A Practical Dramaturgy for Immersive Practitioners

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DEDICATION

Dramaturgy is not a service; it is a collaboration. This thesis is dedicated to all the immersive practitioners who dare experiment and pioneer new stories focused on inclusivity and sharing ideas. You have shown me how we really can transform each other through thoughtful, fantastical experiences. May we all continue to dream up imaginative worlds, together.

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ABSTRACT

Immersive theatre is a new, rapidly expanding field of practice, theory, and audience experience. Due to its relative novelty as an experiential artform as well as its inherently interdisciplinary nature, immersive theatre is fraught with conceptual confusion and practical concerns that pose a steep challenge for scholarly discourse and artistic pursuit. Therefore, this thesis serves as a practical dramaturgy for immersive creators and scholars, establishing a common theoretical ground and addressing three primary issues for the genre: audience positioning, blurred boundaries, and framings of consent. Firstly, I explore problems with existing immersive audience ontologies which leads me to posit my own, the "role-to-player," that better accounts for the many planes of audience engagement across the genre. Secondly, I reveal how immersive theatre boundaries are inherently broken and breakable, offering careful design and game studies as a solution for controlling risk-taking audiences. Finally, I underscore the importance of consent in the immersive environment, reframing it as a tool that aligns and expands immersive capacity—something to embrace and better integrate rather than an obstacle to fear and ignore.

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INTRODUCTION

You pass the threshold into a dim parlour reminiscent of a mystical world. The walls are a deep navy speckled with stars, the antique furniture has the faded glory of bygone eras, and myriad birdcages stuffed with oddities and curios dangle from the ceiling. Behind a desk, a medium watches and waits, judging those who enter with a knowing look and a playful grin. You, among others, have been invited to a séance to contact not just any spirit, but the late magician Harry Houdini. Over the next couple of hours, you and your team will be immersed into an uncanny tale of deception, the afterlife, and the supernatural. You are not merely a spectator to these events—you are pivotal to their resolution.

The experience above is not mere fantasy—it is real and accessible, part of a tidal wave of new entertainment. The rise of action-packed escape rooms, intricate haunted houses, mind-bending Virtual Reality (VR), enchanting and environmental theme park universes, hands-on museum exhibits, and immersive theatre has been labeled as 'the experience industry.' [1] More traditional media such as literature, film, proscenium theatre, and video games have certainly transported us into imaginary worlds. These forms, however, offer only limited bodily and sensory engagement. In contrast, the rising 'experience industry' blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, crafting experiential worlds focused on audience interactivity and immersiveness. While this evolution of form may seem sudden, the push for more interactive entertainment has been occurring for decades now.

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[1] See page 5 of Adam Alston's *Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre*. A large swathe of this essay is devoted to situating immersive theatre within the rising experience industry.

That being said, 'immersive theatre' is a relatively new term to the public lexicon and, despite its popularization throughout the UK and international art circles over the past decade or two, much of the US has never encountered it before[2]. Recently, I was struck by how many of my close friends and family members confessed they did not understand what immersive theatre was. Thus, many who attend the immersive theatre production I described earlier, *The Man from Beyond* by Strange Bird Immersive, have no idea what to expect nor how different it is from more traditional theatre forms.

The novelty of immersive theatre compelled my initial research. I found the genre combined aspects of events and media that inspired my imagination over the years: the fantastical and explorable worlds of video games I played; the narrative flow of an experience at the International Spy Museum in D.C. in which I completed challenges within an action-packed story; the interactivity and design of escape rooms I enjoyed as a customer and facilitated as a game master; the embodied, heightened self-awareness when moving through haunted houses; the strange sensations of presence in VR; and many more. Immersive theatre is interactive, allows decision-making, connects one with bodily sensation, and relays intricate stories through more than dialogue. This is not to say that previous theatrical forms have not done these things; rather, it is to assert the increased capacity of immersive theatre to achieve these—the tools are more plentiful.

In the UK, dramatic distinctions between immersive theatre and more traditional theatre forms already have precipitated extensive discourse. However, given the regional and cultural limitations of that knowledge along with rapid change in the genre and

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[2] Though there is not an official study for this, the lack of awareness in the US public is common knowledge among immersive theatre practitioners. Furthermore, expansive immersive theatre scenes are currently confined to large metropolitan areas. The online informative hub for immersive events *No Proscenium* demonstrates this—the vast majority of productions take place in the biggest US cities.

experience industry, it is necessary to review what constitutes immersive theatre and its current definitions. There are not many domestic locales where immersive theatre has started to take root. The 'Now Playing' section of No Proscenium, a popular website dedicated to "everything immersive," features the latest news on immersive productions across five geographic areas: Los Angeles, New York City, San Francisco Bay Area, the Midwest, and the rest of North America.[3] This organizational parsing indicates immersive theatre companies have a significantly dense population in only three US metropolitan areas—other cities being grouped under large regional chunks. This is because there are problems that arise in trying to put an immersive production in motion.

Firstly, it is hard to know exactly what practitioners are trying to cultivate in audiences— 'immersion' is an abstract, highly debated concept. Further complicating matters is conflation with other phenomena (such as 'presence' and 'flow') and a lack of models to visualize the production aspects that play into immersion, especially in immersive theatrical context. Immersion has an extensive, interdisciplinary theoretical field and history that are dense and contradictory at times, which makes the concept inherently difficult to navigate and approach for newcomers.

Secondly, immersive theatre has received a good deal of scholarly attention, but those outside the UK have been less unlikely to encounter it. Resources on contemporary issues, theory, and practice are not easily accessible. New immersive artists and scholars in the U.S. have a steep challenge to acquaint themselves with the complexities of approaches to this amorphous genre.

Lastly, immersive theatre practice is confusing in itself. Not only does immersive

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[3] See https://noproscenium.com/regional/home

theatre encompass many forms, it needs audience facilitation to maintain immersion. There are no across-the-board methodologies for positioning audiences, controlling unstable boundaries and risk, and providing ethical, consensual environments.

I address these theoretical and practical issues below. To begin, I walk through a survey of scholarship on immersion and adapt models to use in immersive practice. A solid, foundational understanding of immersion and its related concepts is needed to contextualize the inherent goal of 'immersive' theatre. However, scholarship confuses and disagrees on the usage of these concepts, as will be shown. So, I also disentangle immersion from other concepts and argue in favor of recent scholarship that clarifies and distinguishes these phenomena. I end this survey by adapting the models of such recent scholarship to provide a conceptual foothold for immersion (as well as presence) and standardized tools for practitioners that measure and classify phenomena.

Following that, I conduct a review of immersive theatre scholarship and its current overarching themes. Immersive theatre is itself composed of many varying, niche approaches. Rather than try to encapsulate immersive theatre in a reductive or vague definition, I instead explore primary texts that best demonstrate the expansive boundaries of the genre. Since there exist many creative theories around immersive work, I group scholarship into themes to easily represent the current standing of this diverse theoretical field. Particularly, I recognize three predominant concerns in contemporary immersive theatre theory and practice: conceptualizing audiences and their experiences, designing boundaries that control audience behavior while still allowing greater agency, and ensuring productions are ethical rather than exploitative.

I conclude by outlining solutions I will propose in the ensuing chapters as a

practical dramaturgy for immersive theatre. I also explain why Strange Bird Immersive's

The Man from Beyond will be a continual reference throughout my argumentation, as

well as the place gaming studies has in this work and should have in any discussion of

immersion.

Immersion: Its History, Conceptual Challenges, And Application

In order to facilitate the immersive theatrical state, we must have an idea of what

it is. This is a subject fraught with disagreement. Understanding immersion first requires

knowledge of its roots and how it became a widely used concept. Fortunately, it is

generally accepted that a single text became most widely-cited, foundational concept of

immersion and propelled game studies to prominence and heated debate: Janet H.

Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Klich, 223;

McMahan, 68; Calleja, 18; Nilsson et al., 110). In her 1997 book, Murray theorized about

the textual and narrative experiences that developing digital technologies would enable.

She cultivated an interest in how narratives find new mediums over time: as a Harvard

English Literature Ph.D. student, she studied the evolution of the novel; as a former

I.B.M. programmer, she always kept tabs on developing computing technologies; and as

a professor at M.I.T. and later Georgia Tech, she played into engineering-centric

environments to develop new methods of storytelling (Margini). In short, she is one of

the pioneers of digital storytelling. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* combines the ideas of

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—a story for the stage once considered less legitimate in form[4] that

morphed into a literary masterpiece, and *Star Trek*'s holodeck—a virtual environment

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[4] In making a point about how storytelling mediums are considered inferior to others, Murray provides
perspective by referencing how Shakespeare and Jane Austen "were once considered to be working in less
legitimate formats than those used by Aeschylus and Homer" (345).

that is both a simulator and storytelling device. The book thus treats the evolving digital landscape of the turn of the millennium (then called 'cyberspace') as the newest site and medium for narratives.

It was hugely controversial. In the introduction to the 2016 Updated Edition, Murray discusses how her book, as one of the first media criticisms to take video games as serious cultural and aesthetic objects, was assailed by print-loyalists and postmodernists. Print-loyalists were bent on upholding the superiority of text and words on physical pages rather than digital screens. Postmodernists, preoccupied with hailing the hypertext as the future of narrative, were upset that Murray paid little attention to them (Murray, x-xii).[5] While *Holodeck* was positively received by the new field of game studies, it sparked the notorious debate between narratologists and ludologists; those who wanted to study games as narrative experiences, and those who wanted them to be studied as distinct abstract systems (Margini).[6] While stronger narrative foci in gaming have emerged since *Holodeck*, some scholars take this change too far, like Homan and Homan who conclude that "narrative in video games has become all-important" (175). This is fallacious because plenty of current games prioritize focus on gameplay.[7] The ultimate takeaway regarding Murray's work is that purist ludologists and narratologists

[5] Murray uses the introduction to this new edition to compose a retrospective historical account of how her text was received by scholars and how she inadvertently ended up at the center of the narratology versus ludology debate.

[6] The specifics of this debate are unnecessary here because it was predicated on the entirely different video game landscape of the late 1990s/early 2000s. The gaming landscape has since dramatically evolved to have more narrative-driven experiences or at least more complex narrative elements to inform and contextualize gameplay (for further background, see Appendix—A Brief History of Narratives in Video Games).

[7] Examples include online multiplayer games like *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, and *League of Legends*. In addition, there has been a new sub-genre of single player games where skill in combat is prioritized, backstory is often hidden, and players are expected to "git gud": *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, *Bloodbourne*, & the *Dark Souls* trilogy. Lastly, the mobile gaming market is full of arcade-style games for quick, on-the-go gameplay.

were wrong: we have ended up in a future where video games *can* provide new and

fascinating methods of storytelling—just as Murray predicted. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is

not only influential in the controversy it produced, but it is also considered a foundational

text.

Murray made strong use of the idea of immersion, basing an entire chapter around

it as a way of describing the multi-sensory experience digital storytelling may be able to

offer (123-153). She introduces immersion through the metaphor of water:

> *Immersion* is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being
> submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive
> experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation
> of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from
> air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. We enjoy
> the movement out of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that comes from
> being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within
> it. (124)

Other conceptions of immersion have since emerged, but we must recognize that

immersion as "being or feeling surrounded by something" was the original consensus of

scholars (Nilsson et al. 110). This warrants clarification regarding whether immersion

was meant to be psychological or physical. Though she uses the term 'psychologically

immersive,' immersion involves physical sensation *and* psychological perception; stimuli

across multiple senses result in perceptual envelopment. Immersion is somewhere in-

between: sensation and perception work together.

It is also worth noting Murray thought many types of storytelling were compatible

with virtual worlds, including theatre. She explicitly used theatrical metaphors within her

book:

> We are all gradually becoming part of a world-wide repertory company, available
> to assume roles in ever more complex participatory stories. Little by little we are
> discovering the conventions of participation that will constitute the fourth wall of
> this virtual theatre, the expressive gestures that will deepen and preserve the

enchantment of immersion. (153)

> In trying to imagine Hamlet on the holodeck, then, I am not asking if it is possible to translate a particular Shakespeare play into another format. I am asking if we can hope to capture in cyberdrama something as true to the human condition, and as beautifully expressed, as the life that Shakespeare captured on the Elizabethan stage. (346)

While immersive theatre would not be officially coined as a term until the early- to mid-2000s, reflecting on this early marriage of theatre, gaming, and immersion expands our ideas of what *outside* the performing world converged to create immersive theatre. Her theatrical metaphors poignantly predict the future of immersive theatre and virtual worlds.

