# Digital Games and Theater in America

## Part III: The Sociocultural Implications of the Theater-Game Alliance
### By Dan Barnard

### Slide 1

Hello, this is the third presentation in our panel so if you haven't already listened to parts 1 and 2 do go back and do so as the heart of the ideas in our panel lies there. In this part 3 what I'm going to do is reflect on the potential for social change inherent in the relationship between digital games and theatre. I'm going to attempt to think through some of that potential through some case studies and attempt to propose some ways forward in work that is a bit more tentative and exploratory than we have been in parts 1 and 2.

### Slide 2

In the previous two presentations Dimitra and Aikaterini discussed the interpenetration of digital games and theatre that we have witnessed in recent years. In part one, Dimitra discussed how games borrow heavily from theatrical elements and conventions and in part 2 Aikaterini explored what games can do for theatre. I'm now going to explore what potential for social change there might be in this interpenetration.

### Slide 3

My name is Dan Barnard and I'm a Senior Lecturer at London South Bank university where I teach on the Acting and Performance course and where I am also part of the Centre for the Study of the Networked Image.

I began my career as a theatre director making more traditional theatre in which an audience sat quietly in the dark watching a group of actors portray a story while pretending that the audience weren't there. The content of the plays I directed was calling for social change on topics from colonialism to capitalism to climate change and had increasingly activist aims. My collaborator Rachel Briscoe and I began to be more and more struck by the disconnect between asking our audience to take action while making them sit quietly in the dark. We began to ask ourselves whether theatre might become not merely a call for action but an opportunity for audience members to rehearse a different way of being together and to do this we began to draw on elements of game mechanics so that our audiences made the transition from being a "paying audience" to a "playing audience" – to borrow a phrase from Tassos Stevens, the Artistic Director of UK company Coney. To enable that playing – that interacting between audience members, we began to use digital technologies and we began to

collaborate with artists who use code and software, including Joe McAlister, with whom we have been collaborating since 2017.

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Rehearsing different ways of being and being together

When theatre takes its audiences and makes them the players – which is obviously a word from the field of games but also another word for actors in English – it can invite these players to rehearse different ways of being and of being together – to adapt Shyba's phrase.

In the late aughts and the 2010s, there were a number of theatrical experiences which, knowingly or unknowingly, created a sort of LARP/theatre hybrid in which the audience all took on characters in the play.

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This includes productions such as Coney's *Small Town, Anywhere* in 2009 in which all the audience members took on the role of citizens in a small town where some strange events were going on. These audience members had a range of choices in how they performed their characters and the decisions they took. Coney described the piece as "playable theatre." A Small Town Anywhere is theatre for around 30 playing audience who take hats and badges to become citizens of a small town for the most momentous week of its history. Originally inspired by Clouzot's film Le Corbeau, it's a story about a community at war with itself, riven by tribalism and petty ambition, and testing if solidarity can survive. Simmering gossip and tensions between the two tribes of Wrens and Larks are stirred to boiling point by the poison-pen signing themselves as The Raven.
Small Town is also about the roomful of strangers who become the playing audience, and what communal sense emerges through their play. The story of the town that unfolds is responsive to the choices they make, individually and collectively. An advance interaction with the Small Town Historian, online or in person, gives audience the opportunity to cast themselves into the Town and make their own history- including their filthy secret, which may or may not be discovered.

In an interview with academic Josephine Machon, Coney's artistic director Tassos Stevens said: "In terms of agency there are amazing immersive experiences, such as with Punchdrunk, where you have agency of exploration, but not over the outcome of the piece. Whereas with *A Small Town Anywhere*, there is an agency for the audience in terms of interaction *and* the outcome is made in response to, by and with them."

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In Austria at Schauspielhaus Graz, director Philipp Ehmann directed Press Staat for Revolution in 2016, which he described as "a theatre or parlour game by and with the audience. According to resistance guru Popović's motto: "Civil disobedience is a team sport!", together with others you can try out new ways to redesign the future of the fictitious state of Libertalia. The game is designed for a maximum of 30 players who will have a collective experience, but also be confronted with new sides of their own personalities." These collective experiences and this process of being confronted with new sides of your personality obviously creates the possibility of social change.

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UK company Fast Familiar (then called fanSHEN) created *Disaster Party* in 2017, a playable theatre experience for 15 audience members, which used headphones. The marketing copy read: "Have you ever wanted to be someone else for a couple of hours? Well now you can - pop in your headphones, listen to your lines, and leave yourself behind as you become a character in this interactive show. As the evening plays out, there are some dramatic developments that nobody had anticipated. How will your character respond? You decide." The company would often consciously give players character roles with a gender different to their own as a way of inviting people to explore a different way of being in the world. The piece starts with audience members being fed every line of dialogue they say and being told in detail where to go. As the evening progressed and audience members became more and more confident, they were given more and more freedom to chose their own dialogue and actions, resulting in a final climactic decision that was entirely the audience's own.

