth of *applied aesthetics* has broadened the concept of aesthetics which is now understood as a system for measuring value *local* to a particular field or genre. ”These explorations do not follow the same trajectory as traditional aesthetics in its attempts to generalise about art and beauty,” Mckee writes. ”Rather they explain how particular forms of culture work and how they might be valued.”[225]

Mckee positions *fun* as the phenomenon central to organizing the aesthetics of entertainment, making room for serious philosophical discourse around a practice of ethical hedonism (or “good fun”) in which the most extraordinary and valuable goal in human existence is the experience of fun. This begins to get at an understanding of fun and flow as a constituent of human adaptivity. Similarly, understanding *fun* as a discrete phenomenon constituting the aesthetic spine of *play* — and by extension, *game* — brings into focus an evaluative system for cultural artifacts within these fields centering on their potential to produce fun.

Ralph Koster, author of the popular and accessible book *A Theory of Fun for Game Design,* makes a similar argument about the tendency for play and game theorists to graft the intrinsic value of the experience of fun onto activities that support particular rhetorical notions of play and games. However, Koster makes a case for embracing the potent efficacy of fun to engineer games that develop player skills appropriate to survival in the twenty-first century. Koster posits that the experience of fun is an evolutionary trait that rewards and reinforces the practice of behaviors that

[225] McKee, 6.

increase the survivability of individuals and their offspring. He notes that human adaptability — arguably our most efficacious survival trait — necessitates a robust neuro-cognitive intrinsic reward system capable of associative learning in which the acquisition of intrinsic reward becomes associated with a behavior that does not otherwise motivate an intrinsic reward. Considering how games produce fun, he argues, reveals that games are ideal learning technologies and that the skills humans develop in-game relate to the underlying mechanics that produce the behaviors that result in fun.[226]

Koster's concept of fun draws heavily on Csikszentmihalyi's theory of the *autotelic experience* which has become known simply as *flow*. His model positioning the occurrence of flow as the abscissa between challenge and skill has far-reaching implications for understanding fun, play, and games. Csikszentmihalyi makes a point to note that "the most typical kind of flow experience is play, and games are the most common forms of play activity" immediately followed by a clarification that "play is not synonymous with flow" which he justifies by claiming that flow is "a conceptually independent process which might or might not underlie these activities." [227] Csikszentmihalyi's "might or might not" statement implies specific conditions that an individual meet in order to experience flow. He develops upon these conditions extensively, forming a basis for understanding *fun as the result of felicitous play.*

Csikszentmihalyi positions flow as a "*proximal* theory of motivation" which

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[226] Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (OReilly Media Inc., 2014).
[227] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 137.

examines the "phenomenological account" of human experience to understand how our species has established a diverse repertoire of behaviors. He argues that at some point in human evolution, survival depended on adaptability and flexible cognitive responses allowing humans "to learn how to master and control a hostile and changing environment."[228] Csikszentmihalyi argues that contrary to earlier notions of primal motivating drive such as Freud's *eros*, human drives occupy a range of behaviors which do not all reduce to the libidinal pleasure of sexual reproduction, and that "various behaviors associated with control and mastery—such as curiosity, interest, exploration; the pursuit of skills, the relishing of challenges—need not be seen as derivatives of thwarted libidinal sexuality."[229] He argues that humans are possessed by the drive to leave traces and that those traces may be inscribed as cultural legacy or passed on biologically to our progeny. "The two are not reducible to each other," he writes, "but are equally important motives that have become ingrained in our natures."[230] Those scholars who have approached the issue of intrinsic value tend to explain reasons for enacting intrinsically valuable behaviors in terms of their instrumentality. This argument buttresses Sutton-Smith's assertions regarding the rhetorics of play. Csikszentmihalyi states that such efforts tend to ignore the emotional experience of the people enacting the behaviors, "yet individuals constantly evaluate their quality of experience and often will decide to continue or terminate a given

[228] Ibid., 228.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.

behavioral sequence based on their evaluations."[231]

Concern around the practical application of flow and critical fun to entertainment experiences, including theatre, might be traced to the immersive, attention-consuming state that flow induces. Csikszentmihalyi arrived at his understanding of the flow state after conducting "extensive interviews with hundreds of rock climbers, chess players, athletes, and artists"[232] out of which he was able to identify common traits of a particular type of experience which these individuals "enjoyed so much that they were willing to go to great lengths to experience it again."[233] These traits, which Csikszentmihalyi marks as the subjective characteristic of flow, include the total involvement of the participant in the activity "to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself."

Csikszentmihalyi's emphasis on total involvement echoes Huizinga's description of play activity as requiring the "total engrossment" of the player. This may raise a concern among some theatre scholars that *fun* as a theoretical and practical approach to theatre undermine the efficacy of theatre as a medium for cultural and social critique. Clearly, criticism could result from a perception that the flow state creates an engrossing experience that causes a player to foreclose on their critical awareness. In digital game culture, within which *fun* has entered the discourse in a meaningful way, it makes sense for scholars to debate the ethics of utilizing game mechanics to engineer

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[231] Ibid., 233.
[232] Ibid., 230.
[233] Ibid.

flow experiences inducing repetitive play and player loyalty (aka, addiction). Within the multi-billion-dollar industry that produces objects like massively multiplayer role-playing games and optically immersive digital realities, such a loss of social awareness and reflection ought to elicit concern. In this context, games are mediated by intransitive computational systems, designed as commodities and controlled by corporate entities driven to turn a profit. When 4chan trolls and "magic circle jerks"[234] try to justify their misogynistic behaviors as a defense of their right to have *fun* — which many did during Gamergate — they earn the scores of critical rebukes that dominated discourse in the game studies community. However, the field of theatre has not developed a rich discourse around the idea of fun. Locating where fun occurs, how it occurs in theatre, and considering the *experience of fun* in the game of theatre can elucidate an understanding of the "engrossing experience" of gameplay not as a means of foreclosing social consciousness but as a way to understand how players embody experiences which lead to socially aware reflection.

The 2015 Metis Arts of the Off-West End production of *World Factory* provides an excellent example of a theatre production that successfully utilizes *fun* as both an intrinsic motivator and aesthetic material for social commentary. *World Factory* invited audience members to step into the role of factory owners in an interactive theatre experience mapping the textile industry and the economic relationship between the UK and China. Metis Arts describes *World Factory* as "a game in which the audience

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[234] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), Ch.6.

works together to face the pressures and decisions of global manufacture and trade. Immersing the audience in the stories behind contemporary consumer capitalism, we follow the process through which the Chinese textile trade serves western demands, with the choices, trade-offs and imbalances we meet along the way."[235] Players formed into teams that collaborated to make choices that impacted the narrative structure of the story, and as the game progressed, these choices confronted players with the fact that they were very likely wearing the commodities around which the "real world" version of their performed ethical compromises play out. Theatre critic Matt Truman described *World Factory* as "one of the guiltiest pleasures going…The sense of competition carries you away, and the game is great fun as a result, but there are no prizes for principles." Henry Hitchings of the Evening Standard confirms that:

> It's easy to be seduced by the idea that winning means generating the largest profit you can. But this is a show that tests the relationship between our competitive impulses and other factors. How far will ethical and environmental considerations impinge on commercial ones? Wrestling with this question, against the clock, makes for a richly absorbing experience.[236]

Adding to this, Lucy Brooks writing for *Culture Whisper* describes how her immersive and fun *World Factory* experience gave rise to significant reflection on a serious social issue:

> Teams begin with the best moral intentions but as the pressure kicks in, get swept away with the competitive game element. In the name of profit, players soon vote for child labour, bribes and unfair pay…Not only does this innovative game structure make for a compelling evening, it negotiates a fine balance of exploring real issues, without feeling preachy. We weren't told to care about the

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[235] "World Factory." Metis Arts, June 3, 2020. http://metisarts.co.uk/projects/world-factory.
[236] "World Factory," Metis Arts, June 3, 2020, http://metisarts.co.uk/projects/world-factory.

> workers' conditions, we were made to care. And this is where World Factory shines as a piece of theatre. The traditional boundaries between audience and subject matter are smashed: we are implicated in the web of the show.[237]

Although Jacques Ranciere articulates the need for audiences to practice critical distance in theatre, it may be overly restrictive to suggest that a theatre player must achieve critical consciousness *during the performance* for the theatre to act as a medium for cultural or political critique. The theatre experience includes the *preparation for* and *reflection upon* the event of theatre, and players who are unable to muster critical consciousness during the event because they are engrossed in flow may still interpret the social critique while reflecting upon the event.

### 3.3 - Radical Fun

The concept of radical fun posits that the phenomenon associated with the word fun is actually two discrete but inextricably related affective outcomes. We might regard this bifurcation of fun as the *promise of fun* — or simply *fun* — and *radical fun*. Both the promise of fun and radical fun produce the enjoyment associated with fun. The promise of fun motivates play behavior and provides a pleasant affective experience. Fun happens when an individual recognizes the presence of a game and marshals their attention to begin scanning the field for relevant cues. The player makes an implicit or explicit declaration of their intent to initiate or engage in gameplay,

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[237] Lucy Brooks, "Review: World Factory, the Young Vic," Culture Whisper, 2015, https://www.culturewhisper.com/r/things_to_do/preview/4635.

focusing their anticipatory attention on the game. In *Group Juggle* the players assemble in a circle; in conventional theatre the audience take their seats, and the curtain rises[238]. Players then recognize action opportunities in patterns of environmental stimuli such as game rules, theatre conventions, and other affordances that evoke a sense of challenge and convert *attention* to *interest*. Recognizing a game initiates the process of flow. A player throws you the ball, challenging you to make a catch; the stage lights come up on a scene rich with sensual cues, challenging you to recognize or interpret the underlying fable of the narrative. The recognition and establishment of the meta structure of the game is the first successful performance of relevant cues. This is similar to the concept of lusory attitude and is organized by and related to perceived action opportunities that develop the player's reasonable expectation to experience fun. You anticipate that if you continue to make the catch and throw the ball to the next player, you will have fun; if you continue to successfully recognize and interpret the fable, you will have fun.

The anticipation of play establishes the *promise of fun* as the necessary temporal prerequisite for *radical fun*. The conversion of attention to interest occurs at the induction of the promise of fun; people first recognize the promise of fun as they begin to experience the pleasures associated with play behaviors, before the deep experience of complete engagement. *Radical fun* is the full obtainment of the promise of fun. It is the playful submersion into an optimal *flow state,* at which point the player becomes fully engrossed in the play activity, foreclosing self-consciousness,

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[238] These days term "curtain rises" is a metaphor for the opening conventions of a show, and rarely actually includes a show curtain rising.

developing intuition, and performing spontaneity.

The following sections unpack the phenomenon of fun, situating radical fun adjacent to jouissance and to Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow as a starting point for a granular examination of fun as a motivating physiological drive for adaptive behavior. This section of the dissertation examines relevant theories from several scholarly fields that help articulate the levers and pulleys that make fun happen and how the experience works on the players' bodies.

### 3.4 - Jouissance to Flow

To understand radical fun, it helps to situate it in relation to *jouissance* and *flow*; concepts also used to describe states of positive affect, occurring when an individual becomes fully absorbed in an activity, resulting in a pleasurable or joyful experience. Where jouissance occurs at the potential or limit of pleasurable activity, it is understood that flow may occur not only at the limit, but also along a continuum or "channel" of relevant activities that form a causal progression towards the limit. Examining jouissance as a particular type of flow experience differentiated from other flow experiences by the intensity of the affect establishes a framework for situating *radical fun* adjacent to both jouissance and optimal flow as the apogee of a playful experience, generating the potential for personal growth and transformation. The *promise of fun* — or simply fun — is conceptually adjacent to plaisir, and akin to "micro-flow." *Radical fun*, therefore, tracks not only the intensity of the play experience but marks an

emergent phenomenon resulting from skilled, intuitive play.

The concept of jouissance comes out of the scholarly tradition of psychoanalysis, where it was articulated into discourse by thinkers like Jacques Lacan. The word jouissance comes from the French and shares word origins with the English words joy (enjoy, enjoyment, joyful). Lacan used the word to describe a particular type of psychological experience resulting from the performance of a pleasurable activity that transgresses the iterative physical and social limit or boundary of behaviors associated with that activity. Lacan associated jouissance with ecstatic, orgasmic experiences — often about transgressive sexual experiences — and argued that the transgression transformed the experience from pleasure to ecstatic pain.[239] While Lacan's, notion of the transformation of the reward stimulus (pleasure) to a negative stimulus (pain) points to a transgression of a boundary or limit at which the experience violates a normative social order. This violation is simultaneously the precondition for ecstatic aspects of jouissance and its transfiguration into an experience of pain.

Other thinkers have taken up aspects of jouissance, notably Roland Barthes, who mentions jouissance in "The Pleasure of Text." For Barthes, jouissance stood apart from a more ordinary positive affect which he calls *plaisir*. The Barthean concepts of plaisir and jouissance relate to a system of signification constituting the normative social context that Barthes named the *studium.* Plaisir is the affective phenomenon resulting from the harmonious execution of actions that establish — and are

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[239] Jacques Lacan and Bruce Fink, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (New York, NY: Norton, 1999), Book XX.

established by — the studium. These actions are the reiterative means of signification within the studium, reproducing and buttressing established norms and expected outcomes, and do not alter the "phase space" of the existing studium. An actor performing within the studium practices the articulation and reiteration of known and knowable signification. They reinforce the existing order — the existing studium. They buttress the conventional. Reiterative actions that result in plaisir may approach but do not transgress the threshold of the studium.

Jouissance occurs as the result of what Barthes calls the *punctum* or puncturing of the phase space boundary of normative social behavior. The punctum is the puncturing of the membrane of the social body. Punctum occurs as a result of extraordinary and transgressive action on the actor's part. The punctum marks that which exists or moves outside the studium — outside of cultural articulation — and which is not tolerated by the studium. Punctum disrupts order and iterates rather than reiterates. As the studium does not tolerate an unarticulated occurrence, the actor cannot sustain the occurrent action without disrupting the studium by re-inscribing the rules or reiterating the action that precipitated the punctum. A reiteration of the punctum results in "creativity," the creation of new knowledge within the studium.

At the punctum, the "grain," or materiality, of the action pushes through the constraint imposed by the studium moving from iterative to inventive action, and potentially expanding the phase space of the studium. If, for example, the body is the grain of the dance, the studium comprises the rules or form particular to that type of dance and the full range of movement the body may perform within the context of the

form. Plaisir then rises out of harmonious execution of form, and jouissance occurs when the body — working from the studium — transcends reiterative form, and "when the materiality of the means of signification interrupts meaning."[240] Like Lacan, Barthes described jouissance as having transcendent and euphoric aspects, but establishes plaisir as the antecedent experience which, while still pleasurable, does not produce affective response as intense as jouissance.

Jouissance "designates a type of extraordinary sensation which derives from the moment before the human child leaves its state of comfortable bliss."[241] It presents the concept of a pre-linguistic state of awareness in the infant human resulting from a lack of differentiation with its mother. The infant's perception of similitude with its mother extended through the mother to the rest of the infant's perceived universe, resulting in a blissful state of perceived universal connectedness. This blissful state evaporates with the development of language and the subsequent conceptualization of the self as distinct from the environment but may be recovered in fits and starts during certain limit-experiences — notably, sexual experience and orgasm — or when an individual disrupts their relationship with a normalized order in a particular, pleasurable way. "Jouissance is often thought of as a pleasure which operates particularly at the level of the body's materiality," write Gilbert and Pearson, "being associated with that moment which is characterized at once by pre-linguistic experience and by the child's

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[240] Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (London: Routledge, 2006), 64.
[241] Ibid.

effectively unmediated relation to the mother's body."[242]

These limit-experiences produce a feeling of jouissance that recovers a nostalgic awareness of pre-linguistic bliss blended with an accompanying pain. The pain rises out of the necessarily brief occurrences of jouissance and the feeling of nostalgic loss it engenders in the actor. The sense of loss comes from a deeply engrained memory of our pre-linguistic state that — when performing within normative bounds — remains obfuscated by conscious thought. During our pre-linguistic state, we dwell in a more-or-less uninterrupted state of Jouissance, which arises from our lack of differentiation from our mother. The occurrence of the perception of language permanently and irrevocably inscribes a sense of self and differentiation from our environment that constitutes our sense of normative social order.

One potential problem with the psychoanalytic view of the pre-linguistic self is that it presumes the occurrence of an experience in a subject who, by definition, lacks the language to verify or describe the experience of undifferentiated jouissance. Additionally, it begs the question: what constitutes language formation, and when an individual is capable of expressing an individual need, does this not constitute a degree of self-awareness? One must answer how a baby's cry differs from a linguistic form of communication. Although a cry may seem primal and unsophisticated, it is a proven vocal strategy infants utilize as a tool for communicating needs. It is possible to discern an infant's needs, to an extent, by differences in the vocalization of a cry. The notion of a pre-linguistic state is further complicated and challenged by a series of

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[242] Ibid.

recent research projects studying the cries of babies. Using computer-assisted sound analysis, researchers in Europe studied the cries of babies born to French and German mothers.[243] They discovered that the first post-natal cries of French babies were noticeably different from the first post-natal cries of German babies. This research and other adjacent research draws the conclusion that the fetus begins to learn the sound of language from inside the mother's womb and that a newborn's cries contained these learned sounds[244], suggesting a nascent awareness of self may exist alongside nascent awareness of environment.

Nevertheless, the notion of a pre-linguistic state offers a conceptual ideal that has been taken up by other thinkers across several fields, including important theatre practitioners whose work in the mid-twentieth century continues to influence theatrical conventions in the Western traditions. Significant theatre practices emerged from this notion of a pre-linguistic state, including Via Negativa (Grotowski) and Neutral Mask (Lecoq), many of which suggest that the result of inscription in the post-linguistic state is a corruption of the body (and by extension, the mind) of the player (both actor and audience). Such interpretations frame the pre-linguistic state as something akin to a prelapsarian state — infused with a Judeo-Christian notion of "the fall" that occurs at the advent of the knowledge of self — and equate occurrence of jouissance in theatre practice to *spontaneity* occurring during the transcendence of conventional techniques

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[243] Christine Moon, Hugo Lagercrantz, and Patricia K Kuhl, "Language Experienced in Utero Affects Vowel Perception after Birth: A Two-Country Study," *Acta Paediatrica* 102, no. 2 (September 2013): pp. 156-160, https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.12098.

[244] Eino Partanen et al., "Learning-Induced Neural Plasticity of Speech Processing before Birth," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 37 (2013): pp. 15145-15150, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1302159110.

inscribed in the body of the actor. "Some students conceive of it as a state of self-forgetting," writes physical theatre scholar Mark Evans, "where the jouissance of the performance seems to by-pass the conscious application of exercises and techniques"[245]

Evans' description of his students' jouissance experience during practice — a lack of self-consciousness and by-passing procedural awareness — bears resemblance to dispositional conditions of flow. "For flow to be maintained, one cannot reflect on the act of awareness itself," writes Csikszentmihalyi, "The moment awareness is split so as to perceive the activity from 'outside,' the flow is interrupted." Viewing an action "from the outside," as Csikszentmihalyi frames it, is the act of perceiving the self in the act of performing the action, or in common shorthand, being self-conscious. Self-awareness or self-consciousness results from a particular mental process[246] which, in addition to proprioception and kinesthetic awareness, includes processes for measuring "appropriateness" of action within situational contexts. These processes of self-consciousness are part of a feedback system critical to the processes of associative learning that become aroused by the perception of error and are specifically keyed to enhance the perception of error when aroused. The perception of error generates negative valence towards performing behavior that produced the error. The negative valence may be quelled either by avoiding performance of the erroneous behavior or by correcting aspects of the behavior that

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[245] Mark Evans, *Movement Training for the Modern Actor* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 163.
[246] David R. Vago and David A. Silbersweig, "Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, and Self-Transcendence (s-Art): A Framework for Understanding the Neurobiological Mechanisms of Mindfulness," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 6 (2012), https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00296.

are perceived to be the cause of the error. Regardless of the action — whether to stop performing the action or to adjust behaviors leading to the error in the action — the need for an active decision is discursive (i.e., against the flow) and assuming that the activity which produced the error was also the activity through which the actor was moving into, or had already achieved a state of flow, then a cessation of the activity interrupts the flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi writes, "Flow is difficult to maintain for any length of time without at least momentary interruptions."[247] When an actor persists in the flow-inducing behavior, Csikszentmihalyi calls these interruptions "interludes (from the Latin inter ludes, 'between plays')…when questions flash through the actor's mind such as 'Am I doing well?' or 'What am I doing here?' or 'Should I be doing this?',"[248] preventing the actor from experiencing full engagement.

The cognitive equivalent of an actor's "full engagement" described by Csikszentmihalyi resembles phenomenological aspects of the autonomous stage of *procedural learning*. Cognitive theorists use the concept of *procedural learning* to describe the process of developing an intrinsic memory (aka., muscle memory) within the individual body/mind necessary for the acquisition of new skills. Cognitive scientist Paul Fitts' influential model for skill acquisition[249] describes the learner moving through three distinct phases: Cognitive, Associative, and Autonomous. Similarly, a

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[247] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 138.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Paul M. Fitts, "The Information Capacity of the Human Motor System in Controlling the Amplitude of Movement.," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 47, no. 6 (1954): pp. 381-391, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0055392.

simplified model of skill acquisition[250] proposed by Stuart and Hubert Dreyfus, researching at the University of California, Berkeley, suggests a progressive sequence of skill learning moving from unskilled through Novice, Competency, Proficiency, and Expertise towards Mastery.  These models suggest that as a learner acquires a skill, they spend less attention executing individual components of the skill, until the skill becomes "automatic" and the performer enters an *absorbed state where self-reflection falls away*, and they intuitively and holistically integrate the skill into the situation of a particular performance.  Attentional resources, which are finite but renewable, are fully engaged in the performance of the activity.  This leaves no cognitive "room" to direct attention towards processes of self-awareness.  Such processes will then drop below the threshold of awareness unless compelled back into awareness (usually through the occurrence and perception of error).  Provided the performance activity continues to "flow" without the occurrence of errors significant enough to trigger self-awareness the mental process of self-consciousness will remain below the threshold of awareness.

Writing about his practical experience as a theatre director, Peter Lichtenfels equates *embodiment* with procedural learning schema.  After working through the challenges of directing a full cast of actors with whom he did not share common language proficiency, Lichtenfels describes his actors in the early phase of the rehearsal process as "rigid," "one tempo" "snatching at breath" and speaking with

[250] Stuart E. Dreyfus and Hubert L. Dreyfus, "A Five-Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Directed Skill Acquisition," January 1980, https://doi.org/10.21236/ada084551.

"generalized tone."[251] Models for procedural learning demonstrate that learners in the early stages of skill acquisition are preoccupied with dividing the skill into isolated parts and organizing them into a schema. This preoccupation with the "parts" of the skill command all of the learner's attention, leave little room for *intuition* or experimentation with the skill, and subvert the conditions for flow.

As learners begin to embody a skill, they learn to sort through the schema and stimuli intuitively, dedicating less and less attention to executing subordinate skills and freeing the mind to experiment with the execution of the skill as a situated, holistic, and absorbed embodiment — a sort of improvisation, as performance scholar Lynnette Hunter suggests. For artists to engage in this level of improvisation, Hunter writes, they must be "highly skilled, with exceptional disciplinary experience from which to draw."[252] Similarly, Lichtenfels writes that actors in his rehearsal space "do not go to each scene to perfect repetition, but to prepare the body to forget" so that they "can play and transform as the need arises, all in front of an audience."[253] In a sense, Lichtenfels' skilled actor is Hunter's skilled artist engaged in improvisation. Both are examples of the learner fulfilling the process of procedural learning when the skill becomes autonomic or "forgotten," and the performer is free to play or improvise within their performance.

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[251] Peter Lichtenfels, "Embodiments," in *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies*, ed. Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 131.
[252] Lynette Hunter, "Valuing Performance/Practice as Academic Knowledge.," in *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies*, ed. Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 202.
[253] Lichtenfels, 132.

According to yet another model for procedural learning proposed by Dee Tadlock, skill acquisition requires a declared vision or goal. The "predictive cycle" model presumes a similar progression towards mastery as the other procedural learning models, but it differs from the Fitts and Dreyfus models by suggesting that the learner must focus on the conditions of the desired outcome to form the skill.[254] Feedback articulates where the practice fails to achieve those outcomes. The more clearly the outcome is articulated for the learner, the higher the efficacy of the training.

Lichtenfels transformed the actors' performance through repetitious practice focused on progressing towards an outcome or *limit.* "My understanding of how I work with actors on embodiment is to visit, revisit, and keep revisiting all moments," writes Lichtenfels, "constantly asking questions, always interrogating." The interrogation acts as a cybernetic process through which Lichtenfels delivers feedback, correcting errors in the actors' reiteration of his vision, and becomes the means by which Lichtenfels sculpts a rehearsal process to approach a mastery state in which actors begin to perform intuitively. Performing at the limit, the actors work synergistically together within the context of the performance to enter into what Bertalanffy called the "flowing balance" (or in German "Fliessgleichgewicht").[255] For Lichtenfels, this stage of the performance process is marked by the actor in flow who "breathes" on stage, enabling the audience to "breathe" in response. This echoes

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[254] Dee Tadlock and Rhonda Stone, *Read Right: Coaching Your Child to Excellence in Reading* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2005).
[255] Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2019), 101.

Brecht's assertion in A *Short Organum for Theatre* that an audience will only have fun if the actor they are watching is having fun.[256] It also suggests a communal dimension to jouissance and invites a comparison to what Victor Turner calls *ideological communitas.* "'Flow' may induce communitas, and communitas 'flow'" writes Turner, "Here it is not teamwork in flow that is quintessential, but *'being'* together, with being the operative word, not doing."[257] In this state, actors embody an "energy greater than in daily life" that Lichtenfels explicitly declares the motivating value of participating in theatre, both as an actor and an audience member.

It is not difficult to imagine that Csikszentmihalyi — working to develop the nascent field of positive psychology — was influenced in the development of his concept of flow by Barthes concepts of plaisir and jouissance. In his article "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," Csikszentmihalyi argues that it is useful to distinguish between positive experiences, separating those that are pleasurable (plaisir) from those that are enjoyable (jouissance). "Pleasure," he argues, "is the good feeling that comes from satisfying homeostatic needs," whereas people experience enjoyment "when they break through the limits of homeostasis — when they do something that stretches them beyond what they were."[258] Like Barthes, Csikszentmihalyi describes pleasure as the result of behaviors performed within a limit — a homeostatic behavior that

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[256] Bertolt Brecht et al., *Brecht on Theatre* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 26.
[257] Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology." *Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies,* 60, no. 3 (1974) Rice University: https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63159, 79.
[258] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 293.

maintains an existing order. This concept of pleasure is like the *promise of fun* that a player experiences as they negotiate in-game challenges that focus their interest but do not push them to the limit of their potential. In *Group Juggle*, perhaps the group has settled comfortably into a pattern of five balls that allows for a low flow level without demanding full attention engagement. It may be a little fun, but at this level, the challenge only maintains homeostasis in the ecology of group skill. Perhaps pleasure results from successful interpretation of relatively simple narremes that confirm expectations inherent to genre, style, or convention for the theatre audience. Nothing is invented, no new knowledge or skill is acquired, but the experience is still pleasurable.

However, like Barthes, Csikszentmihalyi uses *enjoyment* to describe the experience that results from puncturing or "breaking through" the limit maintained by homeostasis. Enjoyment results from allostatic behaviors that challenge or grow the limit — the juggling group push their limit by taking on a sixth or seventh ball, demanding full engagement from all the players, and priming conditions for optimal flow for players in the group. For Csikszentmihalyi, the important phenomenological aspects of *pleasure* and *enjoyment* not only included the positive affect resulting from felicitously performed behavior, but also the drive generated in anticipation of the positive affect.

Critically, Csikszentmihalyi argued that both pleasure and enjoyment were intrinsic motivators. "Pleasure and enjoyment are the names we give to those autotelic experiences that are their own reward," he writes. While both generate positive

motivational salience, they exist as distinct traits which support different adaptive behaviors in humans. Pleasure reinforces existing behavioral paradigms that have proven — often over ancestral time — to be efficacious survival behaviors. Enjoyment reinforces a drive to learn, grow, and adapt behaviors to respond to persistently unstable variables in our environment that present new threats to, and opportunities for survival. Enjoyment, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is a result of activities that induce *flow*.[259]

Nevertheless, it strains credulity, to suggest that the enjoyment an audience member experiences when they become fully absorbed and in-flow during a theatre performance — or that *Group Juggle* game player experiences when they find themselves in-the-groove — is somehow on-par with the ecstatic, orgasmic jouissance of breaking through the limit of the known into the wild-space of our pre-linguistic bliss. Pleasure and enjoyment do not make a tidy binary, and like many things, they are but concepts that attempt to organize complex experiences that occur along a continuum. Similarly, flow experiences vary from fully engrossing and transformational mind-expanding peak flow experiences to subtle and even mundane mind-wandering micro-flow experiences. While it is important to understand that Csikszentmihalyi positions the flow experience as an optimal experience that occurs at the apotheosis human behavior, he also acknowledges that flow occurs far more often in mundane moments, and that we often engage in activities that generate "micro-flow."[260]

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[259] Ibid., 294.
[260] Ibid., 12.

While phenomenologically similar to, if less intense than optimal flow experiences, micro-flow experiences accompany homeostatic behavior and compare to Barthes plaisir. Micro-flow experiences, while pleasurable, motivate reiterative behavior and by extension buttress established paradigms. Like all degrees of flow, micro-flow occurs with the felicitous performance skill in equilibrium with the difficulty of the present challenge, however, unlike with optimal flow, both the level of skill and the challenge are considered to be "low."

The original model for flow developed by Csikszentmihalyi in 1975 (see Figure 22) demonstrates an "actor" (or subject) entering a flow state "when perceived opportunities for action are in balance with the actor's perceived skills."[261] Further research, however, suggested a more complex formula for mapping flow, and demonstrated that activities that were perceived to be low-challenge, low-skill did not generate an optimal flow experience. Although his initial model has disseminated through multiple academic fields and often shows up in popular discourse, Csikszentmihalyi adapted his original model to reflect more recent research, creating a new model (see Figure 23) to demonstrate that "flow is expected to occur when individuals perceive greater opportunities for action than they encounter on average in their daily lives, and have skills adequate to engage them."[262]

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[261] Ibid., 248.
[262] Ibid., 247-248.

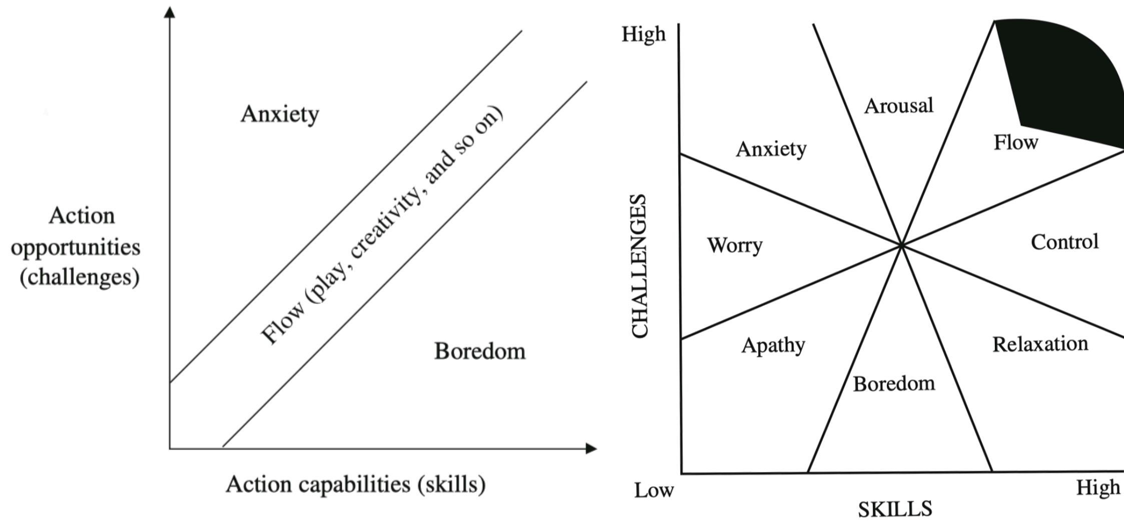


Figure 22 (left) and Figure 23 (right): Csikszentmihalyi's original and updated model of flow

Implicitly, the new model suggests the occurrence of flow becomes more likely as the abscissa of both skill and challenge approach the limit of the model and does not occur at all when the abscissae locate nearer the zero-point of the model. It recommends an understanding of flow as the result of the performance of an aggregate of skills rather than a single skill or behavior, and the notion of "low" or "high" skills must be understood in reference to the psycho-physical demand placed on the individual. In other words, a "low" skill aggregate would produce a low demand on the psycho-physical resources of the actor, whereas a "high" skill places a greater demand on their psycho-physical resources. For example, if an able-bodied adult responds to an action opportunity that only requires the skill of *walking*, they will only place a low demand on their psycho-physical resources and will not enter flow. Similarly, most able-bodied individuals can perform *sitting still* without putting more than a low demand on their resources. However, when an action opportunity demands

an aggregate of skills — for example, walking *in a complex memorized pattern* (as actors do when they perform their blocking), or sitting still *while observing and decoding visual puzzles* (as does the attentive theatre audience) — it is possible that the aggregate demand is “high” enough that the individual may enter flow. Within the context of the activity, the aggregate of skills forms into a single *skill complex* that the actor performs simultaneously which increases the summative demand placed on the actor’s psycho-physical resources.

