

## Digital Games and Theater in America

### Part II: Theater and/as Digital Game(s)

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As Lori M. Shyba has proposed, central among the benefits to be reaped by MMORPGs via the incorporation of theatre tools are enhanced gameplay experiences, games' development as "a unique art form," and their emergence as "an experiential way to rehearse social change" (2007, 779). The latter insofar as this development has the potential to empower participants, cultivate their social skills as well as their political informedness and cultural awareness. Theatre has also tapped into the possibilities that digital games and their affordances present.

Indeed, theatre creators have pushed the interpenetration of the two realms forward, thus rendering the foregoing affinities more prominent. In this way, they allow their works and their audiences to negotiate novel ways of co-owning the theatre experience and actively engage in meaning-making processes. Many theatre practitioners since the 2000s have figured that borrowing conventions, narrative structures, and plot devices from digital games would open new vistas of possibility for theatre's poetics. Immersive theatre creators, particularly, were early adopters and started experimenting more rigorously with gamification in the last decade.

What follows is an overview of indicative theatre projects and their reception, moving from projects in which the digital component of MMORPGs is less conspicuous yet figuratively and narratively present, to those in which digital technology is integral to the conception and production of the works.

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A case in point is the much discussed and award-winning *Sleep No More* by Punchdrunk, which opened in New York in 2011 (earlier version produced in 2003). The work is a take on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that relies heavily on game logic and mechanics. Its "[a]udiences move freely through the epic story of *Macbeth*, creating their own journeys through a film noir world," according to its creators ("*Sleep No More*"). Staged in large-space locations filled with meaningful architectural details, *Sleep No More* invites audience members to embody their own

“avatars” by wearing masks throughout the performance. Masked and silent they can wander through the carefully designed 3D physical setting; follow actors who lead them to their parts of the story, set up like side quests that add intrigue and enthrall the participant; gather information and unlock developments or separate tales by searching drawers, looking at the pages of books, and going through letters containing clues. They can also share private scenes with actors, whose content (such as tasks to be performed) allow the chosen audience members to access other courses through the fictional world and drama. As Megan Reilly (2014) has reported, the audience of *Sleep No More* is “turned into a group of first-person players in a game,” since the theatre experience “lends itself well to planning approaches and achieving goals” in ways akin to those of digital games. Slide change Moreover, similar to gamers immersed in a game like FL, audience members are immersed to explore a branching-out/non-linear narrative, and they can choose how they will move through the storyline, and they can revisit a production to experience more “folds” of the drama, thus replaying the theatre game. The underside is that, again similar to gamers, participants may downplay the social aspect of the experience by deciding to treat fellow attendees as non-playable characters, selfisolate as single players, or become aggressive “in an effort to attain their goals” (Reilly 2014). Displays of defiance toward theatre conventions can derail or disrupt the experience of the performance as art.

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These less favorable, inbuilt possibilities in gamified theatre that may compromise the artistic experience have been dealt with effectively by other immersive and interactive works. *Then She Fell* by Third Rail Projects provides a good example. Like *Sleep No More*, this work has international reach and is distinguished by the awards it has attracted over the years as well as by its longevity: it was first performed in 2012. Its title alludes to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, from whose life and writings it was inspired. In fact, it has pulled game mechanics into its design precisely for the purpose of placing each audience member at the center of their own Alice-like journey, as its director, Zach Morris has explained (qtd. in “Press release”). The carefully set up “dreamscape” of the performance creates “poetic space where individuals could find themselves seen, heard, and integral to the action, and thereby find themselves reflected in it” (qtd. in “Press release”). Slide change As in *Sleep No More*, here too audience members are encouraged to explore the space “to discover hidden scenes; encounter performers one-on-one; unearth clues that

illuminate a shrouded history; use skeleton keys to gain access to guarded secrets; and imbibe [custom designed] elixirs" ("Then She Fell"). However, there is a key difference between the two works that hinges on how the audience's experience has been curated. As Reilly (2014) documents, the fifteen-member audience, much smaller and manageable than that of *Sleep No More*, "is split up and led to different start points on" the journey through the fictional world and drama, which they are to experience in an intimate yet less autonomous mode, similar to how "on-rails" digital games are played. And although the lack of autonomy may make the experience feel somewhat artificial for those seeking enhanced agency, its integrity as art—the quality of the audience's interaction with the drama and relation to the story—is properly safeguarded.

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Located somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between autonomy and dependence and breaking new ground with regard to how the theatre-game alliance can be configured are the works *Now Now Oh Now* by The Rude Mechanicals (first performed in 2012) and *Whist* by AΦE (first performed in 2017). The former invests in the notion of theatre and games as loci of sociality and socializing, while the latter invests in the digital component of digital gaming. Slide change *Now* can be described as a combination of the social dynamics of Live-Action Role-Playing Gaming, MMORPG logic, escape room design, and serious games content, with a Brontë-alluding aesthetic ("Now"). Audience members collaborate amongst themselves, interact with their environment, and use knowledge from the field of evolutionary biology to solve puzzles that allow them to not only unlock the drama, the mysteries of the story, and the room they are in but also gain a more profound understanding of the loss(es) with which the choice and chance driving evolution are shot through. The multi-player component of the performance is what allows the process of mentally, affectually, and kinesthetically navigating the drama of randomness, beauty, and destruction that lies at the heart of this work to be experienced as a shared, social quest. This is its most significant asset. It effectively shifts the weight from the well designed and executed entertainment side of the production to its value as dramatic theatre with an artistic, social, and pedagogical mission, in the sense that it treats a socially resonant, thought-provoking theme via innovative and engaging theatre poetics, while encouraging the audience to mine meaningful lessons about the human condition.