There are various models of immersion that expand the concept beyond Murray's original thesis. Most scholars discussing immersion are, knowingly or not, building upon Murray's groundwork. One that directly builds off Murray is Marie Laure Ryan's model of narrative immersion in her essay *From Narrative Games to Playable Stories*. Ryan, realizing the potential of Murray's ideas, explored interactive narrative forms theorizing on the futuristic ones Murray predicts and the limited hypertexts of the time (45). Drawing on video games, Ryan derives four kinds of narrative immersion in interactive environments: spatial, temporal, emotional, and epistemic. Spatial immersion is the kinetic experience of moving through space as well as emotional reaction or attachment to the virtual environment one may feel via a "sense of place." Epistemic immersion is simply described as "the desire to know," relating most closely to mystery stories and quests in which players gather information over time. Temporal immersion consists of the narrative effects of curiosity, surprise, and suspense. Players are motivated through curiosity to make discoveries, which often lead to surprise; however, suspense is less

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direct since it requires active management of player uncertainty.[8] Finally, emotional

immersion derives from the emotional, interpersonal relations between the player and

other characters (54-57). Ryan indicates the difficulty of attaining emotional immersion

since computer-controlled characters are rarely functionally helpful to players as well as

interesting and empathetic (56). This point is now outdated. In the decade since this essay

was published (2009), there has been an explosion in narrative-driven video games where

characters are integral to gameplay and generate emotional affect.[9] Furthermore, some

multiplayer narrative experiences have created emotional connections between players

rather than competition.[10] Despite the model's limitations, Ryan provides unique insights

about how narratives are integrated with interactivity to produce immersive experiences.

Ryan's model, though, is for *narrative* immersion and it should not be conflated

with other means of immersion. While her model addresses interactivity within digital

environments and each branch is not necessarily confined to narrative axes, her

framework is based in narrativity to complement ludic immersion—immersion through

challenge and gameness (54). This is certainly helpful for immersive theatre since we are

often narrative driven in our practice[11]; however, it does not fully represent all that

immersion can be. An ideal framework needs to fully incorporate ludic immersion. Not

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[8] Ryan clarifies that temporal immersion's suspense is concerned with the events of the future rather than epistemic immersion's focus on uncovering what happened in the past. (55)

[9] Examples would be the *Dragon Age*, *Uncharted*, and *Final Fantasy* series, as well as games within the newer, choice-centric interactive narrative genre, like *Until Dawn*, *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: Two Souls*, *Detroit: Become Human*.

[10] *Journey*, for example, shattered boundaries by having players pop in and out of each other's playthroughs, help each other progress, and wordlessly communicate through sing-song tones, allowing for players to interact across the globe and craft touching, ephemeral moments in an adventure that acts as a microcosm of the phases of life.

[11] Rose Biggin actually builds on an earlier version of this model to analyze the immersive experiences of Punchdrunk, a renowned immersive theatre company that creates large-scale works which are often cited as standards for the genre (114-116).

only does immersion largely derive from game studies, but immersive theatre often incorporates games or has gameness within it, as will be shown later.

Gordon Calleja attempts to address the many forms of immersion and other concerns via his Player Incorporation Model (PIM). First and foremost, Calleja's idea of 'incorporation'—the basis of his model—is meant to replace immersion as a concept, and we need to understand why. One issue in scholarship about immersion is that various disciplines and scholars within them approach immersion differently without explicitly stating how they conceive of it. This is also the case with the idea of 'presence,' another foundational concept that often accompanies or conflates with immersion in discourse. 'Presence' is derived from 'telepresence,' a term coined by cognitive scientist Martin Minsky in 1980 to describe how the remote operation of machinery can engender a feeling of inhabiting that distant space. Telepresence became a popular concept within the newer fields of robotics and virtual reality. Divergent meanings of the term started in 1992 with the launch of the journal *Presence*, with some scholars (like Thomas Sheridan) separating telepresence as operation from virtual presence in digital environments and others using the term interchangeably. Soon, telepresence was shortened to presence, and various scholars began attributing different terminological and ontological meanings to the term. Eventually, presence became inconsistent in its application along with immersion, and the two terms also became inconsistent in relation to how they were used together (Calleja, 18-21). Therefore, Calleja is trying to eliminate discrepancies, reveal problematic assumptions, and stabilize discussions of immersion/presence by having us adopt 'incorporation,' which still accounts for the myriad phenomena attributed to immersion/presence thus far (32-34).

He makes his model multi-dimensional, with each dimension affecting the perception of another while also being composed of macro and micro temporal phases (long-term and outside motivations/engagement versus moment-by-moment involvement in gameplay). Calleja illustrates that categorical aspects of immersive experience cannot be totally separated from each other as well as that players are affected by games within *and* outside of gameplay (37-41). The PIM is composed of 6 dimensions. Briefly, they are as follows (see pgs. 43-44):

1. Kinesthetic Involvement: anything that relates to movement or control in games, including learning and internalizing these actions.

2. Spatial Involvement: those spatial qualities having to do with virtual environments, from control, navigation, and exploration to feelings of inhabiting spaces.

3. Shared Involvement: all aspects relating to being or interacting with other agents in the game, whether human-controlled or computer-controlled.

4. Narrative Involvement: any engagement with the scripted narrative or narrative deriving from players' interactions in the game world.

5. Affective Involvement: the qualities of games and experience that evoke emotion, from pre-designed moments of affect to how players respond to in-game events.

6. Ludic Involvement: engagement with choices and the repercussions of those choices within the game, whether goal-oriented or done impulsively.

His dimensions offer insights into aspects of immersion we might not have otherwise considered, assisting practitioners in grasping many facets of engagement that facilitate the immersive state.

Calleja concludes with his definition of incorporation. He argues immersion and

presence are founded on exclusionary logics that do not account for consciousness as an

"internally generated construct based on the organization of external stimuli according to

existing experiential gestalts" (169)—a critique that immersion and presence

problematically assume individuals are somehow able to completely exclude the external

world (167). This leads him to incorporation, a metaphor for virtual environment

habitation that operates on a double axis: players assimilate the virtual into their

consciousness while simultaneously being embodied into the virtual via avatars (169). He

gives the following definition:

> We can thus conceive incorporation as *the absorption of a virtual environment
> into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the
> systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented
> by the avatar.* […] It is a synthesis of movement (*kinesthetic involvement*) within
> a habitable domain (*spatial involvement*) along with other agents (*shared
> involvement*), personal and designed narratives (*narrative involvement*), aesthetic
> effects (*affective involvement*), and the various rules and goals of the game itself
> (*ludic involvement*). (emphasis original, 169-170)

Clearly, this is a far more *involved* conception of immersion, one that better accounts for

the complexity of the experiential phenomenon. The PIM is an excellent framework for

dissecting games, and it can easily be translated and applied to immersive theatre

practice. There is, however, reason not to abandon immersion and presence in favor of

incorporation.

Robert Farrow and Ioanna Iscovides take issue with Calleja's model, particularly

because it frames incorporation as involving player embodiment in the virtual world

(Calleja 169):

> "Calleja's PIM does not so much solve the problem of digital embodiment, but
> suspends judgment on the problem. The focus of the model is instead on
> distinguishing a number of discrete elements of player involvement (kinesthetic,
> spatial, shared, affective, narrative, ludic) and perhaps understanding embodiment

as a phenomenon which might arise from some combination of these depending on the game (Calleja 2011:43-45). This schema is helpful in providing a robust analytic framework with which to understand and describe the experience of gameplay, but does little to show the ways in which such experiences relate to an alternative sense of embodiment or an assimilated environment. (226)

This critique is correct insofar as Calleja does not support how players are incorporated through avatars in digital environments—how players feel embodied within games. His six dimensions may contribute to the *sense* of virtual embodiment, but it is contentious that players are somehow embodied within these games. Farrow and Iscovides agree with Calleja's assessment of the philosophical misconceptions surrounding the usage of 'immersion' and 'presence,' but they disagree with his model because they do not believe players can willingly and transcendentally extend their consciousnesses (226-229). This is a deal-breaker since they argue understanding digital embodiment is integral to furthering knowledge of what immersion is.

Farrow and Iscovides herald Calleja and others for addressing the ambiguity of immersion and presence, yet they fail to define what these terms mean. This could be an oversight since the article is primarily a proposal for the necessity of digital embodiment in defining immersion. In the section "Engagement, Immersion, Embodiment," Farrow and Iscovides assume a player's greater sense of embodiment within the virtual environment lends to a more immersive experience[12] (223). This is problematic since they frame explorations of engagement, immersion, and presence as the "language of

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[12] This is illustrated in the close of the section: "There is a general consensus among designers that immersion is achieved through fostering a sense of embodiment. But if embodiment is the right way to conceive (or frame) being 'in-the-game' then how might this be promoted? […] If a sense of immersive 'being' in a game is rather something that can be promoted by the convincingness of our experience of a digital world, what would be characteristic of such experiences?" (224). It is also worth noting the consensus among designers they reference is not supported—all their sources are scholarly.

embodiment" (225).[13] Thus, citations meant to support their belief that gaming research is focused on embodiment are actually inadvertent, authored impositions assuming those sources are discussing embodiment in the first place. Engagement, immersion, and presence are conflated to represent vague, confused gesticulations toward embodiment. By not defining or delineating engagement, immersion, and presence as separate phenomena, Farrow and Iscovides limit perceptions of conceptual nuances existing amongst scholarly confusion in order to construct a false commonality of embodiment in immersive gaming scholarship. This flattens the discourse and is self-serving to the authors.

This flattening, in tandem with their subsequent critique of Calleja, is a means of suggesting and introducing the efficacy of phenomenological approaches to digital embodiment. This is another issue since the authors use phenomenology to elucidate the idiosyncrasies of primordial versus digital embodiment to discredit the ideal of total immersion— an ideal that they never define in their work. The authors use these phenomenological distinctions between real and virtual worlds to simultaneously limit the immersivity of digital embodiment while proposing how to better approximate digital embodiment to increase immersivity (227-231). They do make useful and relevant points in demonstrating human consciousness is not transcendental but embodied, and embodied consciousness cannot be extended into digital bodies (226-229). These do not suffice as counterpoints to immersive theory. A range of immersive concepts was flattened to 'the language of embodiment'—the authors project phenomenological understandings onto

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[13] The first sentence of the following section, used to sum up their argument so far, is "We have argued that the language of embodiment is often used in unclear or inconsistent ways in gaming research literature" (225).

this flawed idea:

> For a convincing and immersive experience, one should be more or less unaware of the way in which it is being mediated. (229)

> A more immersive or convincing sense of embodiment within digital worlds may thus depend on experiencing a convincing, meaningful world within which the player has an elevated sense of responsibility. (231)

> Designers should focus more on narratives, consequences, and shared interactions if they want to create gameplay experiences that are thoroughly engaging and rewarding. (231-232)

In lumping approaches to immersion, presence, and engagement together, Farrow and Iscovides have confused themselves. They have ended up in a catch-22 between limiting immersion (by indicating the distance between the real and virtual) and advocating for how to increase it (by suggesting methods of improving engagement). By approaching immersion as a conglomerated concept that aspires toward replicating embodiment in digital worlds, they have attempted to resolve scholarly confusion; however, this merely makes immersion a nebulous phenomenon absent of nuance. They end up calling for phenomenology to aid in describing immersive experiences and collecting data on physiological and psychological immersion. This suggests existing scholarship is inherently flawed. The authors are unable to derive conclusions about immersion and digital embodiment because they have problematized and conflated all existing argumentation, compelling them to argue more evidence is needed. The problem they point out and try to solve is largely their own construction. Without realizing it, they force suspension of their own judgment on digital embodiment as they level that critique at others.

Unlike Farrow and Iscovides, we must thoroughly consider the many theories of immersion and make sense of how 'presence,' 'immersion,' and other terms are similar

and/or distinct; we do not need to throw everything out the window. Many studies have attempted to pinpoint what induces the cognitive, embodied states we associate with immersive experiences. These studies present myriad methods of how to accomplish immersion or presence. While confusion around these concepts certainly exists, there are two ways of better understanding these states to facilitate them in our practice and in audiences: 1) analyzing surveys of scholarship to ascertain what qualities seem to distinguish these concepts[14] and 2) adopting a multi-dimensional approach that addresses the complexity of these states. Doing so is necessary before diving into topics of immersive theatre because we cannot share understandings of what audiences are experiencing or what the artform aims to do with such confusion en masse.

Using Surveys of Scholarship to Distinguish Immersion, Flow, and Presence

Rose Biggin crafts both a thorough interdisciplinary survey of immersion and other states as well as a multi-dimensional approach to immersive experience in her 2017 book, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience, Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk*. Its focus is on immersive theatre; thus, the concepts are directly applicable to our practice. Despite its approaches and ideas being rooted in Punchdrunk's particular methods, productions, and phenomena, Biggin introduces novel concepts that realize a multi-faceted grasp of immersion.