This accounts for Csikszentmihalyi’s assertion that individuals take up the performance of micro-flow inducing behaviors — like doodling in a notebook during a boring lecture, or daydreaming while washing dishes — when they are involved in extrinsically motivated behaviors that do not require their undivided attention, but that nevertheless compel involuntary focusing of attention to a “limited stimulus field.” I have observed, for example, that skilled players of *Group Juggle* will add “flourishes” like passing the ball behind their back, standing in “tree pose,” or dancing in place, voluntarily adding to their individual *skill complex* when the collective group skill mandates a level of difficulty that the skilled individual is not challenged by. In these instances, when the actor voluntarily performs a micro-flow behavior in aggregate with the involuntary behavior, they place a greater demand on their psycho-cognitive resources, potentiating or increasing the likelihood that they will enter flow.

For Csikszentmihalyi, the *willingness* to attend to the flow-inducing behavior establishes the potential for flow. When environmental or internal circumstances prevent an individual from *voluntarily* focusing their attention, they will not enter flow.

Sustained over time, such circumstances may even cause that individual to suffer from "flow deprivation." "The inability to focus attention voluntarily leads to psychic disruption," writes Csikszentmihalyi "and eventually to psychopathology."[263]

Implicit in the imperative of *willing* attention is the critical role of *attentional sovereignty* — not only to the potential for flow, but for the mental well-being of the individual performing flow-inducing skills. The actor *cannot* enter flow without the perception that they are attending to a particular stimulus field of their own volition. However, by voluntarily attending to a flow-inducing procedure that has been bundled into a *skill complex* that otherwise demanded involuntary attention, the entire skill complex may be performed by the actor while exercising *attentional sovereignty.*

This reveals that underlying, requisite cognitive resource involved in the phenomenon of flow is *attention,* and it is useful to consider *attention* is the radix of "skill" in Csikszentmihalyi's model for flow. While all skill requires an investment of attention and the degree of the complexity of a skill or skill complex is measured by the attention it demands, in its conventional mode, theatre places a particularly intense demand on the attention of the audience and promises powerful affective rewards for audience members who maintain concentration. Indeed, "optimal experiences are made possible by an unusually intense concentration of attention on a limited stimulus field,"[264] therefore the potential for flow may be understood to occur when the player voluntarily engages an action opportunity presenting a challenge in equilibrium with the demand to their attentional capacity.

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[263] Ibid., 11.
[264] Ibid., 7.

### 3.5 - Attention, Interest, and Creativity

The art of the performer, according to master illusionist Henry Hay, resides within their ability to first seize the *attention* of their audience and then transmute this attention into interest, for “attention enforced without interest is a fine definition of boredom.”[265] The actor plays the ebb and flow of audience interest and attention along narrative arcs in the peaks and valleys of rising conflict, climax, and denouement. Attentional control plays a significant role in actor training — from Stanislavski’s “circle of concentration“ to cultivating “soft focus” in Viewpoints - beginning with the actor’s ability to regulate their attention and interest. Attention plays a significant role in creativity. It is, to Viola Spolin, the essence of spontaneity — the iterative performance, that punctures the known of Barthes studium to elucidate the unknown. It is, therefore, no surprise that the game of theatre — along with rehearsal, practice, and preparation for performance — makes particular demands on processes related to attention.

Performance psychologists have conducted numerous research projects attempting to develop or verify theories of attention as a finite, but renewable, human resource and the role attention plays in performance. In *Sports Psychology: Concepts and Applications,* Richard Cox describes several fundamental mechanisms — widely accepted within the field — that “explain the relationship between attention and

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[265] Henry Hay and Audrey Alley, *The Amateur Magician's Handbook* (New York, NY, NY: Signet, 1983), 2.

performance."[266] The dynamic relationship between *controlled* and *automatic processing* forms a procedural linchpin in mechanisms relating attention to performance. Cox explains that when a performer attempts to acquire a new skill, they must utilize *controlled processing* to sustain a degree of conscious awareness of the execution of their performance. When we practice (perform) a skill (aka, process), the performance demands a portion of our *process capacity* — comprised primarily of our attentional field — and the attentional demand significantly limits the human capability to "multi-task" additional skills requiring controlled processing. Csikszentmihalyi agrees that humans have a limited *processing capacity* — variably referred to as cognitive load or working memory — within which our *attention* is a finite but renewable resource. "Recent research confirms that when we search for information either in the environment or in memory," Csikszentmihalyi writes, "we must use up a certain amount of this limited capacity."[267] However, if an actor is persistently motivated to sustain a practice, they will eventually bundle the constituent sub-skills of a practiced skill, converting the process from a controlled process to an *automated process*, requiring less attention to execute and unburdening our process cap[268]acity.[269] The phenomena associated with these processes forms such a foundation of human awareness that it is not surprising that other fields have articulated the process as well: from *chunking* (game studies), to *working/motor*

[266] Richard H. Cox, *Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications* (McGraw-Hill, 2012), 139.
[267] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 161.
[268] Cox, 138.
[269] Ibid.

*memory* (cognitive studies), to *grokking* (science fiction), the concept remains consistent.

It is the question of how we motivate our practice; Csikszentmihalyi argues, that laying the foundations for experiencing flow instantiates the first prerequisite of creativity. Attention compelled by *extrinsic motivation* has the potential to stifle creativity and potentiate a disharmonious practice. However, attention compelled by *intrinsic motivation* develops into *interest* and curiosity. It is not a mere casual curiosity that leads to creativity, but "an unusually acute curiosity"[270] toward something in which the actor has developed an interest. The sustainment of intrinsically motivated attention upon a particular problem, or challenge, at the limit of the performer's capabilities potentiates iterative *relevant* behaviors which, in relation to the broader social context in which the performance situates, form the conditions for creativity.

Csikszentmihalyi proposes a model for creativity consisting of requisite traits embodied in the creative individual — *interest, perseverance,* and *dissatisfaction* — adding that *social context* provides the necessary evaluative system for inducting the iterative behavior into collective human knowledge.[271] Csikszentmihalyi speculated that the true abundance of human wealth comes not from their material resources, but from the collective knowledge and skill in human minds. "But to select, decode, store and retrieve such wealth," he laments, "information must pass through a processing system that cannot handle more than a few bits or chunks of information at any given

[270] Csikszentmihalyi, 162.
[271] Csikszentmihalyi, 162-165.

time."

Learning and creativity must be understood in response to the environment. "If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he chooses to learn" writes Viola Spolin in *Improvisation of the Theatre,* "and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach him everything it has to teach."[272] An environment only "permits" to the extent that occurrences in the environment will stimulate particular patterns of information in the mind of the learner. Given the enormous amount of sensory data available in the environment at any give moment, and the incredible complexity of skills and instincts often taken for granted, *attention* provides the cognitive function that allows humans to organize and parse symbolic meaning from internal and external sensation directly relevant to the motive to perform an action or skill. Attention "is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought," writes William James, "It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others."[273]

Although finite, Spolin suggests that individuals possess situational dispositions that allow them to utilize attention with greater efficacy. This ability results from the individual's capacity to "experience deeply," which she describes as the ability to attend to relevant sensory input at a high resolution. Individuals who possess the ability to experience deeply possess "talent." While, in the common parlance, "talent" references a person's natural-born ability to perform a particular skill or set of skills,

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[272] Viola Spolin, Carol Sills, and Paul Sills, *Improvisation for the Theater: a Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Northwestern University Press, 2000), 3.
[273] William James, "Principles of Psychology," Classics in the History of Psychology -- James (1890) Chapter 11, accessed May 31, 2022, https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/prin11.htm.

Spolin argues that talent relates to an individual's ability to attend to sensory data relevant to the performance of a particular skill at a high resolution. "What is called talented behavior is simply a greater individual capacity for experiencing," she writes. "Experience is penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive."[274]

Spolin valorizes intuition, positioning it as the release of tacit knowledge that occurs at moments of crisis when performers "transcend the limitation of the familiar, courageously enter the area of the unknown, and release momentary genius."[275] Spolin's "limitation of the familiar" and Csikszentmihalyi model of creativity evokes Barthes studium and punctum, and imagines the iterative performance accompanied by jouissance as the "release of genius." Moving beyond the known requires a performance of intellectual and physical skill. However, it most importantly requires cultivating an *intuitive* perception that results from the mastery of skill or development of "talent." Imbued with intuition, the actor moves beyond tacit knowledge into the un-traversed territory of spontaneity and creativity. Spontaneity "creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from the handed-down frames of reference,"[276] allowing the actor to perform outside the studium.

The transcendent, intuitive state occurs when the actor has bundled the procedures of the skill and performs the skill as an *automatic process*. The actor no longer needs to perform the skill as a controlled process and feels free from the frames or limits that

[274] Spolin, 3.
[275] Spolin, 4.
[276] Ibid.

nevertheless continue to influence the execution of the behavior. These are the conditions of spontaneity, in which the actor is simultaneously outside the limit and in relation to the limit of the studium. The frame is still present and still important to the experience, but it is not felt as a "rule" or constraint because the actor moves freely within the constraints. One "feels" a constraint when they become conscious of it acting upon their behavior as one does when they involved in *controlled processing.* Before an actor has memorized their lines, for example, they must continuously return to their script, or when they are still learning their blocking, they may need to stop to recall their next move rather than simply moving without thought. Until these processes are committed to memory, the actor cannot — as Spolin would say — play within the form.

A frame or constraint acts as a directive control when a novice internalizes a skill, and in a re-directive way, when an actor commits a significant error while performing the skill. An "error" in this sense occurs when a performer executes a relevant skill imperfectly or in response to irrelevant environmental cues. The actor performs a speech at the right moment but botches the line, or says the line perfectly, but in response to the wrong cue. A player's ability to discern relevancy relates to their mastery (aka, talent) of the skill they perform and both influences and are influenced by psychological and physiological arousal.

Performance psychologist D.M. Landers developed a model demonstrating the relationship between a performer's arousal and their attentional field.[277] Landers'

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[277] Daniel M. Landers, "The Arousal-Performance Relationship Revisited," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 51, no. 1 (1980): pp. 77-90, https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.1980.10609276.

model shows that individuals in states of low arousal (tired, bored, or uninterested) have a general focus and are more likely to attend to task-irrelevant cues in addition to task-relevant cues. Therefore, low arousal decreases a performers ability to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant cues and increases their distractibility. This is evident in *Group Juggle* when the challenge level is too low for the group. Players will tend to chat or joke with each other taking focus away from the core tasks of the game and dropping balls that should have otherwise been easy to catch.

On the other hand, performers at a high level of arousal (nervousness, anxiety, or excitement) will tend to over-focus, narrowing their attentional field to the extent that they gate-out task-relevant cues, missing out on information critical to efficacious performance. This phenomenon is evident in *Group Juggle* when the group is playing at or over the limit of their skill. This tends to over-focus players, and often leads to a situation where a player over-anticipates a throw coming from one direction causing them to miss a throw coming from another direction.

Landers proposes that at a moderate level of arousal, a performer will narrow their attentional field just enough to gate-out task-irrelevant cues without gating-out task-relevant cues, entering a zone of optimal performance. In this zone, the performer experiences an increase in “anticipatory skill,”or the ability to construct efficacious models for proximal behavior.[278] However, both low-arousal and high-arousal states contribute to decrements in anticipatory skill.

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[278] Norbert Hagemann, Bernd Strauss, and Rouwen Cañal-Bruland, “Training Perceptual Skill by Orienting Visual Attention,” *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2006): pp. 143-158, https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.28.2.143.

Based on Landers' model, the model shown in Figure 24 demonstrates a correlation with Csikszentmihalyi's original model of flow. This model suggests that low-challenge opportunities that produce boredom are typically accompanied by low states of arousal, whereas high-challenge opportunities that produce anxiety are typically experienced as states of high arousal. Additionally, this model suggests a link between the state of flow and the feeling of interest, both of which are most likely to occur in the zone of optimal performance.

This becomes particularly interesting and relevant to theatre practice when considering games and exercises designed to prepare actors to go on-stage. Breath-work, for example, is often used to calm pre-show nerves, and tactics like "box breathing" have been demonstrated to reduce activity in the sympathetic nervous system, lowering arousal. Box breathing is a technique of controlled deep breathing in which the actor inhales, holds full breath, exhales, then holds an empty breath, each on a four-count and repeats as necessary. This reduces physiological arousal, helping to move the actor from a state of anxiety in which their attentional field is over-focused into the zone of optimal performance. Box breathing has been used by actors with pre-show anxiety, Navy SEALs going into battle[279], women in labor[280], and as a cognitive behavior therapy tactic[281] for preventing or truncating panic attacks. By mindfully and

[279] Mark Divine, "Breathing Technique for Calm: Tips from a Navy SEAL," Time (Time, May 4, 2016), https://time.com/4316151/breathing-technique-navy-seal-calm-focused/.
[280] "Patterned Breathing during Labor," American Pregnancy Association, December 9, 2021, https://americanpregnancy.org/healthy-pregnancy/labor-and-birth/patterned-breathing/.
[281] Alison Binns, "Breathing Exercise: Box Breathing," CBT Bath - Ali Binns, Accredited Cognitive Behavioural Therapist and Mindulness Teacher (CBT Bath - Ali Binns, Accredited Cognitive Behavioural Therapist and Mindulness Teacher, February 5, 2019), http://www.alibinns.co.uk/resources/breathing-exercise-box-breathing.

intentionally lowering their state of physiological arousal, subjects reduce the likelihood that they will under-attend to task relevant cues. On the other hand, if a cast is tired and under-stimulated (maybe they are half-way through a long run), a warm-up activity like *Group Juggle* can activate arousal, introducing physical activity linked to strong attentional affordances — like a juggling ball hurled towards them — to induce focus, moving actors from over-generalized focus into the zone of optimal performance.

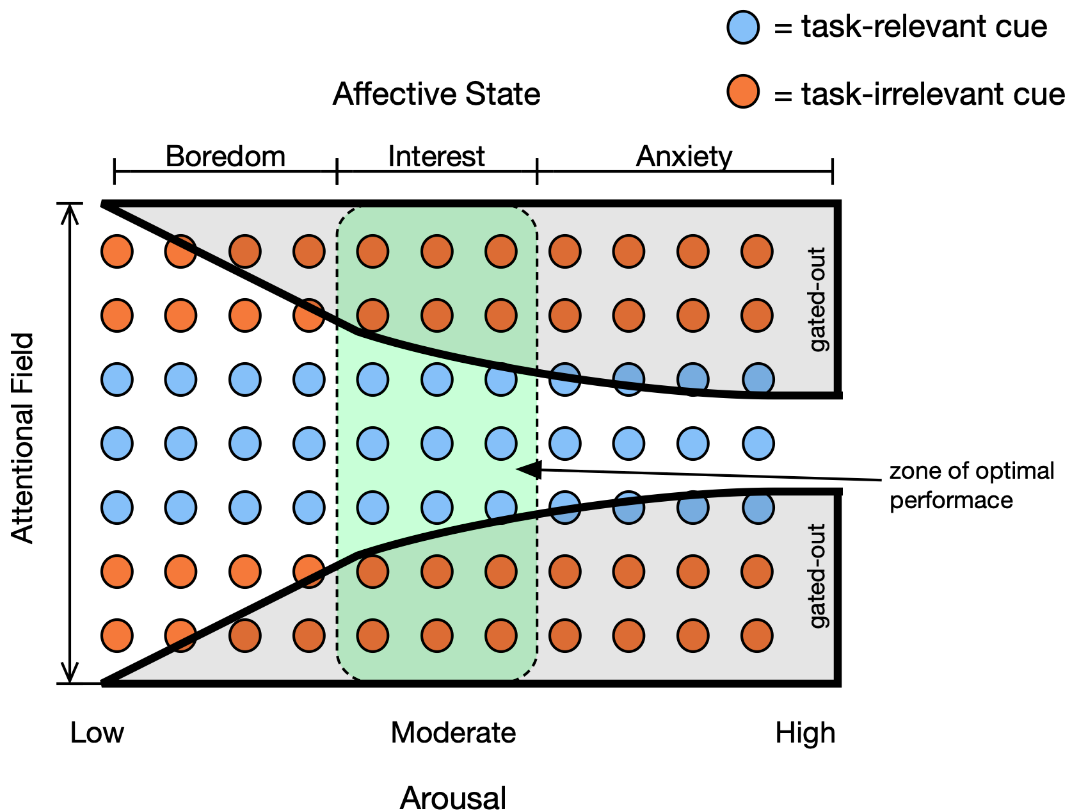


Figure 24: A model for arousal, attention, and flow, adapted from Lander's model.

When performing a skill, actors project imaginary sequences of actions based on a framework of expectations. These expectations correlate with the sensorial stimuli or

cues that the actor anticipates occurring in their immediate environment. William James documented this phenomenon in The Principles of Psychology, writing:

> The preparation of the attention and volition; the expectation of the signal and the readiness of the hand to move, the instant it shall come; the nervous tension in which the subject waits, are all conditions of the formation in him for the time being of a new path or arc of reflex discharge.[282]

Anticipation preloads particular neural patterns so that the receipt of stimulus fitting the expected pattern triggers "reflexive action," which requires less time and effort than "complete sensory reactions."[283] These slower complete sensory reactions result from the need to process "complete" sensory data *without* the benefit of the preconditioned sub maximal loading that occurs when an actor successfully anticipates cues. Anticipation is a form of imagination, predicting a potential outcome by selectively attending to relevant cues in the environment. This imagination primes neural networks to act upon confirmation stimuli to shorten reaction time and reduce cognitive load. These projections occur milliseconds before the initiation of action and generate a "steady-state" submaximal event potential referred to by researchers as the P50 waveform. P50s are believed to be evidence of persistent sensory gating. "Sensory gating" write Light and Braff, "is crucial to an individual's ability to selectively attend to salient stimuli and ignore redundant, repetitive or trivial information,

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[282] William James, "Principles of Psychology," Classics in the History of Psychology -- James (1890) Chapter 3, accessed May 31, 2022, https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/prin3.htm.

[283] Shravani Sur and VK Sinha, "Event-Related Potential: An Overview," *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* 18, no. 1 (2009): p. 70, https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-6748.57865.

protecting the brain from information overflow."[284]

` E. C. Cherry famously demonstrated this phenomenon which became known as the 'cocktail party effect[285]', conducting experiments in which listeners keyed in to speech in which they recognized a pattern (such as their name) or believed they could anticipate another's speech (such as an idiom or cliché). When a single speaker was recorded and played back simultaneously (to reduce other discriminatory factors), the listener tended to notice the speech containing a string of clichés over random, unpredictable combinations of words.[286] Cherry's experiments indicated that attention is drawn towards systems that afford opportunities to confirm expectations and that people are rewarded when their attention has been efficaciously applied. When an individual accurately predicts the outcome of an event — for example, when the Group Juggler successfully anticipates when and where a ball is thrown to them, facilitating a catch — they receive a neuro-cognitive reward that builds an association between the perceived stimuli (the anticipated throw) and the predicted outcome (the arrival of a catchable ball). They learn. As the association builds and is reinforced, learners recognize the pattern of associations as a discrete informational object rather than a grouping of discrete objects. This "bundling" of information allows for the freeing of additional attentional resources when engaged within the relevant environment.

[284] Gregory A. Light and David L. Braff, "Human and Animal Studies of Schizophrenia-Related Gating Deficits," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 1, no. 1 (1999): pp. 31-40, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-999-0008-y.
[285] Michael S. Gazzaniga, Richard B. Ivry, and G. R. Mangun, *The Biology of the Mind* (W.W. Norton, 2006).
[286] E. Colin Cherry, "Some Experiments on the Recognition of Speech, with One and with Two Ears," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 25, no. 5 (1953): pp. 975-979, https://doi.org/10.1121/1.1907229.

The accuracy with which an actor projects expectations is a measure of their *anticipatory skill*, or *anticipatory attention*, and a significant determinant in the efficacy of their skill execution. For example, if someone throws a ball towards a player, the player executes a sequence of activities that will move their body to catch the ball based on a projected expectation for where and when the ball will intersect with the space where they perceive the best opportunity to catch the ball. The environment generates many sensory cues which may or may not assist the player in assembling an accurate model for predicting the optimal catching procedures. Their ability to gate-out irrelevant cues while attending to as many relevant cues as possible will increase the likelihood that they will construct an efficacious model for predicting the accurate time/space for catching the ball. When the player then catches the ball, confirming the efficacy of their predictive model, they receive an affective reward. Higher levels of skill, or the capacity to "experience deeply," assist actors in discerning more complex relevant cues in the environment. When an actor regularly makes efficacious predictions, the likelihood to perform error decreases, drawing their attention away from the *constraints* of the skill. This, in turn, reduces their *perception* of constraint and increases the potential to enter flow. Having internalized the rules or constraints of the skill procedure, an actor develops *intuition* and experiences a feeling of freedom and mobility in the performance that gives rise to spontaneity. Significantly, Spolin suggests that in this state of spontaneity a person opens to learning by increasing their capacity to experience, and "it is in the increasing of the individual capacity for

experiencing that the untold potentiality of a personality can be evoked."[287]

Such potentiality upholds a concept of mastery through progressive, and reiterative procedural bundling, where *mastery* allows for a more granular experience of the occurrence based on efficacious and efficient use of attentional resources. Developing mastery of a skill, according to Csikszentmihalyi, requires that a person can "recognize, retrieve, and manipulate about 50,000 different symbolic configurations" before claiming that distinction.[288]

Given the extreme limitations on our attentional resources relative to all available sensory input, it is no wonder that attention is deeply implicated by social context, even commodified, and that a concern over the autonomy of attention would manifest in theatre practices, theatre performance, and in the broader context of the mushrooming attention economy. Certainly, one could make a case that the allocation of attention — as a process of the body — is a subject to the impositions of ideology and that theatre practitioners like Grotowski, Lecoq, and others could target these processes for emancipation.

In the actor training practice of Viewpoints, the cultivation of "soft focus" is introduced at the beginning of training, and Bogart and Landau explicitly identify the hardened gaze as an ideological manifestation of masculine, goal-oriented hierarchy. "In a culture governed by commodities," they write, "consumption and the glorification of the individual, we are taught to target what we want and then find a way to get it…

[287] Viola Spolin, Carol Sills, and Paul Sills, *Improvisation for the Theater: a Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Northwestern University Press, 2000), 3.
[288] Csikszentmihalyi, 161.

Like a hunter after prey, our vision is narrowed down to a preconceived series of possibilities."[289] At any given moment, our attention to visual input fluctuates between a "hard" or "soft" focus. Focus, in this context, means the concentration of attentional resources on a particular field of stimuli. When we engage "hard focus," our attention concentrates at the center of our visual field, and we become aware of details within that area of our visual field. Entering a soft focus, we "reverse our habitual directional focus and allow information to move in toward us."[290] Our attention may still gravitate towards the center of our visual field but we may become more aware of input from the periphery of our visual field. In soft focus, we experience a decrement in our ability to perceive fine detail but may become more aware of extensive environmental conditions and patterns of movement.

Viewpoints training provides numerous exercises in which learners develop *attentional control* and *attentional flexibility* by voluntarily directing attention to their peripheral vision, or to our other senses which typically play subordinate roles to the hegemony of vision. In viewpoints, a practice of attentional control not only heightens "360 degree awareness" as a instrumental function, it serves as the gateway opening to alternative perspectives on the learner's concept of reality, demonstrating quite effectively the learner's relative — and relatively keyhole-sized — perspective on the actuality of the physical and social environment in which they perform.

Bogart and Landau address the same core issue that Lecoq and Grotowski strove

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[289] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: a Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (Nick Hern Books, 2014), 31.
[290] Ibid., 32.

to remedy with, respectively, Via Negativa, and Neutral Mask. All three theatre practices develop variations on a similar core theme. Grotowski's practice developed on the concept of plastiques as a form of signature movement developed first through releasing the spine and then flowing freely and expressively through a series of images while experimenting with concepts like focus, touch, and tension before moving on to text or script. Neutral mask forces attention on to the body in an extraordinary way by erasing the face as a medium for expression. All of these practices are designed to disengage the actor from their comfortable "grey zone" (as Bogart calls it) — the floating zero, the medium, the comfort zone — which equates to the "crust of human experience" imagined by Lecoq, Grotowski, and others who cleave (or cleaved) to the notion that our bodies must be *stripped* of an offensive ideology that permeates our very bones and our musculature, and that has pressed deep neurological ruts in our minds.

On the other hand, Viewpoints do not position the transformative aspect of practice as reductive. It has not been positioned as a via negativa — a stripping away — but rather as the acquisition of new skills, and the alternative perspective accompanying such skill acquisition. It is an additive practice that seems designed to question, subvert, and challenge the status quo. The Viewpoints practice leans into the certainty that we carry the marks of history in the way we move, think, and feel, but does not position history as the soul author of our internment, withholding us from our primal utopian origins. By training attention while unpacking previously bundled physical and vocal procedures, the Viewpoints practitioner develops greater attentional sovereignty

and flexibility within their own practice, leading to intuitive, spontaneous, and creative performance.

For the theatre-maker, the intentional manipulation of attention goes beyond the actor's ability to exert control over their own attentional resources. Skilled manipulation of audience attention is the signature of entertainment virtuosity. "Attention is a simple response to a stimulus," writes master magician Henry Hays, "either to a loud bang or (much more powerful) to a feeling of interest."[291] The magic of theatre happens when the performer converts an audiences' attention to interest. "Interest is selective, an expenditure of energy by the interested party" he writes, "You, the performer can never command it, only invite it." An audience must first *recognize the process* the performer enacts in order for it to be interesting. They must possess knowledge of the process with which they will then make predictions about the expected actions to occur. This recognition is akin to the conventional awareness an audience brings with them into a performance. It is their recognition of the rules of theatre and the "willing suspension of disbelief" they adopt as a ludic disposition. If the audience does not recognize the procedures of theatre — as they may not, for example, during a performance of invisible theatre — they may not develop a framework that will transmute attention to interest. When the lights come up on stage, for example, even if the initial action on stage would be considered mundane outside the context of the play, the audience recognizes the action as an expository gesture that promises to develop into compelling storytelling, making the otherwise mundane,

[291] Hay, 2.

interesting.

Furthermore, the processes must not only be recognizable, but they must be what Hays refers to as "goldilocks" processes. "Processes too big, too small, too fast, too confused, or too slow for you to take in can't give a sense for involvement: they aren't interesting."[292] In other words, the goldilocks zone of procedural interest, like the ideal conditions for flow, occurs at the abscissa of challenge (the complexity or "size" of the process) and skill (the ability to attend to the process). This phenomenon is easier to recognize in serial structures more common to television narratives in the current prestige era of television, than to theatre (which tends towards an episodic, genre-based structure). Imagine a viewer attempting to watch an episode of a highly serial narrative like *The Wire* starting in the middle of the second season without having watched all of the preceding episodes. The challenge of the narrative at that point in the series is so complex that without considerable show-relevant skill, acquired by watching the subsequent episodes, the "process" of decoding the narrative is too "big." The viewer would likely find the story uninteresting and would not be motivated to continue watching *The Wire*. That same viewer would likely find the narrative far more interesting if they arrived at the same second-season episode having already seen the preceding episodes — in order — and would likely continue to be motivated to watch *The Wire.*

Indeed, the "feeling of interest" focuses the individual on activities with flow potential. The occurrence of interest coincides with the occurrence of intrinsic

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[292] Ibid.

motivation. Attention focused by intrinsic motivation transmutes to interest. Interest can be thought of as a "sixth sense" — as the ability to sense flow potential. The feeling of interest focuses attention on relevant cues that generate the expectation of flow which, in turn, generate a feeling of interest. Hays recognizes that the procedures of a well-crafted theatre performance must harmonize with the audience's capacity for attention. As the audience discerns and decodes the procedures that initially captured their attention and became interested, their attention will fall off unless presented with additional, relevant cues that make the procedure more complex or, as Hays puts it, "big." Having solved or decoded the inciting process, the audience will withdraw their interest unless the performance cues new relevant action opportunities through *procedural inflation*. Subsequent performance procedures will continue to generate feelings of interest provided that the current procedure remains in the "goldilocks" zone through gradual inflation of the attentional demand placed on the audience.

We may understand theatre as a game, and Hays' "processes" as the game nodes, made up of implicit rules, like conventions, and explicit operational rules including the narremes of the narrative. As the narrative progresses, each subsequent sequential narreme becomes more complex as it references information interpreted in previous narremes. This accounts for *procedural inflation* from one narreme node to the next, and an audience-player entering the performance late may not experience the procedural "goldilocks" zone necessary to generate interest because the procedure will likely seem too "big" for them to understand.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, superimposing the model of an ideal *interest curve*

over Csikszentmihalyi's model for the *flow channel,* suggests that rising narrative action and rising player interest track along the flow channel. Provided that procedural inflation occurs in a narrative at a rate that tracks along the flow channel, not only will an audience stay interested, but the narrative will place an increasing demand on the audience *process capacity*. As this demand nears the potential or *limit* of the audiences' attentional resources, the likelihood increases for the audience to enter into a flow state. Distractibility becomes a key factor for theatre players — both actor and audience — as attention must be maintained within a particular relevancy field to achieve flow. However, without an increase of player concentration that is in step with the increase of attentional demand, the player will be unable to obtain a *liminal cognitive load* which is the fullest engagement of cognitive resources sustainable without committing a distracting error and is the point at which the player enters peak flow potential.

The successful execution of a playful action delivers on the "promise of fun," resulting in a sense of satisfaction proportionate to the intrinsically motivated effort. In *Group Juggle*, players perform the core mechanic of the game by throwing and catching small balls in a pre-determined pattern. The individual's throws and catches act as micro-promises — small expectations fulfilled with a relatively small degree of effort. While the micro-promises are small, they are continuous, and so produce a low-level but steady sense of satisfaction. As additional balls are added to the throwing pattern, the difficulty increases, and the attentional load requires greater effort. Activities that become more effortful require proportionate motivation to sustain. While

the individual action — or “core mechanic”of *Group Juggle* remains constant (the throw and catch), as the effort required to perform the catch increases, so too does the affective reward of a successful catch.

The “core mechanic” of a game should be the mechanic that produces the re-iterative behavior which simultaneously allows for the fulfillment of micro-promises and moves the player towards the macro-promise — or the optimal flow experience of radical fun. In a theatre performance, the “core mechanic” is the successful interpretation of the fable through observation of the discourse presented by the actor (and other pertinent theatre makers). This mechanic, like the catch and throw of *Group Juggle*, can be assessed on the accuracy or efficacy of the performance. That is to say that in the performance of the mechanic, the player can perceive potential for both success and failure. In *Group Juggle*, the player drops the ball; in a theatre performance, the player “misses a beat” or loses the thread. This allows the player to evaluate individual “moves” and detect error (producing stress) and success (producing satisfaction). When a core mechanic allows for the production of satisfaction by the fulfillment of successful moves, then the game generates “low level” fun which in turn may support the recruitment of approach valence towards the overall goal, which may be regarded as the successful execution of a particular patterned sequence of felicitous performances of the core mechanic.

When the core mechanic presents a player with procedural inflation that escalates in step with the player’s capacity to successfully perform the core mechanic, then it is possible that the player will eventually approach liminal cognitive load within the

context of the game. It is at this moment, often occurring at the climax of the narrative, that the players (audience and actor) — having playfully engaged in the game of their own volition, having successfully exercised their skill capacities, and having connected themselves to a broader social context through identification with the narrative — gain access to their full potential, and the experience of jouissance, flow: radical fun.