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*Whist*, on the other hand, explores the changes in audience perception and meaningmaking that accompany the digitization of gamified theatre. A true theatre-art installation-digital game hybrid, *Whist* pushes the boundaries of theatre poetics forward, as Rebecca Gordon (2017) grants, at the same time as it invites audiences to participate in the transformation of prevalent notions of what constitutes interactive theatre. It orchestrates this transformation by setting Virtual Reality-headset-donning audience members off “on a journey into a Freudian world of unfolding dreams” (Gordon 2017). Which dream the audience member experiences depends on how they play a game that involves ocular and kinesthetic interaction with sculptures planted in the performance space. Targeting specific spots on the sculptures, while engaged in digital gameplay powered by the VR technology, visually unlocks dreams which the audience member navigates and is free to explore, while also navigating the physical space (i.e. moving from one sculpture to the next). How they will experience the dream, journey through the dreamworld, and interact with the drama also depends on where they choose to focus their attention while in the dramatic context around which the dream revolves. Their personal response to the experience in social terms issues in a brief psychological profile received at the end of the show (Gordon 2017). Perhaps the most important affordances of a work like *Whist* are not those that concern how it changes the terms and stakes of entertainment and art, but those that concern what audiences learn about the possibilities of entertainment and art, and about themselves as they take ownership of their experience of both.

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The question of ownership of meaningful experiences involving digital games and theatre, and the learning that people gain as a result lie at the center of many applied theatre practices developed in the past decades in the field of theatre in education. Numerous educational programs and implemented research projects have enlisted digital games to serve diverse educational purposes. Some interventions aim at promoting learning about theatre and drama, and others at promoting learning through theatre and drama about other subjects (Anderson, Cameron, and Carroll 2009). The well-known, applied theatre and theatre-in-education methodology of Process Drama has proven to be markedly compatible with digital games, which it first attracted in its orbit in the mid-aughts. In a 2015 article, Joanne O'Mara expounds on the benefits to be reaped from the marriage of Process Drama to digital games in terms of literacies acquisition: acquisition of

functional, critical, and creative skills pertaining to language use and beyond. O'Mara draws on a project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) to, first, deliver a learner-centered, highly participatory model in which the strategies of Process Drama are integrated with the text- and action-related properties and uses of digital games; and second, to prove that application of the model enhances literacy outcomes for students. Apparently, the combined affordances of Process Drama and digital games allow for the development of socioculturally resonant texts in-action, with the learners as active co-creators, which can revolutionize practices of literacy education and training in the arts.

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Around the same time, and as if informed by ARC's and O'Hara's research, Pierrepont School in Connecticut gave a fresh spin to classics education by staging classic texts on digital game platforms like *Halo*. Theatre director and drama educator Eddie Kim and his middle and high school students formed the EK Theater company, which specializes in developing digital theatre pieces that blend classical literature with epic and devised theatre, Bunraku puppetry, and MMORPGs. As Paul Darvasi (2016) writes in his cover piece of their innovative work, in a "typical" EK Theater production, live performers (students) "narrate dialogue from classic works to scenes of video games as avatars move through the action," while "[t]he director decides which game scene will project on the main screen." During the performance, the action takes place on the large screen while the "[d]igital puppeteers, voice actors, and technicians sit below the screen in a highly visible row of computer terminals and game consoles, speaking lines, moving characters and managing the sounds and transitions" (Darvasi 2016). This is not the only instance of gamified digital theatre used to serve educational purposes out there. But, to our knowledge, it is the first to experientially engage students in the production of original classics-based, digital driven applied theatre projects that contribute not only to a radical retooling of classics education, but also to a daring repurposing of classics reception more generally, much needed in today's "expansive media environment" (Darvasi). Although students of a young age, the "digital natives" of our societies (Prensky), may be the primary beneficiaries of an educational praxis that taps into their entertainment/media interests to respond more effectively to their educational needs, "digital immigrants" too can profit greatly from educational practices that integrate "the benign and empowering uses of [digital] technologies" with the inherently pro-social medium of theatre.

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Along the tracks of a similar rationale but placing emphasis on how digital games can be utilized to stave off the risk of alienating demographics accustomed to digital games as an interactive form of entertainment and socializing, Greg Foster (2017) advocates the development of a "theatre for gamers." There is notable value in how Foster justifies and showcases via his practice-as-research project "how game design, in terms of its concepts, theories, technologies and notions of play, [can] to the design of live performance and engage the new game playing audience within contemporary society" (iv). Although the specifics of Foster's proposition lie beyond our scope, it is worth noting the pillars of his "theatre for gamers" for what they reveal about "reequipped" contemporary rehearsals of social change. With (1) the focus of activity centered on audience members repositioned into the roles of players, (2) theatre practitioners recast as facilitators, (3) distributed authority and authorship of the theatrical event, and (4) the replacement of storylines with generative story-worlds, the "theatre for gamers" earns a place in the long genealogy of theatre as a field and vehicle of social action. Yet, the digital thread running through it means that the social action toward which it is oriented can be energized in a most timely fashion. Indeed, it can be powered by the four modes that social researchers Nicole Mirra, Ernest Morrell, and Danielle Filipiak (2018) consider crucial for contemporary people to be able to interrogate and transform the social and material conditions of their communities. These are: critical digital consumption, critical digital production, critical digital distribution, and critical digital innovation. This, we believe, can potentially hold for all kinds of gamified digital theatre; an encouraging, and much anticipated, prospect.