One intriguing aspect of Biggin's work is how she defines presence and immersion. With presence, she departs from prior definitions limiting it to the digital environment. Biggin instead positions presence as a manifesting awareness of one's own

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[14] As in, what is the consensus on each concept? What makes these states different from or related to each other?

corporeality in relation to others. Her take is unique in situating performers and

performance spaces as essential to this feeling:

> The spectator and performer share the same space; presence is merely the act of being present for the gaze of another. *Strong* presence in this context describes what this book takes to be a key aspect of immersive experience: strong presence is "the actor's ability to occupy and command space and to attract the spectators' undivided attention. […] The spectators sense that the actor is present in an unusually intense way, granting them, in turn, the intense sensation of themselves as present. To them, *presence occurs as an intense experience of presentness*" (Fischer-Lichte in Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks 2012: 108–109; my emphasis). *Presence* here begins to overlap with *stage presence*, and certainly, hidden moments of intimacy with a highly charismatic performer might employ this as a source of power to create immersive experience. (23)

While this is useful for recognizing how interactions with performers and spatial

awareness of performative spaces generate 'strong' embodied affect in audiences,

presence here relies upon "the gaze of another." This is not suitable for immersive

experiences where one is physically alone, such as digital games or a moment of isolation

in an immersive theatre production. The implication with this definition is one *only* feels

present in relation to others, which is disputable.

Biggin does, however, indicate she is primarily focused on immersive experience

rather than presence (22), and this is where she really breaks some ground. For Biggin,

immersion and presence are closely related concepts (23), yet immersion is much more

"gradual, fleeting and connected to more cognitive/emotional responses," generating a

feeling of 'being there' (44) in which the intensity and efficacy are contingent on

subjective engrossment (45). In other words:

> Immersive experience is not a felt/not-felt binary, but exists as a series of graded states. It is a necessarily temporary state that makers can do their best to construct/allow for in advance but can never guarantee. Its intensity in the performance moment is linked to its temporary nature, and also key is the idea of barriers to immersion and a spectator's being able to differentiate between the relevance of various distractions. (47)

Biggin's specific idea of what constitutes immersion may not be that clear; however, the

value in her definition lies in the assertion that it is not a binary but a series of graded

states, and that there are barriers to immersion that ought to be lowered to maximize the

potential of audiences experiencing it intensely. Conceptualizing immersion as a fluid

phenomenon allows greater possibilities for how it can be induced. Untethering

immersion from felt/non-felt binaries shifts our focus to multiple dimensions that all have

potential to lend themselves to audience experience (such as the ones Calleja laid out

above). This approach extends immersion across the various forms of interaction/play

and across mediums (live theatre and digital technology).

　　Biggin spends her book crafting her own dimensions of immersion: interactivity,

narrative, and environment. Interactivity encompasses imaginative, cognitive, sensory,

physical, and cultural modes of participation (74). The narrative dimension deals with

how audiences interact with the storyworld (diegetic space) and plot, creating their own

discourse and shifting between narrative states (139-142; 153). Finally, environment

refers to the created theatrical world and awareness that it is fictional space separate from

reality (201). Biggin concludes:

> Interactivity, narrative and environment all have the potential to create, influence
> or intensify immersive experience. They also have the potential to become
> barriers to immersion if they seem to be at odds with other aspects of the work or
> do not feel themselves, for whatever reason in the moment of performance, to be
> properly understood. A piece of theatre may choose to hold any of these aspects
> in major. Or they might all be given equal weight. When separate elements
> become greater than the sum of their parts the effect can be powerful, *and it can
> be difficult (in retrospect as well as in the heat of the moment) to consider
> precisely what is going on when someone is "immersed," by the very nature of
> the experience*. Considering how various aspects of a production might, or might
> not, contribute to a quality of immersive experience allows the phenomenon to be
> explored in greater detail. (emphasis added, 207)

This reveals an intentional vagueness in how she defines immersion and why she prefers

the phrase 'immersive experience.' Biggin's idea about immersion's graded states and dependency on multiple variables renders the concept somewhat unstable, and it seems from the quote above (where I have emphasized the text) that she is not sure how to configure it. If we are to understand the state immersive theatre aims to facilitate, we need a more solid definition.

Another noteworthy scholar in the discipline who has reframed immersion and presence is Josephine Machon. In her definitive book *Immersive Theatres*, Machon also develops these concepts out of a detailed, interdisciplinary literature review. She particularly theorizes how these phenomena engender inhabited sensory experiences of performing and perceiving bodies that interact with each other in the contexts of the space and their lived histories. Within immersive theatre, Machon believes presence is better thought of as *praesence*, a return to the etymological roots of the word to evoke the feeling of human sensory presentness, a state of 'being at hand' and 'before the senses.' This includes the live(d) nature of experience wherein live performance and lived histories exchange, informing perception (43-44). While her definition of presence is more specific, it is also grounded in practice. Given presence emerged outside of theatre scholarship and other disciplines use presence to describe phenomena outside of theatrical experience, we must take this definition with a grain of salt. Perhaps there are different types or states of presence—this will be explored in psychological reviews below.

Regarding immersion, Machon argues live(d) *praesent* experience of bodies inhabiting and responding to imaginative worlds is a key aspect of immersion and the defining feature of immersive theatre (67-68). Yet she views immersion complexly,

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adapting concepts from Calleja's *In-game* to create 3 categories of immersion in immersive theatre: 1) immersion as absorption, as in total engagement in an activity; 2) immersion as transportation, when audiences are imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in an otherworldly-world; and 3) total immersion, which involves the two previous forms plus when audiences are made aware of their own *praesence* (62-63). Again, this perspective is limited to immersive theatre theory and practice. Furthermore, as Farrow and Iscovides have demonstrated (albeit imperfectly), the concept of total immersion has been criticized as an unrealistic ideal. What is more remarkable about Machon's approach is that she conceives of different types of immersion and somewhat echoes Biggin in that 'total immersion' is a graded state that involves the other two forms.

If we conceive immersion as a series of graded states with multiple dimensions, then we should be able to develop a conceptual model that reflects these possibilities in dimensional space. But models often require concrete parameters with diverse, standardized hard data to be useful in representation and cross application. This makes it necessary to evaluate psychological surveys of immersion. The definitions explored thus far have limitations and, frankly, are quite humanistic in their approach—this is a problem since 'immersion' has been used broadly across many academic fields with varying definitions (e.g. the humanities often focus on immersion as subjective experience while scholars in other disciplines explore it as a property of technological systems).[15] Even though the above authors utilized interdisciplinary sources, they formed their understandings based on a select few psychological and gaming studies theories.

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[15] Calleja, Michailidis et al., and Nilsson et al. all demonstrate throughout their respective works the wide discrepancies in approaches to immersion that currently exist across scholarship.

Psychologists have been debating these concepts for a while, and unlike more humanistic approaches, their concepts are more rigorously measured against data. These surveys will lay out the rest of the confusion in discussing immersion ('flow' contributes to many contemporary misunderstandings), demonstrate the flaws inherent in the above theories, and finally offer a means of disentangling these concepts.

Another concept thrown around in relation to immersion is psychological 'flow'.[16] The two are often blended.[17] Briefly, flow is a concept popularized by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1990s to describe the optimal performance of those mentally absorbed in a challenging activity (Biggin 28). In these cases, challenges were enjoyable because a person's skill level matched the challenge given to them—entertainment was in doing the task itself. Central to an experience of flow was constant feedback and clear, attainable goals (29). An optimal experience had to meet stringent requirements to be considered flow:

1. there are clear goals every step of the way

2. there is immediate feedback for one's actions

3. there is a balance between challenge and skills

4. action and awareness are merged

5. distractions are excluded from consciousness

6. there is no worry of failure

7. self-consciousness disappears

8. the sense of time becomes distorted

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[16] Biggin also integrates flow in her book, describing it as one way in which immersive experience manifests (37).
[17] The distinctions between flow and presence are generally clearer, though they do perhaps share some similarities that, as has been discussed by scholars (Michailidis et al. 3).

9. the activity becomes autotelic i.e. performed for its own sake

    ((Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 110–3) in Biggin 29)

These requirements have been debated over time—some scholars have held that all 9 should be met, others have suggested they do not need to be achieved simultaneously (Michailidis et al. 2). Like immersion or presence, flow is a controversial a concept without concrete qualities.

Lazaros Michailidis, Emili Balaguer-Ballester, and Xun He composed a brilliant survey of scholarship on the differential qualities of flow, presence, and immersion. In *Flow and Immersion in Video Games: The Aftermath of a Conceptual Challenge*, Michailidis et al. explore contradictions within existing theories of these concepts, exposing vast rifts between scholarly approaches and pervasive academic confusion. Ultimately, they conclude psychological flow and immersion refer to the same phenomenon, and presence, while separate, is part of immersion:

> To conclude, immersion and flow do not appear as conceptually distinct, and their proposed differences are not compelling enough to set immersion apart as a different mental state. Although presence is enveloped in immersion, it appears to be a distinct mental state, even on a neural level. The remaining dimensions of immersion are very similar, if not identical, to flow's. Thus, we suggest that the terms of flow and immersion can be used interchangeably, until further behavioral and neurophysiological evidence is provided in experimental settings specifically designed for disentangling the two states. (5)

While the conclusion is bound to be controversial, this survey is the most recent, comprehensive parsing of the field on these concepts (2018), citing 117 sources. Simply, despite flow having strict qualification criteria and supposedly occurring during tasks individuals were skilled at, there is no hard qualitative or quantitative evidence suggesting flow is distinct from immersion.

As a clarification, it is not the goal of Michailidis et al. to propose new definitions

of presence, immersion, and flow, nor render a final judgment on the matter. Instead, they

review existing definitions and current supporting data to disentangle these phenomena.

The article is influential in demonstrating how scholarship on immersion, presence, and

flow is not as stable as many scholars have thought. If immersion and flow are part of the

same phenomena, or at least cannot be significantly distinguished, then decades of

arguments are moot. This also applies to arguments contending presence equated to/was

interchangeable with immersion or flow. Thus, many sources that Calleja, Biggin, and

Machon built their theories on are fundamentally flawed.

A Three-Dimensional Model for Immersion

Enter Niels Nilsson, Rolf Nordahl, and Stefania Serafin. Their article *Immersion*

Revisited: A Review of Existing Definitions and Their Relation to Different Theories of

Presence thoroughly surveys current scholarship around immersion and presence, then

organizes general approaches within a comprehensible taxonomy that is subsequently

modeled. This model shows how all the above theories, including other noteworthy ones

in the field, relate to each other. In addition, Nilsson et al. demonstrate common through

lines with a cross-disciplinary viewpoint, recognizing widespread usage and confusion

across academia. They propound four general perspectives on immersion, simplifying

and unifying the immersive theoretical field:

> One of the most prominent differences between existing views of immersion is
> the distinction between immersion as technology and immersion as a subjective
> experience. To use Murray's water metaphor, some believe immersion to be an
> expression of how deeply one is submerged into a body of fluid, while others
> believe it to be the subjective experience of being submerged. More specifically,
> it seems reasonable to distinguish between four general views of immersion: (a)
> immersion as a property of the system used to present the virtual world; (b)
> immersion as a perceptual response to that system; (c) immersion as a response to
> an unfolding narrative, the characters inhabiting the story world, or the depiction

	Table 1. Summary of the Presented Definitions of Immersion.			
Authors	A property of the system	A perceptual response	A response to narratives	A response to challenges
Slater (2003)	**System immersion**: A property of the technology mediating the experience. The higher the fidelity of displays and tracking, the greater the level of immersion.			
Witmer and Singer (1998)		**Immersion:** A feeling of being enveloped by, included in, & interacting with the virtual environment.		
Arsenault (2005)		**Sensory immersion:** A sensation of being enveloped by the multisensory representation of the virtual world delivered via high-fidelity displays.	**Fictional immersion:** The sensation of being mentally absorbed by fictional stories, worlds or characters.	**Systemic immersion:** The mental absorption experienced when facing challenges that match one's capabilities, including the challenges involved when exposed to nonparticipatory media.
McMahan (2003)		**Perceptual immersion:** The sensation of being surrounded by the virtual environment that increases proportionally with the number of modalities provided with artificial stimuli.	**Psychological immersion (immersion on a diegetic level):** The mental absorption experienced during exposure to the world of a game's story.	**Engagement (immersion on a nondiegetic level):** The state of focused attention on the game brought about by the desire for gaining points and/or devising a winning or spectacular strategy.
Adams and Rollings (2006)			**Narrative immersion:** A state of intense and focused attention on the story world & the unfolding events and acceptance of these as real.	**Strategic and tactical immersion:** A state of intense preoccupation with observation, calculation, & planning or with swift responses to obstacles.
Ermi and Mäyrä (2005)		**Sensory immersion:** The feeling of being surrounded by the multisensory representation of virtual worlds delivered through large screens and powerful sounds.	**Imaginative immersion:** The sensation of being mentally absorbed by a game's story, its world, or its characters.	**Challenge-based immersion:** The mental absorption experienced when facing challenges requiring mental or motor skills.
Ryan (2003; 2008)			**Narrative immersion:** A state of intense focus on a narrative; can be divided into 3 subcategories: *immersion* (elicited by a strong sense of place and the joy of exploration), *temporal immersion* (caused by a desire to know what will happen next), and *emotional immersion* (brought about by emotional attachment to characters).	**Ludic immersion:** A state of intense absorption in the task currently being performed.