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In terms of rehearsing a different way of being *together*, Fast Familiar developed a piece exploring group psychology in collaboration with neuroscientist Kris de Meyer. The piece, called The Justice Syndicate, premiered in 2017 and has now been performed more than 80 times. The piece is structured in such a way that it invites audience members to have an intense embodied experience and then an opportunity to reflect on that experience in a debrief facilitated by de Meyer, which outlines the dynamics from group psychology that play out in the piece – and in wider society – and give the audience tools to avoid some of the more destructive patterns that can occur in group psychology – and which the creators had witnessed playing out in 2016, in the Brexit referendum in the UK and in the Trump election in the US. In the piece, the audience take on the role of a jury considering a difficult case, in which the evidence is not clear cut. The piece features no live actors and instead involves the 12 audience members sitting around a table together, each with an iPad, on which they watch videos of witness and expert testimony, study documents relating to the case, receive prompts for discussion and vote upon the verdict of the case.

De Meyer writes: "Another of our aims with the piece was to create an experience in which participants are highly immersed (or absorbed) and then follow that with a debrief session in which they are invited to reflect on what happened. One motivation for including the debrief is that people tend towards "naïve realism" (Ross and Ward, 1997), meaning that we have a natural tendency to think that we see the world objectively. When having group conversations as in *The Justice Syndicate*, this naïve realism may lead us to think that these are the only possible discussions we can have and the only correct conclusions we can draw. However, the wide range of outcomes (from unanimously guilty to unanimously not-guilty and anything in between) and the diverse discussions and group dynamics we have observed demonstrate that this is not the case. The role of the debrief is – without being didactic – to make the participants aware of these differences, and to introduce new mental tools that allow them to make sense of their experience (insights from individual and group psychology).

When the debrief starts, the participants are asked to set aside the specifics of the case and, in a facilitated discussion, they become aware of how their experience of taking part relates to (and may differ from) that of other members of the group. Through input from the facilitators, they are also able to compare their group's experience and outcome with the groups before them. Often these discussions lead to a profound shift in their perception of what happened during the immersive experience. For a group who has just concluded that the defendant is guilty, hearing that other groups before them have come to radically different conclusions (despite seeing the exact same evidence) can be very surprising. For a group who rather harmoniously reasoned themselves to a consensus, hearing that other groups split into opposing and entrenched camps can be equally eye-opening.

The participants' understanding is further shaped by weaving crucial insights from the psychology of individual and group decision making into the debrief. These insights help the participants to self-reflect on their own experience of immersion. This often results in participants "playing back" snippets of the immersive experience as they reflect on the moment when they made a decision, or when the group discussions took a particular turn.

This combination of experiencing something with ensuing self-reflection is known to be a prerequisite for experiential learning (Kolb, 2014), and one of the reasons why we made the reflection time of the debrief part of *The Justice Syndicate*: we wanted the piece to be a playful experience of real-life disagreements. Despite its reflective nature and break with the immersive piece, the debrief is not perceived by the participants as didactic, but rather appreciated by them as an additional means to make sense of the experience itself.

The digital element of *The Justice Syndicate* was crucial because it allowed the audience to immerse themselves in the role of jurors, taking on an active role, in the absence of any of the embarrassment or differences in status that might have been present if they had been interacting with actors. I have written in more detail about this elsewhere.

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In another collaboration between De Meyer and Fast Familiar, the experience was moved out of theatres and into school classrooms in the North East of England in a piece called If I Were You, which was designed to encourage perspective taking in teenagers. It was prompted by a reported decline in the capacity to take the perspective of another person and the empathy that can accompany this perspective taking. In this piece, which again used iPads, the playing audience of teenagers were divided into two rooms, where two groups experienced the same story but from the different perspectives of two characters in the story, Nat and Jamie. Over the course of the experience, both groups were prompted with questions about what their own character was thinking or feeling, and how their character thought another person in the story was thinking or feeling. Those questions were built into the experience to simultaneously trigger and measure cognitive and emotional perspective-taking. In all groups, participating students misidentified the feelings of character who was not "their character" in the story, suggesting an underdevelopment of emotional perspective-taking. In a debrief after the piece, however, the two groups game together to explain why the different characters had taken the actions that they had. After collectively debriefing on the experience, 84 per cent of participants reported that the experience had helped them to take other perspectives.

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Outdoor theatre and promenade theatre existed before the advent of digital games but the phenomenon of both analogue and digital pervasive gaming has helped theatre makers and audiences re-imagine the forms that theatre can take.

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In Austria Play:Vienna create an almost annual pervasive game theatre hybrid called Journey Into the Night. In many ways the piece seems more game than theatre: A pursuit across the city in multiple parts in which players Try to make it through a series of checkpoints as quickly and as stealthily as possible, while avoiding being caught by chasers. Should you be captured, you become a chaser yourself and have to pursue your former friends and allies. No skates, no bikes, no cars — just your feet and public transport. However, there are a series of checkpoints you have to go to and within which you cannot be caught and this is where the theatrical elements of the

experience happen. Different bits of the story are told through interactions that happen at the check points between players and live actors. Play:Vienna normally run this once every year in Vienna and have done so since 2010, but with different stories unfolding within the same structure each year.