### 3.6 - Self Efficacy and Intrinsic Motivation

Howard Gardner's view on multiple intelligences postulates that people develop diverse cognitive arrangements which result in peculiar sensitivity to certain aspects of the environment, which then tend to attract attention more than other aspects.[293] In other words, certain things are more interesting to certain people. Eventually, by regularly attending a particular field of stimuli in the environment, the individual develops an interest or disposition toward relative stimuli. Ralph Koster, in *A Theory of Fun,* suggests this is the reason people are attracted to such a wide range of fun-generating activities and why, for example, people like actors and basketball players are motivated by embodied play experience, while others would rather play a board game.[294] For the creative individual, acute interest precedes *perseverance*, which is the stamina to stay engaged with the practice beyond what might seem reasonable to an outside observer. "What keeps some people concentrating on the domain while

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[293] Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983).
[294] Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (OReilly Media Inc., 2014).

others waver in their interest and dilute the focus of their psychic energy?"[295] asks Csikszentmihalyi. He uses the term *psychic energy* as a way to express attention as a resource. A person's psychic energy includes their attention and the *effort* to maintain ("paying") attention. When a person attends to information that interests them, the effort required to pay attention is reduced, which, in turn, reduces the potential discomfort and stress produced by the effort of concentration.

"Whenever we encounter human activity that requires concentrated investment of psychic energy," writes Csikszentmihalyi, "we assume that this event is not random but the product of conscious effort." Effort consists of the expenditure of energy resources and the marshaling and coordination of these energy resources towards a particular goal. The production of effort produces stress (short-term) on the body. A concentration or protraction of stress will result in the production of negative valence emotions or feelings such as discomfort, exhaustion, and pain. The intensity of these stress responses act as a negative feedback loop, dampening the positive valence of the incentive reward (the promise), reducing forward locomotion, and bringing the performer closer to a state of *ambivalent equilibrium*. In a state of ambivalent equilibrium, positive and negative valence pertaining to the performed activity reach a state of balance, and the performer is no longer motivated to perform the task.

Whether the anticipated outcome of action delivers a promise or a threat is the result of a complex synthesis of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and involves sensory-related "primal" responses to stimuli, but also culturally inscribed interpretations of the

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[295] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 163.

social cost of the relevant activity and other learned interpretations of the relevant activity. For example, eating an In-n-Out cheeseburger might generate a strong positive affect related to the anticipation, or promise, of satisfaction related to the pleasure produced by the flavor and satiating qualities of the food. Without additional interpretations generating negative affect, we might expect to run to In-n-Out whenever we get hungry. However, there is a social cost, both in terms of the necessary expenditure of currency and in the potential harm repeated burgers might inflict on our physical appearance (which could negatively impact our ability to achieve other goals), and the interpretation that repeated consumption of burgers could be bad for our overall health (and ability to produce effort and endure stress). Add to all these factors the expected effort required to produce the locomotion necessary to procure and consume the burgers. If the sum of these factors results in valence leaning towards the burger, then we go and get a burger. If it stays balanced or leans the other way, then we do not go to eat a burger. The valence complex of any given activity is the sum of all factors determining the motivational disposition of an individual towards an action opportunity.

When an actor reaches a state of ambivalence in an *intrinsically* motivated practice, they are in a state of *intrinsic ambivalence*. When they reach ambivalence as a result of *extrinsic* motivation, they are in a state of *extrinsic ambivalence*. Intrinsic ambivalence may be regarded as an inherent process of effort recovery. The result of ambivalence is the cessation of effort pertaining to the relevant activity, because equilibrium provides no forward locomotion. This cessation reduces stress and allows

the body to recover attentional and energy resources required to exert effort, and eventually allows for a restoration of the intrinsically motivated behavior.

While extrinsic ambivalence works similarly to intrinsic ambivalence, the extrinsic scaffolding may complicate the process. In some instances, the scaffolding may not "dial down" the production of stress in the same way that the inherent effort reduction of intrinsic ambivalence does. The conditions and processes which produce the extrinsic motivation, which is by definition not inherent to the body of the performer, will not necessarily go away as the actor reaches ambivalence and may continue to produce stress on the actor even after the actor is no longer performing the relevant activity. This could have a number of effects, including a slower recovery of attentional and energy resources necessary to renew effort, and the formation of long-term stress (bad stress) conditions.

In his article titled "An Integrative Analysis of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Sport," published in the *Journal of Applied Sports Psychology*, Robert J Vallerand developed the "Self-Determination Continuum" as a diagram for situating an actor's motivational attitude towards their practice. The continuum (see Figure 25) illustrates Vallerand's proposal for progressive strategies to foster an individual's intrinsic motivation to practice.[296] With the Self-Determination Continuum and accompanying strategies, Vallerand does not simply seek to find a way to make sure people show up to practice. For the theatre artist, *intrinsic motivation* is the vital force driving practice;

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[296] Robert J. Vallerand and Gaétan F. Losier, "An Integrative Analysis of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Sport," *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 11, no. 1 (1999): pp. 142-169, https://doi.org/10.1080/10413209908402956.

for Grotowski, this was the sublimation at the terminus of Via Negativa; for Lecoq, the drive *élan vital* behind *le jeu*.

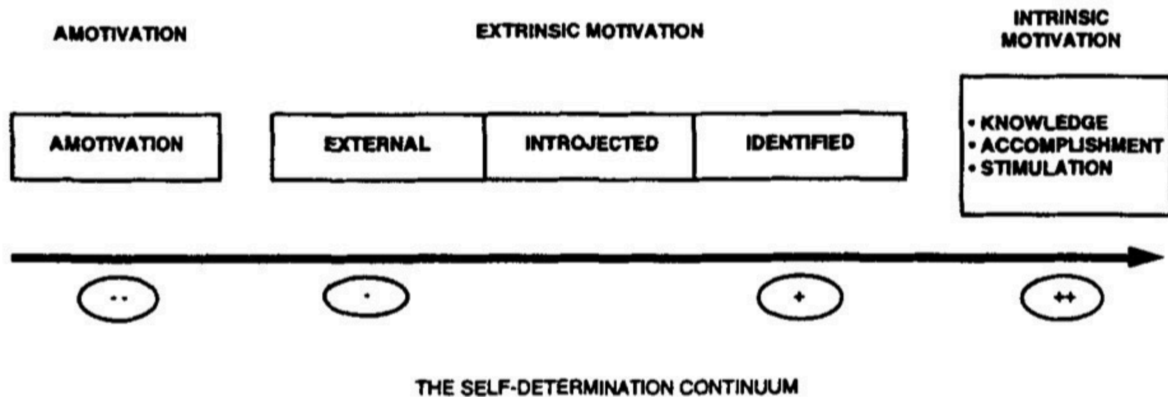


Figure 25: Vallerand's "Self Determination Continuum"

An intrinsically motivated performer *seeks out* opportunities to practice and will engage in practice "freely, with a full sense of volition and personal control," writes Richard H. Cox in his comprehensive overview of the field *Sports Psychology: Concepts and Applications,* "There is no sense of engaging in activity for a material reward or any other external reward or motivation."[297] According to self-determination theory, an intrinsically motivated individual practices *agency* and is thought to be *autonomous* within their practice.[298] Autonomy in this context not only references an eagerness to show up to practice, but a joyful freedom of movement experienced as *mastery* within the practice itself. Understanding that terms like *mastery, autonomy,*

[297] Richard H. Cox, *Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications* (McGraw-Hill, 2012), 66.
[298] Ibid., 62.

and *agency* may acquire unintended implications as they translate across fields, these are the words that describe phenomena like *creativity*, *spontaneity*, and *fun.* Individuals practicing *intrinsic motivation* are not just having fun but *practicing* fun. Vallerand's research suggests that an actor intrinsically motivated to practice not only acquire the skills particular to their practice but also acquires a greater propensity for intrinsic motivation and are more likely to cultivate a *harmonious passion* for their practice as opposed to an *obsessive passion.*[299]

In her article calling for the application of sports psychology to performing arts, Sanna M. Nordin-Bates notes that "passion is the difference between just doing drama and being an actor, and between having a job as a dancer and being a dancer." Indeed, Vallerand — in a follow-up study published in 2005 — demonstrated research to defend a position that passion is instrumental in the perception of identity. He argues that when a performer regularly engages in a practice they enjoy, the practice develops into a passion that the performer holds as a defining characteristic of their concept of *self*. Passions resulting from an autonomous practice (intrinsic motivation) manifest in the practitioner as *harmonious passions* which are characterized as healthy, joyful, and in harmony with the other aspects of life. Harmonious passions are *sustainable,* and far less likely to lead to burn-out than *obsessive passions.* Obsessive passions result from a practice in which the performer may experience peak potential, but within a contentious training framework within which they do not practice

[299] Ibid., 67.

autonomy, but rather act as an *efficacious pawn*[300] to some entity that imposes enough *extrinsic motivation* to stand in for intrinsic motivation. Performers developing an obsessive passion often suffer from perfectionism (potentially developing into disorders related to body image or ego) and agonistic competitive attitudes towards collaborators, an issue that Nordin-Bates points out leaves its mark on the performing arts citing evidence that shows dancers "with higher rates of chronic injuries and greater use of health-threatening behaviors also reported higher levels of obsessive (rigid) passion."[301]

The creative performer, according to Csikszentmihalyi, must harbor a fundamental dissatisfaction with the prevailing status quo that governs the domain of the skill in which they have invested their interest. Creative people, he argues, are disposed towards a *discovery orientation*, which allows them to remain open to discovering new way to reconfigure the status quo. Csikszentmihalyi's *discovery orientation* bears a striking conceptual similarity to Lecoq's concept of *disponibilité* which Lecoq describes as a desirable skill possessed by the creative actor to remain in "a state of discovery, of openness, of freedom to receive."[302] *Dissatisfaction* helps to expand upon what both Koster and Sutton-Smith postulate as the evolutionary role of fun and play as profound efficacious human mechanisms for species adaptability and

[300] Cox (p 64) explains it like this: "In the efficacious pawn, you have an individual who is confident that he can successfully perform a task, but who is doing it for an external reason. When the external reason is removed, he will no longer be motivated to perform the task although he may continue to do so without enthusiasm or real motivation."
[301] Sanna M. Nordin-Bates, "Performance Psychology in the Performing Arts," *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2012, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199731763.013.0005.
[302] Simon David Murray and John Keefe, *Physical Theatres: a Critical Introduction* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 147.

survival.

In the creative performer, a*cute interest, perseverance,* and *dissatisfaction* combine to produce something *new* in the practice. However, Csikszentmihalyi remarks, creativity requires a social frame to *actualize* the creative act. No matter how new or different the skill, if the performance is never *regarded* as creative within the domain from which it articulates meaning, then it is not creative. It is only when the creative act is brought into the proper social context that change occurs, for it is *that* social context that prompts creativity. The creative deed only becomes actualized by the milieu that birthed it, by the roar of the crowd. In conventional theatre the role of *actualizer* is performed by the audience.

## Part II - Practice

# Chapter 4: Player Preparation and the Frame Experience

### 4.0 - Beyond the Magic Circle

"Designers create not just the game itself, but also the ways that players enter into the game system," write Salen and Zimmerman, so "how and when does a player enter into a game? Where does the initial seduction begin?"[303] Board game designers *Fantasy Flight Games* produce several fun and extremely complicated board games, including *The Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars Rebellion*, *Twilight Imperium* and many others. The rule book that comes in the box of *The Game of Thrones Boardgame* is an epic 32 full-sized pages and comes with an index to help players navigate through the extensive rules. The book contains interesting graphics, fantasy images that invoke the fantasy realm of George R. R. Martin's Westeros, and a skeuomorphic design that makes the rulebook itself seem to be an ancient — possibly magical — tome. Although all of these design components make the process of working through 32 pages of rules more enjoyable, the designers produced a 23-minute video summarizing

[303] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (The MIT Press, 2010), 24:5.

the rules to make the preparation process less arduous and to facilitate expedient play. The production values on this video are slick and entertaining, and include sophisticated animation, visual effects, music and audio effects, and a voice-over performed by a talented actor with a dialect and script that suggests they might be an inhabitant of Westeros. The video seems designed not only to streamline a player's ability to take up the rules of the game, but to generate excitement and invite the player to step into the world of Westeros as the leader of one of the warring Houses. As the video draws to a close, the dramatic and martial soundtrack begins to swell and the narrator asks, "Will you take power through force? Use honeyed word to coerce your way onto the throne? Through strategic planning, masterful diplomacy, and clever card play, spread your influence over Westeros!"[304] The music builds to a cinematic climax as the video fades to black.

Although the activity of watching this video might not fall into the tidy category of gameplay, as would play behaviors performed within the formal magic circle of the game, it is undeniable that there is something lusory about the presentation of the rules and their call for action. Fantasy Flight has produced game artifacts in both the skeuomorphic rules book and the evocative rules video that not only deliver the rules of the game but invite the player into the world of the game. By positioning players either as holding an artifact of Westeros (the rule book), or directly addressing them as a potential claimant of the throne, these game artifacts cue an invitation to adopt a lusory attitude, and step into the fantasy world of the game by assuming an alter-ego. The

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[304] "A Game of Thrones Board Game." Second Edition, accessed May 31, 2022. https://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/a-game-of-thrones-the-board-game-second-edition/.

opportunity for imaginative play in preparation for *The Game of Thrones Boardgame* transforms the hefty task of learning the rules of the game into an entertaining — even fun — experience.

Games necessarily have rules. While many of the rules may be implicit, most games contain explicit rules that must be learned by players before play begins. Complex games like *The Game of Thrones Board Game* - made up of complex systems of explicit rules — present players with a fairly hefty task they must perform before they get to approach the magic circle of the game. "This is a genuine hurdle for players," write Salen and Zimmerman, for "they must attend to the initial set of chores that lie on the border of the magic circle; they must properly perform the rituals of entry."[305]

In an asymmetrical game, like theatre, this set of chores will look quite different for each player group. Depending on the complexity of their roles in the game, different player groups may also require an unequal amount of preparation, as is clearly the case in the game of theatre. Actors spend weeks, if not months, studying the script, learning their lines and blocking, getting into character, getting fitted for costumes, and preparing their body and mind for the event. In fact, most actors will spend more time in preparation for the game than in playing the game itself. The audience has quite a different experience preparing for the event, and it is not uncommon for an audience to limit their preparatory behaviors to securing a ticket, dressing up a bit, and traveling to the venue. Most audience-players view the rules of theatre as implicit — limited to

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[305] Salen and Zimmerman, 24:5.

familiar conventions — and therefore it may not occur to them to do anything more than dress up and show up.

The preparatory practices of conventional theatre are not only made durable by the expectations of the audience, but also by the training and rehearsal practices of actors. Rehearsal for conventional theatre prepares the actor to perform in a narrow space of possibility. Actors must allocate considerable psychic energy towards precise reproductions of memorized and scripted behavior, with an assumption that there will be little or no explicit interaction from the audience during the performance. As a result, such interactions breach the procedural rhetoric of the implicit event contract.

Rehearsing for conventional theatre serves to reinforce the assumption of passive, receptive roles in the body of the audience. This understanding mandates that participatory theatre would require a re-scripting of the preparatory events for both actors and audience. Facing intense institutional inertia, cultural and economic intransigence, traditional friction, and the absence of a participatory cannon, re-scripting rehearsal procedures for actors in the American theatre would have required a seismic event beyond the scale of the "Audience (r)evolution." Nevertheless, when many in the American theatre community began voicing concerns over the perception of an increasingly inattentive audience (as discussed in Chapter 1), when immersive theatre and other pervasive theatre experiences saw a surge in popularity (as discussed in Chapter 2), and as the idea of "audience engagement" began to trend in the discourse, many theatre professionals saw an opportunity for engaging the audience as they *prepared* for the theatre. By designing events that occurred in the

time and space immediately before or after the performance, these theatre professionals sought to instill in the audience a greater sense of participation and — by extension — agency. Such *frame experiences* allowed audience players to engage in activities of their own volition that re-cast their role as passive observer to active participant, without necessarily rescripting the conventional play procedure of the performance event. The "rehearsal" for the audience, however, was relatively unexamined, and exploratory gestures made toward examining and possibly reimagining how an audience prepares were met with enthusiasm and considered innovative.

Focusing on the audience engagement program enacted at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City, California, this chapter examines the *frame experience* as a contemporary response to the perception that the durability of theatre conventions mitigate player participation by ossifying player role collations into distinct and asymmetric player experiences. Frame Experiences (aka, lobby games or lobby experiences) form distinct but related magic-circles within the limen of the formal temporal, spatial, and social frame of the theatrical event. They are understood as an attempt to furnish audience-players with additional symbolic capital with which to engage in felicitous play with the embedded narrative of the theatrical event. Additionally, discrete frame experiences are meant to provide opportunities for explicit choice, in which player choices make a measurable impact on the representational system of the frame experience. By placing the frame spatially and temporally adjacent to the theatrical event, and through additional narrative framing devices,

experience designers seek to establish an event *complex* made up of one or more frame experiences that are thematically tied to the central performance event in a way that allows the player to perceive the complex as a single event within which they experience a degree of agency not typical for conventional theatre.

### 4.1 - Audience Engagement at the Kirk Douglas Theatre

In 2008, Center Theatre Group Producer Kelly Kirkpatrick detailed a memo outlining audience engagement objectives for the recently opened Kirk Douglas Theatre. The memo proposed guidelines for piloting programs geared towards engaging a younger audience.  This audience — it was assumed — would respond positively to a "hip vibe.” The memo proposed that young, potential theatergoers sought more interactive events both before and after the performance they were attending. The memo pointed to innovations by other American theater companies including running full in-house bars, holding post-show talk backs or pre-show lectures, and designing built-in social events like “under 30” nights.  At the time, the Kirk Douglas Theatre was well positioned to take up this mandate.  Having just opened for business in 2004, its relative nascent status and its relative small House size (317 seats) compared to Center Theatre Group's other, more storied venues — the Mark Taper Forum and the Ahmanson Theatre (739 and 2,000-seats, respectively) — a space that could best handle new approaches to audience engagement.   Both the Taper and Ahmanson had a deep subscriber bases that helped to provide reliable box office

revenue, opportunities for development income, and the less tangible but still important phenomenon of word-of-mouth publicity. Without an effective and demystified system designed to measure the entertainment preferences of the audience, decision makers left to speculation and assumption will tend to make safer choices regarding the programming and audience experience. Not only did this make the Taper and Ahmanson less suitable for any kind of innovation, but producers like Kirkpatrick were eager to cultivate the Douglas as a place of innovation, facilitating more opportunities to bring in thematically riskier work that might not appeal to a broader or less targeted audience.

The Kirk Douglas Theatre was also architecturally ideal for social or interactive pre-or post-show experiences designed to include or be available to the entire audience. Redesigned in 2004 from the historic Culver Theatre Cinema, the Kirk Douglas Theatre sported a lobby large enough to hold the capacity of the house without exceeding the fire marshal's mandates. By contrast, the Mark Taper Forum lobby resembled something closer to a hallway and seemed to be designed to move an audience through rather than give them a place to socialize. While the Ahmanson had significant lobby space —including several areas large enough to host many people comfortably — the lobby design at the Ahmanson is fragmented and spread out over multiple floors and across opposite ends of the building. The lobby of the Kirk Douglas Theatre occupies a single, contiguous and large open space within which almost the entire lobby is visible from any given point within the lobby.

Perhaps most important in its positioning to take on Center Theater Group's

audience engagement initiative, the Kirk Douglas Theatre employed and managed its own in-house front-of-house staff. Both the Ahmanson and the Mark Taper Forum - which physically reside as part of the Music Center in downtown Los Angeles - are operated by the Music Center Guest Relations department and share a standardized front-of-house staff and front-of-house procedures with the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and the Disney Music Hall. This standard staff is rotated through all four venues and trained to deliver a uniform and highly traditional front-of-house experience. House management for these venues emphasizes delivering audience members to their seats in a timely and efficient manner, facilitating basic crowd safety strategies, and maintaining a quiet and orderly, non-disruptive audience during the performance. With an independent front-of-house, the Kirk Douglas Theatre could hire and train a team to provide an audience experience that went far beyond the traditional theatre experience and focused on delivering innovative audience engagement programs.

In the late summer of 2008, the company hired me as Performance Manager to take the lead on the audience engagement program at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, working with Theatre Manager Eric Sims.[306] Collaborating with producers, and partners in Education, Literary, Marketing, Artistic, and Development departments, the team set about the task of fulfilling Kirkpatrick's mandate. The title of "Performance Manager" was eventually changed to "Audience Experience Designer" — a unique position in the theatre — reflecting an institutional commitment to innovating in the

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[306] Eric Sims has since been promoted to Associate General Manager of Center Theatre Group, and then to Ahmanson Theatre Presentations Manager.

space traditionally occupied by the audience.

The first innovation to occur as part of this commitment was reimagining the role and responsibilities of the in-house front-of-house staff. The resident staff circa 2008, while well-trained to deliver a conventional front-of-house experience, were not prepared to take on some of the responsibilities the experience design (XD) team envisaged for the Douglas. The XD team sought to create a front-of-house staff that could operate as ambassadors for the company, that understood how to deliver proactive customer service, that had a practical knowledge of theatre, and that considered themselves "theatre people." While many of the resident front-of-house staff were theatre enthusiasts, very few — if any — had practical experience in the theatre beyond working as an usher. Despite the ready availability of actors seeking part-time work in Los Angeles, the previous hiring manager reported that she had a policy to never hire actors because of a perception that their unpredictable rehearsal schedules would interfere with their work schedule.

After receiving permission from Center Theatre Group's General Manager Nausica Stergio, and general approval from stakeholders in Marketing, Education, and Literary departments, the XD team enacted a plan to create a new position in the front-of-house. Employees in this position would be trained in customer service using a model similar to that used at the Ritz Carlton and by Apple for their retail stores. This model put a strong emphasis on facilitating exceptional interactions between guest and host based on a foundation of authentic listening and a performed customer service "score." This new theatre position took its name from a position designed for the

Apple retail experience called the “Concierge.” At the time, it was not uncommon for larger regional theatres to have a concierge position in the lobby, however, the concierge at the Douglas was not cast from the same mold, which tended to place the concierge behind a desk or a podium waiting for the questioning theatre patron to approach. Like the Apple concierge, the Kirk Douglas Theatre concierge served as a host and guide for audience members entering the theatre. Their job was not just to make sure that every member of the audience felt welcome, but to serve as a kind of docent for the theatre and for the current and upcoming shows. To fill the concierge position, the XD staff promoted exceptionally qualified members of the existing staff and hired externally, focusing on hiring theatre practitioners into the position.

After the launch of the concierge program in early 2009, front-of-house staff who left the company were replaced by concierges, and by the 2014 season the entire front-of-house staff was composed of concierges. By 2017, over 90% of the roughly 30-members of the concierge team identified as practicing theatre artists, including actors that had appeared on CTG stages, theatres in New York and Chicago, other Los Angeles stages, and on well-known television programs. Additionally, the majority of staff members working as concierges held university degrees in theatre or adjacent fields, including several staff holding MFAs or PhDs. By 2014, the breadth and depth of the theatre knowledge and experience possessed by the Kirk Douglas concierge team was enough to significantly transform the lobby experience, as up to nine concierges per show actively and enthusiastically engaged audience members, inviting them to participate in lobby games, engaging them in conversation about the show,

and hosting post-show conversations.

Many of the lobby experiences designed for the Kirk Douglas Theatre required facilitation and the concierge served in this capacity as game masters, referees, or MCs. Several *frame experiences* required facilitation by concierge serving as actors within their role as facilitator. During the Kirk Douglas Theatre production of the Rude Mech's original old-west musical *I've Never Been So Happy*, the performance on stage was preceded by a "shindig" in the lobby. The lobby space was transformed to resemble a Texas-style shindig, the floor covered with hay and hay bales, and the lobby overflowing with carnivalesque games. Concierges were dressed in western style clothing — jeans, cowboy hats and boots, plaid country-style shirts, and the like — and played in character as carnival workers. Several concierges rotated through the role of the "barker" whose job it was to keep the audience excited and involved by making loud announcements and tossing out thematic and improvised jokes like a stand-up comedian — a role that required considerable improvisational and comedy skills. Other frame experiences featured concierges acting in alter-ego roles including one in which concierges dressed up and performed as referees, complete with zebra-striped shirts and whistles (which they blew at scripted moments), and one performance in the lobby that featured a concierge escaping from a straitjacket.

The concierge team was sometimes referred to as the radical hospitality team, as they served as the agent for delivering aspects of the Kirk Douglas Theatre's radical hospitality program. As discussed in Chapter 1, the practice of radical hospitality takes up Derrida's dialectic of the Law of Hospitality versus the laws of hospitality to

understand the rules governing social interaction between a host and guest. The laws of hospitality produce conditions for guest behavior that render the guest's privileged status contingent upon an efficacious performance. Breaking the rules of hospitality transforms the guest into a parasite. By contrast, the Law of Hospitality proposes a virtually impossible ideal with spiritual overtones, in which the host willingly and unconditionally fulfills every request made by the guest regardless of the cost.

Hospitality is a social technology that mediates conflicting human drives. At its best, hospitality serves as a contract to mitigate disruption and conflict when the needs of different social groups come into contact within a shared space, and typically does so by formalizing a relationship defined by the hierarchy of status. The typical hospitable relationship includes a host and a guest. The host to guest relationship is analogous with the ruler to subject relationship, as the host is assumed to be in control of the shared space, but willingly defers their status and offers the guest privileged status based on their implicit agreement to adhere to the laws of hospitality.

The hospitable relationship is a social relationship at play, whose durability depends upon the willing participation of each agent, and their ability to perform according to the implicit laws of hospitality. Over time, as these laws become culturally inscribed, they become conventions, and as such, are often invisible or taken for granted. They codify as tradition, and the practice of the laws outlives their rationale. As the laws of hospitality become a norm, they mark the boundary of acceptable behavior within a dominant polity, and those who do not adhere to the rules of behavior are marked as being outside the polity — or at best on the fringe — and become

subject to repression, ejection from the polity, and violence.

Radical hospitality is a practice taken up *by the host* of a polity that interrogates the dominant transcript, looking for calcified rules that have outlived the circumstances in which they were originally negotiated, with the intention of removing barriers to accessing and dwelling in the polity.  That this is a practice of the host is essential because within the polity they are regarded as authors of the dominant transcript. Those with “guest” status performing a similar interrogation may be regarded as external threats working as malevolent actors seeking to undermine the state.

The XD team at the Kirk Douglas Theatre understood the event of theatre as a social polity that developed laws of hospitality situated in the broader dominant transcript of American social and cultural norms.  They viewed the laws of hospitality as closely entwined with the conventions of theatre and overlapping with the implicit rules that aggregate as player roles, especially for the audience.  A traditional front-of-house staff serves as the principal host, performing and enforcing the rules of hospitality, including verifying guest status by “taking tickets,” enforcing implicit dress codes, and preventing certain behaviors such as bringing unauthorized food or drink into the venue, all of which purport to uphold some process necessary to the orderly performance of the theatre event.  The concierge, by contrast, sought to interrogate front-of-house practices and adjacent conventions to understand when and where opportunities existed to deconstruct outdated rules.  Concierge participated in training sessions and conducted quarterly symposiums at which team members familiarized themselves with the concepts of Derridian hospitality and brainstormed procedural

changes in the front-of-house script that could be performed as acts of radical hospitality.

Undoubtedly, the most significant role played by the concierges as they pertain to this dissertation is their role as game masters and referees of the lobby game experiences or *frame experiences.* Between 2009 and 2017, the concierges and the games they facilitated became the trademark for the Kirk Douglas Theatre, resulting in its receiving the first ever LA Weekly "Best of" reward for "Lobby Experience,"[307] and being the subject of an American Theatre Magazine feature[308] about innovative game designs at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. The linchpin in the development of *frame performances*, the Kirk Douglas Theatre concierge team was the focus of a panel "A New Frontier: Using Audience Engagement to Connect with Theatregoers" at the national conference for Theatre Communication Group in 2011.

The XD team at the Kirk Douglas Theatre designed frame experiences which were intended to negotiate tension rising from a conflicting institutional motivation to — on one hand — create theatre in a conventional mode intended to satisfy the perceived will of a huge subscriber base with — on the other hand — the desire for innovation expressed by many CTG staff and artists, most of whom engaged and interacted within the broader American regional theatre scene where the "audience (re)volution"[309] simmered. By designing an interactive experience in the temporal and spatial frame

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[307] L.A. Weekly, "Best Theater Lobby Exhibits," LA Weekly, May 23, 2019, https://www.laweekly.com/best-theater-lobby-exhibits/.
[308] Russell M. Dembin, "Where the Show Begins in the Lobby," AMERICAN THEATRE, September 8, 2016, https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/01/02/where-the-show-begins-in-the-lobby/.
[309] TCG: Theatre Communications Group. "Audience Revolution Convening." TCG, 2015. https://tcg.org/Events/EventArchives/AudienceRevolutionConvening.aspx.

around the formal event and attempting to create aesthetic and thematic associations between the frame and formal events, the intent was both to cause participating audience members to reflect upon the "evening" by conflating the fun experience of agency felt while playing the lobby games with their more receptive disposition during the performance. The cynical (and unfortunately common) motivation for this was to elevate the "Summative Impact" by keying up audience "Captivation."[310] Less cynically, the intention was to develop within the subscriber base a dispositional fluency for the symbolic capital of participatory experiences in order to attenuate curatorial resistance to programing participatory performances within the season plan. Additionally - and particularly from the Literary Department - lobby experiences were thought of as a technology for producing symbolic capital for audiences who might require what was commonly referred to in the audience engagement niche as "interpretive assistance."

The institutional schizophrenia over the rhyme and reason for such an undertaking required a constant negotiation with stakeholders in various departments about what kind of frame experiences were appropriate to produce. This often manifested in a director or playwright vetoing carefully planned experiences out of a protective fear that their carefully crafted narrative journey would be disrupted if the audience played in the lobby beforehand.

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[310] Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin, "Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre." (San Francisco, CA: WolfBrown, 2012), 72.

### 4.2 - Risk and the Invitation to Play

Before venturing into a discussion about the design and implementation of specific frame experiences, it may be of some value to consider the ideological implications of extending to the audience an invitation to play in the lobby, as in many ways this seemingly simple act lies at the core of the institutional friction that provided a significant design constraint on many of the experiences created for the Kirk Douglas Theatre (KDT).

The conditions which the designers at the KDT viewed as ideal for developing frame experiences was one of minimal institutional involvement — or what was generally thought of as interference. The phrase “fly it under the radar” was uttered frequently during the development of frame experiences, and the XD team developed familiarity with the minimum amount of “rubber-stamping” required to green-light an experience. We intentionally kept material expenses constrained — not only as a programmatic strategy of fiscal sustainability, but as a tactic to avoid the additional scrutiny mandated by budgetary approval processes. Over time, the XD team developed an accurate awareness for which activities could be “flown under the radar” and which would require greater institutional buy-in. Generally, such institutional approval had to do with so-called “artistic” issues, which meant that one or more of the designers intuited something about the experience that may not be in alignment with the artistic aspirations of the creative team overseeing the theatre’s *central performance*.

With rare exception, the frame experiences were conceptualized and developed

without input from the director or playwright of the central performance. The institutional inertia common in an arts organization as large as Center Theatre Group (CTG) ordained a default separation between the traditional theatre makers such as the director and playwright, and those responsible for aspects of the audience experience outside the traditional frame of the production. Although for many audience members the frame experience represented a significant portion of the event, organizationally, CTG proceeded to situate the program as a front-of-house initiative without adjusting operational procedures to include front-of-house personnel in design meetings with the director as is common practice with other design departments — scenic, costumes, lights, and so forth.

It was explicitly articulated that direct communication initiated by the experience designer with the director or playwright regarding frame experience design was not permitted. Reasons for this constraint were rarely offered, but when they were, they were typically that the concepts needed to be "translated" for the creative team, or that an individual within the organization — typically the show producer or dramaturg — already had a personal relationship with the director and for that reason would be better situated to discuss lobby engagement activities with the director. When one imagines how absurd it would be to extend such constraints to other designers — such as the costume designer or the lighting designer — the extent to which the organization held frame experiences at arm's length is glaringly evident.

When the XD team sensed that something in the experience might be too "risky" — that it might make too much of an "artistic statement" — the only recourse was to

negotiate with the producer of the show, who served as a communication conduit between the experience designer and the "creative team." In these instances, the request for approval rarely if ever had to do with mitigating risk for the audience. The XD team sought to mitigate expenditure of effort and reduce risk to their status within the organization which — in turn — afforded us a modicum of independence in the design process.

The lack of a direct communication channel to core artists proved a constant source of frustration and inhibited many of the XD teams more promising designs. When the team requested artist approval for a concept, there was no guarantee that we would receive a response within a timeframe that made it possible to proceed with the idea. On a number of occasions, producers would offer an immediate response to inquiries, neglecting to include the artist in the discussion, and elevating their own creative agency by acting as a surrogate for the creative team. This unfortunately common situation recalls Herbert Blau's observation that the audience is held as the arbiter of value, which causes people of "authority" to claim to know the opinion of the "audience" as a way of claiming actual authority.[311] Nevertheless, it was easy to tell from where the XD team stood — which was typically in the midst of the audience — what kinds of frame experiences were valued by the audience. It is not hard to recognize when someone is interested, engaged and having fun.