Figure 1: Table of Immersion Definitions from Nilsson et al. [18]

of the world itself; and (d) immersion as a response to challenges demanding the use of one's intellect or sensorimotor skills. (110)

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[18] (Nilsson et al. 111)

They define these as system immersion, perceptual immersion, narrative immersion, and challenge-based immersion. Nilsson et al. are not discounting existing scholarship; rather, they are teasing out the commonalities of different theories to uncover the various planes immersion operates on. This approach provides concrete elements and a framework that paint a comprehensive portrait of all the manifestations of immersion.

The authors organize each covered definition into a table charted with their 4 types of immersion. While they do not directly review as many authors as some of the surveys above, the other sources I have touched on corroborate this taxonomy as a derivative of the greater discourse. The table also sparks ideas for how we might locate other theories (such as those of Calleja, Biggin, and Machon) within these categories (Figure 1).

Nilsson et al. then propose a taxonomy of three dimensions: system immersion, narrative immersion, and challenge-based immersion. There are two reasons why immersion by perceptual response is not a fourth dimension. Firstly, the authors believe the effects of this immersive kind increase proportionally with system immersion (hence why the two were compared earlier); adding this as another dimension is not significant. Secondly, the authors tie in ideas of perceptual response to a type of presence they discuss later. Thus, with three dimensions, the authors draw a model with each acting as an orthogonal axis (Figure 2).

If immersion is a series of graded states among multiple dimensions, then a model that charts the capacity of immersive experiences in multi-dimensional space simultaneously accounts for the different types engaged and the efficacy/intensity each type facilitates within a particular experience. Nilsson et al. provide such a model; a

method of visualizing, illustrating, and gauging differences in immersion across experiences and mediums. Because of the great flexibility of immersive theatre as an interdisciplinary, amorphous genre, as well as the interdisciplinary uses of immersion that in some way is connected via similar experiential phenomena, this model is a map of the immersive landscape. Certainly, the model condenses immersive dimensions, eradicating some nuance. But this is intended and explicitly stated—the authors have positioned some theories as subcategories of a dimension, arguing concomitant engagement of these subcategories intensify the dimension they belong to (117). This is clearer walking through the meaning of each vertex on the model:
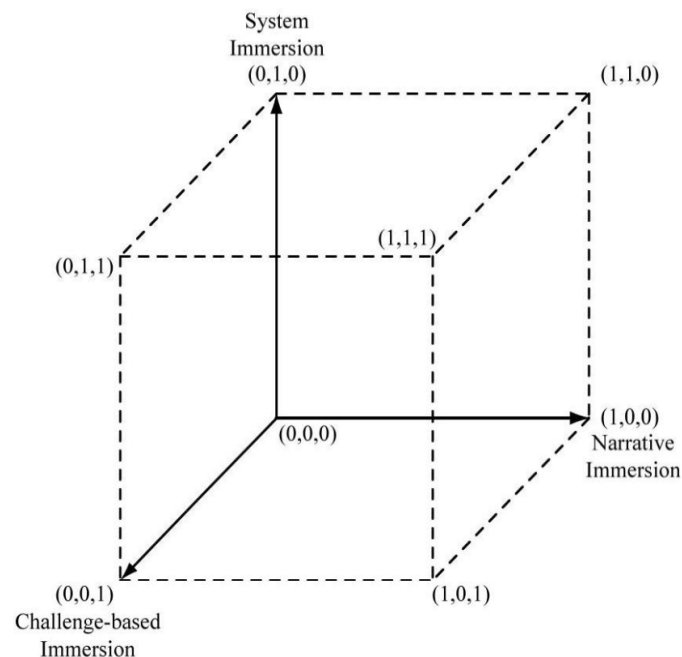
Figure 1. Illustration of the proposed taxonomy of existing conceptualizations of immersion. The three axes represent the extent to which interaction with a system involves system immersion (vertical), narrative immersion (horizontal), and challenge-based immersion (depth). The degree to which each type of immersion is presented is represented on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 represent absence and 1 represents the highest possible level of immersion.

Figure 2: Three-dimensional Diagram of Immersion from Nilsson et al. [19]

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[19] (Nilsson et al. 118)

Nilsson et al. provide the following descriptions of each extremity:

- The origin 0,0,0 corresponds to an unmediated experience, or one relying on a very low fidelity system, devoid of both interesting narrative contents and obstacles posing a noteworthy challenge (e.g., waiting for someone in an empty parking lot).

- The corner 0,1,0 represents an equally trivial scenario despite the user being technologically immersed (e.g., waiting for someone on an empty virtual parking lot). It is possible a novice VR user will experience some degree of preoccupation with the virtual world due to the novelty of the simulated parking lot. However, this mental absorption can be attributed to the experience of some degree of spatial immersion.

- The points 0,0,1 and 1,0,0 both represent situations involving little technological immersion but a high degree of narrative immersion (e.g. a great work of literary fiction) or challenge-based immersion (e.g. a Sudoku puzzle or game of foosball).

- Fantasy roleplaying games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, may be used to illustrate the experience corresponding to the coordinate set 1,0,1. Such games need not involve explicit use of technology; players may experience narrative immersion when they assume the role of a character in an unfolding story or in challenge based immersion due to the mental skills required to tackle the fictional challenges.

- The points 0,1,1 and 1,1,0 correspond both to video games running on technologically immersive systems capable of delivering high-fidelity

tracking and sensor stimuli in several modalities. In the case of point 0,1,1, the
game would involve an ideal balance between intellectual or sensorimotor
challenges and the player's capacity for action. In the case of point 1,1,0, the
game would present the player with an interactive narrative that strongly
appeals to the player's curiosity to know more about the ongoing events, the
fate of the virtual characters, or the virtual space itself.

- Finally, the corner 1,1,1 might correspond to a video game running on a
technologically immersive system but involving both obstacles posing a
suitable challenge and an interesting story. (117-118)

Applying this model to immersive theatre reveals an obvious problem. Though the
authors are cognizant of the other disciplines that use concepts of immersion, their model
still favors digital gaming. Currently, the model relegates immersive theatre to only 2 of 3
dimensions: challenge-based immersion and narrative immersion. System immersion
exclusively refers to technological systems mediating experiences, like screens, speakers,
headphones, and VR goggles (112).

Scholars and practitioners need to standardize an approach to and language of
immersion, and Nilson et al.'s model is the most comprehensive. Instead of just
acknowledging its shortcoming in application to immersive theatre, there is great value in
adapting it for interdisciplinary use since it enables standardized measurement and
comparison—something the immersive theatre field currently lacks. I therefore propose
an extension of parts of mediated systems. If we return to the descriptions of system and
perceptual immersion in the table above, there are a few keywords that focus on systems
while moving beyond strictly digital interfaces. These qualities are high-fidelity,

multisensory representation, and artificial stimuli (111).

High-fidelity simply relates to anything produced and perceived at a superior enough quality to be believable and/or engrossing with little distraction. There is a tendency in the world of technology and even gaming studies to strive for mediated experiences in which audiences are increasingly unaware of technological presence and how their perceptions are being manipulated. Ideal immersion in this case would essentially look like the false, programmed world of *The Matrix*. The crux of *The Matrix*, however, is that Neo and the other humans plugged into machines have never known their reality is false. Thus, this technological goal can be reframed as a dystopian/utopian ideal that ignores human agency. Can one be immersed if they actively reject whatever is supposed to be immersing them? The notion of high-fidelity technologies containing objective, inherently immersive properties is at least partly a fallacy. Deconstructing high-fidelity and its relation to immersion to be more subjective—partly reliant on human agentic behavior of active attending and believing—extricates this quality from digital technologies. It can be applied to other mechanics and equipment intended to manipulate sensory perception whilst remaining non-obvious or invisible, such as scenography and stagecraft.

Scenography and stagecraft create multisensory representations of artificial stimuli, especially in the immersive theatre environment. More gaming-oriented approaches to immersion stress being 'enveloped' or 'surrounded' by the virtual environment; however, from a technical perspective, the performance environment has just as much *capacity* for feelings of surrounded-ness or presence. I stress *capacity* to draw a line between technical elements as a greater, representational system and

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whatever affect this system may evoke, such as spatial immersion. Nilsson et al. associate

spatial immersion under narrative immersion because they are following Ryan's narrative

immersion taxonomy (Ryan 54-55). However, Ryan argues spatial immersion is not

strictly narrative (54), relating the space of virtual environments to the narrative

component of setting (55). If the system of stage technologies and theatrical elements

used for sensory manipulation is considered outside the context of storyworld (diegetic

space), we can gauge an immersive production's capacity for system immersion via the

high fidelity of its design and how artificial stimuli construct representations across

multiple senses. In other words, a production involving the crafted stimuli of touch and

smell—beyond the usually cultivated sight and sound—is more robust than one with

similar audio-visual fidelity that does not explore as broad a range of senses, as far as

systemic mediation is concerned.

With system immersion expanded to include the properties of stage technologies

and elements, we can apply the model of Nilsson et al. to immersive theatre as a method

of comparison between productions and a tool to guide our facilitation of immersion. If

immersion is a multi-dimensional series of graded states, then we can engage each of the

three axes to increase immersive capacity. The higher the total immersivity of all three

axes, the more intense immersion can be. Narrative immersion increases the more

audiences are involved with the story, storyworld, and characters. A highly developed,

consistent story that is trackable and discoverable allows a greater immersive capacity. In

challenge-based immersion, audience members need clearly defined goals, or the

freedom to set their own, in an environment of gameness framed by rules and boundaries.

When challenges meet audience members' skill sets and are surpassable, audiences are

kept from boredom or frustration. This area of immersion encompasses psychological

flow (Nilsson et al. 115-116). Concerning system immersion, the design and use of

lighting, sound, scenery, props, fragrances, special effects, etc. function together as

components to form multisensory experiences. Yes, scenography and stage elements

often support the storyworld and seem part of narrative immersion. However, referenced

here is what and how elements are used to intensify the experience—this does not include

whatever particular qualities are related to the storyworld itself.[20] When a greater number

of senses are engaged and stage elements are carefully designed to be nonobvious,

audiences are more likely to slip into fantasy as boundaries of reality are blurred. This

approach allows us to easily define and conceive of the many types of production aspects

that facilitate complex immersive states.

  This model offers a methodology of determining the immersive components of

productions, the efficacy of components' affect in relation to intended purpose, as well as

the overall immersive goals of shows we craft. Facilitating immersion becomes simpler

since the model visualizes immersive potential; we can home in on specific elements we

need to cultivate.

Adapting a Model for Clarifying Presence

  Yet as Michailidis et al. informed us earlier, presence appears to be different from

immersion, meaning the incorporation of another model is necessary. Nilsson et al. use

their model to illustrate the relationships between 4 existing definitions of presence, but

all these critically depend on the virtual environment (119-128). Unfortunately, presence

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[20] For example, the technology and presence of a high-fidelity aural soundscape in an immersive theatre space is system immersion. The specific sounds that the system plays are part of the storyworld, which makes them a component of narrative immersion.

is as volatile a concept as immersion. Matthew Lombard and Matthew T. Jones

standardized various disciplines' conceptions of presence by demonstrating the existing

gaps between definitions. They identify 5 major areas of contention: 1) whether

technology is involved or not, 2) what presence is a property of (person, object,

communication, etc.), 3) what is the source of the stimuli (external/internal, and what

does that mean?), 4) how is technology perceived (is technology involved or not, and is a

person's perception of that accurate?), and 5) what aspect is of interest (spatial, social,

self, engagement, realism, cultural, parapresence[21]) (14-27). For reference on the sheer

complexity of existing disparities, Lombard and Jones have created a diagram (Figure 3).

Whereas using the above model assisted in settling on a foundation that integrated

multiple dimensions of immersion, there are not currently models doing the same for

presence. What constitutes presence is much more debatable given the breadth of the

field and the complete contradictions that exist between definitions. So, Lombard and

Jones' framework (Figure 3) is a method of clarifying how interlocutors are using

presence and discovering new aspects of presence to consider/incorporate into practice if

deemed valuable or suitable.[22]

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[21] The perception of something present that is not, like phantom limbs or the 'presence' of religious deities.
(26-27)
[22] For example, it is worth noting that Theatre and Performance Studies have theorized and discussed
presence (outside of immersive pieces) as stage presence.

Figure 3: Diagram of Various Concepts of Presence from Lombard and Jones [23]

In tandem, the three-axis immersion model, the presence framework, and the various definitions of immersion and presence that were detailed earlier produce a more meticulous understanding of these phenomena and the confusion around them. Articulating differences in approaches shapes better conversation about the variety of methods of immersive facilitation, within the genre of immersive theatre and across other disciplines. Ultimately, if these concepts continue being widely used and immersive theatre keeps evolving to be more interdisciplinary, the conceptual gaps between practice and theory must be bridged. Doing so discovers more efficacious ways of inducing immersion, presence, and other forms of affect within audiences. Currently, the ideal conditions for immersion and presence allow for the most opportunities of these multi-dimensional phenomena to manifest. Therefore, maximizing experiential capacity across production elements is the best way of engaging and involving audiences.