Pieces like this and like Fast Familiar's audio piece A Walk in the Park among many others have led to a situation in which we might not know if a person we pass in the street or the park is experiencing a theatrical artwork or just going about their daily lives – and in which the whole fabric of our cities become the stages for which artists create work.

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The theatre and digital game hybrids that have emerged in recent years have meant that new people who had seen themselves primarily as gamers or as theatre artists can begin to expand the palatte of artistic experiences that they engage with. The acceleration in digital theatre-game hybrids that can be experienced remotely, from a phone or laptop has also meant that people who struggle to leave home because of a disability or who live in a remote place far from large scale cultural provision can now experience artworks on an equal basis to non-disabled city dwellers.

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The digital nature of some digital game and theatre hybrids have opened up opportunities for audience members to have collective experiences with people in other places. Fast Familiar's sequel to The Justice Syndicate, called The Evidence Chamber was converted during the pandemic from a co-located digital theatre experience, in which audience members sat in a room together using iPads, to a remote experience which incorporated a video calling function into the piece's software, allowing people to play together from all over the world. People from 20 different countries played over 25 performances, meaning that conversations about justice, law, evidence, reasonable doubt and the jury process itself could happen between people from a wide range of countries, cultures and legal systems, greatly enriching the discussions and interactions that took place during the piece.

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Western theatre has traditionally lasted only an evening and has taken place in a single location – what Shakespeare referred to as "the two hour traffic of our stage." Digital games, by contrast, have a much greater variety in how long they last and theatre artists have begun to borrow this to create experiences that you can engage in sporadically over longer periods of time.

Examples of this include Blast Theory's Karen, in which the life coach Karen with whom you interact via your phone begins to break the boundaries in your relationship, contacting you at strange times and with inappropriate questions. Fast Familiar's whistleblower story Smoking Gun unfolds over the course of a week, with players being sent evidence each morning and discussing it with a group of other players each evening. With pieces like this, the length of engagement can expand or shrink, with some of Smoking Gun's players spending half an hour a day looking at evidence with others spending hours on end. In this way, theatre can become more like reading a novel, where you can pick it up and put it down and reflect upon it and wonder what might happen next in the times in between.

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So, to conclude my part of this presentation, the new hybrid form of digital theatre and games can invite people to rehearse different ways of being and of being together. It can allow them to have an embodied experience followed by reflection – and reflection that not only asks what would I do in a certain situation (as with traditional theatre) but what did I do in that situation – and why – and how might I gain the freedom to do something different next time when a similar situation arises in real life. It can invite teenagers in schools to explore perspective taking in new and powerful ways. It also enables shifts in the places where theatre happens, the people who experience theatre and the times and rhythms through which we experience theatre and the role it plays in their lives. Digital innovations in combination with the new interactive forms of theatre that the theatre and games interpenetration produces can mean that audiences can have collective experiences with people in other places – and rich and productive interactions and discussions can emerge from this.

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To conclude our three presentations, we would say the following:

There is a lot that theatre and digital games can still learn about each other, and a lot more that the world can learn from their alliance, in whatever configuration this may manifest. Ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interruption of theatre's workings as well as the workings of other forms of entertainment, art, and learning which require social intimacy, has caused an avalanche of attempts to digitalize previously analog media of socializing. There is much that these attempts can draw to their benefit from the hybrid, intermedia, and multimodal cultural texts that theatre and digital games have built upon an existing fertile ground of structural, functional, and psychosocial affinities. It is to these affinities that we focused on in the first part of this series of three presentations, where we showed how the theatre's fundamental elements, design principles, operative conventions, and sociocultural uses find application in an MMORPG like

*Fallen London*. Digital games such as this have shown us that social distance does not have to mean absence of productive socializing or lead to a degeneration of social skills, and theatre can certainly contribute further to that. As we have tried to show in the second part of these three presentations, by acting upon their affinities both theatre and digital games can enhance their appeal for new kinds of audiences; enrich their toolboxes as forms of art; multiply and diversify their affordances as portals to meaning making and platforms of learning. In this way, both theatre and digital games will be more likely to contribute to a "re-equipping" of contemporary "rehearsals of social change," as per Shyba's usage of the term, in all three of the above spheres of activity and sites of cultural production. In the third presentation we have looked at some examples of attempts to engage in these "rehearsals of social change and the potential for further developments that they point to.

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Thank you, I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank Dimitra and Aikaterina's wonderful work to which this has only been an addendum and I look forward to seeing and interacting directly with you in the Q and A, rather than just staring and speaking into the void and recording this as I have been! If you want to get in touch before then, these are my contact details.