As the engagement program matured at the KDT, CTG Associate General Manager Eric Sims noted that CTG — as an institution — came to regard the frame

[311] Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 4.

experience “to be part of the event,” however it was subject to “a one-directional flow in the sense that the work on stage is the wellspring from which everything else flows… The work on stage is the godhead that we all pray to.” Authoring an experience in the lobby that was somehow at odds with the “work on stage” was a form of blasphemy. Sims’ comment acknowledges the steep hierarchical status gradient between traditional theatre makers and those who have not been valorized by tradition, and the inherent risk involved in thwarting the artistic intentions of those closer to the apex of authority.

The ideology inscribed within that system of values expresses and produces meaning both through the narrative gameplay of cultural capital as discussed in the previous chapter, and also through the social and institutional structures that facilitate the production of meaning. The steep hierarchy of theatre institutions like CTG valorizes and protects creative virtuosity and the means to acquire capital. This system relies on a reciprocal relationship between the ability to discern and procure virtuosic talent, the capital to facilitate production elements demanded by the talent, and robust open channels of revenue for renewing capital. This powerful and effective system continues to deliver spectacular diversions that are lauded by critics and fans as the pinnacle of culture. The organization explicitly articulates a blend of hierarchical corporate organization, and traditional theatre hierarchy, with the Artistic Director as CEO at the acme of status and authority (although held accountable to the typically wealthy Board of Directors), and the audience entering the organization, upon the purchase or acquisition of a ticket, as an honored guest.

When a person purchases a ticket to the theatre, they accept the implicit invitation to attend, and the purchase notarizes their participation in the conventional contract of theatre.[312] At some level, their response to the invitation may be compared to Althusser's notion of interpellation, and the invitation — which must originate from an authorized representative of the institution — may be regarded as the authority "hailing" the subject. To respond to the hailing is to accept the underlying ideology and the particular arrangement of the roles of agency that are taken up by accepting the invitation. This may be regarded as the player opting-in to the experience of going to the theatre. Through the transactional gesture of purchasing (or otherwise obtaining) a ticket, the consumer becomes the audience, and begins to perform in accordance to the implicit rules of theatre which situates them as a guest, beholden to (and protected by) the laws of hospitality and respectability that have become indelibly (if sometimes cryptically) inscribed in the American theatre experience. To then expose this audience member to an additional invitation to play once they have already arrived at the theatre — and one decidedly unmarked in the canon of conventions — is to suggest a renegotiation not only of the rules of the experience, but of the player's status within that experience.

From the design-end perspective, what is at risk in this renovation of the rules of the game is nothing less than the apparatus for making meaning. At the Kirk Douglas Theatre, when pushback came from a producer or director, it generally had to do with

[312] "This contract consists of rules that determine how players interact with each other in the game, as well as the meanings and values that the players give life through play. Sustaining the contract to the end of a game requires players to maintain the integrity of the magic circle. Rule-breakers can damage this fragile frame. A cheating player will test the limits of the social contract and possibly disrupt it. A spoil sport is likely to destroy the social contract entirely." Salen and Zimmerman, 28:12.

how the frame experience *changed the meaning*[313] of the core experience in a way that was not in alignment with what the director or playwright intended the audience to take away from their production.

In an extreme case, the exclusive right to the production of meaning within the central performance was protected through legal contract. For instance, the performance contract for KDT's production of David Mamet's play *Race* explicitly prohibited any audience engagement activities. If concierges were observed engaging in anything reasonably regarded as a pre-show or post-show audience engagement activity related to the narrative of the show, CTG was liable for a significant fine, and the author's estate would be entitled to pull production rights from CTG. In this instance, had a concierge offered an audience member waiting in the lobby an invitation to engage in a conversation about the play, they would not only have been exposing CTG to financial and reputational risk, but they would be taking a significant personal risk that could put their employment status in jeopardy. That the Mamet estate was willing to approve a legal remedy to enforce their authority as the ultimate arbiter of meaning-making acknowledges the perception of frame experiences as disrupting or "modding" aspects of the meaning-making mechanisms of the core performance. That CTG was willing to enter this contract without any discussion with the KDT engagement team demonstrates the steep status differential within the organization, and the position of the engagement team within the hierarchy.

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[313] "Meaningful play in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The meaning of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome." from Salen and Zimmerman, 3:4.

Whether or not there is value in discussing the invitation to participate as interpellation depends on the extent to which one believes that it is possible to escape the influence of ideology, or whether it is possible for us to produce anything that is not subject to the ideology in which (and for which) it was produced.  Any answer provided could be dismissed as ideological, since in providing such an answer one would undoubtedly employ the signs and signifiers of ideology.  Can one produce meaning outside of the hegemony while employing the technology of ideology, or in the attempt do we simply mark out more ideological territory?  At some point one must make some kind of ethical choice and draw a line, and where one chooses to draw the line will reflect not only their position within — and relationship to — the hegemony, but the degree to which their invitation might stand in for authority.

Ranciére writes, "we no longer live in the days when playwrights wanted to explain to their audience the truth of social relations and ways of struggling against capitalist domination" — a generous assumption which I extend to theatre makers of all sorts, not just playwrights.  Gone are the days of the riotous Bowery B'hoys, the rowdy Forrest partisans, contending against the respectable Macready elites for control of the theatre.  For better or worse, that issue resolved, and when it did, class struggle became a narrative curiosity for American theatre.[314]  That is not to say that theatre ought not to challenge assumptions and continue to provide a space for cultural and political critique, only that to approach the act of making theatre with the intent of emancipating or enlightening an audience situates the maker in a position of authority

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[314] Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: from Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

above their imagined audience.

Recognizing that from a particular point of view an invitation to participate may never escape the badge of ideology, one may regard the conventional invitation — that which was implicit in the purchase of a ticket — as ideologically neutral. This is akin to an actor standing in "neutral," to Bogart and Landau's concept of "medium" in Viewpoints, and to the center of the polity from which perspective the world seems ordinary — normal — the water we swim in. Each invitation to participate is situated, so that to interpret the meaning of the invitation requires a specific understanding of the contexts within which the invitation intervenes.

When an audience attends the theatre, they do not typically call out or even notice the numerous invitations to participate that the implicit rules of theatre mandate. Such invitations are smoothed and blended by the confirmation of player expectations into the background of awareness within the event of theatre. They serve as subtle cues for player action, not unlike a cue for an actor that invites them to make their "move". The house doors open, bells chime in the lobby, the house lights fade to half, pause, then go to black. Music swells, then light illuminates the stage. All these cues invite the player to participate in a particular, unexceptional, and expected way that codifies their role as audience.

It is only when an audience member is confronted with an invitation that would result in an explicit renegotiation of the rules framing their roles of agency and status that they will hesitate to consider whether or not to accept the invitation. Such an invitation may be regarded as marking an extension of the phase space of player

agency — as a potential breach in the "studium" or a declaration of "house rules" — that will have a *meaningful* impact on the player's experience of the event. In this instance, the qualifying term *meaningful* is an organizing term designating those invitations which would intervene in and disrupt the implicit rules of theatre to the extent that the player explicitly alters their in-game behavior.

Invitations that intervene in and disrupt the implicit rules of theatre have the potential to excite a perception of risk from the audience or even *actual risk* which Gareth White, author of *Audience Participation in Theatre*, refers to as the "Horizon of Risk." Like White, I contend that the Horizon of Risk ought to be an early consideration in structuring and invitation to participate. Participatory theatre confronts the audience with "special opportunities for embarrassment, for mis-performance and reputational damage,"[315] to a degree that the maintenance of decorum and the right to refuse the invitation take on great significance.

The conventions of theatre act as a complex system of ambivalence that recursively forms and is formed by normative patterns of player behavior. As the audience performs their role, they (re)write the script for the next audience. The ambivalence they experience in the frame around the central performance is the result of conventions that balance positive internal valence (the reward and promise of entertainment) with negative externalities (negotiating public spaces and the actual and perceived risks associated with doing so). The balance of approach and avoidance valences generate a homeostatic social environment "designed" to be a neutral or

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[315] Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 73.

"medium" space that does not produce meaning relevant to the performance. In this way, the conventional frame experience consolidates the meaning making apparatus of the event complex to the central performance. This consolidation of meaning accounts for the designation of "audience participation" as an activity outside the normative behaviors of the audience, when in fact the audience is a participant even in the most conventional theatre event imaginable.

As a complex system with a diverse set of agents (players), theatre conventions are durable but not fixed. When conventions are disrupted by the introduction of a meaning-making apparatus *inside the frame* of the performance, the balance between positive and negative valence is disrupted as is the ambivalence that maintained the homeostatic social environment responsible for mitigating the perceptions of risk. Generally speaking, White argues, *real* risk is not what deters an individual from participating, but the "perception of the risks by the individual that leads to conscious and unconscious choices about how and whether to participate." He cites an "economy of self-preservation" that exists in all social settings, but which is particularly pronounced in closed authoritative institutions, such as conventional theatres.[316]

The audience-player confronted by an unexpected invitation to play will become motivated to restore social homeostasis by engaging in allostatic behaviors. The nature of these allostatic behaviors will be determined in large part by the type of valence imbalance encountered. The addition of positive valence or the increase of the perception of reward will motivate approach behaviors, generally resulting in the

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[316] Ibid., 82.

audience member accepting the invitation. Negative valence or the increase of the perception of risk will motivate avoidance behaviors, likely resulting in a rejection of the invitation. Certainly, rejecting the invitation is the most expedient path to restoring homeostasis. Accepting the invitation will require a player to perform the allostatic behaviors in response to a new environmental stress as they move to rebalance the risk/reward equation. When the player balances the risk/reward equation, they settle into a homeostatic state, albeit different from before. The addition of new environmental conditions and the subsequently balanced behavioral responses change the experiential path of the player, and necessarily alter the *meaning* of the event.

The *reward* for accepting the risk must be perceived and understood in relationship to the perception of risk inherent in accepting the invitation. Risk balanced against perceived value will increase the likelihood for participation and may be mitigated either through association with intrinsic rewards (making it fun) or extrinsic reward (receiving a token of perceived value) or by undermining the conditions for embarrassment by adjusting the social expectations for decorum. How one authors the procedure for participation "will produce, in the landscape of possibilities available to its participants, a challenge to their abilities and to their desire to remain safe from loss of face."[317]

[317] Ibid., 78.

## 4.3 - Audience Interactivity Matrix

There are a number of indirect control techniques used by game designers that help to diminish a player's perception of risk and to increase the likelihood that games will result rich emotional outcomes. Such emotional responses are the natural outcome of participatory experiences — many of them are unique to interactive experiences — and are often the reason people engage in these participatory experiences. In her discussion of participant motivations, Jane McGonigal, author of *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, notes that the most powerful "currency" to emerge in the "economy of engagement" is emotion. "The economy of engagement is also an economy of feelings, in which positive emotions—pride, curiosity, love, and feeling smart—are the ultimate reward for participation."[318] Furthermore, the types of emotional response a participant experiences can be determined by the type of participatory activities in which they engage.

Experience designer Nicole Lazzaro, founder and president of XEODesign, Inc developed a concept for mapping these emotional outcomes called "The Four Keys to Fun" (see Figure 26) that is utilized by game designers to examine the way that games deliver emotional experiences, and these "keys" — or types — apply broadly to interactive or participatory experiences. According to Lazzaro's model, the four types of fun that an interactive experience may deliver are 1) Hard Fun, 2) Easy Fun, 3)

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[318] Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World; Includes Practical Advice for Gamers* (London: Vintage, 2012).

People Fun, and 4) Serious Fun.[319] Each of these types of "fun" result from different modes of participant activities and contribute to specific emotional responses from participants. Hard fun describes experiences which present participants with a challenge that they must overcome using strategy or mastery in order to achieve a specific goal. Easy Fun describes the kind of experience which invites participants to explore a world, take on a role, or "take the controls" of a system, in a way that de-emphasizes challenge and encourages fantasy. People Fun experiences utilize mechanics which create social interaction between participants, relying heavily on the "addictive" nature of human relationships. Serious Fun results from purposeful experiences designed to change the way a participant thinks, and is often wedded to real-world outcomes so that the outcomes are seen to have an effect transcending the representational world in which it occurs.

[319] Nicole Lazzaro, "The 4 Keys to Fun" (XEODesign®, 2010) https://www.xeodesign.com/research/.

| Key | Experience | Emotions |
|---|---|---|
| **Hard Fun** | Challenging | Fiero |
| | Strategy | Frustration |
| | Overcoming Obstacles | Relief |
| | Obtaining Goals | |
| **Easy Fun** | Exploration | Curiosity |
| | Imagination | Surprise |
| | Interpretation | Wonder |
| | Investigation | Awe |
| **People Fun** | Cooperation | Amicability |
| | Competition | Amusement |
| | Communication | Admiration |
| | Performance | Compassion |
| **Serious Fun** | Learning | Excitement |
| | Repetition | Focus |
| | Meditation | Relaxation |

Figure 26: Lazzaro's 4 Keys to Fun

As we saw in Chapter 2, designers use an Interest Curve to visualize the actual or intended degree of player interest along a timeline representing the duration of a game, and a Space of Possibility to understand the degree to which player choice impacts the outcome of a game. By considering the complexity of the Interest Curve, the breadth of the Space of Possibility, and how much indirect control to design to amplify the efficacy of both, an experience designer may craft a performance which integrates, within a single Interest Curve, specific emotional responses typical to more traditional narratives and those native to participatory outcomes. It is not unreasonable

to assume that directors and playwrights comfortably at home with traditional forms of performance would consider the task of crafting an interactive performance a daunting and foreign undertaking, and it is useful to consider a model for clarifying the experience designer's focus and objectives, and beginning — in broad-strokes — to orient the project in terms of how audiences will interact with it.

WolfBrown's "Audience Involvement Spectrum" (described in Chapter 1) is a good starting point for such a model, although it requires an added dimension in order to become useful in this way.  Experiences for a "Receptive Audience" necessitate a focus on designing an expected audience reaction or Interest Curve - as in traditional theatre — whereas experiences on the "Participatory Audience" end of the spectrum call for a focus on designing the Space of Possibility. However, this correlation does not yet take into consideration the dimension of choice, which has been demonstrated to be the energizing force at the very core of every interactive experience.

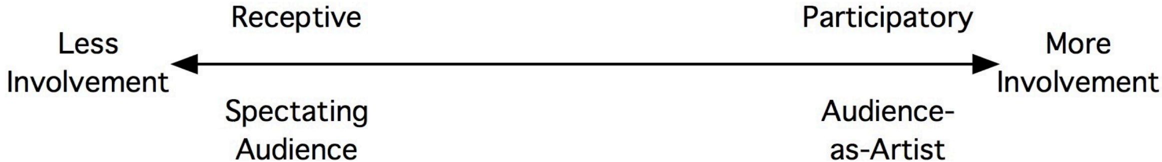


Figure 27: WolfBrown’s Audience Involvement Spectrum

By adding the dimension of audience choice to WolfBrown’s Audience Involvement Spectrum, it is possible to transform the model into a useful and practical

tool to assist experience designers in locating not only their locus of creativity but also to determine how a particular experience positions the audience. Similar to the WolfBrown spectrum, this new model, which I will call the "Audience Interactivity Matrix" (AIM), positions specific experiences along an axis of *involvement*, expanding the spectrum vertically, along a perpendicular axis of *choice* (see Figure 28).

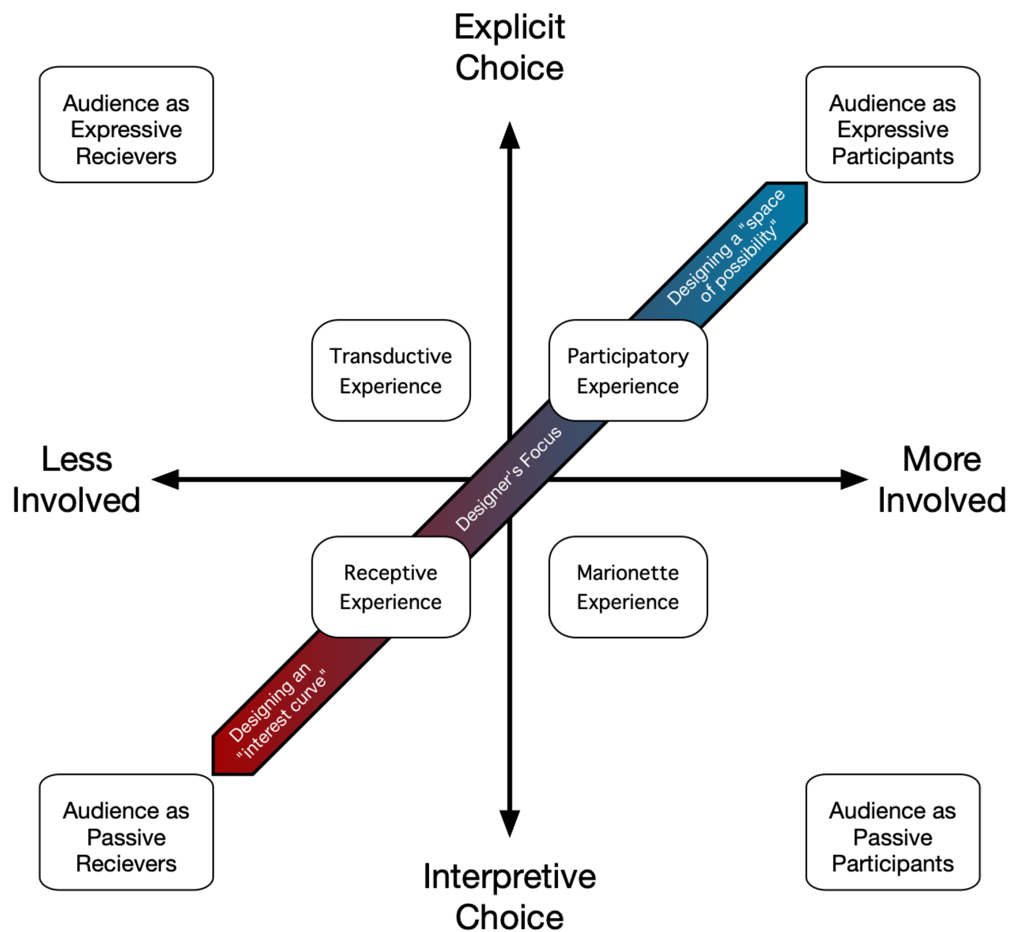


Figure 28 - Audience Interactivity Matrix (AIM)

Placement along the involvement axis describes the degree of direct audience

involvement with the performance, which takes shape through the physical activities of the audience as they take part in the designed performance. In a conventional sense, this is a determination of the degree to which the audience is "on stage." Experiences with a high degree of audience involvement might include those in which the audience is brought up onto the performance space or where the audience is asked to perform certain activities within the framework of the representational world of the performance. Experiences with a low degree of audience involvement would include the traditional model of audience as spectator, where there is a clear delineation between the physical and psychological space occupied by the audience, and that of the performers. The "zero point" along the involvement axis might even be thought of to represent a tangible separation (spatial or temporal) between the location of the audience and the location of the performance.

Placement along the "choice" axis describes the quality of choices an audience makes concerning the experience, whether they are involved in the performance or not. These range between *explicit choice* (those that have a direct impact on the representational system of the game) and *interpretive choice*. In this context, interpretive choices are purely internal choices relating to an individual's interpretation of the experience. While interpretive choices are reactions to the performance, they are strictly internal, and do not alter the direction of the performance or create an impression of control over outcomes.

By determining whether a performance includes low or high audience involvement combined with explicit or interpretive audience decision making, my AIM

model categorizes experiences into four quadrants. These quadrants define the types of interactive experiences that may be designed within the context of a performance: Receptive Experiences, Transductive Experiences, Marionette Experiences, and Participatory Experiences. The AIM demonstrates how each of these experience types positions the audience in a certain way. It also shows how the "Designer's Focus" axis runs diagonally through the matrix, articulating whether the creation of a particular experience demands greater design focus on the Interest Curve or the Space of Possibility (and/or how much indirect control will be needed to reconcile these).

The positioning of the audience described in each quadrant indicates what the audience's relationship to the performance is while engaged in that particular experience. The descriptives used for audiences parallel the position on the Involvement and Choice axis. Involved audiences are called "Participants" whereas uninvolved audiences are referred to as "Receivers." Similarly, audience members involved in making explicit choices are considered “Expressive” — meant to draw focus to both the intentionality and deliberation involved in making an explicit choice. Conversely, “Passive” audiences are those for whom the experience only affords interpretive choices that do not substantially impact the representational world of the game. The combination of these descriptors produces four "positions" for the audience, which are dependent on the type of experience: the Receptive Experience positions the audience as Passive Receivers, the Transductive Experience as Expressive Receivers, the Marionette Experience as Passive Participants, and the Participatory Experience as Expressive Participants.

WolfBrown's "Audience Involvement Spectrum" more or less identifies the Receptive and Participatory Experiences (and the corresponding audience positioning), and these forms of experiences have been somewhat elucidated by that spectrum and the accompanying study. The AIM, however, reveals two additional "collateral" experience types and their corresponding audience positioning — the Transductive Experience — which includes the *frame experience* and *frame performance* explored at length in this dissertation — and the Marionette experience.

Marionette experiences are those in which the audience is invited to step into a performance role but without agency or freedom to make explicit choices within the representational context of the performance. One recent example of such an experience was the British and German theatre group Gob Squad's original production called *Western Society.*[320] The theatre troupe recreated a meme video on YouTube that depicted a coastal California family sitting and interacting with each other while watching television. As the central performance progressed, audience members were selected one at a time to replace the actors on stage, so that gradually more and more of the family characters were played by members of the audience. Although these audience members took over for the actors, when they came up on stage, they were fitted with headphones connected to iPods that played synchronized audio tracks containing explicit instructions dictating what to do, where to go, and what to say. In order to avoid the embarrassment of causing the performance to fail, these audience

[320] Ben Brantley, "Review: 'Western Society,' It's a Selfie World after All," The New York Times (The New York Times, February 19, 2015), https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/theater/review-western-society-its-a-selfie-world-after-all.html.

members focused on following instructions and were not afforded opportunities to improvise in ways that would cause them to significantly impact the outcome of the performance.

The Transductive Experience, or *frame experience*, presupposes low audience involvement in the central performance, and occurs outside the spatial and/or temporal boundary that constitutes the formal magic circle of the performance. The player makes explicit choices that impact a representational system that is situated adjacent to the performance, and while meaning is transmitted between adjacent representational systems, the explicit choices made in the frame experience do not explicitly impact the representational system of the theatre performance. Common examples of frame experiences include facilitated post-performance conversations, pre- or post- performance interactive installations or games, and other opportunities to engage in experiences designed or curated to accompany the performance. The metaphor of a frame is used to suggest that — like the frame around a painting — the frame experience exists "around" the art and is adjunct to the art. Nevertheless, a frame can be a work of art in and of itself, and the shape, size, and design (indeed the existence or lack) of a frame can significantly impact how an artwork is received.

The frame experience operates as a discrete representational system embedded within the larger context of the primary representational system (the central performance). The frame gains meaning from its relationship to the central performance but has separate rules and context which allow participants to make explicit choices. These choices may or may not explicitly impact the central

performance, but within the context of the embedded "collateral" experience, they are explicit. The frame experience is “transductive” because within the broader context of the *performance complex* (see Figure 29), which includes the central performance and the frame performance(s), meaning produced by explicit player choices in the frame impacts the production of meaning in the central performance. “Meaningful play in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome” writes Salen and Zimmerman, but through transduction, meaning produced within one system may transfer and impact the interpretation of meaning within another system.

Players produce *evaluative* meaning through the performance of ludic behaviors either implicit or explicit to the rules of the game, or *descriptive* meaning by reading or decoding cultural capital provided within the context of the game. Evaluative play forms meaning through a consideration of *how* or *why* the body behaves as it does within the context of the experience. For example, an audience member performing the implicit rules of theatre as dictated by conventions would generate little meaning evaluated within the context of conventional theatre, whereas the audience member performing explicit behaviors outside the conventions of theatre will generate *evaluative* meaning.

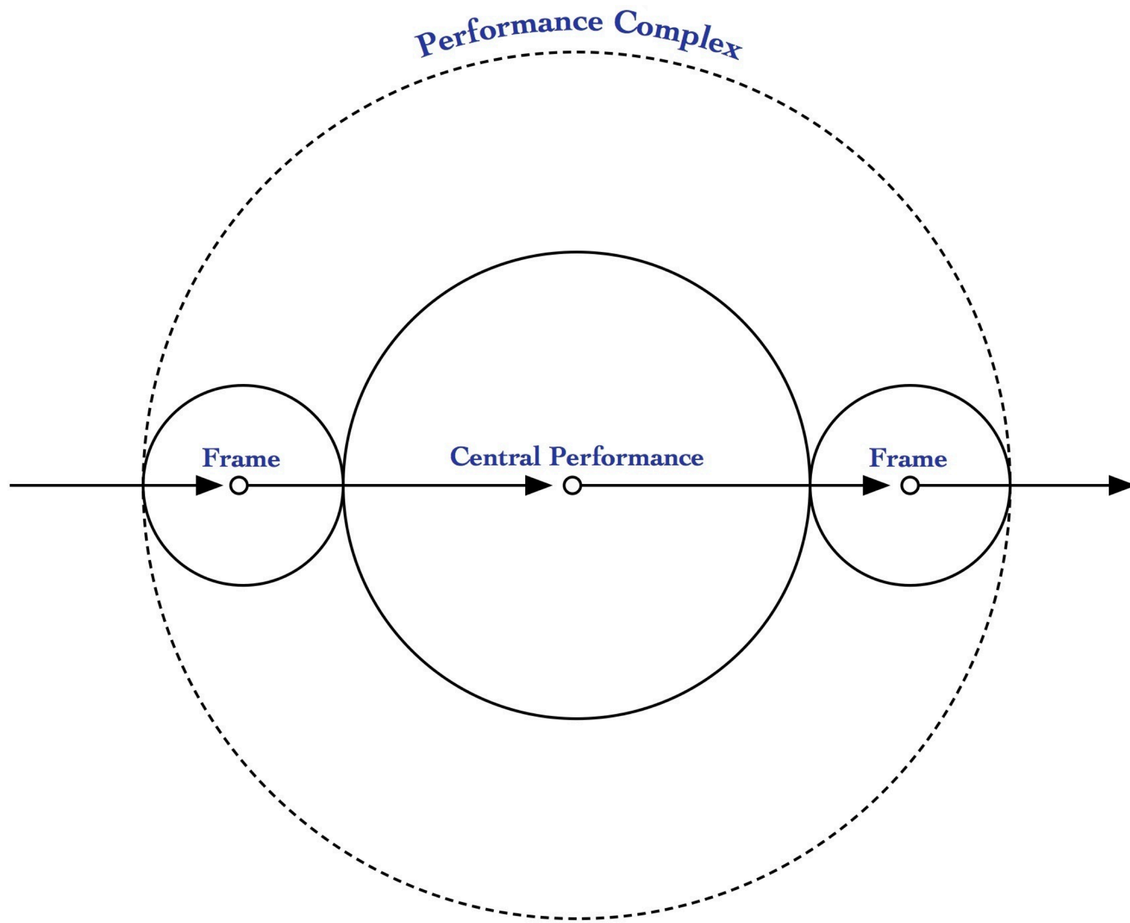


Figure 29: Performance Complex with Transductive Experiences

Frame experiences like *The Incomparable Prize Fight* (examined in detail in Chapter 5), and *Love Stories*, which this chapter will explore in the next section, produced evaluative meaning by offering audience members opportunities to participate as performers in the larger performance complex, and by furnishing roles of agency in a game experience adjacent to the central performance. The adjunct — or collateral — representational system, the frame experience, both gains meaning from and transmits meaning to the primary representational system or central performance.

Meaning is articulated in the interaction between these two representational systems, and — in effect — the boundary of the representational world of the play is expanded to include the frame.

### 4.4 - Rule Complexity and Love Stories

The Kirk Douglas Theatre XD team designed the game *Love Stories* to accompany Todd Almonds two-hander rock musical, *Girlfriend,* about the complicated “first love” between two teenage boys in 1980s Nebraska. *Love Stories* demonstrates one approach to managing risk, and how the invitation (or invitations) to participate may translate as aesthetic material through the bodies and choices of the players.

The game began as audience members stepped into the theatre lobby from outside to get their ticket scanned. The interactional procedure between the ticket taker and the arriving audience member is deeply inscribed in conventional theatre and an obvious first choice for embedding invitation procedures. Not only does the ticket taker portal provide a check-point procedure which presumably all audience members pass through, but most audience members expect to receive some basic information and possibly instruction about the show or theatre. The concierge who managed the ticketing transaction at the Kirk Douglas Theatre utilized a bar-code ticket scanner which — along with a subtle and expected hand gesture — typically prompts the audience to hand their tickets to the ticket taker to have them scanned. Typically, an

audience will then wait to have the tickets handed back before continuing on. This afforded the concierge time to relay all the expected information (how long is the show, where is the bathroom), and time enough to drop in an extra instruction or two. In the case of *Love Stories,* the concierge handed the ticket back to the audience member along with a game card. They then instructed the audience member to, "take this card to the concierge over there (nodding towards a high-top table in the middle of the lobby, and the person sporting a bright red badge with the word "concierge" on it), and they'll explain what to do with it." Receiving this instruction as a matter of course, most audience members follow it as a matter of course. Such a procedure was known as "positioning the choice" as "opt-out," meaning that the invitation — or the choice of whether or not to participate — was positioned to the audience as a choice *not* to participate, rather than a choice *to* participate. Using the institutional authority associated with the conventional procedure of ticket taking to insert additional instructions places the burden of choice on the audience to opt-out of the experience.

A highly complex experience with many explicit rules, that takes more than a couple of minutes to play, and that demands many resources per player to execute properly should be positioned with an "opt-in choice," and the more complex and resource heavy, the more one ought to scale towards opt-in. When presented the choice to opt-in, or left to discover the choice on their own, fewer members of the audience will participate than if presented with the choice to opt-out. This scales down the number of participants which could be necessary if the experience is complex or resource heavy. Just as important, those who opt-in are generally more loyal to the

experience and willing to tolerate greater degrees of complexity before giving up or becoming frustrated.  Typical opt-in procedures include placing a “rabbit hole”[321] somewhere that prospective players may find it, or one of the concierges will gently offer an invitation as part of a broader conversation.

Positioning the choice as *opt-out*, as one could imagine, has about the opposite effect as positioning it as *opt-in.*  It is an effective procedure for generating a high rate of participation *provided* that the experience is not complex and does not require a heavy resource load.  People who discover they are already playing a game they did not really intend to play are more likely to regard any complexity as intolerable and soundly reject the invitation.  The challenge of successfully authoring the choice as *opt-out* is identifying where, when, and how to introduce the game within the conventional procedures that the audience member has already implicitly chosen to perform.

In the case of *Love Stories,* when audience members arrived at the aforementioned table, the concierge stationed at the table offered them a pen and invited them to answer the prompt on the game card, or if they were not up to it, they could simply hand the card back to the concierge.  This concierge followed up the opt-out positioning with a quick opportunity to opt-in or opt-out.  The only explicit action the audience had taken thus far was to cross to the table in the center of the lobby, after which every subsequent choice would be positioned as opt-in.  This was important, because the stakes and complexity of *Love Stories* escalated as players

[321] A rabbit hole, is a secret door that takes you to Wonderland…or gets you started playing a game.

progressed.  However, the XD team determined that by placing an opt-out procedure at the top of the game, they primed the experience for a high level of participation.

Players who elected to continue with the experience responded to the prompt "In three or four lines, share the story of your first great love!"  At this point *Love Stories* resembles one the most common lobby experiences in the Kirk Douglas Theatre repertoire:  the "write-and-post" mechanic.   The write-and-post encourages an audience to respond to a prompt by writing something which they post in a public area alongside posts placed by other audience members.    Write-and-posts offer an intriguing blend of anonymity and performance.  Writing is usually a private act, where the author has only to negotiate with their own expectations of reception and in the case of a write-and-post authors usually remain anonymous which acts as a risk mitigation that the participant manages, allowing for a certain amount of intimacy in the responses.  Given that the prompt for *Love Stories* dealt with a presumably emotionally charged relationship, the XD team understood that the experience could bring up unpleasant memories or cause friction between a player and someone they brought with them to the theatre (who may not have been the subject of the write-and-post). After giving the player a pen, the concierge pointed to a wall on the far side of the lobby where the cards were being posted and instructed them to take the finished card to the concierge standing by the wall who would explain how to hang the card.