Design alone does not suffice, though. Facilitating immersion and other affectual phenomena requires maintaining production elements and audiences in the moment. Given that our discipline employs stage and house management, the smooth operation of technical elements and actor cues is rarely an issue if planning is thorough and stage managers and ushers are skilled. The problem with *immersive* theatre is that the genre heavily invests in challenging agentic audiences by multiple means. Our systems must be highly developed and controlled for all sorts of audience action and reaction. Thus, we must now explore the problems of immersive theatre.

The Many Definitions & Themes of Immersive Theatre Scholarship

It is necessary to have a better understanding of what specifically is meant by 'immersive theatre'. The above clarification of immersion and related concepts simplifies

one plane of confusion on immersive theatre; however, the many forms immersive theatre can take is another cause of vast befuddlement. Yet these adapted models and refined senses of immersion and presence better equip us to dive into the genre's complexity—it is easier to grasp genre diversity knowing the multi-dimensionality of immersion and presence. As I demonstrate below, defining immersive theatre is not so much a fruitful task as is exploring the medley of form and theory that better illustrates the field. I use several foundational texts as a launching point, then organize this exploration into themes of contemporary concerns. These overarching issues later inform the foci of my practical dramaturgy.

As prominent immersive theatre scholar Adam Alston states, "pinpointing just what constitutes immersive theater is a difficult task, but it might be proudly identified as theater which surrounds audiences within an aesthetic space in which they are frequently, but not always free to move and/or participate" (*Audience Participation*, 1). Truly, the definition of immersive theatre is loose at best, but Alston's idea of what it *might* be does lead us in the right direction. The immersive performance typically "surrounds audiences" inside of a cultivated, "aesthetic space." When compared with traditional theatre, immersive theatre allows much greater degrees of audience movement and participation. However, these agential abilities vary across productions or even within segments of shows, making these actions something audiences are "frequently, but not always free" to do. The above qualities tend to unite swathes of the genre, but a definition resting solely on these is fallible. For example, Sound&Fury Theatre Company considers its work immersive theatre despite that its productions often involve total darkness with exquisitely designed soundscapes to immerse audiences. Even if soundscape as aesthetic

space is not such a reach (depending on artistic semantics), then perhaps the absence of enabled movement and direct participation alienates such productions from the prior definition. Sound&Fury believes their participation is defined by active, aural "attending" to the event (Home-Cook and Ball, 129-134). Furthermore, many notable immersive theatre shows take the form of audio-guided tours across towns or cities (such as Leddy's *Susurrus* in Swift; Rimini Protokoll's *Outdoors* in Pons; and Coney's *Adventure 1* in Alston's *Making Mistakes*). To some, the superimposition of theatricality is on an aesthetic cityscape or landscape, yet for others the environment may be a blasé everyday locale or unimpressive sprawl of concrete jungle. These are just a few examples why defining immersive theatre is hard, but there exist many others. Therefore, we are brought to an important question: can immersive theatre be defined at all?

Josephine Machon, in her foundational text *Immersive Theatres*, complicates the notion of defining immersive theatre. Machon urges us to resist the concise stability of definition and see immersive theatre for the nebulous form it is (53-54)—a form that is inherently interdisciplinary (28). She specifically dissects what 'immersion' and 'immersive' mean, defining the former as the act of being submerged in liquid or deeply involving oneself, and the latter as a term derived from digital terminologies referring to something that stimulates multiple senses beyond sight and sound (21-22). She cites and agrees with gaming scholar Gordon Calleja's position that the problem with 'immersive' and 'immersion' is that they currently have multiple, vague meanings and definitions that various academic disciplines use differently (59-63). Machon attempts to resolve this via her three categorical model, but as shown in the previous sub-section this falls short of encompassing all that immersion can be, She is on the mark, though, in asserting that

another problem in defining immersive theatre is that 'immersive' and 'immersion' have come to be marketing tools and catch-all terms "used with impunity to describe a movement that is occurring in contemporary performance practices towards a visceral and participatory audience experience with an all-encompassing, sensual style of production aesthetic" (66). While Machon does indicate that immersive theatre is discernible as practice that lets audiences physically interact with performers in the 'playing area' (67), she concludes that whether theatre is immersive is contingent on both artistic intent "alongside *the artist's ability to succeed in this intention"* (69, emphasis by author). This intent is enveloping audiences within the immersive state.

According to Machon, the term 'immersive theatre' entered common parlance in artistic and academic circles circa 2004, and later theatre criticism around 2007 (65-66). However, what we define as immersive theatre today has existed across other smaller theatrical genres and artistic movements for several decades. Immersive theatre has swallowed what was previously separated into site-specific, site-responsive, promenade, interactive, and environmental theatre; while there are some who still try to distinguish works via these other terms, as Rachael Blyth points out "none of these terms holds the particular cultural connotations—the 'so hot right now'—of the 'immersive'" (194). Machon offers an in-depth dive into the genealogy of these genres, connecting them to Artaud's Theatre of the Absurd,[24] the Happenings of the 1960s, Richard Schechner's Environmental Theatre manifesto, Joan Littlewood's and Grotowski's ideas about

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[24] She connects to Artaud in two ways. First, she likens immersive theatre to a glorious enactment of his manifesto for a 'total theatre,' one in which gestures, objects, and signs are used in a new spirit aimed at an individual's whole anatomy. Secondly, she situates him as the direct precursor and primary inspiration for the theatre artists of the 1960s who broke theatrical/artistic convention and started experimenting with the forms that have developed into contemporary immersive theatre (30).

theatrical *communitas*, and parallel movements in installation/performance art and virtual art (28-38). Thus, while the immersive theatre genre often strikes people with its novelty, it is well-grounded within recent artistic tradition. Its ground-breaking reputation, or conversely to many others its obscurity, is likely because most of these developments in theatre have occurred within the UK and a few cosmopolitan cities across the globe.

There has indeed been much scholarship on immersive theatre; however, this scholarship still falls short in reaching a consensus of theory on the genre. Furthermore, little is available on how to craft and facilitate immersive theatre because the genre prides itself on secrecy and the unexpected as a way of intriguing audiences and privatizing artistic approaches as trade secrets.[25]

Most of the research I found was composed of articles and academic essays, however there are a few notable books on the subject. Josephine Machon's *Immersive Theatres* is considered a comprehensive text—not only does she theorize about the quintessential features of immersive theatre, she also introduces us to the foremost practitioners of the form and asks them to define their art, their perspectives, and their goals for and relations to audiences. As such, it is often regarded along the lines of "the closest thing we have to a textbook on the subject" (Frieze, 2). It is important to note that Machon has a penchant for audience embodiment and sensory engagement; her book grew out of a prior influential essay, *Watching, Attending,* Sense-*making*, focusing on how immersive theatre has the capacity to increase awareness of our senses. Another book dedicated to the genre is Rose Biggin's *Immersive Theatre and Audience*

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[25] This is partly why Maravala and Ramos call for sharing methodologies—currently, not many are being shared (*Exeunt*). In addition, the creators of Strange Bird Immersive have voiced similar frustrations about how people share ideas in the escape room industry, but the same openness is not present in the immersive theatre community.

Experience: Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk. Biggin, who has worked closely with industry juggernaut Punchdrunk on multiple occasions, explores their work with multi-disciplinary theories about immersion, interactivity, and narrative flow. Though based around a single theatre company, the use of some of the most recent theories and perspectives on these topics makes it an important text. Knowledge of Punchdrunk's works is necessary for immersive scholars and practitioners; not only are they pervasively cited, they're often considered standards of immersive theatre, inspiring many scholars and other productions. Furthermore, Biggin's extensive interdisciplinary approach is an impeccable integration of immersive theatre with outside perspectives on immersion. Finally, academic James Frieze's anthology, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, is a wonderful source for its vast amount of entries from prominent immersive theatre scholars and practitioners alike—it even features a few fringe pieces exploring other immersive forms. The diverse perspectives are compelling, not only for their different foci but also because some authors flatly disagree with others. This offers a well-rounded idea of the problems and ideas in the field currently. In addition, the authors in this anthology have crafted useful concepts teasing out ethical and agentic issues in immersive theatre. Whereas Machon and Biggin's books respectively focus on what goes into immersive theatre and makes it unique, Frieze's anthology is dedicated to new takes on what the form is doing, and the quandaries faced.

Rather than diving into each of the numerous essays, I will instead cite some popular issues explored in the discourse and attribute the respective scholars to them. My goal is to offer a reasonable snapshot of current scholarship to those who are not familiar with what has been explored, especially since it can be quite niche. A great deal of

immersive theatre scholarship focuses on the negotiations between audience and

production, audience/performer dynamics, ideas about the design, and how immersive

theatre is used as a tool for various means. These are loaded topics, so it is useful to break

them down further into somewhat digestible chunks. I have organized the following

themes in a way that builds toward the problems my practical dramaturgy addresses:

audience positioning, boundary design, and audience exploitation.

Negotiating Audiences: Embodiment, Subjective Experience, and Positioning

A more specific and prevalent theme in the realm of audience negotiations and

dynamics within productions is embodiment. Across her essays and aforementioned

book, Josephine Machon thoroughly theorizes embodiment. She makes us aware of

heightened senses and bodily being with concepts like *live(d)ness* of experience and the

praesence of being aware of one's own embodied watching and responding (*Watching,*

Attending, Sense-*making* and *On Being Immersed*). Esther Pons considers the embodied

knowledge of all those participating in the immersive event—knowledge that collectively

and subjectively shapes and informs productions as they play out (122-123; 126). George

Home-Cook and Kristian Derek Ball together conceptualize immersion as "dynamic

embodied attending," a useful definition for atypical immersion pieces like those with a

focus on aural experience (131-133). Nele Wynants explores a prior incarnation of

immersive practice—the phantasmagoria shows of the late 18th/early 19th century—and

how optical illusions of ghostly projections engendered a felt, supernatural presence

within audiences. Countering ideas that the immersive state totally removes our

perception of reality, Carl Lavery argues that belief in imaginative transcendence is

derived from Western exceptionalism accorded to humans by philosophers. Thus, he re-

tethers us to our physical embodiment within the world, urging immersive theatre to refocus itself on elucidating the ways we are already always participating—especially within a greater cosmos and the fragile ecology of Earth. As shown, there are many intriguing and unexpected ways in which embodiment has been approached, reconfigured, and reconceptualized to better understand audience subjectivity in immersive performance events.

Another pattern in immersive theatre scholarship is elaborations on subjective experiences of time—the ways in which being immersed can disrupt or destabilize our notions of a constant, linear experience of time. Roberta Mock presents a unique perspective in her analysis of a lengthy performance art piece, *Away in a Manger*. Her essay is not a formal article; rather, the left side of the full piece is her field notes composed during the experience—whatever she was thinking in the moment, whatever associations she made. Opposite is her analysis of the event: a reflection on what she does/does not remember, what gaps and missing moments in the notes suggest her immersion, as well as how the perceived viscosity of time-flow seemed to morph between moments. Thus, she expands ideas of memory and senses of spatio-temporality. Esther Pons draws our attention to how stories of the past converge and affect the present, especially during immersive performance. She specifically employs two Greek conceptions of time: *chronos*, which is akin to conceptions of chronologically linear time, and *kairos*, a moment in between when a significant occurrence makes that moment meaningful—a timeless time. To Pons, we re-enact the past, make the present memory, and pre-enact awareness we may have in a yet-to-be-determined future. Spyros Papaioannou builds on time and subjectivity by citing immersion in Punchdrunk

productions as a process of de-rationalizing one's role as performer or spectator by temporally 'losing' rather than 'finding' oneself. This is a state of positive displacement where incapacity to understand how one should 'be' in the production and constant repositioning lead to creative experiencing within the event; a focus on the 'here and now' rather than waiting for finite representational outcomes to play out. This perspective reveals how subjectivity, including experience of time, is contingent on audience positioning.

Audience positioning is critical to any immersive work, both in how audiences are situated to act by designers and facilitators and how they invariably re-position themselves throughout performances. Especially in productions with greater audience agency, negotiations between audience and performer are omnipresent and must be carefully navigated. Elizabeth Swift, while comparing hypertexts to immersive theatre, speaks about interactivity and how structural limitations guide audiences. Theatrical company non zero one declare that their mission is to craft interactive performance allowing for different outputs where participation and choice matter but are not required. They outline four important areas of consideration: providing an *implicit and explicit 'why?'* (as in, why should I do this?), *control* of ambiguity, protecting audiences against *exploitation* and betrayal of trust, and *pushing further* audiences who want to be challenged while offering those uncomfortable clear choices to opt-out. Adam Ledger emphasizes the importance of allowing audiences agency but not total control as well as the plentiful ways practitioners should clearly guide audiences as a form of dramaturgical maintenance—the burden of upholding tone and quality is on practitioners, not the audience.