When players arrived at the wall with their cards filled out, the concierge stationed at that location presented players with another simple opt-in choice. Players could either finish the write-and-post by hanging their card on the wall, or they could play the

game, *Love Stories.* If they elected to keep playing, they were given a lanyard and a badge printed with the words, "I'M IN!" The "I'M IN!" badges produced an identity cohort of willing players, and helped those players find others who had elected to play *Love Stories*. After receiving their badges, a player's first goal was to find one other player and share the love stories they wrote on their card with each other. After sharing their stories, they were then to work together to author a new love story that combined elements of their two stories into a single *fictional* love story. This was called a "Duet." Once players successfully formed into a Duet, they would seek out another Duet and repeat the process to form a Quartet by combining elements of the two Duet stories. Having successfully formed a Quartet, players would move around the lobby together in their Quartets seeking other Quartets to form Octets. Players who successfully formed an Octet were invited to return to the wall to post their cards where they would often — without prompting — perform their story.

At each step along the way, the dynamics of the game shifted as the experience transitioned from an intimate, private, and mostly anonymous act of performance to an often-histrionic rendition of the fruits of their collaboration. Similarly, as the story passed from a personal reflection to a collaborative fiction, players were confronted with a process of negotiation during which they would not be able to retain all of the elements of their intimate story. As Quartets and Octets formed, group social dynamics started to play out, with some groups working more by consensus and others falling in behind one or two leaders.

The player focus shifted during the course of the game from retaining aspects of

one's personal story to arriving at a satisfying end story. Additionally, after the concierge handed players the "I'M IN" badge, all invitations to participate were initiated by the players themselves. At each stage of the game, *Love Stories* negotiated the perceived risk of participation by offering frequent opportunities to renew the choice to opt-in coinciding with incremental elevations of complexity and risk. These were further mitigated by transferring the role of extending invitations (a role of agency) to the players themselves.

The challenge of designing procedures for player opt-in is paramount to the audience experience designer, because no matter how clever, beautiful, or fun a frame experience may be, if no one participates the experience is vacuous. What's more, many frame experiences contain or rely upon social mechanics and simply will not work without meeting a particular threshold of player involvement. Unlike most games — where player participation is assumed — frame experiences work with the implicit assumption that the audience will *not* participate.

Developing an efficacious invitation to play is complicated and has implications to the overall ruleset of the experience. Many audience members have no context for frame experiences and are taken by surprise when approached with an invitation to participate in a lobby game. Even before rules are explicitly articulated, the player is confronted with whether or not to accept the new rules. The question "do you want to play?" contains the subtextual question, "will you abide by this new set of rules?" Without clearly articulating the rules of the experience within the invitation to participate, the invitation excites a perception of uncertainty and risk — a situation that

might inspire the thought, “what am I agreeing to?” While some players provide their own internal motivation to participate in experiences that produce risk — those people who might be considered naturally curious or adventurous — for most players, receiving an invitation without explicit knowledge of the rules they are agreeing to immediately generates a negative valence.

On the other hand, unfurling a detailed set of rules for the experience along with the invitation to play will often and likely result in an immediate rejection of the invitation. Imagine arriving in a crowded lobby along with a friend, colleague, or significant other that you brought with you to the theatre, and being approached by someone with a name badge who invites you to play a lobby game in which you will need to write a paragraph about your first great love experience, then find another player with whom to share paragraphs before combining them into a single fictional story, and then working as a couple to find another couple with whom to share and combine fictional stories into a single story that you then hang on a designated wall for others to read…And while the explanation drones on, your eyes glaze over because you lost the thread way back at “share paragraphs” and now you’re just waiting for a lull to politely decline the invitation.

Influential UI (User Interface) designer Steve Krug, author of *Don’t Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability,* identifies this phenomenon as the impetus for his First Law of Usability. Krug argues that “puzzling over things that don’t matter to us tends to sap our energy and enthusiasm”[322] and that we therefore resist

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[322] Steve Krug, *Don't Make Me Think!: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* (Berkley, CA: New Riders, 2017), 19.

expending cognitive resources on activities that present no evident value. Game designer Wendy Despain notes that Krug's First Law addresses a mistake many designers make when they assume that players will make the effort to optimize their in-game performance by carefully reading and understanding all of the rules or aspects of the interface.[323] Instead, she instructs, "people do what is called *satisficing*." When confronted with an invitation, she notes, they quickly scan relevant cues balancing optimal outcome against required effort for the most expedient choice.

Complexity demands an investment of attentional resources and taxes *working memory*, something that is already generally in short supply. The lobby may be noisy and full of people; the player may not be familiar with the layout of the theatre; the player may have arrived at the theatre as part of a group requiring social obligations; they may be invested in something on their mobile device — the list goes on. Attending to a complex new set of rules while surrounded by these distractions and other demands for attention requires a significant investment of effort. Caught between the Scylla of attending to complex rules or the Charybdis of agreeing to participate without understanding the risks involved, most audience members simply reject the invitation.

Rather than regarding this tendency as a non-negotiable constraint mandating a fixed limit on the complexity of lobby experience design, it is possible to identify the *acute variables* within the performance of an invitation, and to understand that these variables offer levers that allow not only for predictable and scalable participation, but

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[323] Wendy Despain, *100 Principles of Game Design* (New Riders, 2013), 190.

also for scalable complexity in the ruleset. Understanding *rule complexity* as an acute variable rather than a fixed constraint is an important consideration in designing a frame experience. Leveraging complexity as an acute variable, a designer can intentionally increase or decrease player participation. From this point of view, game complexity is an environmental stress that challenges the attentional capacity of the player and demands an adaptive response. As with other acute variables, *variable complexity* allows for gradual and incremental increase of complexity through iteration that generates durable allostasis until the player has opted-in to the full complex of rules in the game. Without understanding complexity as a variable, lobby experiences are reduced to either tepid participation or a game palette consisting only of "easy fun."

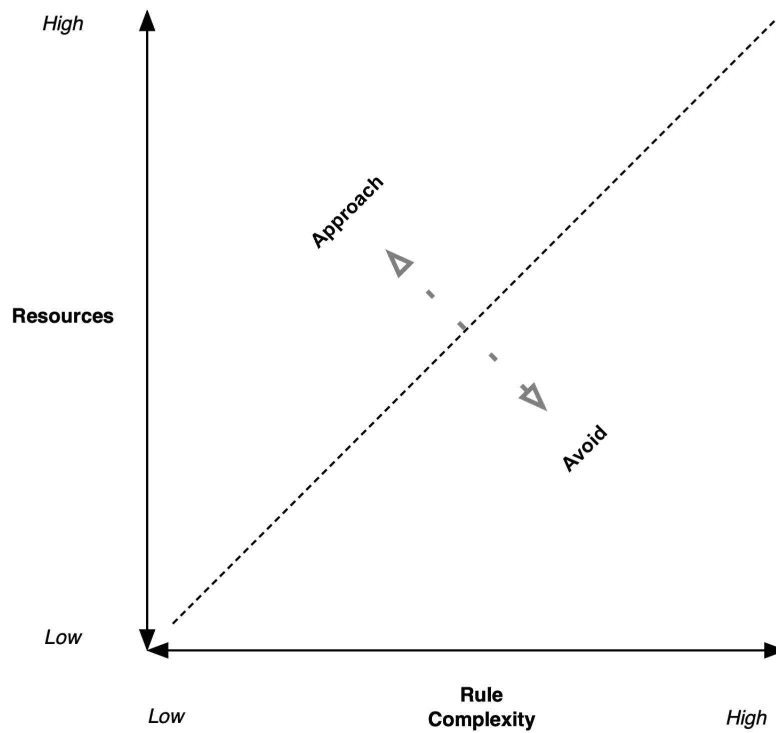


Figure 30: Complexity Threshold.

The “complexity threshold” of an experience marks the point of balance between the demand the rules place on the player’s available attentional resources and variable resources that encourage an approach valence.  A player at the complexity threshold will experience ambivalence when invited to participate in an experience, and any perception of additional complexity or any additional demand placed on their attention will result in the player rejecting the invitation.

It may go without saying that players bring with them all their individual preferences and circumstances which cause them to react differently to both complexity and mitigating resources, and it would be a Herculean labor to map all of the possible influences that contribute to the balancing of individual player valences.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that these complex circumstantial and psychological variables distribute normally across the population making it possible to intuit the approximate location of the complexity threshold for lobby games, and the designer's practical experience and playtesting allow for the refinement of this location. Indeed, the quickest and easiest way to locate a complexity threshold is to observe whether player participation exceeds or falls short of the designer's expectations. Having an awareness of the complexity threshold of an experience gives the designer a valuable lens through which to consider the various constraints of the experience, and to match those constraints with appropriate resources. What's more, such awareness allows a designer to utilize complexity as an aesthetic material, intentionally deploying more or less complexity within the experience as a way of creating meaning.

Generally speaking, the complexity of a frame experience may be scaled up by allocating more resources to the experience, or by employing specific procedures for mitigating complexity. Relevant resources include those temporal, spatial, material, and labor capital available as constituents for the procedures that will allow for greater or lesser complexity. As the program at the Douglas developed and the XD team started testing the limits of what we could do, much of the early design process would keep us occupied accounting for our resources and looking for ways to either leverage additional resources or find more efficient processes. This early work came to fruition during the Kirk Douglas Theatre production of *The Royale,* when the XD team developed our most robust and ambitious frame experience to date — and the subject of the next chapter — *The Incomparable Prize Fight,* which became the template for

several subsequent game designs at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

# Chapter 5: The Incomparable Prize Fight

## 5.0 - Lobby Game as Frame Performance

As discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, during the early part of the new millennium, American theatre audiences became a subject of renewed interest within the regional theatre community, and the term “audience engagement” became an ubiquitous catchphrase that signaled innovation, adaptation and even revolution. Theatre Communications Group launched its “Audience (RE)volution” initiative, hosting panels and workshops for audience engagement best practices, and rewarding individuals and organization practicing audience engagement with highly visible grants. Prominent philanthropic institutes like the Irvine Foundation offered significant incentives to arts organizations that could demonstrate innovative approaches to audience engagement, and research firms like WolfBrown partnered with theatre companies and arts organizations around the nation to understand audience behaviors and preferences. Year after year, the premiere regional theatre conference in North America, the Theatre Communications Group (TCG) conference, hosted panels and discussions taking up the emergence of audience engagement programs, such as the panel entitled “A New Frontier: Using Audience Engagement to Connect with Theatregoers” during which I presented the innovative Concierge Program at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Despite the undeniable consensus that formed around the notion that audience

engagement was a thing to be valued in the theatre community, it became increasingly clear that the inherent vagueness of the term allowed for a range of interpretation that led to Babylonian confusion of tongues around the actual definition of "audience engagement." Differing organizational goals and artistic priorities could generate entirely different understandings of what it meant to practice audience engagement. For example, companies like Mixed Blood Theatre framed audience engagement as a radical effort to make theatre accessible to underprivileged members of the community,[324] whereas Dog & Pony DC developed audience engagement as a mode of participatory theatre in which the art produces opportunities for audience agency not typical in the conventional theatre model.[325] Large theatre companies, like our Center Theatre Group, experienced this mix of interpretation internally, where intradepartmental priorities set the audience experience agenda. Marketing departments, for example, were likely to understand audience engagement as a "value added" to the price of a ticket — an extra sell point to put butts in seats. On the other hand, Development departments tended to see audience engagement as a means to reach patrons with deep pockets or to generate a narrative of innovation that appealed to grant funding institutes. Literary departments saw audience engagement as a creative feedback tool for new work, or to provide "curatorial insights" to audience members that increase the summative impact of the show.[326] Education departments

[324] Mixed Blood Theatre entered the conversation with its version of "Radical Hospitality" in which they offered free tickets to those who could not afford them.

[325] "Dog & Pony DC," Facebook, accessed May 31, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/dandpdc/.

[326] Rebecca Ratzkin et al., *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art: Featuring Measuring the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre: The Final Report on the Landmark Two-Year Intrinsic Impact Theatre Study from Research Firm Wolfbrown and Authors Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin* (San Francisco, CA: Theatre Bay Area, 2012).

tended to understand audience engagement as an opportunity to make theatre more accessible to young audiences.

Largely independent of any department, the Kirk Douglas Theatre audience experience (XD) team chose to understand audience engagement as an intrinsically audience centric endeavor focused on delivering an audience experience within the frame of the performance (the time and space immediately surrounding the show on stage). As discussed in Chapter 4, which examined the Concierge program, the Kirk Douglas Theatre audience experience team believed that simple person to person relationships provided the best way to deliver an engaging experience. Guided by the themes and ideas explored during the stage performance, the team sought to design interactive experiences that facilitated a dynamic exchange of ideas between two or more fully activated human beings. Although these pre- and post-show experiences were referred to as many things, such as lobby games, parlor games, frame experiences, and lobby activities, the Douglas Team's preferred term was *frame performances.* This acknowledged the intrinsically performative aspect of the events and positioned them within the overarching *performance complex.* As discussed in Chapter 4, the *performance complex* includes both the *central performance* (the performance on stage, the "show," ticketed event, etc.) and *frame performances* as subordinate events within the encompassing boundary of the entire experience at the theatre. To some extent, the frame included all the possible activities immediately before and after the central performance that fall under the umbrella of the performance complex but are not considered to be part of the central performance, so

the term *performance* was added to differentiate between experiences intentionally designed for audience participation and those implicit in the conventional mode of theatre.

Recognizing that social and cultural norms tend to generate constraints that prohibit easy participation for some individuals, the Kirk Douglas Theatre audience experience team sought to develop systems to dismantle or overcome barriers to engaged participation. While the concierge program persisted as a highly efficacious and increasingly popular program for building engaged relationships with the Douglas audience members, the audience experience team recognized that using *interactive mechanics* to design opportunities for audience members to engage with *each other* *p*rovided a powerful and playful, and fun remedy the social risks that tended to prohibit audience participation.

By the Winter of 2013, Eric Sims — my principal colleague on the XD team — and I had effectively established pre- and post-show "lobby games" (such as the "Love Stories" game discussed in Chapter 4) as the Kirk Douglas Theatre's signature approach to audience engagement. While our approach to audience engagement was not widely understood within Center Theatre Group, General Manager Nausica Stergiou and Associate Artistic Director, Kelley Kirkpatrick gave us the green light to extend experiments using game mechanics as an engagement strategy. This support was made explicit when Center Theatre Group sent me to the annual Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. This was the first time in CTG's history that the company sent an employee to GDC and signaled an endorsement of proposals to build

*interactive mechanics* into the audience experience.

Between panels at the GDC in late March of 2013, I designed the first iteration of the lobby game for playwright Marco Ramirez' play, *The Royale*, a game I would later title *The Incomparable Prize Fight.* It was the most complex and interactive frame experience designed at the Kirk Douglas Theatre to date, and many of the principles and mechanics developed for the game continued to provide the Kirk Douglas Theatre XD team with a versatile and durable toolbox for designing interactive audience experiences in the limen — or frame — of the theatrical event. In this chapter, I discuss the design and implementation of *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, providing a case study for the practical applications of the theory of radical fun and the game of theatre expressed in Part I. Additionally, I expand upon those concepts by documenting specific game principles and mechanics developed for frame performances during the practice-as-research project at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

## 5.1 - Entering the Frame

If you have ever lived in Los Angeles, then you know that the celebrities of certainty — death and taxes — play only a bit-part in the daily grind compared to the ubiquitous expectations of weather and traffic. It takes no leap of the imagination to visualize a local morning news weather graphic depicting a column of sunshine icons stacked seven-high next to a column made entirely of "72°." Just as predictable: the exasperated quips about the inevitable traffic carmagedeon and panicked hysterics

that ensue during the lightest of drizzles — quips that, predictably, offer LA newbs an opportunity to demonstrate their recently acquired cultural acumen while one-upping the quirky provinciality of “native” Angeleans. However, if they ever hope to survive in LA, novice Angeleans must learn that predicting and navigating the red and orange Google Map grid is no less than a rite of passage inducting them into a way of life adapted to the ubiquitous forecast: sunny and 72°. Expect traffic.

Guests arriving at the Kirk Douglas Theatre during the Spring 2013 performance of Marco Ramirez new play *The Royale* would have predictably negotiated their preferred traffic-beating route to Downtown Culver City where they would have likely parked in one of a handful of multistory parking complexes surrounding the core downtown area. Chances are they would have emerged from the parking complex into the room-temperature twilight evening where the predictably vibrant downtown Culver City nightlife would be in full swing. These theatre guest had every reason to expect the arc of familiar predictability to extend along their journey according to well established expectations, all the way to will-call, into and through the lobby, into the house and right up until the curtain rose on *The Royale*, at which point they would predictably expect the action on the stage to challenge (or at least tickle) their expectations in a slightly unpredictable way. In fact, for Kirk Douglas Theatre regulars the pre-show ritual was as implicit, ubiquitous, and predictable as LA weather and traffic. It must have felt like rain when they arrived outside the theatre to the most unusual sight of a person vigorously punching a speed bag in the typically vacant historic ticket booth.

Figure 31: The Boxing Office.  Photo by Ryan Miller.

The Kirk Douglas Theatre has its historic box office — also known as the "ticket booth" in the middle of an elegant terrazzo, outside the doors that enter into the Lobby. In the early 2000s, architect Steven Ehrlich and his firm restored the Culver Theater — an historic and decaying remnant of the Streamline Moderne aesthetic — to near perfect condition.  The restored ticket booth, however, was not intended for practical use, and lacked the space and resources necessary to accommodate the ticketing demands of a contemporary theatre company like Center Theatre Group that runs the Douglas.  Instead, designers intended the aesthetic link to the building's storied past to serve as a contrast to the significant renovations made on the building's interior "in an effort to separate old and new."  The renovated exterior juxtaposed with the innovated interior invited guests who progressed from the "public circulation along the building's

perimeter" to the functional interior to "rethink the theater experience."[327]

During a typical production at the Kirk Douglas Theatre between 2008-2017, guests of the theatre learned that the functional box office and will-call was located a dozen feet away along the Eastern wall of the terrazzo. Even though KDT guests may have come to expect the historic box office to be empty and locked up, that did not seem to dampen the intrinsic curiosity that it inspired in onlookers. It was common for audience members to try to get a look inside the ticket booth on their way to will-call or just before getting their ticket scanned at the lobby entrance.

Even when empty, there is an inherent theatricality to the historic box office at the Douglas. Located like a bunker on the frontier of the theatre, the box office was originally designed to facilitate a panoptic overwatch guarding against the illegal border crossings of the un-ticketed. It is a space originally designed to facilitate the transactional exchange between the institution and its tourists — a passport stamp, a temporary visa, an explicit permission to enter the guarded space within — transforming the un-ticketed horde into the ticketed guest. Left un-garrisoned, the empty booth turns the panoptic gaze inward. The observation post becomes the observed post. Without the presence of an authorized figure within the booth, the near 360º of paneless glass window invites passersby to regard the emptiness of the space as one might regard an empty stage. Like a stage, the box office is separated from its surroundings by both form and function. It is space to be viewed from the outside, and one that signals the authority of its occupant by virtue of their institutionally legitimized

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[327] By: Cathleen McGuigan et al., "Architectural Record RSS," Architectural Record RSS, 2005, https://www.architecturalrecord.com/.

and exclusive access. The transparent but impenetrable border marks off a performance space from a viewing space, and guests arriving at the theatre initiate their role as spectator when their curiosity directs their gaze into the empty booth.

Guests arriving at the Kirk Douglas Theatre to see *The Royale* did not find the historic box office empty, nor did they discover it occupied by a member of the theatre staff. What they saw was a performance — an actor engaged in an undeniably performative act — an act meant to be seen, and one that ordained the implicit theatricality of the ticket booth and canonized it as a legitimate representation of the legitimate stage. It would not take long for guests to discover that the actor pounding on the speedbag inside the ticket booth was — in fact — just like them: a guest to the theatre. Arriving guests would eventually receive an invitation to play a game that would induct them into the performance as players: "Step into the historic box office, visible to all passersby, and show us what you've got!" This game, titled "Boxing Office," was one of four mini-games designed as part of the frame experience titled *The Incomparable Prize Fight* for audiences of the Center Theatre Group production of *The Royale. The Incomparable Prize Fight* demonstrated the ascendance of an approach to audience engagement at the Kirk Douglas Theatre that valorized interactivity between audience members as a preferred modality for audience engagement.

## 5.2 - Approaching The Royale

The Center Theatre Group production of *The Royale,* directed by Daniel Aukin, was the world premiere of Ramirez' "bioplay of the first African American world heavyweight boxing champion"[328] based on the life of Jack Johnson, who defeated white boxer James Jefferies in 1910 America in what was dubbed the "Fight of the Century." Set during the Jim Crow era, the milieu of Ramirez' play captures a time when, according to David Zirin, author of *A People's History of Sports in the United States,* the dominant cultural attitude in the United States "was not only that blacks were mentally inferior to whites, but also that they were physically inferior to whites."[329] *The Royale* tells story of Jay "The Sport" Jackson (a fictional portrait of Jack Johnson) and his hero's journey to overcome internal obstacles and familial conflicts as he prepares to step into the ring to become champion of the world.

A key narrative thread in *The Royale* traces Jay's journey of transformation to become a boxer, and a person, capable not only of contending in the fight of his life but achieving victory. Although, certainly imbued with complex themes of race and identity, the plot of *The Royale* follows a basic genre-specific progression common to boxing and sports stories in which the protagonist must, under the guidance of a mentor and against all odds, undertake a rigorous training program to acquire the skills

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[328] Robert Hofler, "Legit Review: 'the Royale'," Variety (Variety, May 6, 2013), https://variety.com/2013/legit/reviews/the-royale-play-review-1200466094/.

[329] David Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protests, People, and Play* (The New Press,New York. 2008), 42.

needed to enter a competition in which they are not favored to win. In the process of undergoing the transformative training, they must confront some aspect of their ego that has held them back from unlocking their full potential. They only unlock this potential when they identify what truly motivates them to fight. This gives them the internal fortitude to complete the training and enter the final competition. Although specific to sports narrative, the basic narrative structure followed the ubiquitous "Hero's Journey" made famous by Joseph Campbell.

Although Jack Johnson was considered "a hero for many members of his race," like Johnson, the fictional Jay Jackson also "drew the wrath of segments of both the African-American and white communities because of his unwillingness to assume a subservient position and play the role of the grateful black."[330] Ramirez explores this attitude in *The Royale* through the lens of Jackson's relationship with his sister Nina. Nina's son suffered a violent beating at the hands of white supremacists who were outraged by Jackson's audacious rise through the ranks of the white dominated boxing world. Nina implores Jackson to abandon what she sees as his vain quest for validation, insisting that the world is not ready for an African American boxing champion. Should he win, she argues, innocent people would pay the price in blood. His sister's admonition becomes Jackson's greatest obstacle to winning the fight, sowing doubt into his resolve to win. This doubt rises to the surface during the prize fight at the climax of the story. Jackson's boxing opponent is depicted on stage as his sister Nina, who delivers her "blows" as reprimands and condemnations. Whether

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[330] S. W. Pope and John Nauright, *Routledge Companion to Sports History* (London: Routledge, 2012), 153.

Jackson possesses the resolve to win the fight depends on the efficacy of Jackson's preparation for the fight, which includes physical conditioning, clarification of purpose, and fortification of identity.

Realizing that the audience members who played *The Incomparable Prize Fight* would also be engaged in "preparation" for a central event, the performance of *The Royale* inside the theatre, I sought to produce game aesthetics that would mirror Jackson's journey as he prepared for his grand, climactic fight. Presented with a defamiliarizing theatricality, the climactic fight in *The Royale* employs a "house rule" (convention variant) established earlier in the play, in which the portrayal of violence is abstracted and transformed through rhythmic choreography into a dance-like exchange between actor/combatants. Rather than face each other in the boxing ring, the actors stand down-stage right and down-stage left facing off against the audience through the fourth wall rather than each other. Whereas traditional stage combat has developed around the concept of "selling" the realism of the violence on stage, in *The Royale* the actors never throw a "realistic" punch, and the aesthetic value of the stage combat rises out of its potential as metaphor rather than efficacious illusion. The metaphoric portrayal of violence not only abandons spectacle as virtue, but the *arrangement* of the combatants facing the audience situates the audience-player as a combatant. The audience as combatant becomes a recipient of the "blows" from both fighters, and the medium through which the combat "moves" must resolve. This cleaves to the narrative that the "fight of the century" plays out not only within the boxing ring, but also within a much larger "cultural ring," thereby challenging the

audience-player to regard their body as an active figure within the cultural frame of 1910 America. This silhouetting of racial identity markers infers evaluation emerging from the relative degree of defamiliarization that the audience experiences within the afforded provisional reality. Although the meaning making remains descriptive, these moments suggest evaluative meaning production when the players "fight" with the audience. However, since no invitations are extended to provide an explicit renegotiation of the rules of agency, the audience remains receptive — or at best, to recall the forms of audience engagement laid out in Chapter 4, in an extremely passive marionette experience. The meaning-making remains descriptive.

Nevertheless, I regarded the symbolic violence as something akin to the portrayal of violence in analogue games — particularly board and card games, where the "violent act" may actualize as the play of a card, the movement of a pawn, or the role of dice, and the spectacle of violence materializes only through semblance in the lacuna between game symbols and affordances. The speculative anticipation is formative. It holds together and is held together by the co-relation of phases within an event arc.[331] This kinship provided the inspiration for *The Incomparable Prize Fight,* which — at the climax of the experience — utilized analogue game modalities to allow players to perform abstracted violence.

Recognizing that the audience undergoes a similarly transformative — if far less rigorous — journey in preparation for a sanctioned performance, I designed The Incomparable Prize Fight as a larp-inspired, parallel narrative game, inviting the player

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[331] Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (MIT Press, 2011), 25.

to embody a figure of a boxer training for the fight of their life. Using a Brechtian design approach, I drew on the genre-based plot progression of *The Royale* to identify the protagonist's four discrete journeys within which they face action-opportunities that must resolve before they reach the conclusion of the narrative — in this case, the final fight. Although in the play these journeys braid together and overlap within scenes, I treated each journey as a discrete, stand-alone game within the larger game — a mini-game. A Brechtian director or dramaturg would call each of these units of action an *individual occurrence.* Each behaved as game nodes, narrative beat, or narremes in *The Incomparable Prize Fight* paralleling the narrative structure of *The Royale.* The first game, "Boxing Office" corresponded to physical conditioning; "Fight Board" stood in for clarification of purpose; "Swagger Wall" was to fortify identity; and finally "Prize Fight" captured the glory of facing and overcoming obstacles.

### 5.3 - Conceptualizing The Incomparable Prize Fight

On the XD team at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, we started our process with a consideration of the desired outcome of the experience. Outcome, in this instance, was determined by the expected player experiences during the game — what they feel — and how the rules of the game serve to generate player behaviors that precipitate these desired outcomes. Although there are many opportunities for nuanced articulation of player experience, by 2013 I identified three primary outcomes or effects that seemed efficacious both in generating intrinsically motivated play and in

transferring meaning to the central event. These potential outcomes which I called the "Three Effects," were the "Hands-On Effect," the "Eureka Effect," and the "Empathy Effect." Like the Aesthetics lens in MDA (discussed in Chapter 2), Three Effects situates *player experience* as central to the production of meaning in the performance.

Experiences that produce the Hands-On Effect provide audience-players with action-opportunities to embody or manipulate tangible, physical materials related to the central performance — for example, the lobby game "Boxing Office" in which concierge invited players to punch a speedbag. Hands-On experiences corroborate the audience-player embodiment of the *figure* by presenting certified action-opportunities in which the player's body performs a move without the mediation of a "game piece." In these experiences meaning derives from the performance of the player's body within the *individual occurrence* of the game. While other types of lobby experiences also situate the player as a figure, Hands-on experiences demonstrate the player/figure conflation as explicitly as the conventional role aggregation of the actor demonstrates player/figure conflation. In other words, the audience-player handles and manipulates an "in-world" prop just as an actor-player handles an "in-world" prop.

Other games produced the Eureka Effect, an "ah-ha" moment — akin to Wolf-Brown's "moment of curatorial insight" and sharing territory with the v-effekt — that would meaningfully shift the audience-player's frame of reference for the central performance. Eureka Effect experiences tend to deliver direct information relevant to decoding narremes during the central performance. Such experiences might be regarded as preloading the audience with symbolic capital, generating a sort of pre-

performance exposition, and for this reason, the XD team paid special attention to avoiding experiences that would potentially "spoil" some aspect of the central performance by pre-generating closure in the audience.

Experiences that created the third outcome, the Empathy Effect, situated an aspect of the audience-player's identity in relation to that of the protagonist. The Empathy Effect is likely to raise an eyebrow for any practicing Brechtian scholar aware of Brecht's criticism and intentional subversion of the tendency towards and experience of empathy in theatre. I will point out, however, that Brecht makes use of the ubiquitous human tendency to empathize by intentionally designing theatre that interrupts empathy. Whatever criticism Brecht may have levied against empathy, in Brecht's theatre, human empathy is an important aesthetic material without which much of what makes Brecht's approach unique would be unremarkable.

In line with Brecht's approach, the Empathy Effect in frame design is intended to afford opportunities to *examine* empathy. Empathy is a value-neutral process that is, as David Barnett points out, "immune to differences in context."[332] An audience can feel empathy for a person regardless of their social status and are just as able to feel empathy for a prince as a pauper. Therefore, theatre that utilizes *unexamined* empathy as a narrative tool operates as *propaganda* to the extent that the narrative valorizes a dominant social transcript. Our aim, by contrast, was to expand the possibility for a player to make a critical response to moments of potential empathy during the *central performance* by situating a personal circumstance as relevant social capital within the

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[332] David Barnett, *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 65.

*frame performance*. Empathy Effect enables the audience member to scrutinize the protagonist's choices by contextualizing them within the audience-player's lived experiences. Within the frame performance, the audience-player can deliberate on the choice before making a relevant explicit action that produces some form of feedback. Using their own unique social history, the audience-player unpacks — in advance — a situation that will have an analogy to an experience encountered by the protagonist. When they then perceive the analogous experience during the central performance, this "unpacking" moves easily from their "back-pocket" to their working memory where it may serve as comparative capital allowing for a more felicitous interpretive performance.

The XD team used two additional technologies — what we called the "3 H's" and the "4 keys" — to ensure that our lobby games engaged the players through diverse pathways and appealed to a range of play styles. Like Jason VandenBerghe's Five Domains of Play, and Richard Bartle's Player Types, these tools were intended to classify types of experiences and player preferences to help predict what kind of experiences would be appealing and as a way to challenge ourselves to design outside the box when our initial ideas failed to "check all the boxes." The Four Keys we borrowed directly from game researcher Nicole Lazzaro's "Four Keys to Fun" (discussed in Chapter 4), to use as a compass to orient each individual experience, and to make sure the game was experientially diverse enough to motivate a wide range of players.

Brown and Ratzkin devise similar taxonomies in their co-authored study

supported by The Wallace Foundation, *Making Sense of Audience Engagement*, which was released in 2011 and was widely discussed within professional circles related to theatre engagement. Brown and Ratzkin proposed several audience typologies that organized audience members according to their preference for engagement activity, visualizing these on a Venn Diagram in recognition that any given audience member may have several preferences. Their six audience types — Active Learner, Casual Talker, Insight Seeker, Critical Reviewer, and Technology Based-Processor — echo Bartle's Player Types and share conceptual territory with Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. A designer with a clear understanding of their audience could leverage the typology to match experiences with intrinsic preferences to optimize participation, or simply create designs that engage all audience types. Brown and Ratzkin also proposed the *Key Dimensions of Engagement* as a tool for exploring the "underlying characteristics and dimensions of audience engagement programs and activities."[333] "The goal" they suggest, "is not to provide a 'cookbook' or laundry list of interesting practices, but to provide artists and managers with general guidelines for thinking about program design in reference to the various typologies."[334]

Within these guidelines, they mark four "key directions" for unpacking engagement programs. Understanding "engagement" as a term-of-art that equates to "flow" and "fun," these four key directions bear striking resemblance to Lazzaro's Four Keys of Fun, both in form and function. Like Lazzaro, Brown and Ratzkin present their

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[333] Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin, "Making Sense of Audience Engagement," vol. 1 (The San Francisco Foundation, 2012), 25.
[334] Ibid.