Jorge Ramos and Persis Maravala take a different perspective: audiences should have the experience of agency but not actual agency, and productions should support this with an audience-centered dramaturgy—audiences are guests that should be invited to participate in multiple opportunities guided by practitioners (*A Dramaturgy of Participation*). Using experimental immersive piece *Coriolan/us* as a jumping point, Andrew Filmer examines the production's live video feeds and cameras that cause audiences to see themselves in the action from different perspectives. He concludes this effect compels audiences to constantly re-focus and re-position, and thus reframe the event. For Filmer, analyses of immersive theatre need to move away from ever-expanding, unhelpful taxonomies and become more relational by detailing existing audience perceptions and the dramaturgical and aesthetic logics that inform audience positioning. Finally, Machon across her works asks us to examine immersive performance as contracts between performers and audiences, agreements that require consent. Here, ethical positioning—negotiated and agreed upon consensual boundaries and respect—is just as important as considerations of physical positioning or status.

The various perspectives of embodiment, subjective experiences of time, and audience positioning within existing literature are indicative of the need to figure out an approach that accounts for the many ways an audience member can experience an immersive production. Audience subjectivity and experience remain contentious subjects filled with theory but lacking in concrete, practical methodologies. I will address this need later by introducing a new approach to audiences that simultaneously considers multiple dimensions of audience subjectivity and experience, much like the models adapted above.

Immersive Theatre Design: Boundaries and Risk-taking

Another popular topic of immersive experiences is boundaries: how physical and behavioral boundaries are defined and manifested. Papaioannou associates audiences with space as a part of design; audiences are like a choreographic landscape that is worked through and around, or like nomadic spectators over smooth space—space shifting in relation to movement and presence. For Papaioannou, audiences *are* boundaries that shape the production as they move through space. Julia Ritter also bridges audiences and boundaries, giving us an excellent idea of the many different forms of boundaries that can be followed or transgressed in immersive theatre. She focuses on four areas: 1. the complicity of audiences within the invisible rules of the production (47-50); 2. the porosity of audience members shifting between openness and resistance to experience, thereby confronting their personal boundaries (50-54); 3. the contagion of behaviors or acts that are witnessed and repeated until they extend beyond the bounds of the inciting event (54-55); and 4. the inclusion offered through collective participation that often goes beyond the performance—such as fan blogs and dedicated online communities (56-57). Rosemary Klich associates the boundaries of immersive theatre with those of videogames, offering that Punchdrunk audiences can operate under the game rules of ludic immersion while in the theatre space. Klich defines ludic immersion as audience focus on in-the-moment decision-making, which includes making goals, seeking rewards, and prioritizing a production's interactivity over dramatic elements (227). Audiences have the ability to intuit these rules and play into the gameness of ludic immersion, or if they are more interested in the narrative and dramatic world, they can ignore game rules in favor of aesthetic experience. Either way, such rules of behavior

differentiate the theatrical game as a liminal space separate from reality, erecting a boundary between the real and fantasy. Mock also acknowledges these boundaries and asserts that they are meant to be respectfully tested; the negotiation of boundaries is a process of discovery central to immersive encounters. If audiences are meant to test boundaries, then Richard Talbot warns us that participants are always unsure of actual boundaries and there may arise conflicts between what is asked of audiences versus what they want to/think they should do.

The immersive event is fragile and numerous things can go wrong, making each moment carry certain risks. Adam Alston considers the risk of breaking boundaries via his concept of errant immersion—instances in which audiences unknowingly transgress boundaries but believe these transgressions to be part of the experience (*Making mistakes in immersive theatre*). It is no surprise that some scholars consider immersive theatre boundaries inherently porous or broken.

Imperfect boundaries, audience vulnerability, and audience agency create an environment of heightened risk[26] as boundaries are actively tested and negotiated, especially if rules must be intuited. Alston has written most extensively on the subject of risk in immersive performance, theorizing how neoliberalism's value of entrepreneurialism is present in productions where taking risks is rewarded with special viewings or content (*Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value*) as well as how the perception of risk is an appealing and marketable factor to audiences, such as the excitement of signing an intimidating disclaimer (*The Promise of Experience*). Talbot

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[26] Risk in immersive theatre can take the form of physical risks to those involved (e.g. navigating dark spaces, engaging in touch), psychological risk for potentially triggering or intense content, and the risks of being vulnerable and taking action in ways that overcome or ignore normalized social standards of etiquette.

paints risk in a more negative light, underscoring the risk of audiences not recognizing narrative and contractual shifts or challenging the porous structure of the immersive event. But given how much immersive theatre draws upon the risqué, the horrific and supernatural, or otherwise intense events and leaps of faith, I agree with Alston that the perception of risk—or at least a controlled risk—is an attractive feature to potential audiences.

The perception of risk often relies on the creation of believable, alternate realities that give audiences the power to make decisions. Imagining such alternate realities is another prominent subject in the discourse. I am not speaking of the construction of detailed, narrative storyworlds within more common immersive theatre, but rather how immersive performance incorporates techniques that expand how it operates or what it can be. Lindsay Hunter introduces us to the Alternate Reality Games (ARGs): pervasive games that are not confined to a traditional, designated space, and are also immersive by containing a narrative structure or otherwise organized storyworld.[27] Some ARGs are internet-based, taking players to secret web pages with puzzles that paint grand conspiracies that players get to uncover. Not only do these games often rely on denial of their true form, as in "This is not a game," but their players adopt an intentional performance of belief in the fantasy (players know it is fake, but they collectively pretend it is real and protect the illusion). This means ARGs allow the superimposition of the imagined onto the real, and thus allow for critical and strategic reflection applicable to both realities. Swift integrates the idea of alternate realities through her comparison of hypertexts and participatory theatre. Specifically, she focuses on how user/audience

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[27] To provide a recent example, Netflix and Baskin Robbins teamed up to launch an ARG around *Stranger Things* Season 3 in July 2019, which may provide teasers for Season 4 once solved (Joho).

interactivity produces an ergodicity in which the different possible permutations of audience choices lead to multiple alternate realities where narrative and subjective experiences are modally divergent yet still within the constraints of the system. Thus, she promotes the use of Possible Worlds Theory to assist us in considering all potential outputs of audience experience. This includes how different audience responses and even the particular individuals present can lead to entirely different constructions of the imagined world. In addition, Klich proposes Punchdrunk productions form their own alternate realities that operate under a unique system of rules, similar to VR. In her eyes, immersive theatre is more like video games than traditional dramatic performance, requiring the hyper attention of audience members to many multi-sensory information flows while demanding their response and participation within a multi-dimensional performance text. Interaction types continually shift depending on individuals' motivations, and different choices lead to different rewards or outcomes of subjective experience (within a closed system, of course). All of this is to say that immersive theatre enables a much greater degree of possible, branching pathways of experience.

The unstable boundaries, risks, branching pathways, and expanded audience choices within immersive theatre allow wonderful possibilities when properly designed yet lead to mishaps in audience behavior when these qualities are not controlled. non zero one warns that too much choice can overwhelm and frustrate audiences as they do not know what to prioritize. In addition, Talbot's concern over audiences not recognizing contractual shifts means that audiences and/or performers can be endangered if audiences risk-take in ways they should not. Thus, the authors in these topics have illustrated that the design of boundaries and audience choice is a primary issue for immersive theatre

practitioners.

Immersive Theatre as a Tool: Ethics and Exploitation

The risk-taking and increased interactivity of immersive theatre has played directly into growing cross-industry trends. The idea of the 'experience,' of undergoing some significant or ritualized event, is becoming a popular yearn. Therefore, the marketplace is seizing upon immersive theatre, and practitioners across entertainment are changing how they promote events, using buzzword concepts like 'immersive' and implying risk or challenge to lure audiences. Alston talks about this rising experience industry, referencing marketable experiences (e.g. elaborately detailed theme parks, immersive technologies like VR, and immersive performance) along with experiential marketing, marketing for a product that takes the form of a tangible, immersive event (e.g. video game promoters staging a real-life simulation of what their gameplay is like). Rachel Blyth adopts a somewhat cynical tone in her essay, demonstrating the rise of corporate sponsorship in wake of en masse arts defunding by governments, and how previously niche artists and groups are finding themselves having to create a broader and more marketable appeal. Whereas re-discovered, abandoned building ruins used to provide affordable, edgy, aesthetic spaces, the market has caught wind of their newfound artistic profitability; they are no longer part of an innovative imaginative practice but rather an investment strategy that previous arts tenants are priced out of. Immersive performance is becoming more exploitable.

This brings us to the discourse on the myriad ethical quandaries of immersive events and where our creative approaches fail or can be challenged. Ruth Bowman analyzes an immersive museum experience, *Follow the North Star*, in which guests

pretended to be runaway slaves that must find their way to freedom through the Underground Railroad. Participants engaged in menial tasks simulating forced labor and ran around interacting with intense characters, yet were told at the conclusion that they could never ever imagine how hard it was to be a slave; clearly, this is problematic since, as Bowman argues "the form encourages *FNS* participants to individuate the story of race and slavery without accounting for the differences between themselves and a nineteenth-century runaway slave" (75). Visitors, then, do not learn much about the real stories of actual slave experience, and they are refused the opportunity to critically engage with the politics of performing the past along with the futility of trying to recreate it. More broadly addressing similar conceptual issues across the immersive theatre scene is Alston, who argues that particular forms of audience experience are idealized and striven for despite their unattainability, which can "produce ethical compromises that are misleading and unrepresentative" (244). His primary example is *66 Minutes in Damascus*, an immersive production that simulated civilians being kidnapped by the Syrian Army. He contends that immersive experiences tend to drift toward idealism and aestheticization while claiming a degree of authenticity, which is troublesome since 'authenticity' is gauged by subjective perception of truth. Further, the attempt to convincingly frame 'authenticity' as truth leads to the fallacy that it is possible to produce another's experience and make it known. Pons also focuses on the potentially controversial creation of experiences via her reflection on the ethics of co-design. In Rimini Protokoll's, *Outdoors*, the production was built around the lives and experiences of a local town's choir. While the ethnographic approach excited the choir members at first, they came to feel as if they were a labour force that had to tailor their experiences to a pre-designed technological structure and

dramaturgy. Rimini Protokoll was intent on fitting the stories into a preset mold; the choir members' stories were told, but they were exploited for them (124-125).

Occasionally, immersive theatre also commits ethical missteps by simplifying political perspectives and offering biased interpretations of its subject matter. James Ball studies immersive performance and technologies in relation to militarization, civilian versus military perspectives, and war trauma. He writes that while immersive experiences try to convey what art and representation cannot, these can fall short and fail, maintaining a critical distance such as that enabled by nation-states and existing power structures to keep war distant from reality. For him, glitches—unintended interruptions or effects that make players/audiences emergent—are powerful tools that can reveal audience subjectivity within coerced narratives. This better approximates experiences of sensitive topics like soldier trauma because glitches make clear the instruments of power at hand as well as the shortcomings of immersive performance—what it shies away from and its inherent inability to wholly replicate reality. Geraldine Harris actually challenges assumptions made in immersive theatre scholarship, encouraging us to rethink immersive politics. She asks, why do we perceive discomfort and disturbing events as having greater effect/affect over pleasurable ones? What equates pleasure with neoliberal narcissism? She rightly brings up our tendency to position art as functional and progressive, which is a problem since immersive theatre can be disjointed and not allow for thinking beyond mere face-value critiques. Harris also stands against some other scholars, arguing that we should not prioritize subjectivity and embodied experience over mentioning politics. One of her examples is that Machon refers to many feminist immersive practitioners without once discussing the centrality of feminism to their works. Clearly, immersive theatre has

a balancing act when it comes to ethically implementing its imaginative worlds and discussing its effects.

Ethical treatment and exploitation of audiences themselves is also a major concern across scholarship and practice, especially given the recent attention to handling intimacy. James Frieze actually dedicates an entire section of his three-part anthology to facilitating ethics ("Part II, Facilitating Immersive Performance: Ethics and Practicalities"). In their dramaturgical essay within this anthology, Ramos and Maravala detail how they use participatory rituals, immersive environments, and interactive gameplay in tandem to meticulously structure audience behavior in productions like their *Hotel Medea*. Bringing up in an article from *Exeunt* magazine the issues of secretive and mishandled practice within the immersive community, Maravala and Ramos argue practitioners should share methodologies and actors need to be trained beforehand to handle intimate experiences. As briefly mentioned earlier, non zero one is careful to make sure that no one in their experiences feel exploited for dramatic effect. Questions are configured to be non-invasive, and challenges always have transparent opt-out clauses allowing audience members to remain in their comfort zones whenever needed. In another *Exeunt* article, Alice Saville also explores recent concerns over designing for intimacy. She calls on practitioners to integrate active, ongoing consent in performances by allowing opt-outs, voluntary participation, and disclaimers of intense content since audiences are playing a game they do not know the rules to. She also hammers the point that us artists own the stage, and productions often mirror the power dynamics outside of them, privileging white, able-bodied men. Ethically facilitating intimacy primarily manifests as consent. Thus, these authors have demonstrated how managing consent is a

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relevant, evolving topic immersive theatre is grappling with.

On macro and micro levels, immersive theatre occasionally exploits subject matter, communities, and audiences. Scholars and practitioners are realizing the extent immersive theatre can appropriate, mislead, and downright violate those involved in these experiences. The immersive community needs to contend with market forces, how politics are ever-present across the genre, and the ethics of what productions choose to address. I will later argue, however, that the issue of consent is much more pressing, and attention to ensuring everyone in productions are safe and respected must be foremost. With recent movements like #MeToo and recent scandals across the theatre scene, violations of consent can no longer be ignored or pushed to the side.

Issues in Practice and a Dramaturgy to Address Them

Walking through the above themes has exposed three current concerns in immersive theatre practice: 1) the lack of concrete methodologies for conceptualizing audience experiences that apply across the genre, 2) the unstable design of boundaries that have to control for risk-taking audiences with expanded capacities for decision-making, and 3) the need to facilitate immersive experiences in ethical, consensual manners. My thesis will theorize on each of these concerns as a means of providing a framework for improved immersive theatre practice.

Thus, this thesis will serve as a practical dramaturgy for the following aspects: how to consider the positioning and roles of audiences in immersive theatre; how to define and realize the boundaries and rules that must be present in an immersive production; and how to best facilitate immersion as an embodied, cognitive state and consensual experience. My intentions are to unify several bodies of existing theory and

present new ideas that will further our understandings of the complexities inherent in immersive practice. At the very least, my ideas serve as a springboard for continued interest and improved practice in immersive theatre.

Chapter One is focused on audience subjectivity and how we can better theorize about audience positioning. While a vast chunk of immersive theatre scholarship has focused on audience agency, there has been much disagreement. I argue that many useful approaches to audiences are not applicable to the genre as a whole. This is due to the great attention paid thus far to only a few highly popularized immersive productions and companies as well as the fact that the genre is incredibly diverse and amorphous. My goal with this chapter is to explore the existing perspectives and problems, then propose a new framework by which we, as practitioners and scholars, can ask more detailed questions about what we want our audiences to do or articulate more planes of audience experience. The referential term I posit to accomplish this, 'role-to-player,' is not meant to be a definitive solution. Rather, it is a way of enabling us to think in more unique ways about audience experience while also consolidating many ideas about subjective experience down to a single concept. For some, the collapse of perspectives to a single term that is then expanded in definitional meanings may seem an odd choice for an evaluative framework. However, given the ubiquity of other referential terms for audiences used by current practitioners and companies to prioritize certain aspects of audience experience, I believe that 'role-to-player' can highlight gaps and blind spots that other scholars and practitioners may not be aware of. At the very least, my framework serves as a tool for comparative analysis. At most, the concept presented is suitable for adoption by those evaluating audience experience. I close the chapter by employing 'role-to-player' to

analyze the intriguing positions audiences may find themselves in during *The Man from Beyond*. My hope is that putting this conceptual framework into practice will demonstrate its efficacy and potential.

Along with audience agency and experience comes boundaries and limitations inherent in productions that restrict certain behaviors whilst encouraging others. Thus, Chapter Two is dedicated to making these oft-hidden boundaries and rules emergent and critiquing their problems. Here, boundaries and limitations do not only refer to physical barriers and concerns but are also constituted by abstract parameters informing audience choice and performer/audience negotiations. In a genre that is known for masking its boundaries in order to support the immersive illusion, I argue that we still need to find ways of making boundaries clear and assuring audiences that they are not in danger within the game-like environment of immersive theatre. I believe these are necessary to accomplish due to shifting rules between immersive productions, inherently broken boundaries, moments of intensity where the potential for things to go wrong is greater, and the blurring of audience perception between fantasy and reality. If we are giving audiences enhanced agency and interactivity while asking them to trust us, be vulnerable, and play into the storyworld, then we must account for the ways in which boundaries and limitations can—knowingly or unknowingly—be broken and transgressed. We must implement precautions and fail-safes. In the chapter, I discuss scholarly ideas such as audiences as choreographic landscape, potentiality for errant immersion, inherent audience risk, and reward. These ideas lead me to the epiphany that a penultimate immersive production, one in which the fantastical is indistinguishable from reality, is a dangerous ideal where safety is likely to be compromised. Therefore, I suggest that as

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practitioners we must be willing to concede some aspects of the intense immersive event as our responsibility to audiences and performers. As a simple method of discerning how we can choose to limit parts of immersive productions, I home in on three important planes of moments of intensity: activity, proximity, and realness. I define these fields and what their risks look like in practice, then I posit ways in which concessions can be made in each and what that would mean for the production. This is done to offer practitioners a means of identifying problems in immersive productions and presenting potential solutions. Finally, I go into greater depth about the gameness of immersive theatre's rules and boundaries, which in turn results in the proposal that game design tools and theories can help us craft better, safer immersive experiences. While this chapter focuses heavily on safety and there are plenty more existent concerns about boundaries and rules, safety is prioritized since it is a current, relevant concern that has not yet been thoroughly addressed.

Well-established boundaries and rules in and of themselves, however, are not enough to ensure an optimal immersive experience. This is why Chapter Three's purpose is to demonstrate the importance in the production of a safe, consensual environment in which audiences and performers can maximize immersive experience. I argue that the current issue of consent in immersive theatre must be addressed in order to allow audiences and performers to commit themselves to the experience. While some may see consent mechanisms as barriers to immersion, I reframe consent as a tool that actually minimizes such barriers by aligning the immersive capacities of audience members and the productions they are negotiating with/within. I explore several contemporary issues with consent in immersive theatre before evaluating some of the common mechanisms

that are currently mis/used to facilitate audiences. This leads me to suggest a few improved strategies of best ensuring consent in immersive theatre via these mechanisms: using non-obtuse waivers while not relying upon them as a one-time consensual agreement; briefing audiences with clear rules and boundaries that paint definitive hard lines that should not be crossed; establishing safe standards of behavior that alleviate audience anxiety about what they are allowed to do; providing audiences opt-out abilities that respect active consent without penalizing their experience; and being generally transparent about protective policies and methodologies of handling consent, preferably by making different levels of transparency accessible and giving power to audiences to consent to how much transparency they receive. I conclude that, as practitioners, it is our duty to clarify our approaches, maintain active consent, and hold ourselves accountable for safety in the immersive performance space.

It is my intention to put these ideas into action as a method of demonstrating their practical use and efficacy. This leads me back to the theatrical company whose experience was referenced at the start of this section, Strange Bird Immersive. Strange Bird Immersive's production, *The Man from Beyond*, will serve as a continual reference. Not only was *The Man from Beyond* incredibly impactful as my first immersive theatre experience, but also it complicates the immersive genre through its unique blending of forms. *The Man from Beyond* is both a piece of immersive theatre as well as an escape room. As theatre, it situates its audiences within a dramatic pretense and allows interactivity with the set and live actors. Yet it also places audiences as players in a game wherein they must solve puzzles and challenges within an allotted amount of time, completing an overarching objective to 'win'. This means that within the 90-120 minute

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runtime of the production, 60 minutes are set aside for the puzzle-solving escape room

that is integrated into the story and world of the show.[28] Extending beyond commonly

cited immersive theatre productions that only contain dramatic elements, *The Man from*

Beyond involves a whole game with its own rules, parameters, and dynamics that

audiences experience within the larger theatre piece. Furthermore, audience success or

failure determines which ending of the show they experience—their actions affect the

outcome.

      Digital technologies and gaming have long dealt with ideas of branching

outcomes and decision trees, thus meaning that when these perspectives are integrated

with immersive theatre, we are often made more aware of the complexities inherent in

immersive practice. Many scholars have related immersive theatre to gameness, so I find

it relevant for my research to focus on an immersive piece that explicitly incorporates a

game into its structure (*The Man from Beyond*) since this diversifies a practical approach

to immersive theatre while prompting us to consider the many different forms immersive

performance can manifest.

      In addition, this leads me to integrate video game studies alongside theatre

studies. Several scholars have already used a similar interdisciplinary approach to give us

greater insight into immersive theatre: Rose Biggin via her integration of audience

theories from other media and her inclusion of gaming and psychological ideas of

immersion, Elizabeth Swift in her exploration of the links between participatory theatre

and virtual hypertexts, Josephine Machon through her incorporation of gaming theory

(*Immersive Theatres*), Daniel Homan and Sidney Homan with a marriage of interactive

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[28] The wide variance in total length of time is due to the improvisations of actors and audience as well as how long audiences take to solve the escape room (or not).

theatre with video games, Rosemary Klich by comparing Punchdrunk works with video games, and James Ball through analyzing militarized games and the political possibilities of disruptive glitching. While many of these perspectives hint or theorize about an implicit gameness of immersive theatre, there have been numerous instances in which gaming and/or digital technologies adjacent to gaming were incorporated into immersive productions. A few noteworthy examples include Punchdrunk's use of an online experience for *Sleep No More* that paired players with real-life guests and allowed for a sort of cooperation between them (Biggin, 156-164), the actual integration of VR or digital interfaces that simulated environments in shows like MWM Immersive's *Chained: A Victorian Nightmare* (Yu), and instances in which gaming companies have advertised upcoming games via materially realized, comparative experiences like Playstation/Punchdrunk's *...and darkness descended* (Klich; Alston in Frieze). In addition, these incorporations of digital gaming practices can be extended to include the use of escape rooms within immersive theatre. This is because escape rooms are a rare manifestation of the real world mirroring the virtual world, rather than vice versa. They are derived from digital point-and-click adventures and puzzle games like *Myst* (1993) and online Flash games where players actually were solving puzzles and finding hidden clues to 'escape' some room or place, such as the game credited for starting the craze, *Crimson Room* (2004) (Spira). Therefore, while escape rooms may physically exist outside the digital realm, they follow much of the same game logic, rules, boundaries, and fantastical premises of their virtual counterparts. Immersive theatre, then, has implicit and explicit ways in which it relates to gaming practices. Considering that gaming studies has been theorizing and implementing methods of immersion and player control for quite

some time—much longer than immersive theatre practitioners—ideas from this field are

quite useful in forming a dramaturgy for immersive practitioners and scholars.

CHAPTER ONE: POSITIONING AUDIENCES AS ROLE-TO-PLAYERS

When it comes to scholarship that has interrogated theories about the practice and affect of immersive theatre, much attention has been paid to audiences and their agency. While it is widely agreed that an enhanced sense of agency is a vital part of the immersive theatrical experience, scholars and practitioners disagree on the extent to which this agency is actualized. Some see immersive theatre as offering the illusion of agency in a rigid framework with limited outcomes,[29] others posit that the realization of agency is contingent on how it is fostered via the encouragement of performers[30] and audience behavior.[31] There are also those who stress the liberating nature of immersive audiencing, arguing that the novelty and destabilization of traditional roles and boundaries lead to an inherently powerful autonomy that is sensed, felt, and experienced.[32]

These writings inevitably follow discussions of agency with explorations of audience subjectivity, as in how the immersive experience may or may not have the capacity to be dramatically (both literally and figuratively) different for each audience member due to the variability of their interactions with the performance event. Again, there is disagreement here. Scholars such as Rose Biggin and Josephine Machon focus intensely on heightened subjectivity. Biggin argues that audiences can become their own homodiegtic narrators and Josephine Machon stresses the sensed, embodied live(d)ness

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[29] non zero one defines it this way though distinguishes it from 'interactive theatre'; Swift, albeit she sees expansive possibilities for outcomes within a system.
[30] Maravala and Ramos, *Exeunt*
[31] Tassos Stevens in Grout; Alston, *Audience Participation*
[32] Machon; Ritter

that shapes individual experience during the immersive performance. Yet others are quick to point out that immersive theatre is often a series of repeated shows, meaning that any audience subjectivity is ultimately reproducible or even that this subjectivity is merely an exploited selling point (Alston, *Audience Participation*), subject to economic schemes (e.g. VIP access ensuring special treatment) (Biggin 85-86, 93, 182) or used as an excuse for high ticket prices of a sloppy, fragmented narrative and incohesive production that leaves audiences wandering aimlessly (Gillinson).

Upon surveying immersive theatre scholarship, it becomes clear rather quickly that there exists a breadth of ideas about the efficacy of these productions' varying uses of audience subjectivity. Frankly, while the theories and critiques about agentic audiences all offer valid perspectives and considerations, I believe that this gap in how to conceptualize audiences is due to the amorphousness of the immersive theatre genre itself. Unfortunately, such a gap means that there lacks a common language for audience subjectivity that can be consistently used across the genre—communicating ideas about the positioning and roles of audience members is especially difficult. Furthermore, there exist many forms of audience agency across the genre that often go unrecognized since scholars and practitioners tend to construct too narrow or too vague audience ontologies for theory and practice. This limits understandings of the *potential* of immersive audiences.