"keys" as a cartesian graph, locating engagement programing between diametrically opposed experiential binaries such as Active/Passive, and Social/Solitary. The *Key Dimensions of Engagement* tool works well for theatre programs utilizing the scope of the audience typologies Brown and Ratzkin propose. Indeed, they even suggest that the Key Dimensions respond and relate to their six typologies.[335]

At the Kirk Douglas Theatre, the XD team often considered Brown and Ratzkin's toolset when programing our engagement activities, however, I eventually discovered that the audience typologies and *Key Dimensions of Engagement* limited its consideration of *interactivity* to either an assumption or an unexplored metric. I viewed Brown and Ratzkin's toolsets as an acknowledgment of "new territory" within conventional theatre, and one which reduced *interactivity* to the preference of the "Active Learner." Having situated interactivity as the principle evaluative meaning maker for the KDT engagement programing, I found Lazarro's Four Keys a more useful tool, and one that responded more comprehensively to ubiquitous *human behavior* rather than to a particular set of audience types gleaned from audiences within the conventions of American Theatre. In my work at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, I preferred to work from the assumption that all audience-players are "Active Learners" and that their preference for a particular activity has to do with a perception of the risk horizon involved in participation and how it balances against a perception of intrinsic or extrinsic reward.

The XD team used what we called the 3 H's to begin crafting the intrinsic reward

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[335] Ibid.

structure for the lobby games. The 3 H's - which stood for Hands, Head, and Heart - made it imperative to include activities in the experience that offered players action-opportunities that required some degree of physical participation (Hands), intellectual challenge (Head), and contained something personal and potentially "moving" (Heart). Often "Heart" activities involved social mechanics or recalling and sharing personal narrative. I used the 3 H's as a checklist for engagement activities to increase the likelihood that a player would become "engaged" by placing their bodies inside the experience (Hands), facilitating their intellectual interest (Head), and sustaining investment and "raising stakes" through personal identification (Heart). To some extent, the 3 H's shares territory with the Four Keys. For example, it was not uncommon for an activity that satisfied the "Hands" criteria to also satisfy the "Easy Fun" key as they both tended to work well as Sandbox experiences (more on this later). Similarly, "Heart" experiences tended to also show up as "People Fun" because of the efficacy of social mechanics in generating affect and player investment. These were not, however, viewed as unnecessarily redundant, because the XD team regarded the 3 H's as a gauge for the "depth" of the individual player's experience and the Four Keys as more of a map for the breadth of appeal to potential players.

Once we had a basic understanding of the type of experience we were attempting to design, the XD team at the KDT usually considered the project through two lenses that helped to tune the experience to an optimal level of participation: "Path" and "Resources." The "Path" of the experience interrogated how and whether the player was directed to move through the experience, and whether the team anticipated that

the movement would be intrinsically motivated or require extrinsic motivation. The XD team broke out “Resources” into four types — space, time, technology, and human — each of which provided design limitations and opportunities. Each of the resources could be utilized to direct the “Path” and to mitigate or increase the game’s *complexity threshold*, which could be used as a tool for mitigating or increasing the perception of risk (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Risk mitigation became particularly relevant during the design process for *The Incomparable Prize Fight.* Determined to make the most of the recent institutional endorsement of the KDT engagement strategy, the XD team at the Kirk Douglas Theatre set out an ambitious design objective for *The Royale.* We sought to build a complex frame experience that would provide an opportunity to test the limits of the available resources while honoring the spirit of the central performance and endeavoring not to alienate collaborators within the organization. Most of all, I wanted to build a fun, interactive lobby experience that the audience would explicitly recognize as a game and feel intrinsically motivated to play.

As discussed in Chapter 3, viewed through the lens of radical fun, theatre dramaturgy becomes “a speculative-pragmatic procedure”[336] for navigating or approaching a game experience as technology of lived abstraction. This perspective facilitates methodological reciprocity articulating dramaturgy as a design approach particularly efficacious for games of narrative, imagination, and social play, and endowing the theatre maker with a set of principles and mechanics common to game

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[336] Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (MIT Press, 2011), 25.

design but rarely — if ever — formally practiced in conventional theatre. Conversely, it is possible to "reverse engineer" traditional dramaturgical approaches — such as a Brechtian approach — to understand them as viable methodologies for conceptualizing and analyzing traditional game designs. A game designer might employ a Brechtian methodology to develop a video game, and a Brechtian theatre director, might consider the transition between — and performance of — *individual occurrence* as the *core gameplay loop* or the intentional disruption of *flow* to produce the verfremdungs effect. For a Brechtian game designer, the design process must move through the same deliberations used in a Brechtian approach to staging theatre, including *fable*, *arrangement*, *and gestus*.

For game designers, the concept of *fable* might be easiest to understand in the context of narrative architectural design, as discussed at length in Chapter 2. If we understand a narrative as consisting of a chain of plot points, then we might consider *fable* to be the story fascia and theme that forms, and emerges from, the sequencing and *arrangement* of the plot. The designer selects and arranges events within the story to point towards a particular interpretation of the fable. The player, on the other hand, brings their cultural skill to bear to decode plot points to discern the fable and interpret the designers intent. A well designed narrative does not simply lead a player towards the fable but engages the player with clues that ignite the imagination.

Using a Brechtian approach to identify the design challenges and objectives of a frame performance starts with identifying the *fable* of the central performance. The *fable* of the central performance will function as the key organizing theme — or spine

— for the performance complex that will provide internal cohesion, and a field against which to articulate meaning. Aligning the *fable* of the central performance with the theme of the frame performance allows for consistency within the *performance complex*[337], and a thematic bridge between frame and central performances that interpolates meaning in both directions. In the context of the *discrete* frame performance — particularly when the director is not involved — the experience designer stands-in for the director as the principal interpreter of the *fable* evoked by the playwright.

Although writing about an adjacent storytelling discipline, comic artist and scholar Scott McCloud illustrates a concept called "blood in the gutters" which provides a useful way to visualize fable and how storytellers simultaneously evoke and harness it. In the comics industry, the "gutter" refers to the space on the page between two panels. The most skilled and artful comic artists, McCloud instructs, understand that no matter how beautifully rendered the art inside the panel, no drawing will ever evoke emotionally or psychologically intense moments within a narrative as powerfully and with such personalized high fidelity as the imagination of the reader. Scenes of great peril, terror, and ecstasy — the so called "blood" scenes — lose some of their impact when constrained to a single fixed interpretation inside the frame of a panel, but when adjacent panels point to the "blood" scene without reducing its impact through depiction, the scene plays out in the mind of the reader, bound only by the limits of their imagination (see Figure 32).

[337] See Chapter 2

Figure 32: Illustrating “blood in the gutters” from *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud.[338]

Although “blood in the gutters” specifically refers to scenes meant to evoke extreme emotions, the concept helps to illuminate the undercurrent of story that flows through and beneath every panel in a comic. That undercurrent of story is the fable. It is both the cause and effect of the context of and the sequencing of panels in a comic, which are analogous to narremes — scenes or plot points — in a narrative. In fact, everything within a well-designed narrative is organized around the fable at its broadest thematic level, and, like a fractal, down through broad strokes of scenes, and then with ever finer detail articulating within even smaller “beats.”[339]

[338] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2010), 66.
[339] These smaller iterations of the fable are organized by the semblance of the macro-fable, and it is the relationship between discrete meso and micro fables that forms the macro-fable. The boundary defining these instances is analogous with fractal iterations of the magic circle - what Massumi might call the

In Brecht's dramaturgy these articulations of the fable — these plot points — are called *individual occurrences*. They are close cousins to the more ubiquitous, Stanislavski influenced concept of the *beat*, and related to the idea of the panel in a comic. By focusing on the fable in *The Royale*, I identified the key narrative moments in The Incomparable Prize Fight that paralleled the hero's journey in *The Royale.* These served as the thematic spine for the narrative gameplay in *The Incomparable Prize Fight* - the *scenes* that drove the narrative through the plot, and the basic units of player action around which I could begin to design games.

Having selected these plot points, I labeled each moment with a working title and an "in which statement." This helped to identify both the social context and the potential action opportunities afforded to players and allowed the XD team to begin considering each of the *individual occurrences* as discrete games embedded within the overarching narrative game. "In-which statements" helped to highlight desirable dynamic and aesthetic outcomes for the progressive stages of the game which then helped us determine appropriate mechanics to use for each of these games.

| **Working Title** | **In which…** | **Resulted in the game:** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **"Training the Fight"** | …the player goes through the motions of fighting. | "Boxing Office" |
| **"Strutting the Ego"** | …the player performs a "fighter persona." | "Swagger Wall" |
| **"Finding the Reason to Fight"** | …the player clarifies their motivation to fight. | "Fight Board" |

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*bare activity* initiating the emergence of diagrammatic potential and the terminus of such potential. These edges surround and mark a field within which the virtual and actual harmonize and tune a semblance of the "event reflecting itself, directly and immediately, in lived abstraction" (Massumi, 19)

| **“The Fight”** | …the player brings training, ego, and a reason to fight into the ring for the climactic conflict. | “Prize Fight” |
|---|---|---|

Figure 33: In which…

These were eventually crafted into four stand-alone lobby games that worked together as narrative nodes within the macro-game The Incomparable Prize Fight. “Training for the Fight” became “Boxing Office,” a hands-on opportunity for players to step into the role of a boxer in training. “Strutting the Ego” ended up as “Swagger Wall” in which players made playful boasts in a public area. For “Finding the Reason to Fight” I designed a game called “Fight Board” which invited players to consider their own values and priorities and what they would be willing to inflict and receive violence to protect. “The Fight” became “Prize Fight,” a fast game of abstracted violence in which players took on the role of boxer to fight other players.

All four games relied on strong visual affordance with explicit cultural cues designed to capture attention and cultivate interest. These included visually interesting displays and a lobby map provided to audience members as they entered the theatre. These affordances were reenforced by multiple iterations of gently explicit invitations to participate in the low-risk/high-reward scavenger hunt that constituted the core mechanic of the overarching game called *The Incomparable Prize Fight*.

## 5.4 - Wayfinding, Time, and Space as Aesthetic Material

On one hand, *The Incomparable Prize Fight* was simply the sum experience — or macro-game — of the four mini-games. On the other hand, it provided a unique play

experience that, while it included the four lobby games, was also separate from them. *The Incomparable Prize Fight* was designed to provide a narrative scaffolding and extrinsic reward system for the four subordinate games, specifically to mitigate players' perception of risk. Utilizing a simple *scavenger hunt* technology, *The Incomparable Prize Fight* was an "on-rails" game that provided fascia to bind the four sub-ordinate games together and incorporate them as the "moves" within the macro-game. This same basic scavenger hunt super-structure was used in the subsequent lobby games (mentioned in the Introduction) *Battle of the Bands, Red Tape,* and *Home Game* to increase participation in the subordinate mini-games, by mitigating the risk of embarrassment and providing out-game ordinal payoffs.

By offering out-game ordinal payoffs (I.e., tangible prizes such as drink tickets, and theatre passes), The *Incomparable Prize Fight's* scavenger hunt game mechanic produced an approach valence resulting from the promise of extrinsic rewards. Players who acquired three game cards (see figure 41 below) by successfully completing the first three mini-games — "Boxing Office," "Fight Board," and "Swagger Wall" — qualified to compete in the final mini-game, *"*Prize Fight*."* Playing "Prize Fight" also marked the completion of *The Incomparable Prize Fight* scavenger hunt which resulted in players winning "real-world" prizes such as concessions, theatre tickets, and season subscriptions. Taken as a whole, *The Incomparable Prize Fight* presented potential players with a highly complex set of rules, as each subordinate game had its own discrete rule set. However, since potential players only ever received invitations to participate in one mini-game at a time, they were only ever presented with the rules

pertinent to the game at hand, all of which were intentionally designed with simple rules to allow for a low complexity threshold (as discussed in Chapter 4).

While players were required to play the first three games before “unlocking” “Prize Fight” by winning a game card from each experience, they controlled the sequence in which they played the first three games. As each of the four mini-games functioned as narrative nodes, this allowed for six possible sequences articulating narrative pathways that “parallel” the protagonist journey in *The Royale.* While the narrative always culminated with Prize Fight as the climax, the opportunity to sequence the first three scenes opened a space of possibility within which player choice explicitly impacted the emergent narrative gameplay. Players of *The Incomparable Prize Fight* performed the iterative act of completing each of the mini-games (action) to receiving the associated payout (outcome). This action>outcome molecule created a pattern of player behavior that became the *core mechanic* for *The Incomparable Prize Fight*.

Coupled with the extrinsic reward scaffolding, the core mechanic drove players through the game, mirroring the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards structures that motivated the protagonist in *The Royale.* Just as the early scenes in *The Royale* spun the tale of Jay Jackson’s *preparation* for the fight of the century, the in-game payouts in *The Incomparable Prize Fight* marked player progress by *how prepared* they were for the final mini-game, “Prize Fight.” In fact, the signifier of preparation *was the value* of the in-game payout. A player with two cards in-hand was relatively more prepared for the final confrontation and had advanced further towards that goal than the player with only one card, but entrance in the final bout took demonstrable skill within all three

competencies represented by the first three mini-games:  physical mastery of the skill ("Boxing Office"), a strong motivation to fight ("Fight Board"), and fortification of ego ("Swagger Wall)".

On the other hand, the out-game payout for *The Incomparable Prize Fight* paralleled the cash prize offered the winner of the climactic bout in *The Royale*.  Like the cash prize in *The Royale*, the out-game payout of "Prize Fight" provided an extrinsic motivation that functioned as the *initial* narrative goal, valorizing the in-game payouts by effectively organizing them as subordinate prerequisites for the final payout. However, like the narrative journey of Jay Jackson, the completion of each of the subordinate games afforded the player opportunities for *intrinsic rewards* rising from the experience of play itself, which — not coincidentally — related to player confidence, autonomy, and social responsibility.[340]  As discussed in Chapter 2, this eudaemonic triad is critical to self-efficacy and thus important to the experience of fun.

*The Incomparable Prize Fight* utilized spatial and temporal resources from the Kirk Douglas Theatre to reenforce the suggestion of a player's embodied fictive journey.  As such, the act of *seeking* out the next challenge through *wayfinding* processes — such as reading the game map, scanning the physical space for relevant affordances, and responding to social cues — became meaningful game actions.  The field of human wayfinding originated in the architecture and urban studies disciplines where emphasis is placed on studying variables that impact human spatial navigation.   In its nascent years wayfinding studies placed particular focus on decision making as it relates to

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[340] The eudaemonic triad.

"the planning required for efficient and goal-directed navigation."[341] Scholars of wayfinding generally define the process as the act of "figuring out where you are, where you want to go and how to get there, particularly when your goal cannot be directly sensed at that moment."[342] While wayfinding scholarship has branched out from considerations of geography and architecture to include psychological investigation of the internal cognitive processes of the individual way finder, according to wayfinding scholars Ruth Dalton, et al., "a common feature shared by nearly all wayfinding studies is that they do not take the co-presence, and potential influence, of other human beings into account."[343] By contrast, Dalton and colleagues make a case for the strong influence of social variables on the wayfinding decision-making process.

Whereas the *asocial* wayfinding that marked its early academic articulation has proven useful to computer game studies, recent wayfinding scholarship focused on *sociological* factors serves designers of embodied game experiences like theatre, larp, Alternative Reality Games, New Games, and VR. In "Wayfinding as a Social Activity" Dalton and colleagues develop a new taxonomy that helps isolate variables that contribute to the way people respond to other people and to the traces left by people as wayfinding signposts. Their taxonomy situates sociological navigation along two axes: the strength/weakness of the social communication, and the synchronous/asynchronous presence of the parties in communication. They identify "strength or weakness" as a measure of the intentionality of navigational communication. "Strong,"

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[341] Ruth C. Dalton, Christoph Hölscher, and Daniel R. Montello, "Wayfinding as a Social Activity," *Frontiers in Psychology*10 (April 2019), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00142.
[342] Ibid., 1.
[343] Ibid., 2.

in this instance, indicates intentional navigation communication between the parties involved. We see this, for example, when a tourist receives directions to the theatre from a helpful local. “Weak” social communication indicates incidental or unintended communication. The long line of eager audience members at will-call, for example, may act as a signpost to help other audience members locate will-call and join the line. Whether the wayfinding is synchronous or asynchronous simply depends on whether the communication occurs between parties acting in the same timeframe (Synchronous) or whether the current wayfinder makes navigational decisions based on traces lefts by the other parties (Asynchronous). A “Synchronous Strong Type” of wayfinding, or collaborative wayfinding, could include situations, for example, in which a tour-guide leads a group through a museum, or a family negotiates their journey through Disneyland. These examples include intentional concurrent navigational communication between parties, whereas, in an “Asynchronous Week Type” of scenario, an individual decision-maker follows traces left by previous parties. For example, a hiker follows a trail pressed into the earth by the feet of many previous hikers.

The Incomparable Prize Fight was designed to provide players with conventional architectural and object-oriented cues as well as social wayfinding cues that leverage player bodies and the game artifacts, they leave behind to assist and motivate navigation through the game. The sequence of the navigation forms the semblance of the in-game figure navigating through a wilderness of personal trials en route to the potential for a personal triumph. Diagraming the semblance of a “character arc”

through wayfinding resembles what movement and wayfinding theorists Paul Symonds, David H.K. Brown, and Valeria Lo Iacono call "sociological imagination."[344] Central to their concept of wayfinding, they position sociological imagination as a complex embodied sociocultural experience that produces emergent narrative through the movement of bodies relative to other bodies and to the environment within which they move. Like Dalton et al., their concept pushes back against the precedent understanding of wayfinding primarily concerned with goal-oriented navigation that valorizes expedient arrival to the destination over the emergent meaning of the wayfarer's journey.[345]

Game designer Wendy Despain carves out a space between these two perspectives, stating that on one hand the purpose of wayfinding is for a player to "navigate from their current position to the desired destination," while on the other hand detailing specific wayfinding mechanics that generate evaluative meaning *adjacent to and separate from* the navigational goals of wayfinding.[346] Game wayfinding introduces the "intermediate" goal of narrative play. Navigational goals may "organize" figure movement and provide a super-objective game goal, but the intrinsic value of wayfinding on a moment-by-moment, segment-to-segment basis rises out of explicit sequencing of waypoints and experimentation with the emergent narrative that results.

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[344] Paul Symonds, David H.K. Brown, and Valeria Lo Iacono, "Exploring an Absent Presence: Wayfinding as an Embodied Sociocultural Experience," *Sociological Research Online* 22, no. 1 (2017): pp. 48-67, https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.4185.
[345] Ruth C. Dalton, Christoph Hölscher, and Daniel R. Montello, "Wayfinding as a Social Activity," *Frontiers in Psychology*10 (April 2019), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00142.
[346] Wendy Despain, *100 Principles of Game Design* (New Riders, 2013), 126.

Although a goal or destination certainly works as framework that organizes a wayfinding experience, in *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, the emergent narrative arises out of the *space of possibility* within which the player embodies the imagined journey of the figure.  By coupling wayfinding with explicit player agency in the sequencing of game segments, the customization of the journey makes the resulting emergent narrative personal and responsive to the player. *Seeking out* and *traveling to* the performed objects of the wayfinding (AKA, the three subordinate games) becomes a richly interpretable performative act specifically resulting from the player's explicit sequencing of the events. Without explicit player agency in the sequencing, there would be little if any space of possibility for emergent narrative play.

Perhaps the easiest way to conceptualize how this act of sequencing impacted the emergent narrative of *The Incomparable Prize Fight* is to imagine short log-line narratives of each possible sequence and notice how — even with a quick sketch — they generate noticeably variant semblances of character.

| | **Scene 1** | **Scene 2** | **Scene 3** | **Scene 4** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Boxing Office | Fight Board | Swagger Wall | Prize Fight |
| **2** | Boxing Office | Swagger Wall | Fight Board | Prize Fight |
| **3** | Fight Board | Boxing Office | Swagger Wall | Prize Fight |
| **4** | Fight Board | Swagger Wall | Boxing Office | Prize Fight |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **5** | Swagger Wall | Boxing Office | Fight Board | Prize Fight |
| **6** | Swagger Wall | Fight Board | Boxing Office | Prize Fight |

Figure 34: Sequencing Individual Occurrences for Narrative Variations

For example, Sequence 6 (Swagger Wall to Fight Board to Boxing Office to Prize Fight) could be sketched thus: (1) A boxer starts on a journey with not much more than a big ego (2) then discovers they have something deep and abiding to fight for. Unfortunately, they lack the skill to compete in the big fight. (3) With time running out, they must train to acquire the skills (4) to stand up to the ultimate challenge. Sequence 3, on the other hand, might be the story of a boxer who (1) discovers right away that they have something worth stepping into the ring for. (2) This motivates them to work hard to train their body, (3) but it is not until they fortify their ego that they truly believe that it is a (4) fight they are meant to win. While the figure in each of these journeys may be the same, the *character* they produce because of the explicit sequencing resonates differently depending on the sequence performed.

The concepts of *figure* and *character*, while fundamentally different from the other, both directly relate to player representation within the provisional reality of a game or performance. A player uses the figure — like the top hat or the thimble in Monopoly — as an avatar within the game space facilitating the player's interaction in the game. *Character*, on the other hand, describes a particular set of acceptable game behaviors for a particular figure. Understandably, in embodied games like theatre where the player *is* the figure, it can be easy to conflate *character* with *figure*, and the reason to differentiate between the two may not be self-evident. Nevertheless, much of what

differentiates *figure* and *character* directly corresponds with the difference between the Brechtian idea of the *individual occurrence* from the Stanislavski inspired *beat*. An *individual occurrence* marks the basic narrative unit within which *figures* respond to a particular social or environment condition and are articulated as "a method for actors to play the situation and not the character." [347] The American-Stanislavski "*beat,"* according to Brecht scholar John Rouse "is an excellent equivalent to Brecht's 'individual occurrence '" but unlike the *individual occurrence,* the beat marks a *character's* response to a situation rather than the situation and points actors towards "playing a character." [348]

How a game or theatre event facilitates player agency is contingent upon whether players locate the explicit game choice within the movement of a figure or through accurate interpretation of character. It is a fine distinction that, when parsed, can be understood to pivot around whether *character* is a representation of predetermined internal value set that effectively reduces player agency by gating-out otherwise viable action-opportunities, or whether the word *character* represents an emergent sum of the choices made by the *figure* within a narrative. The first notion of *character* presumes a fixed, immutable value state for the figure, and an actor "playing" that character would be compelled to respond in accordance to that particular value system. For example, a player playing a Lawful Good D&D character must only perform "lawful good" actions, just as a commedia actor playing the mask of Arlecchino will restricted to

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[347] David Barnett, *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 88.
[348] John Rouse, "Brecht and the Contradictory Actor," *Acting (Re)Considered*, 2005, pp. 248-259, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203991473-19, 298.

performing actions relevant to that stock character type (in Arlecchino's case, most likely having to do with sating their ravenous appetite). On the other hand, an actor playing a *figure* responds to the particular social and historical circumstances of the *individual occurrence*, allowing the perception of character to emerge from their actions. Brecht refers to such actions as *gestus*, the repertoire of actions — or "moves" — that a player may make within particular social circumstances that constrain the figure. While the *gestus* may be informed by a figure's bearing and attitude, ultimately a player's *character* is an unstable state sketched by the impression cumulative *gestus* that changes with every action the figure makes.

Barnett notes in *Brecht in Practice* that "the Fabel[349] is concerned with interpreting fictional events through the lens of real social contradictions."[350] In the context of *The Incomparable Prize Fight,* the "fictional" is what is produced when the player moves *as a figure* through the narrative mechanics of the game, and the "real social contradictions" rise out of friction that occurs between audience behaviors mandated by implicit conventions and the games explicit rules or information. As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the defining features of the game of theatre is the bifurcation of the roles of agency that effectively aggregate into an active player (actor) and a passive player (audience). In alter-ego games, like theatre and other roleplaying games, the player embodies the figure. This embodiment of the game figure and the player's subsequent immersion into the imagined reality of the performance/game,

[349] Barnett used an alternate spelling of fable to mark that it held a slightly more nuanced meaning that the common English word "fable," however, aside from this quote, I prefer the common English spelling "fable."
[350] Barnett, 89.

produce the conditions for a potent affective experience. To be clear, even in conventional theatre, it is not only the actor-player that embodies a game figure. The audience-player also embodies a figure from which they observe and interact with the imagined reality of the performance/game. The figure of the audience-player, however, is stripped of the opportunities to explicitly impact the representational system of the performance/game, observing the game space from the margins where they perform the function of evaluating the play of the actor-players and a repertoire of "moves" mostly limited to expressions of approval or disapproval.

Arguably, the most relevant meaning making that emerges from the frame performance is the evaluative meaning that results from restoring the *explicit* roles of agency to the figure played by the audience-player. By designing moments of explicit agency into the formally sanctioned time-space around the central performance, the frame performance defamiliarizes the conventional theatre procedures immediately preceding the show, converting them into aesthetic materials. The previously inert lobby space transforms into virtual reality when the audience-player experiences the ability to "make a move." The interactive lobby experience designed as an individual occurrence within the macro fable of the central performance will provide opportunities for the audience — moving as a figure — to perform explicit actions that develop meaning relevant to the overall performance complex. In doing so, the frame performance is *marked* within the performance complex, and becomes situated within the fable of the show. When the audience-player then moves from the frame into the central performance, they experience a stripping of the roles of agency from their

“figure,” restoring the implicit role of the audiences as passive receivers. This may have the effect of defamiliarizing the conventional experience of the audience during the central performance and forming a new basis for evaluative meaning making that incorporates the agency of the player as a dynamic status — a negotiable social positioning of the *figure* within the game.

Although descriptive meaning making is critical for delivering “interpretive assistance” and for generating affordances that thematically cleave the frame experience to the central performance, the *mere fact* of active player participation must be regarded as the key mechanism for generating evaluative meaning within the macro-fable of the performance complex. This is the primary reason why much “table work” in the Kirk Douglas Theatre experience design approach focused on how to design interactive experiences that centered on adjusting player risk horizon to optimize the likelihood of player participation, and that positioned participation as a scalable variable and, by extension, an aesthetic material.

The concept of aesthetic material presented in this dissertation extends beyond the conventional notion of game aesthetics which tends to limit the concept to a textural nuancing of the undergirding ludic mechanisms that comprise the game. In a conventional understanding, game aesthetics make up the visual and audio “set dressings” that augment but rarely produce meaning. As I have suggested through the case study of *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, however, aesthetic material includes all phenomena perceivable by players relevant to the game experience by virtue of their ability to produce meaning within the game. The definition of “material” in this context

includes material objects and physical phenomena traditionally associated with aesthetics in game design and theatre, including hand props or game pieces, costumes, lighting and sound effects, and scenic elements, and expands upon these to include any perceivable non-physical entity that may shape the production of meaning within the game such as memory, culture, and player participation.

In most games, player participation is implicit and assumed. Conventional game designers rarely — if ever — consider participation to be variable or scalable. It cannot be adjusted or manipulated and only transmits meaning at the tacit level, yet the potential for explicit meaning making is requisite for any aesthetic material. Participation in frame performances, however, is rarely assumed — at least in the contemporary American conventional theatres, for the lobby game space is occupied with a mix of active (participating) players and potential (non-participating) players. In these lobby spaces player participation is a scalable resource for shaping the meaning of an event, and the ratio of participants to non-participants is an important variable feature of the game design.

If game pieces and player participation represent opposite ends along a spectrum of aesthetic materials ranging from the plainly physical to the conceptual, two of the most important aesthetic materials occupy the middle ground between physical and conceptual: space, and time. Game scholar Henry Jenkins, author of "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" posits that any model of narrative game design must start with an understanding of spatiality. It is no coincidence, he argues, that both narratives and games begin with a definition of either the game space or where the story takes place.

“Performance theorists have described RPGs as a mode of collaborative storytelling,” he writes, “but the Dungeon Master's activities start with designing the space — the dungeon — where the players' quest will take place.”[351] Spatiality not only orients the players to the imaginary world of the game, but it also defines the space of possibility by opening potential for player movement and agency. Furthermore, spatiality is intrinsically woven into temporality, as any movement within space requires a collateral movement through time.

Frame performances present a unique spatial-temporal field as they exist in the temporal and spatial margins surrounding a central event or what we my commonly refer to as simply “the show.” Pre-show frame experiences have a fixed and highly predictable time boundary that encloses and defines the temporal phase space for pre-show game experience. As a material resource for experience design, *time* acquires meaning and value through its relationship to *space* and player *behavior*, and the predictability of the correlation between these three aspects. For example, audience members will begin to arrive (behavior) at will-call (space) approximately one hour before the start of the show (time) and will either seek to acquire tickets or enter the lobby (behavior and space).

A designer can utilize time and space within the spatial/temporal boundary marked off for the frame performance based on the expected location of players and their behaviors at any given moment. For example, a frame experience designer can anticipate that when a lobby opens, audience members will enter the lobby through the

[351] Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture ,” Henry Jenkins, 2003, https://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html.

lobby doors, travel through the lobby, and enter the House. In this way, time may be regarded not only quantitatively as a form of durational currency, but qualitatively as a timeline allowing a designer to predict player activity and aspects of environmental tone that will impact the experience. In games, quantitative time is inextricably woven into how we evaluate qualitative time. When the game event is enclosed within a fixed temporal boundary, time becomes a non-renewable resource that determines and limits player movement. Recognizing the formal boundaries of time and space allows designers to consider tempo, pace, duration, and iteration of frame experiences as meaning-makers, and to consider the hard bound stop-time as environmental condition that may be incorporated to elevate stakes and arouse urgency in much the same way as does a game clock in a sporting event.

The timeframe of the experience contains an implicit *beginning-game, mid-game, and endgame.* The audience player/transitions from non-player outside the theatre to audience member in the house, and this transformation takes place as a temporal and spatial journey that has a particular rhythm - what master Noh artist Zeami called *Jo-Ha-Kyu* - a fractal delineation of experience into a "rhythmic pattern" [352]of resistance (Jo), rupture (Ha), and acceleration (Kyu) that informs every aspect of player movement throughout the event. Viewpoints gurus Bogart and Landau insist Jo-Ha-Kyu "can be a useful tool in organizing energy and flow of action"[353] in a composition, and game designer Wendy Despain notes that Jo-Ha-Kyu "describes a dynamic way of moving

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[352] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: a Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (Nick Hern Books, 2014), 148.
[353] Ibid., 149.

things along" as opposed to remaining static and boring.[354] As with other games, this progression tracks along an *interest curve* — or Freytag's Pyramid — and articulates an "on-rails" aspect to the implicit rules that works like an invisible hand guiding the movement and actions of prospective players.

| Lobby Opens | Beginning | Jo | tension | Exposition/Rising Action |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| House Opens | Middle | Ha | rupture | Climax |
| Curtain | End | Kyu | acceleration | Denouement |

Figure 35: Temporal Rhythms

The utility of time within the frame, however, is complicated by normal audience behaviors and conventional pre-show procedures. These include — but are not limited to — "House Open" procedures, diverse audience arrival times, and environmental noise in the lobby and the impact it has on player focus and arousal. Typically, the hard-stop for a frame experience occurs at the top of the show, and a less predictable and far more flexible soft boundary occurs when the lobby opens, or sometime even before the doors open when the audience first arrives at will-call or the box office.

The experience designer may utilize conventional house management procedures to use these portals as valves for controlling the flow of audience through the space. In addition to holding arriving audience members in the space immediately outside the theatre and creating a line at the entrance to the lobby, by "holding the lobby" — a

[354] Wendy Despain, *100 Principles of Game Design* (New Riders, 2013), 194.

procedure which simply means opening the lobby later than typically expected — the designer may also shorten the overall duration of the pre-show experience in the lobby. These procedures create a stock-and-flow mechanism that allows for some control over experience duration, population density within the play space, and — to some extent — the predictability of player behavior.

Where the passage into and out of the lobby is predictable, analogous with "on-rail" experiences, and points along an interest curve, the audience behaves far less predictably when allowed to linger in the lobby. The lobby presents a "space of possibility," where the behaviors of guests open to a far less predictable array of outcomes, and it is within this space of possibility that the frame experience designer works to capture the interest of the audience. When a designer lengthens or shortens the duration of time that an audience remains in the lobby, they respectively expand or contract the space of possibility. For example, an audience member entering the lobby immediately before the performance will predictably traverse the lobby from the lobby door to the House with virtually no intervening space of possibility, whereas the behavior of an audience member who enters the lobby 30 minutes before the House opens is far less predictable. Audience members entering the lobby with surplus time occupy a space of possibility and unpredictability because they have time to engage in a variety of behaviors and to move to any accessible location within the lobby.

After observing hundreds of productions at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, we came to understand that, although no two events mapped the exact same timeframe, the first audience to arrive for events at the Kirk Douglas Theatre tended to arrive

approximately 45 minutes before the published curtain time[355] for the event. For a typical 8pm curtain time, audience members would begin to trickle in at around 7:15pm, and data culled from ticket scanners indicate that rate of arrival tended to peak around 15 to 20 minutes[356] before the published curtain time.[357] Coincidentally, this is approximately the point at which the *House Open* procedure begins, and at the Kirk Douglas Theatre circa 2009, the default *House Open* time was 20 minutes prior to the published curtain time.

Formal House Open procedures are common in the theatre experience and mark the moment the “house” of the theatre — the space where the audience will sit and view the performance — is made available to the audience. For many theatre makers, this marks the beginning of the central performance, and it is common for directors to orchestrate lighting, sound, and sometimes even scenic elements to set a mood or tone for the production. Occasionally, one or more actors may already be on stage in character, generally engaged in a low-key activity that may be interesting to an audience, but, as the formal start of the show has not begun, does not compel attention. From time to time, playwrights will write explicit stage directions for pre-show conditions and activities.

Traditionally, the House Open procedure marks the culmination of processes performed and coordinated between the House Management and Stage Management

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[355] Many theatres, including the Kirk Douglas Theatre, have a formal curtain time that is different than the published curtain time. This allows house staff to seat late arrivals with minimum disruption of the performance. It is worth noting that this convention supports “respectable” theatre.

[356] Observed on the Tessatura System circa 2010 - 2015.

[357] This does not take into account the time between audience arrival at the theatre and the point at which they have their ticket scanned.

teams that transitions "control" of the House space from the Stage Management team to the House Management team. Prior to House Open, the Stage Manager "has the House" which they typically reserve for any last-minute adjustments that need to be resolved and for actors to prepare for the performance mentally and physically by "walking the stage" — a broad term that encapsulates a range of personal and group preparation activities performed in the stage environment. Typically, once the actors have cleared the stage, the Stage Manager initiates the House Open procedure by notifying the House Manager that they "have the House" at which point the House Manager is considered to have control of the House. This control is strictly limited to matters related to the safety, comfort, and seating procedures and does not afford house management any liberty to perform actions that will be regarded as aesthetic material for the central performance. It is typical for productions to establish a formal and agreed upon House Open time, that represents a negotiation between stage management and house management respecting the needs of both "sides of the house" to complete final preparations for the performance. House Managers and Stage Managers typically include House Open times in performance notes that are distributed production-wide at the end of each event and will offer explanations when House Open occurred early or late.

Because the pre-show House environment is widely recognized as creative material for the traditional theatre makers, once the audience enters the House, they exit the discrete frame experience and pass into the central performance. House Open marks a gradual transition between the audience experience designer, and the director

as the arbiter of event design. From a frame design perspective, House Open imposes a considerable constraint on time resources, as the House Open procedures tend to encourage audience members to exit the lobby and enter the House, and in the process remove themselves from the playing field of the frame experience. Given that many audience members arrive at the theatre after House Open, the occurrence of House Open has potential to seriously undermine participation in frame experiences.

This potential may be slightly mitigated or amplified by seating conventions related to ticket permissions. The two most common ticketing schema are *Reserved Seating*, and *General Admission Seating.* When a production employs a Reserved Seating strategy, they mitigate some of the pressure for audience members to enter the house immediately upon House Open, by including in the implicit participation contract an explicit rule promising that specific seat locations identified on the ticket will be available to the ticket holder during the performance. By contrast, a General Admissions ticket does not extend this explicit rule, and rewards the audience that enters the House early with a meaningful choice that potentially impacts their ability to receive and/or participate in the performance. In effect, audiences make their first significant game move by selecting their position in the House.

Depending on the architecture of the theatre and particular design and aesthetic choices of the production, position in the House may have a significant impact on the player's experience. At the Douglas we would frequently say that there was "not a bad seat in the House," which implied that the stage was fully visible and unobstructed from any seat in the House. However, there is no denying that the experience of sitting

front and center is quite different from sitting in the back of the House or wedged into a side gallery staring down at the stage from an oblique angle. When productions employ Reserved Seating, the audience either has that choice taken from them (if the seating is assigned) or they make the choice at the point-of-purchase. It is common for theatre companies who utilize Reserved Seating to commodify player position by placing a price premium on in-demand positions (typically front and center). Indeed, while from a lobby design perspective, Reserved Seating affords more temporal utility, theatre companies tend to use Reserved Seating to scale ticket price, and to “protect” valued seating positions as “house seats” for donors or other VIPs. Reserved Seating generally requires more resources to organize and implement, and while it does tend to facilitate the seating process once the house opens, procedures for the release of ticketed but unoccupied seats have not fully codified in theatre convention and require explicit rules to mitigate empty seats and potential conflicts with late-arrivals.

General Admissions seating requires fewer resources to deploy and allows audience members to position themselves — like rewarding in-game initiative over out-game socio-economic status. However, General Admissions productions risk a more chaotic seating transition, and pressure audience-players to enter the House at the earliest opportunity, effectively stunting time in the lobby (see Figure 36). This potentially undermines participation in lobby activities by reducing the overall duration of player presence in the play space, and by adding the additional pressure to “get in line” as a risk valence to avoid new invitations to play. With General Admissions productions at the Douglas there appeared to be a correlation between the house

count and the likelihood that the audience would begin to form “lines” inside the lobby waiting to enter the House — larger house counts usually indicated longer lines forming up outside the House. Longer lines tended to increase the likelihood that audiences would express desire to enter the house before House Open, which usually articulated as anxiety or discomfort at being made to wait. These attitudes present greater challenges for the designer seeking to engage General Admissions audiences in the lobby. This is particularly true for *discrete frame experiences* that lack outward signs of being integrated into the central performance, as audience members may value their position relative to the central performance over participation in an activity lacking the call of conventional authority.

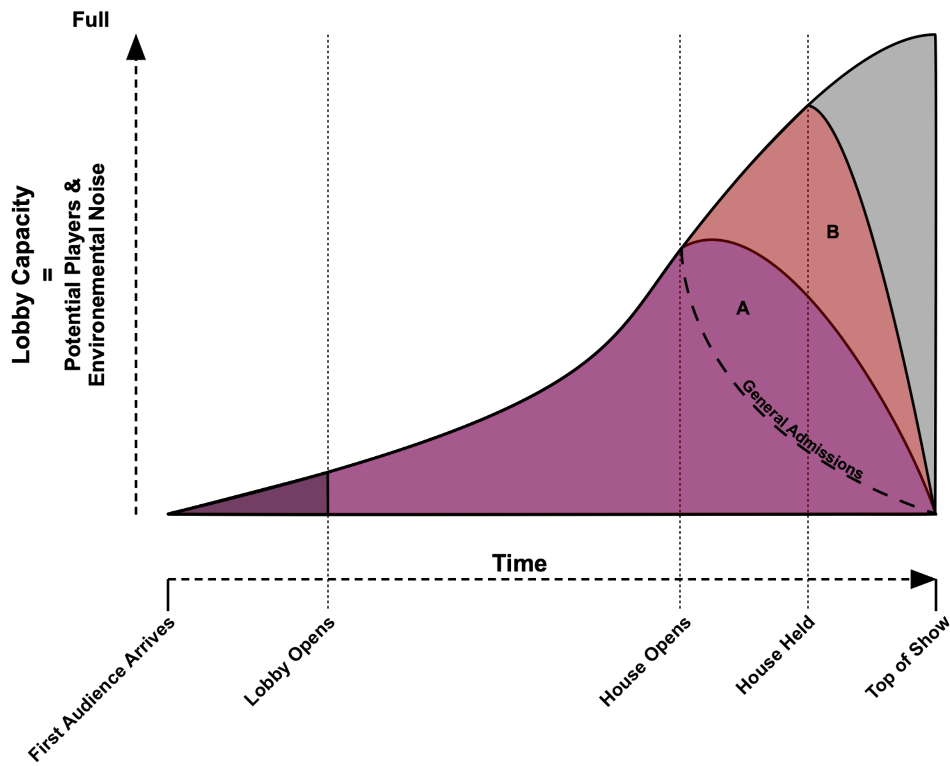


Figure 36 shows typical audience presence in the “frame” space of the theatre, including the space immediately outside the lobby and the lobby space. (A) shows the audience capacity resulting from a typical House Open procedure, (B) shows capacity when the House is held. The grey area demonstrates capacity if the House is held until the published start time, and the dashed line show the typical capacity pattern for general admissions shows.

The time between House Opens and House Hand-Off — typically the last 20 minutes before the performance — is rich with complication, but also with game potential. With the audience free to enter the House, the decision to opt-in to a lobby experience or to continue participating acquires the additional significance of the inferred decision to suspend the transition into the House, and players who opt-in after House Open tend to exhibit more commitment to the experience. There is clearly a

direct relationship between the time remaining before the top of the show, and the pressure players feel to enter the House. As the natural flow of audience from lobby to House drains the "stock" of players in the lobby, players remaining in the lobby will become increasingly aware of cues marking decreasing population density. For most, this serves as a barometer indicating social pressure to enter the House, and it is not an uncommon occurrence to spot a player who was wrapped up in a lobby experience suddenly "look up" in alarm to find the lobby emptier than they expected and rush off into the House in a panic. House Open also has the effect of raising the stakes for those who are invested in the experience and want to complete the experience. The emptying of the lobby acts like the emptying of grains of sand in an hourglass and can inspire excitement in players who see this "racing the clock" mechanic as an intrinsic aspect of the game, encouraging a sense of urgency in players who have opted-in to lobby games as it signals the approach of a hard deadline. A mindful designer might harness the House Open as the gameplay equivalent of the "two-minute warning" in gridiron football.

Conventions dictate a *settled audience* at the start of the show, and most house managers will not hand-off the house to the stage manager until all audience members are in the house (and possibly not until they are all seated). This makes a hard deadline for any lobby experience — a deadline that has the potential to stand in as a time lock mechanic — that must be considered in the game design. Game managers (concierge) must be aware of the deadline, and the design of the game must include cues for the concierge to signal closure of the experience, and to signal scripts for urgent messages

to deliver to players as the deadline approaches. If deadline cues and scripts are neglected, the designer risks either disenfranchising players who invested time in the game but are unable to complete the experience, or, worse, having to deal with a situation where the Front-of-House Manager (FOHM) must delay the House Hand-off due to audience remaining in the lobby trying to cram in some last aspect of the lobby game.

Theatres typically have formal and precise procedures for the *House Hand-off,* at which point the FOHM formally passes managerial control of the show to the stage manager. The procedure exists to organize the environment immediately preceding the start of the show, ensuring that all players on both sides of the theatre are primed and arranged to perform and receive the performance. A literal countdown is performed on both side of the house, terminating at the formal moment designated as the "top of the show." Backstage, the stage management alerts actors with regular time-to-places calls. These calls are so much part of theatre tradition, that actors ritually and reflexively respond with "Thank you, X!" where X is the amount of time to places. For example, if a stage manager calls "Ten minutes to places" most actors will reflexively respond "Thank you, ten!" Front-of-house countdown rituals are not as ubiquitous as backstage procedures, as such procedures vary from theatre to theatre based on resources, theatre architecture and company culture. Nevertheless, common sense house management practices indicate the utility of a countdown procedure similar to the backstage procedure. At the Kirk Douglas Theatre "House Hand-off" procedures started precisely at the published curtain time (8pm for an 8pm show), and provided

there were no complications would take *exactly* 4 minutes, at which point the stage manager would have a one minute "cushion" before starting the show at five minutes after the published curtain time. During these four minutes, the Front of House Manager (FOHM) would lead the concierge through a highly scripted countdown coordinated over a discrete network of two-way radios. This included choreographed movement through the lobby space accompanied by scripted "calls" designed to encourage audience to enter the House that the concierge would perform in various locations around the lobby. The FOHM typically initiated and performed the procedure using a digital stopwatch, which allowed them to call five cues to the concierge: one to begin the hand-off procedure (at 8pm), and then one every minute for four minutes. The final cue was typically a call to the stage manager, formally handing them the show ("The show is yours"), simultaneously cuing the concierge to "Close your doors." With rare exception, the KDT house hand-off procedures would effectively clear the lobby and deliver audience members to their seats, ready to receive the performance, and marking a hard closure to any sanctioned lobby activity. Thus, the start of the house hand-off marks the outer temporal boundary of the experience.

### 5.5 - Boxing Office and Sandbox Experiences

Audience members electing to participate in *The Incomparable Prize Fight* could choose to begin playing at any of the first three games. However, because players tend to move along predictable spatial/temporal pathways into and through the lobby

(which functioned as a wayfinding game space), the KDT experience design team diagrammed the anticipated sequence in which the audience typically moves through regions of the theatre. This then was used to leverage a degree of *indirect control* over the space of possibility, to optimize participation by placing the most inviting and low-risk experience first in the temporal/spatial sequence. Salen and Zimmerman offer a concise definition of the Space of Possibility as "the space of all possible actions that might take place in a game, the space of all possible meanings which can emerge from game design."[358] Game designer Jesse Schell describes "indirect control" as the intentional result of specific game features designed to increase the predictability of participant choices without impinging on the "feeling of freedom" that accompanies a robust *space of possibility*.[359] When a player embodies the game figure — as they do in theatre, sports, field play, and other embodied games — and enters the physical game space, the degree to which they move with a perception of freedom within the game space correlates with the degree to which they will perceive a space of possibility. In frame performances, therefore, the degree to which a player experiences the freedom to move through or within the game space is virtually analogous with the space of possibility within the game.

During a typical production at the Kirk Douglas Theatre — such as *The Royale* — the audience enters the lobby through a bank of doors at the front of the theatre (see Figure 37) (A) before entering the House through one of four doors (B) leading from the

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[358] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (The MIT Press, 2010), 6:11.
[359] Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design* (Morgan Kaufman, 2008), Kindle location 5383.

lobby, through a connecting hall space call the “vom”[360], and into the House.  This creates a predictable sequence for the physical pathway that potential players will traverse as they transition from non-player to audience-player.

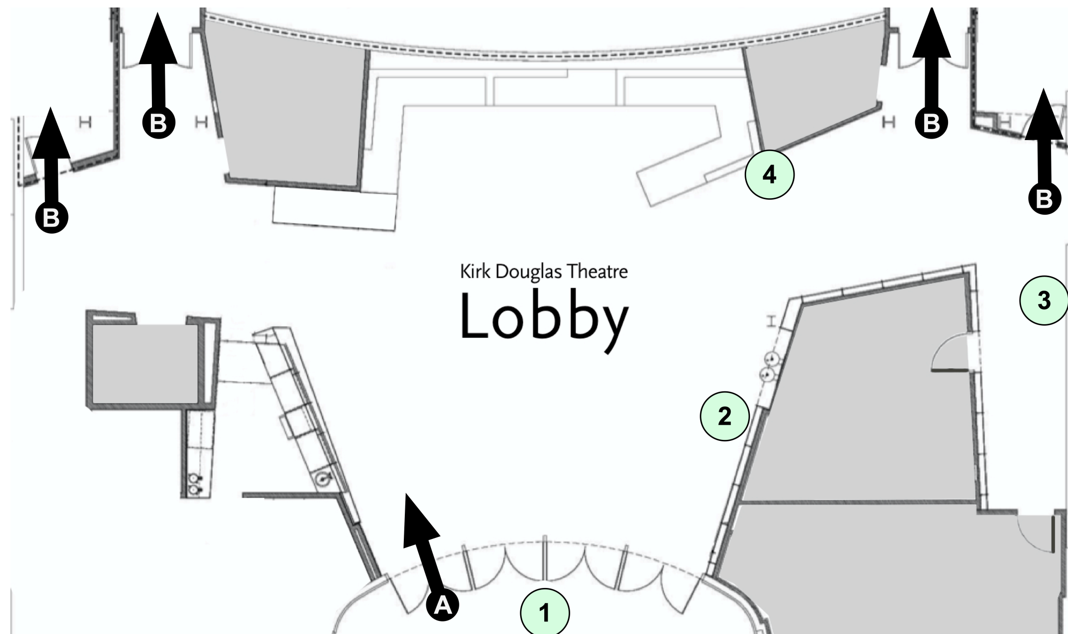


Figure 37: A map of the KDT lobby during *The Incomparable Prize Fight.* Numbers mark the locations of the mini-games. (1) “Boxing Office,” (2) “Fight Board,” (3) “Swagger Wall,” (4) “Prize Fight”

The physical doorways (A and B) mark the limen between discrete spaces, each of which is informed by unique social expectations and implicit rules, and the act of passing through these portals signifies a transformation of the audience-player’s status.  Outside the theatre, the prospective audience performs very few conventions of the theatre — nor is there any expectation for them to do so.  Any status they may perform will be contingent upon the expectation that they will enter the lobby within the permitted timeframe.  Having passed through the first portal (A) and entered the lobby,

[360] Although these hallways were not technically vomitoria, they functioned as as the closest approximation to voms that the KDT had in it’s default configuration, and a vom is a more specific and useful label for a space than would be a “hallway”

the theatre patron's role as guest becomes formalized, and they become subject to the laws of hospitality, many of which are inscribed within the implicit rules of theatre (as discussed in Chapter 1). The lobby space is a transitional space — a space of preparation — and when the player moves from the lobby to the House (B), they signal a transition from preparation to performance, and they acquire the additional player roles that aggregate into the "audience" status. As discussed in Chapter 2, these transitions are formalized by the architecture of most indoor theatres, which necessitate a spatial (and, thus, temporal) journey through and into separately enclosed spaces accessed by typically narrow and fixed portals.

As mentioned in the start to this chapter, the Kirk Douglas Theatre's historic box office was an ideal location for the "first" game, which was designed as to stand-in for the individual occurrence with the working title, "Training for the Fight: in which the protagonist goes through the motions of fighting." By giving players a chance to punch a speedbag in the historic box office space, "Boxing Office" offered an unalloyed *hands-on*, *easy fun*, *sandbox* experience. Experiences that are hands-on, easy fun, and sandbox all tend to stoke player curiosity. That the location also provided grist for the wordplay in the title was icing on the cake. As predicted, curiosity compounded with curiosity as audience members could not fail to notice the unusual activity playing out in the ticket booth: some other audience members pounding away on a speedbag. We used the box office as the site of subsequent sand-box games — discussed in the Introduction — like "Roar of the Crowd" during which players used the box office as an audio mixing booth, and "Jam Lab" in which

players experimented with an electric guitar hooked up to a robust effects processor.

The clear social affordance such activities generated when performed in the highly visible historic box office provided what Dalton might call Synchronous Weak Social wayfinding, even though audience members had yet to receive an invitation to play. Such unmarked wayfinding can create a surplus of curiosity — a recognition that the witnessed event defies expectations in a way that puzzles or intrigues the witness without baffling or repulsing them. As it is not a particularly durable curiosity, it was important to provide the audience with context for the experience to increase the likelihood of converting their curiosity to interest. Motivated by this curiosity, the audience practically invited themselves to the game, which was intentionally designed with simple rules to encourage player participation. Of the four mini-games in *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, "Boxing Office" provided the lowest complexity threshold. During previews (which functioned as the Beta-testing phase), the only rule presented to players was: "Step in to the Boxing Office and see what it feels like to punch a speed-bag."

Defined as games with open or flexible goals, Sandbox experiences — according to Despain — can be dialed up in different ways to make them useful for player engagement, player retention, or both.[361] A Sandbox designed to *engage interest* should provide easily identified affordances so that players have enough knowledge to begin experimenting with minimum instruction, and if the experience is intended to *retain interest* there must be enough actionable mechanics to either provide

[361] Wendy Despain, *100 Principles of Game Design* (New Riders, 2013), 160.

opportunities for innovation or the performance of skill. Players may be drawn to a sandbox experience by the recognition of affordances that invite action, but if the player immediately exhausts action-opportunities, there is a good chance that they will lose interest and move on. This ought not to be evaluated as a necessarily bad thing, as it is conceivable that a designer might want to create an experience that only engages a player for a moment before drawing them into another experience, but a designer expecting a sandbox to retain interest for a sustained period needs to provide a richly interpretable environment. There need to be enough levers and pulleys to keep a player enthralled to curiosity.

### 5.6 - Fight Board and Leveraging Social Affordance

Undoubtedly, experience designer Eric Sims had activities like *Fight Board* in mind when he claimed, "the best way to *get people to do things* is to *have people do things*."[362] Although this gem of Simsian wisdom may sound a bit like a Zen koan, or a nugatory parsing of the act of "getting" from the act of "having," Sims clarifies his axiom by stating, "if you create some activity around it, people will be drawn to being part of that activity."[363] Such curious onlookers drove participation in Fight Board, and we leveraged spatial resources and conventional front-of-house procedures to augment the efficacy of non-social affordances with the specific intent to draw

[362] Sims Interview, Line 33
[363] Ibid.

audience gaze to the player created game artifacts which then served as social wayfinding traces. Although not "designed" as the first game in *The Incomparable Prize Fight* sequence, "Fight Board" was the first stop of choice for most players. Like "Boxing Office," "Fight Board" offered players a low complexity threshold supported by strong affordances which included legacy artifacts left by previous players, and observable behaviors of current players.

Fight Board combined two common lobby game mechanics — write-and-post and visual voting — to produce a uniquely interesting social game. Players wrote down something for which they would be willing to "step into the ring," and posted it on a public-facing bulletin board using one of three color-coded pins to indicate intensity of their conviction. With the remaining two pins, players "vote" on other player's posts, indicating other "causes" for which they would be willing to fight. The game offers richly interpretable material for both participant and spectators who may find interest in reading posts and noticing patterns of valuation. We used this combination of write-and-post and visual voting in several subsequent games, including the mini-game "Going Home" (mentioned in the Introduction), and "Endgame," a lobby game designed for a production of Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Players of "Fight Board" use custom write-and-post cards that are designed to suggest a birds-eye perspective of a boxing ring (see Figure 38), writing their response inside the symbolic boxing ring. The card has a border that is marked as the space to place pins. Each player receives three push pins that are color coded to suggest three

levels or “weights” of conviction. The colors are the same that are used in boxing to indicate weight class: red for “heavyweight” blue for “middleweight” white for “lightweight”. Cards are pinned to a large classroom-sized bulletin board. The bulletin board includes printed signage and rules that used the same fonts and color pallet as the marketing campaign for *The Royale*, using visual affordances to tie the experience to the central performance.

We positioned the large rolling bulletin “fight board” near the West wall of the lobby, so that when audience members first entered the lobby after having tickets scanned, they would find it filling a considerable portion of their visual field. Since the four center doors between the lobby and terrazzo were stanchioned off to incorporate the pathway to “Boxing Office” as a “ticketed area,” only the far left and far right bank of doors remained available as ports of entry. We kept the left-bank closed so that audience members could only enter the lobby through the lobby-right bank of doors, of which only the left doorway was opened. The ticket taker stood slightly up-right of the opening facing down-left when welcoming audience and scanning tickets. This positioning, combined with the architecture of the building, and the implicit social imperative to enter the lobby after having their ticket scanned, reliably caused audience members to take a step or two up-left as they entered the lobby. Unless they were walking backwards or stepping to the side as they entered the lobby, the audience member would find that their facing oriented them so that the “Fight Board” occupied the right-center of their visual field.

Depending on when an audience entered the lobby, they either had an

unobstructed view of the bulletin board itself, or they would notice several other audience members engaged with the board. During the early phase of the pre-show period, immediately after the lobby opened, the concierge facilitating “Fight Board” actively engaged audience members as they first oriented themselves in the space. This initial scored engagement was designed to quickly facilitate player behavior that would generate synchronous social affordance. We called this type of score “jumpstarting” a game, and frequently scripted it into experiences that generated synchronous social affordance.

The jumpstarting procedure responds to what Sims identifies as strong approach valences influencing a crowd’s tendency to “conglomerate themselves with other’s social activity” both to identify and associate with the inherent validation of social clustering. “People may want to do something,” he notes, “but may require the social validation to do it. They may not want to do it unless someone else is doing it as well.”[364] The jumpstarting performance seeks to harness this simple and powerful social behavior through scored mechanics designed to pull audience attention and rapidly transmute their attention to interest. The techne of the jumpstart relies upon the skill of the facilitator as a performer. As famed magician Herman Hays wrote in his seminal *The Amateur Magician’s Handbook*, “Attention is a simple response to a stimulus — either to a loud bang or (much more powerful) to a feeling of interest. Interest is selective, an expenditure of energy by the interested party. You, the performer can never command it, only invite it.”[365]

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[364] Ibid.
[365] Henry Hay and Audrey Alley, *The Amateur Magician's Handbook* (New York, NY, NY: Signet, 1983), 2.

When the “Fight Board” facilitator noticed physical cues indicating curiosity or interest they “jumpstarted” either by offering a quick invitation to check out what other audience members posted on the board, or if circumstance allowed, embedding and invitation in an ADORE performance. Based on customer service techniques used by Ritz-Carlton Hotel staff and Apple Store employees, ADORE was a lightly scored social technology used by concierge for entering and directing conversations with audience members. The acronym ADORE stands for the sequential steps of a score: Approach, Delve, Offer, Respond, and End. These steps provided flexible performance scripts similar to improv rules or commedia scenarios. ADORE was used by concierge as one of several Customer Experience Skills (CES) that provided steps for engaging audience members that might include asking particular types of questions, making particular types of statements, actively listening for particular cues or looking for particular behaviors. For example, using the Approach step in ADORE, concierges were trained to seek out verbal and non-verbal cues that signal an intention to communicate such as eye contact, facial expression, gestures, and locational positioning, and had a number of “back-pocket” scripts for approaching and initiating conversation with individuals determined to be open to conversation.

The player-created content left on the board offered a wealth of material for the concierge to back-pocket as either quick invites to onlookers or as deeper conversation probes in ADORE. For example, rather than extend bland invitations like, “did you want to check out these posts?” they might say something provocative like, “did you know that more of your fellow audience members prefer to fight *for* dark

chocolate than *against* institutional racism?" or perhaps less inflammatory like, "most members of our audience indicate that *family* is most worth fighting for? Do you agree?"[366] Concierges were trusted to develop intriguing invitations by attending the evolving content on the boar, and following their intrinsic curiosity. In this way, they leveraged their own social awareness, cultural capital, and improvisational skills to surrogate the audience perspective, acting as a principal interpreter of the latent fable emerging from the player created content on the "Fight Board."

Figure 38: Fight Board game cards.

After successfully jumpstarting "Fight Board," the facilitator would adjust their score, reserving less attention for engaging non-players and focusing more on transitioning spectators (passive players) into active players. Unlike "Boxing Office" in which spatial and material resource limits constrained play to one player at a time, "Fight Board" allowed multiple players to engage in overlapping play, including play between different player role aggregations. In other words, spectators would co-exist

[366] Both of these examples are paraphrased from invitations I overheard concierge using.

spatially and temporally alongside active players within the same game space. Placing active players and potential players in the same space introduces social gaze as a performative material and a risk variable for the active player, as the active player may be aware that they are being observed while they play. The mixed play space also leveraged the game-moves of the active player to model rules as they demonstrated how to play the game. Such demonstrations lower the complexity threshold and generate synchronous social navigation affordance, illuminating the participation pathway for *potential* players. A concierge would augment these affordances by using physical and vocal signals like direct eye contact, facing, and projection to address and include as many spectators as possible when they performed an invitation to play the game or explained the rules, even to those who did not explicitly express an interest in playing. This often resulted in spectators receiving multiple iterations of the already simple game rules by overhearing the concierge explain the rules, and by observing other players playing the game, and effectively reduced the complexity-threshold to the point where many spectators were opting to become active players without an explicit invitation from the concierge.

The posts on the “Fight Board” provided passive participants richly interpretable content. Not only could they peruse the gallery of things people would fight for, but they could also observe which of those ideas were shared or supported and which left to dangle alone. Additionally, observers could notice that some posts were supported by “heavier” conviction while others may have many lightweight votes. The nature of the posts also varied from serious to lighthearted, and the tone of the post acted as a

kind of frame for the pins. For example, by far the most popular post was "Family." It was so popular that before the end of the run we needed to add a second card to give enough room for the pins. The most popular pin to place on the Family card was the red or "heavy" pin. There is a story that emerges even in the color choice placed on the card. For example, what does it mean to place a red pin on family as opposed to a white or "light" pin. Indeed, what does it mean if a player sees the opportunity to place a pin in family but chooses not to. There were also several less "serious" cards, including things like "Chocolate (dark)" and "Twerking." These may not have been as popular as "Love," "Family," "World Peace" and other more serious endeavors but their narrative potential is no less amazing and revealing.

Some players resisted the ordinate valuation structure of the game, and they may have found some refuge in the more playful posts, rather than being faced with a virtuous conundrum of ranking love, family, and God, one over the others. On occasion we felt obligated to "curate" the board after discovering objectionable posts. The two most memorable posts that we took down were "eating pussy" and "killing niggers." This curation did not happen without debate — the argument pivoting around the inflammatory nature of the posts and the conversation they were likely to incite. Ultimately, we decided that certain posts had the potential to upstage the central performance, and while the conversations they may have stimulated could have been quite impactful, we determined that this fell outside the design purpose of the game.

## 5.7 - Swagger Wall and Intentionally Disrupting Flow

Figure 39: Swagger Wall

The write-and-post mechanic was used in at least one experience within nearly every frame design at the Kirk Douglas Theatre from 2013 to 2017. It became an ubiquitous tool in our tool box because it is easy for players to understand and it is a versatile mechanic that is easy to adapt to different fables. The nature of the mechanic requires players to leave traces that tend to work as visual affordances for future players which then makes the rules of the game almost self-evident. As was demonstrated with the "Fight Wall," these traces — the "posts" that players have left behind — also facilitate a secondary avenue for passive participation which beyond

arousing intrinsic curiosity and interest, may perform as an implicit invitation for spectators to become players.

The versatility of the write-and-post mechanic extends to the ease with which it harmonizes with other mechanics to make emergent experiences, as was the case with *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, where we combined write-and-post with visual voting in “Fight Board,” for example, and with subsequent lobby games like “Play by Play” and “Going Home” for *Chavez Ravine,* and “Fashion Statements” for *The Black Suits* (mentioned in the Introduction). “Swagger Wall,” however, was the least complex of all the *The Incomparable Prize Fight* games as it simply required active players to perform of a single iteration of the write-and-post mechanic. The intent of “Swagger Wall” was for players to experience the risk and challenge of the social bravado of the prize fighter, and in the process come up with the “fighter name.” The act of publicly claiming greatness requires a great degree of confidence, a self-deprecating sense of humor, or a resilient ego — or perhaps some combination of all these. The signage for “Swagger Wall” contained the prompts, “What are you great at? What are you famous for? Fill out and post the card to announce your greatness to the world.” Players then filled in the blanks on a card (see Figure 40) that said “I’m so good at _____ that they call me_____” which they would then hang up on the wall for all to see.

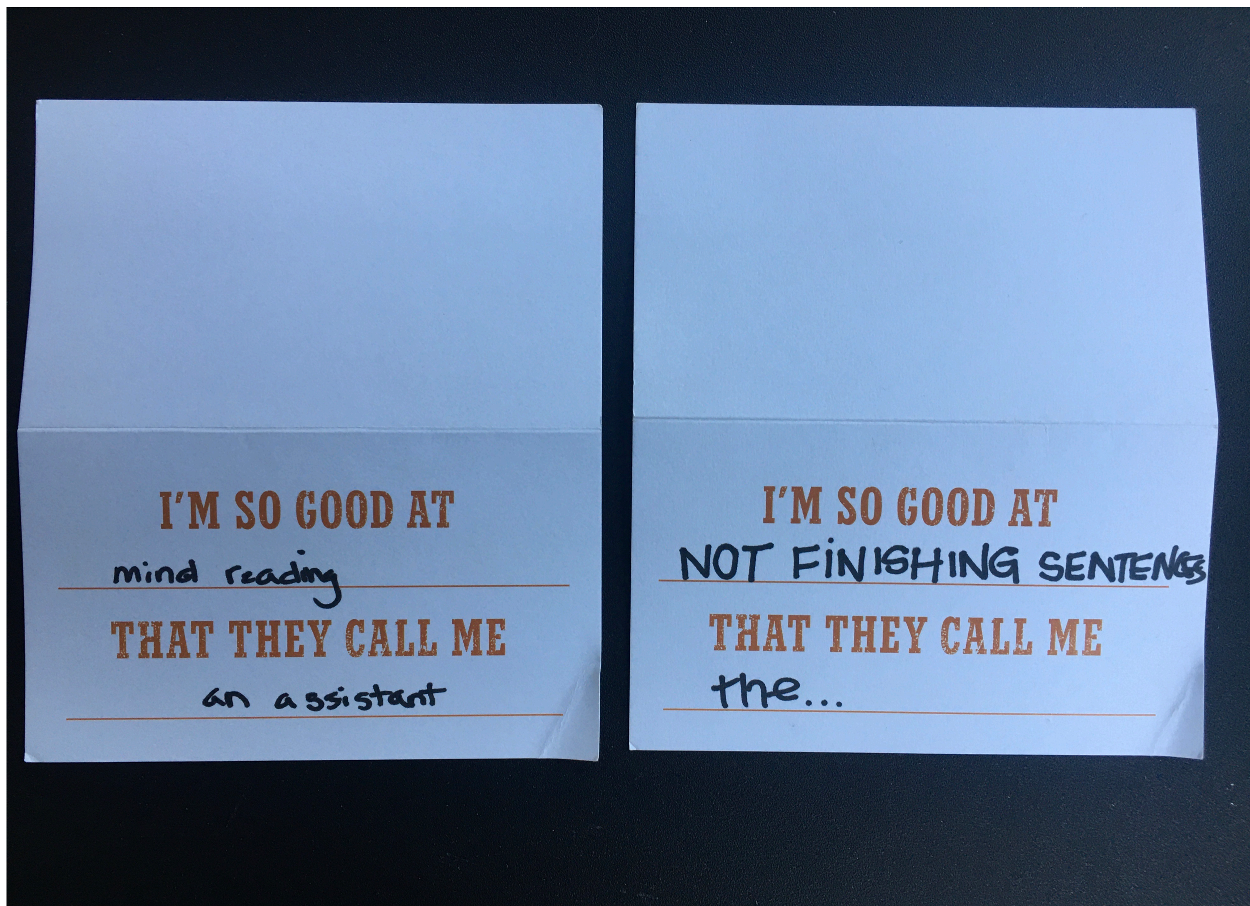


Figure 40: Swagger Wall game cards.

Taken as a whole, the write-and-post mechanic appears to be an uncomplicated mechanic that consists of a single action or move made by the player. This may be the most efficacious consideration when the write-and-post functions as an adjunct to another mechanic or works within a more complex network of mechanics. However, it is possible to unpack the write-and-post, dividing the mechanic into discreet and recognizable internal processes. We designed the score for “Swagger Wall” to subtly defamiliarize these internal processes for the player, cultivating awareness of the individual occurrences within the mechanic as discrete events, and in doing so, augment the sense of self awareness or self-consciousness that may occur when

performing a write-and-post. It may seem counterintuitive to design risk *augmentation* into an experience when risk *mitigation* typically takes priority, but Swagger Wall offers an excellent example of how intentional and calculated risk enhancement may be utilized as a powerful evaluative meaning maker.

Elaborating on the discussion on attention in Chapter 3, when a player performs *distal engagement* they utilize a combination of foci — both internal and external — that are relevant to a non-primary skill practiced for its efficacy at holding interest, low demand on cognitive attentional resources, and ability to be performed without mechanical or cognitive interference in the primary skill. As an example, an athlete might intentionally take up a distal engagement strategy during a warm-up or low-performance workout by listening to music while working out. This has the effect of moving focus away from the internal processes and relying on muscle-memory to properly execute movements. Having mastered a good-form push-up, for example, the athlete does not need to seize conscious control of the internal processes involved in the push-up and instead can focus on the outcome of completing the movement or on synchronizing the movement with the rhythm of a song they are listening to while working out — both are forms of distal engagement. For a player performing a primary skill in which they already have a high level of competency, distal engagement is the defacto performance modus, as it offers the most efficient use of cognitive and attentional resources.

Without over generalizing, it is safe to say that most players who opt-in to write-and-post experiences in the Kirk Douglas Theatre lobby possess a high level of

competency in the relevant primary skills involved: writing a few words on a card, then hanging the card on a wire. It is reasonable to expect that most players will perform distal engagement when playing these games. Their attention will be focused principally on outcome and external effects, and, according to the *constrained action hypothesis,* performance of the skill will be "unconstrained by conscious control."[367]

While a distal engagement strategy may typically be a desirable design approach for a write-and-post, the intention of "Swagger Wall" was — in part — to simulate an experience of self-consciousness by directing player attention to the inherent social and performative elements of the experience. By intentionally disrupting the internal processes of the write and post, I hoped to facilitate a *proximal engagement strategy* for players of "Swagger Wall." An opposite strategy from distal engagement, proximal engagement compels players to allocate full attentional resources to discerning and interpreting cues relevant to the primary skill, and gating out non-relevant cues. This full and conscious allocation of attention to the primary skill — particularly a primary skill that has already been mastered — disrupts and interferes with fluent performance of the skill and increases the likelihood of self-consciousness.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes that "for flow to be maintained, one cannot reflect on the act of awareness itself." As discussed in Chapter 3, "the moment awareness is split so as to perceive the activity from 'outside,' the flow is interrupted."[368] Csikszentmihalyi refers to these interruptions within fluent activity as "interludes" —

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[367] Richard H. Cox, *Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications* (McGraw-Hill, 2012), 140.
[368] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 138.

breaks between acts of play — during which "questions flash through the actor's [player's] mind"[369] that force them to reflect upon the behavior they undertake. Through such reflections the player inaugurates their self-identity as sovereign to the experience and exposes their involvement in the activity to the prospect of social evaluation and embarrassment. Cognitive psychologists note that drawing "attention to the performance of a highly learned skill can be disruptive"[370] to the smooth performance of the autonomic processes required for fluent execution of the skill, and that such disruptions tend to interfere with an individual's situational awareness and ability to exert strategic control.

"Swagger Wall" was designed to intentionally disrupt the player fluency to simulate an experience of self-consciousness while performing the "highly learned" skills necessary to complete a write-and-post. The disruption was intended to underscore and augment the self-reflective act inherent in filling out the write-and-post card and displaying it publicly and gesture towards the "ego" involved in the construction of a boxer's assumed public persona. The construction of the public persona was meant to function as a meaningful waypoint in player's journey through *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, forming a parallel narrative node with the moment in the *The Royale* when the protagonist embraces their fighter persona.

By examining the player experience of a write-and-post using a stock-and-flow model, we identified three opportunities to disrupt flow by introducing a score that

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[369] Ibid.

[370] Wayne Christensen, John Sutton, and Doris J.F. McIlwain, "Cognition in Skilled Action: Meshed Control and the Varieties of Skill Experience," *Mind &Amp; Language* 31, no. 1 (2016): pp. 37-66, https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12094, 45.

created "valves" to stock player movement at each of these points. In a stock-and-flow model, valves indicate instances along the predicable pathway of agents (i.e., the players) where controllable variables can be manipulated to interrupt or hold agent progress. For example, considering the audiences' progress from the lobby into the house as a stock-and-flow model, the door from the lobby into the house is the "valve." When the valve is shut, audience members are "stocked" in the lobby, and when the valve is open, audience members flow into the house.

Using stock-and-flow, we articulated four discrete events within the write-and-post mechanic: 1) observe/plan, 2) write, 3) post, 4) observe/feedback. Between each of these four events, we located a "valve" through which the flow of play passed from one event to the next. Without intentional interference, the three "valves" connecting these four events default to "open" and player attention will tend to flow through the experience with little distraction or opportunities for self-consciousness resulting from procedural interruption.

During the first stage, observe/plan, we expected prospective players to participate as spectators, reading other posts and watching other players write and post their cards. The concierge facilitating "Swagger Wall" did not recruit players but was scored to respond only if players needed help. Instead, their principal task was to manage the distribution and recovery of the material resources of the game (the sharpies, the write-and-post cards, and *The Incomparable Prize Fight* game tokens) and to comment on player performance. As with most scores developed for the concierge, concierges were encouraged to adapt the script to the circumstances and make judgement calls

based on their observations of the individual player, and the temporal and spatial resource demands.

During a typical write-and-post event, we would make sure that pens were made easily available to players so that players could move seamlessly between the decision to participate and actual participation with the fewest possibilities for interruption. However, during "Swagger Wall," audience members electing to transition from spectator to active player needed to acquire a pen and card from the concierge. Not only did this disrupt player flow, it also afforded the concierge an opportunity to interact with the player, draw attention to them, ask gently probing questions about what makes them great, and generally make a bit of a production over it. While handing the materials to the player, the concierge would instruct the player to return the pen and card after filling them out. When players returned with the card and pen, the concierge would read and quickly memorize the card before handing it back to the player and instructing them to hang the card on the wall, after which they could come back to the concierge to claim their game token. If it seemed appropriate to the concierge and if they had available attention, they would draw focus to the player as they hung their card, often calling out what the player had written on their card. By playfully mocking the ego of the player and drawing attention to the "fighter name" just posted, the concierge sought to encourage the players to own their "greatness" by strutting or swaggering in character as a boxer. The player would then return to the concierge one last time to receive their game token, at which point the concierge would encourage them to watch as other players observed the card they just put on the wall.

## 5.8 - Prize Fight and Playing the Climax

Figure 41: *The Incomparable Prize Fight* game cards.

Players who completed the first three segments of *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, qualified to compete against another player for "real world" prizes in the culminating

experience. Using the cards they “won” by completing the other three experiences (see Figure 41), players could play the final game, “Prize Fight,” a fast pace zero-sum card game with simple a rock-paper-scissors mechanic. The winner of the game won all their opponent’s game cards and had the option either to turn in the cards for a prize or compete against another winner for more prizes. Unlike the first three games in which the mechanics afforded and relied upon player introspection and were generously paced to allow players time to reflect and make calculated moves, “Prize Fight” was design to thrust players into an urgent and exciting play space where reaction and reflex win the day. The energetic climax to the narrative journey affords players a pulse-pounding embodied experience of high stakes competition against another fully “trained” fighter, and for the victor, the choice between “cashing in” to collect a prize or going all in to compete again for an even bigger prize.

Where the first three games did not specifically rely upon direct player-to-player interaction, “Prize Fight” positioned the action-opportunity relative to the actions and competency of another player. Simultaneously, the game fostered a subtle camaraderie between players, both of whom arrived as a micro-cohort after having completed a similar sequence of experiences to arrive together at the climax. Not only did players rely upon each other to produce challenging action opportunities, but each players willingness to embrace the performance of the game enhanced or detracted from the narrative play of the other. These conditions invited players into collusion with each other to perform the culminating act of *The Incomparable Prize Fight* as the characters they articulated throughout their gameplay. “Prize Fight” offered players

opportunities to enter *complicity* with each other as an ephemeral ensemble, in which the roles of agency redistribute to make each player both actor and audience, performing not only for each other, but for the crowd of non-players who inevitably gather around to watch. "Prize Fight" was designed not only as an exciting, embodied experience at the climax of *The Incomparable Prize Fight*, but as an act of resistance against the dominant transcript of theatre conventions that demand the audience to remain silent, respectful, and inactive.

On its own, "Prize Fight" would likely have presented players with a daunting risk horizon. Although the rules were not overly complicated, the act of playing a highly performative competitive card game in front of an ad hoc audience was far outside normative behavior for conventional theatre attendees. The risk of social embarrassment for activities like those in "Prize Fight" can be quite extreme and can present prospective players with a sense that they may suffer actual reputational harm by electing to participate. This perception, however, was radically reduced by situating "Prize Fight" as the culmination of three other low-risk activities. For many players, "Prize Fight" became a goal and an inevitability that they strove towards with a sense of urgency[371], and players arrived at "Prize Fight" without explicit invitations from the concierge. In fact, by the time they arrived at "Prize Fight," players needed to request to play the game.

Not only did the journey to arrive at the fight lower the risk horizon for players, it raised the stakes and infused a level of complexity into the narrative play that would

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[371] It was not uncommon during the last minutes before curtain to see players physically rushing to complete the first three activities in time to compete in the Prize Fight.

have been nearly impossible to achieve had “Prize Fight” been a stand-alone experience. The concierge facilitating “Prize Fight” performed a score that encouraged players to recall the experiences they encountered along the journey, and to perform the character capital they developed during those games. The concierge would make announcements throughout the match using the players’ boxer names (from “Swagger Wall”) and any other narrative information they may have gleaned from the players, effectively turning the game into a lightly improvised scene infused with richly interpretive material from the entire *The Incomparable Prize Fight* journey. The game always attracted an audience, and at times the audience for the game would grow so large that it would interrupt front-of-house procedures and block egress between center lobby and lobby left. Often, the conclusion of matches would be applauded, and the ad hoc audiences would frequently respond to player moves in a manner more typical to sports audiences than to conventional theatre audiences — calling out encouragement for a favorite boxer, taunts towards another boxer, cheering or groaning at specific moves. Perhaps most surprising of all, almost without fail, the winner of Prize Fight would perform a clear gesture of fiero, throwing their hands in the air, or a more subtle fist pump. It is difficult to imagine that such a simple game could evoke such a response without the progressive and incremental narrative play of the entire *The Incomparable Prize Fight* complex.

Using a simple rock-paper-scissors mechanic and the card-capture mechanic used in the classic card game “war” players resolve the bout through a rapid-fire series of “moves” during which they slap cards down on a high-top table. As a simple, and

culturally familiar game mechanic, rock-paper-scissors allows for players to pick up the game quickly and perform the core reiterative mechanic of Prize Fight with the ease and confidence of a pro. Surprisingly, rock-paper-scissors is also a strategically robust mechanic. Although the mechanic offers limited statistical depth, as a medium for human interaction, the game offers a level of complexity rich enough to sustain the interest of members of the World Rock Paper Scissors Association, who compete in massive tournaments, and share articles analyzing dominant strategies and trends in the game.[372]

Players chose their "punch" by selecting a punch card (see Figure 41) from their hand and slapping the card face down on the table. This gesture, demonstrated by the concierge at the top of the game, was meant to create a rhythmic punctuation to the player moves and to provide a sense and abstract representation of "punching" the other player. The gesture also served as either a challenge or response to the challenge, as the rule is made clear that once a player slaps down their card, the other player must respond immediately or be knocked out[373]. This generated a pressure that accelerated the game, which helped to generate a sense of urgency and reduced the length of the game. From a temporal resource perspective, this was quite important, because Prize Fight game participation peaked close to the start of the show which presented potential logistical and customer service challenges, as mentioned in section

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[372] "Rock Paper Scissors Strategies - World Rock Paper Scissors Association," World Rock Paper Scissors Association - Professional Rock Paper Scissors, January 11, 2022, https://www.wrpsa.com/rock-paper-scissors-strategies/.

[373] Concierge would inform players that in the event of a delayed reaction, the concierge would count up to three and if they reached "three" then the player was knocked out. Narratively this was meant to simulate a player getting knocked to the mat, but a ten count was too long for this game.

5.4.

After both players slapped down their cards, they simultaneously revealed their move by flipping over the card. Using the rock-paper-scissors mechanic, they determined who won the move, and that player collected both cards and placed them in a "discard pile." In the event of a "tie" both players took their own card into their own discard pile. If one player no longer had cards in either their hand or their discard pile, then the game ended and the player with cards remaining emerged as victor. If both players still had cards in their hand, then the round continued with the next move, which happened as soon as players cleared the cards from the previous move to their discard pile. If either player exhausted the cards in their hand, but still had cards in the discard pile, then the round ended, and the concierge instructed both players to pick up their discard pile and place it in their hands. Play continued in this manner until one player won by collecting all their opponent's cards, or until the end of the last round at which point the player with the most cards won on "points."

Once a winner was determined and announced with accompanying fanfare, the concierge offered the losing player a coupon drink ticket for the KDT bar as a consolation prize. They then asked the champion whether they would like to cash in on their prize or play again for higher stakes. If the player elected to fight again, they would face off against another player who had won their first bout using all the cards they won from their first match. The winner of that "Tier Two" match would again have the option to cash in their cards for a prize, or fight again in a "Tier Three" match. Players fighting in a tier three match played with 12 cards each and, time permitting,

the match would go until one player lost all their cards, was knocked out, or the game reach round 12.  The prizes for each tier escalated significantly.  The winner of a Tier One match could cash in to receive a free drink ticket redeemable immediately at the Kirk Douglas Theatre's full bar; the winner of a Tier Two match could cash in to receive a free ticket to the next show at the Kirk Douglas Theatre or two free drink tickets, and the winner of a Tier Three match could choose between a season pass to the KDT or four drink tickets.  During the entire run of The Royale, only one Tier Three match was played, and the winner — who was a KDT subscriber — elected to receive the four drink tickets, two of which they immediately gave to their opponent.

The Incomparable Prize Fight became the benchmark for lobby experience design for the subsequent four seasons at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.  It was "about specifically creating an experience that will shape audience perspective of the art or open them up to a full appreciation of the art," commented Eric Sims.  "I've often seen that as a kind of human connection with journey of the protagonist.  To me that's always been the linchpin of engagement."[374] It marked the beginning of a period of experimentation leveraging game mechanics in the frame of conventional theatre performances to both enhance and challenge the typical theatergoing experience.

[374] Sims Interview, Line 17.

# Conclusion

## This Insubstantial Pageant

In late October of 2016, a new play from Jon Robin Baitz opened at the Kirk Douglas Theatre to mixed reviews. *Vicuña* told the story of a brash billionaire real estate mogul and former reality TV icon turned presidential candidate in the days leading up to the election. Playing to a mostly left-leaning Los Angeles theatre audience, Baitz's thinly veiled excoriation of the Trump candidacy was initially received as an amusing and sometimes funny cautionary satire that helped ease the pre-election cognitive fatigue burdening those on the political left. "Laughter may not solve our problems, but it can reduce stress levels," noted theatre critic Charles McNulty in his review for *The Los Angeles Times*. "There is something powerfully bolstering about coming together as a community to address the political drama roiling the nation," McNulty argued, and *Vicuña* might have "just enough wit and wisdom to survive past election day."[375] Other critics also called out the timing of the production, with some focusing on the "astonishingly timely"[376] prescience of the playwright and Center Theatre Group that had *Vicuña* in the season line-up well before Donald Trump's nomination as the Republican presidential candidate became a certainty. Still other

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[375] Charles McNulty, "Review: Looking for the Lighter Side to a Nasty Election? Playwright Jon Robin Baitz Delivers It in 'Vicuña'," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, October 31, 2016), https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-vicuna-play-review-20161031-snap-story.html.
[376] Peter Debruge, "L.A. Theater Review: Trump Satire 'Vicuña'," Variety (Variety, November 1, 2016), https://variety.com/2016/legit/reviews/vicuna-review-jon-robin-baitz-donald-trump-1201904995/.

critics considered the timing of the production poorly planned as it spanned a presidential election which conventional wisdom held -- at least inside the "liberal bubble"[377] — that Donald Trump would lose. "[*Vicuña*] will have no more reason to exist after next week," wrote Jason Rohrer for *Stage and Cinema*, "but for the moment, it's one more Center Theatre Group production that reassures liberals that their prejudice is justifiable."[378]

That *Vicuña* would lose its satirical bite after the election was also a frequent, casual conversation among the Kirk Douglas Theatre staff — in particular the XD team — as we formulated our engagement strategy and designed a frame experience for the production. There was a vague but permeating sense that the inevitable defeat of Trump would make the play seem unimportant and irrelevant, and perhaps because of this ambivalence we attempted to design a lobby game that would feel whimsical yet somehow consequential. The game we eventually designed was called *(In)decent Propositions* — although most of the staff ended up calling it "The Lobby Election." Audience members electing to play *(In)decent Propositions* stepped into a voting booth in the lobby where they voted to enact one out of several "propositions." Votes were tallied as the first act played and results displayed during intermission on a flat-screen television mounted in the lobby (see Figure 42). Each proposition was designed to have an immediate and tangible impact on some aspect of the patron or staff experience for that performance. For example, "Proposition CHANGE" mandated a

[377] Nate Silver, "There Really Was a Liberal Media Bubble," FiveThirtyEight (FiveThirtyEight, March 10, 2017), https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/there-really-was-a-liberal-media-bubble/.
[378] Jason Rohrer, "Los Angeles Theater Review: Vicuña (Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City)," Stage and Cinema, October 31, 2016, https://stageandcinema.com/2016/10/31/vicuna/.

suspension of the rule prohibiting food in the House for the second act of the show, "Proposition TREAT" promised that every audience member would be offered a piece of candy as they left the theatre, and "Proposition RAISE" promised that a concierge working that shift would be selected at random to receive a one-time bonus worth an hour of pay (see Figure 43).

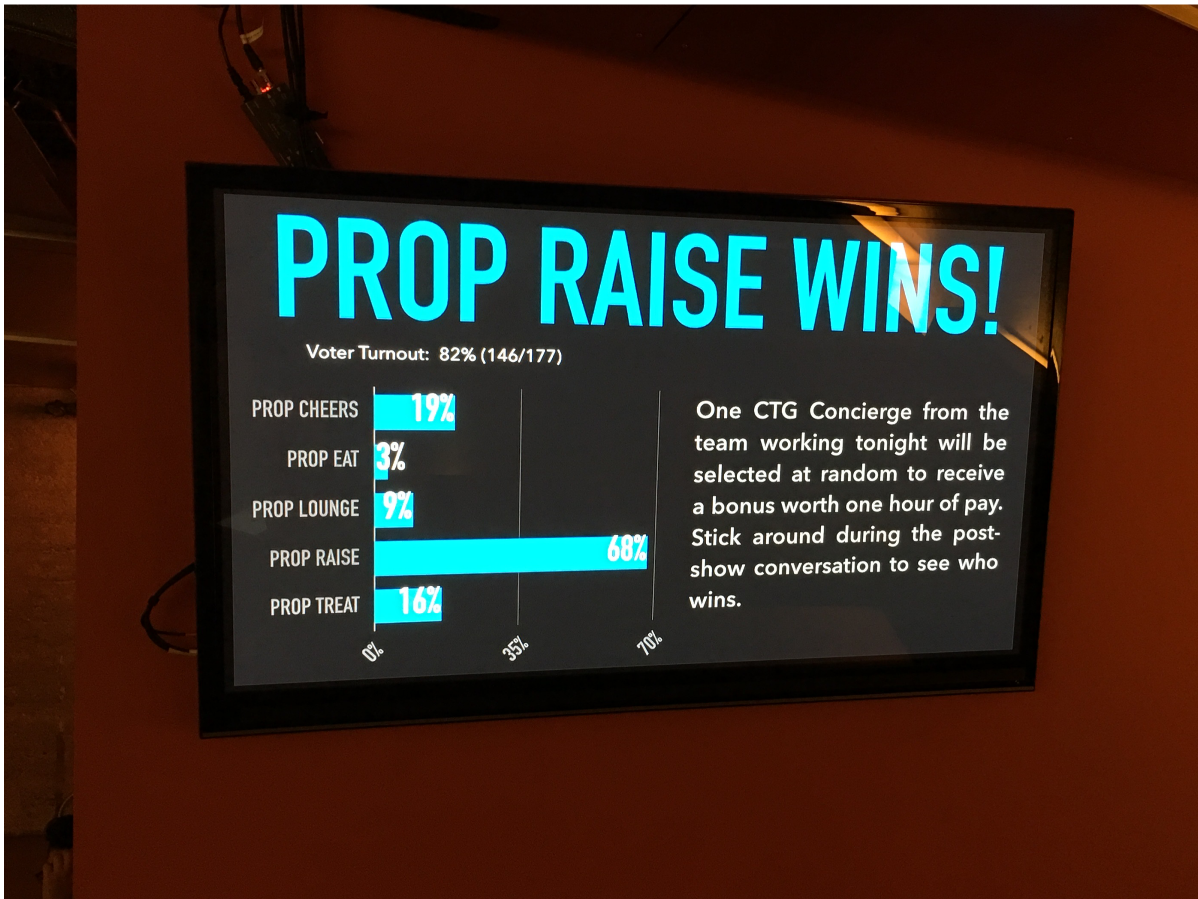


Figure 42: Results of the election displayed in the lobby during intermission. Photography by Tom Burmester

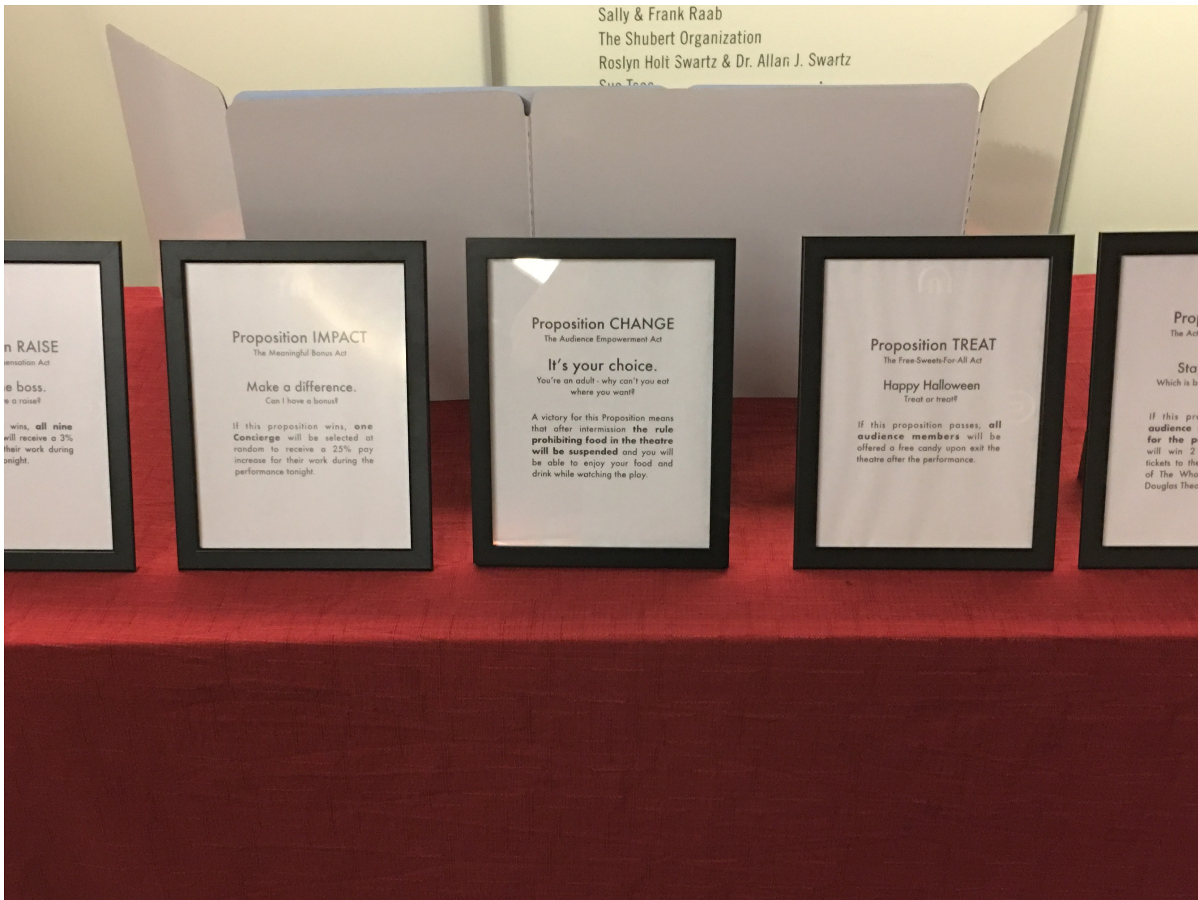

Figure 43: The various Propositions displayed near the voting booth. Photography by Tom Burmester

As an *easy fun* game with a very low complexity threshold and almost no player perception of risk, *(In)decent Propositions* saw a very high rate of participation during previews and through the first week of the run, averaging around 80% of the total House. Then the election happened, and no one wanted to play.

After the election of Donald Trump, the tone of the event took a dramatic and somber turn. Just as Trump's election penetrated and burst the "liberal bubble," so too did "real world" events penetrate and burst the magic circle surrounding both *(In)decent Propositions* and *Vicuña.* Reacting to the change in tone, we discontinued *(In)decent Propositions* and intensified our efforts at engaging audience members in

conversation, including hosting a post-show community conversation in the lobby. Through the remainder of the run, these conversations were well-attended, and emotionally charged to the extent that often, several audience members would break down in tears during the post-show. The drastic shift in the socio-historic context around *(In)decent Propositions* and *Vicuña* may have revealed the liberal bias in the Los Angeles theatre community, but it also demonstrated the need for players to enter games with a lusory attitude. Perhaps it also revealed something about why people enshrine theatre in a cloak of "serious culture" and resist thinking of theatre as a game. While it was immediately clear that *(In)decent Propositions* needed to be cut, there was never a conversation about cancelling the run of *Vicuña.*

Our feeling of playfulness retreats in a time of crisis, but for theatre people it is written in our DNA that "the show must go on." The durability of theatre shows up in the mythology of the traveling player wandering an apocalyptic landscape as much as it shows up in the news during times of crisis. Whether it is in the caravan of actors in *The Seventh Seal,* the Travelling Symphony of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, the reopening of Broadway after 9/11, or the innovative — if dissatisfying — attempts at "Zoom Theatre" during the coronavirus pandemic, our collective imagination is full of real and fictional accounts of theatre persisting through crisis. It seems, however, that as theatre endures and outlasts the crisis of its moment, often something gets stripped away and left behind — some new trend or emerging traditions that might have been wonderful or amazing, but that simply did not have the durability to outlast calamity. Ultimately, the conventions of theatre are only as stable as the society that birthed

them, and when a society trembles, so does its theatre. In the process theatre shakes off all of those "other categories of performance and spectacle"[379] that latch on to the essential dynamic play between actor and spectator, leaving behind something perhaps a bit closer to Grotowski's "Poor Theatre" or to the wandering players of our imagined apocalypse. After all, if all the conventions of theatre fail and fall away, what would be left of theatre would be the essential relationship between the actor and the audience — a relationship our collective imagination can visualize originating at the dawn of human society when our Stone Age ancestors gathered around the fire to enact stories of wonder.

After *Vicuña* and the election of Donald Trump, the radical hospitality program at the Kirk Douglas Theatre — including the concierge program — began to falter and contract. The contraction that began during *Vicuña* accelerated when a series of company layoffs in 2017 gutted the XD team and consolidated control for Kirk Douglas Theatre engagement programming "downtown" in the Education Department. Subsequently, the entire program came to a hard stop when the coronavirus pandemic shuttered theatres. When the Kirk Douglas Theatre eventually reopened for in-person audiences in April 2022, neither the radical hospitality program nor the concierge program was carried forward. The front-of-house experience at the Douglas is, at the time of my writing, once again "conventional," and some few former-concierges who remain on staff now work as ushers or in "COVID compliance," putting the skills they learned as concierges to assuage angry customers who show up to the theatre without

[379] Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1969), 15.

proof of vaccination. It is a different day for the post-pandemic theatre, and now it is difficult to imagine audiences clamoring for the same kind of interactive experiences we used to create at the Kirk Douglas Theatre — many of which put players in close physical proximity to each other and involved swapping game pieces or pens, shaking hands, or crowding into the cramped historic box office. The world has closed in on us since my practice-as-research project at the Kirk Douglas Theatre concluded in 2017. The Trump presidency, the Pandemic, the Insurrection of January 6th, the war in Ukraine, the mounting ravages of climate change, a rising tide of racism and autocracy, and real threats to an individual's ability to make choices about their own body: these all paint a persistent backdrop of crisis that makes it hard for people to summon a playful attitude when they come to the theatre.

Nevertheless, the socio-historic pressures that gave rise to the radical hospitality program persist and — in many ways — have intensified. Already the dominant mode of entertainment consumption prior to the pandemic, streaming media has had its ascendance rapidly accelerated by social isolation, further marginalizing live theatre. In this moment, theatre is buffeted by powerful and unpredictable forces in the physical, social, and economic environment. Within such a dancing landscape of chaotic variables, it is impossible to know whether a time will come when theatre institutions like Center Theatre Group will find the courage to re-imagine and re-deploy programs — like radical hospitality and the lobby games at the Kirk Douglas Theatre -- that seek to address theatre's sustainability by inviting the audience to play and have fun.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, *fun* is a defining feature of theatre — as important and essential as the *play* between actor and audience. Brecht wrote that theatre without fun would have "no wind to fill anyone's sails."[380] Theatre is a *game* that without fun would be little more than sound and fury. If ever there has been a time for theatre makers to lean into fun, that time is now. While our lusory attitude may fall off at times of crisis, it is during such times that we need theatre the most. Theatre has the potential to heal fractured communities, to instigate vital discourses, and to prick the moral imagination…but *only* if it is fun to play.

I would like to believe that, although my efforts at the Douglas did not survive the last few tumultuous years, the work we did changed something in the DNA of the American theatre. We demonstrated a successful play-based strategy that helped make theatre sustainable in the early twenty-first century by focusing on making the experience *fun* for audience-players. While it is my hope that theatre makers will find value in the archive of this work as they navigate theatre through a very unpredictable and threatening future, it is my certainty that if they do, they will —at the very least — have fun.

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[380] Bertolt Brecht et al., *Brecht on Theatre* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 26.

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