Therefore, we must standardize approaches to audience agency and subjectivity as a means of bridging this gap, allowing immersive theatre scholars and practitioners to fully grasp the range of potential audience behaviors, interactivity, responsibilities, and relationships to performances the genre provides. While some theorized ontologies have

gotten close to achieving this, they have fallen short with various weaknesses. In response, I have conceptualized a new audience ontology, the 'role-to-player,' as method of standardizing discussions of audiences across the genre as well as inducing scholars and practitioners to consider all the planes on which audiences may operate during immersive theatre productions. Before presenting this model, it is necessary to understand current scholarly perspectives on immersive theatre audience positioning and why previously conceived ontologies are ineffective.

Exploring and Problematizing the Diversity of Audience Ontologies

Many scholars in the discourse on immersive audience agency and subjectivity refer to generally agreed upon barometers within the genre—the most notable and popularized examples. Arguably, this means that Punchdrunk, the internationally-renowned immersive industry juggernaut responsible for *Sleep No More* (2011-present), *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-2008), *The Drowned Man* (2013-2014), and *The Crash of the Elysium* (2011-2012), is the most common standard as it is the most often cited (for example, see Biggin; Ritter; Klich; Papaioannou). While other companies such as dreamthinkspeak, Shunt, and Coney are also mentioned often and greatly vary in their approach to the genre, Punchdrunk is such a pervasive citation that much theory about audience agency and subjectivity is in some way dependent on their works. This is a problem I find to be understated and unrecognized. While Punchdrunk certainly deserves attention for their specific manner of positioning and enabling audiences, their works follow a certain style that they deliberately cultivate (Felix Barret in Machon's *Immersive Theatres*, 159-165). Thus, the immersive theatre genre and the scholarship around it is decidedly flattened. This is not to say that scholars are unaware of the postulations

involved when theorizing with Punchdrunk as part of, or wholly as, a foundation. Yet this is to make clear that a great deal of practice theory falls short of being applicable to immersive theatre as a genre in its entirety.

Fortunately, we can thank James Frieze and Josephine Machon for compiling books with a diversity of perspectives on immersive theatre. Frieze's anthology of essays by notable scholars (and even some practitioners) is wonderful in showcasing the very different approaches to the nature of immersive audiences, on facilitating these audiences, and the histories of immersive participation. However, given conflicting scholarly perspectives and the many niche topics explored, the anthology is challenging to derive ultimate conclusions from. Instead, its strength is situating the nature of participatory performance in this cultural zeitgeist. Frieze unifies and captures a contemporary snapshot of theory: he integrates ideas from each of his contributors to form his introductory argument and uses his ideas about the current nature of participatory performance to locate a new front of debate. This is useful in its propounding of new scholarly concepts, but it thus poses more questions than it answers; dramaturgically, we are given a wealth of information and perspectives but have to cherry-pick what we find most insightful or intriguing for actual practice. In contrast, Machon's book, *Immersive Theatres*, delves into both theory and practice. While she theorizes about what is inherently involved in the production and affect of immersive theatre, focusing on both what immersive theatre must do as well as the affect/effect it has on individuals through embodiment and engagement, she backs up these theories not only with other scholars but also notably with interviews with the industry's most well-known practitioners. These interviews are then provided to us along with short

backgrounds and biographies of those interviewed. Machon's approach is profound because she heavily invests in the ideas of practitioners as well as her readers—she even states that there are multiple ways and directions of reading her book and is fine with those who pick it up with the sole intent of engaging with the many practitioners in a single source rather than encountering her theory (xix). This presents us with a fantastic survey of those who put immersive theatre into practice and highlights the wildly different approaches to audiences that exist in the genre.

Often, these practitioners have labelled their audiences with terms of hybridity that reflect an inherently different ontology of the audiences within their work, whether actualized or at least aspired toward. Such hybridity not only is indicative of the inter-/trans-disciplinary nature of immersive theatre, but also of the artistic goals of the practitioners. Examples include Adrian Howells's 'audience-participants', Coney's 'playing-audience', Lundahl & Seitl's 'visitors' and Rotozaza's 'guest performers' (Machon, *Watching, Attending,* Sense-*making* 38).

What all of these have in common is an underlying notion of moving away from more traditional forms of spectatorship. This is largely due to increased audience agency and interactivity, artistic foci on subjective experience, and the abolition of a static viewpoint in favor of dynamic movement around and within works by audiences. Of course, some scholars have been quick to point out that theatre audiences have never been wholly passive (Biggin 21, 31), that spectating can be more dynamic than we think (Machon, *Watching, Attending,* Sense-*making* 37-39), and that dramatic/crafted immersive experiences have existed in a multitude of forms for much longer, such as rooms in Roman villas dating back to 60BC that were dedicated to simulating another

world (Calleja, 17) or even 18th/19th century phantasmagoria shows (Wynants). However, many immersive theatre practitioners believe that this genre offers an extreme departure from spectating via active negotiations with performers, greater opportunities of choice, and higher awareness of the sensing, embodied self (for example, see Ritter; Swift; Talbot; Machon). And this does seem to be more than just intellectual ostentation or fluff: audience members have often reported feeling as if they were transported, or completely absorbed in the fantasy, or in a dreamlike state (Biggin; Papaioannou). The caveat is that this happens when the immersive experience and audience member collaborate *well*— plenty of others have ended up frustrated or lost. Yet these accounts do seem to corroborate the existence of a distinct state of being, hence the large scholarly and artistic attention to pinpointing and cultivating this other state through the exploration of new ontologies.

The commonalities seem to end there, though, as the various proposed or utilized ontologies by scholars and practitioners have trouble fitting the numerous configurations of audience relationships that the immersive theatre genre encapsulates. Some artists have even had their work labelled as immersive theatre when they come from other backgrounds or intents, such as performance art (Machon, *Immersive Theatres*). This is where the amorphousness of genre rears its ugly head and foments confusion and disagreement of what constitutes immersive theatre and, therefore, how best to conceptualize audience relationships. We are in an unfortunate position where much seems to be labelled as immersive theatre or more broadly as immersive experience without much nuance as to what exactly that entails. As mentioned above, some have noted that 'immersive' seems to be a buzzword or selling point within a growing

'experience industry' (Alston, *The Promise of Experience*; Blyth). Furthermore, as shown in the introduction, immersive theatre grew out of several previous terms and forms, including site-responsive theatre, environmental theatre, promenade, etc. (Blyth). 'Immersion' is the concept that stuck through popularity as a term of reference and as a focus of study across several disciplines (psychology, gaming studies, etc.). Thus, the label has been applied to a wide range of performance events that displace and destabilize traditional audience relationships, which is useful in unifying productions in novel ways that break disciplinary trappings, allowing us to better view and theorize about the commonalities between them and reconfigure ideas about artistic experience. However, this is also detrimental in that the genre is loosely defined by a buzzword usually applied by critics and audiences rather than a formal taxonomy. This means that theories about immersive theatre ontology and practice become convoluted as the definition of what qualifies as immersive theatre differs across scholars and practitioners.

These scholarly efforts that try to exactly define what constitutes 'immersive theatre' often fail when it comes to practice because the genre is so broad and there is a wide range of production practices; I believe these conceptual energies would be better directed elsewhere. Audiences attending these performance events all have something in common in their increased agency and the ways in which the performance asks more of them beyond traditional audiences: engagement with the unfolding action is taken to new levels. In addition, it is generally agreed that our duty as practitioners is to properly facilitate the experiences of immersive theatre audiences, especially when the genre closely aligns itself with greater moments of intimacy and pushing audiences outside of their comfort zones (a topic I will address in depth in Chapter Three). Properly

addressing audiences and hammering out what their relationships with the performance will be is necessary for immersive theatre dramaturgy.

The problem is that currently there are few general references that can help a majority of new or intrigued practitioners figure their approaches—it seems that prior audience ontologies are akin to artisanal trademarks of the particular scholars and practitioners that have coined them. These ontologies have been carved out to focus on the specific, unique practices scholars and practitioners are interested in or trying to cultivate. There are many approaches to immersive theatre, however, and such ontologies are too narrow to apply to myriad audience configurations across the genre. Furthermore, terms that are less niche are vaguer about what audiences are actually doing—the positions they may occupy, the roles they may take on, and how they may interact with productions. I will walk through prominent, existing ontologies/referential terms to demonstrate this.

Immersive theatre audiences are often referred to as 'participants' in general discourse since "the nature of audience interaction in the [immersive] work always requires some level of participation and involves some experience of immediacy and/or intimacy as a consequence" (Machon in *Immersive Theatres*, 99). In their most rudimentary form, immersive audiences are certainly participants, yet this term does little to implicate *how* audiences may be participating and it does not address how they may be *audiencing*—they are experiencing theatre after all. Machon occasionally uses the phrase 'audience immersant' throughout her book, but she acknowledges that she ranges across terms because of the difficulty in pinning down a single, nuanced term for immersive audiences (74). Along similar lines, prominent practitioner Adrian Howells coined the

term 'audience-participants' for his audiences which is at least slightly more specific; however, he actively recognized and spoke of their capacity as co-creators and co-authors in his work[33] (Machon, 260-263). Machon does get closer in conveying an agentic, active audience with 'audience-adventurer,' but this is only briefly mentioned in a larger point about the different possibilities of existing ontologies (99). These terms are simply unhelpful in conveying how audiences are situated in and related to the immersive performance.

Other practitioners have developed more unambiguous ontologies, but these are only exact as it pertains to their specific practices and ideal audience experiences. Christer Lundahl and Martina Seitl use 'visitors' as they speak about blindfolding audience members and have performers interact with them (Machon, 176); this is owed to the dynamics of visitors in the visual arts and "suggests an active invitee who will be taken care of and be treated as a willing guest within the event" (Machon, 99). While visitors may be active and willing, they are not involved in the generation of the piece, which is an issue for practitioners like Samantha Holdsworth of Nimble Fish who view their audiences as 'co-creators.' Holdsworth does similarly envisage an extension of an invitation to audiences, but Nimble Fish's are much more involved serving a role to the production (Machon, 206). Yet 'co-creators' is also an issue, given that some immersive audiences are not asked to assume the position of artist alongside performers and designers—the experience of a production can be emphasized more than its creation. Interestingly, Rotozaza's Silva Mercuriali somewhat unintentionally bridges these ideas with the adoption of 'guest performers,' since her company makes instruction-based

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[33] I refer to Howells' practice in past tense because he has passed away since Machon's writing.

theatre and finds artistic value and meaning in how audience members react to instructions differently (Machon, 187-188).

The reason the prior terms are not more applicable to audiences across the broader genre is that other practitioners have artistic goals that go beyond or even exclude the purposeful facilitation of audience performance, making any reference to audiences as 'performers' a misnomer. In addition, many practitioners are more interested in what it means for audiences to be present beyond mere visitation—the terms 'guests' and 'visitors' limit audience agency. For example, take Coney's 'playing audience.' Tassos Stevens and his team at Coney came up with 'playing audience' because they pull inspiration from game design. They like audiences to be able to interact with a production as well as influence its outcome (Machon 203); they allow audiences to "take a meaningful part, or play, if they choose" (Grout). Felix Barrett of Punchdrunk can somewhat relate to this ontology. While he does not really use a particular term for audiences, he readily explores their capacities. Barrett has spoken about gameness that can exist in immersive theatre[34], making the space between gaming and theatre a new frontier (Judge; McMullan), as well as how the famous Punchdrunk masks allow audience members to frame the action and act as scenography (Machon 160). Of course, not every immersive theatre production is directly integrated with games/ergodicity (multiple outcomes) nor masks. Coney and Punchdrunk are very well-known for having stylized artistic approaches that have expanded the boundaries of the genre. In addition, moving beyond production mechanics, other practitioners are acutely focused on the mutli-sensory experiences of audience members. Louise Ann Wilson (wilson + wilson)

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[34] He actually compared free-roaming exploration of Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*, to the video game *Skyrim*.

describes her cultivation of an "'attendant' audience," one that is "deeply involved, experiencing many layers of material with all their senses" in her site-specific work (Machon, 229). Wilson's work is environmental, and she's interested in "exploring ways to investigate and metaphorically emplace the 'interior' landscape of the human body within the physical 'exterior landscapes'" (Machon, 238). Thus, the "attendant" audience is a concept that particularly resonates with her practice where bodiliness and finding heightened meaning in the surrounding environment is stressed.

Josephine Machon relates to this in her essay, *Watching, Attending,* Sense-*Making*. Penning this article three years after her book, Machon settles on an ontology for audiences of her own making: the 'interactor.' Out of all the ontologies discussed, the definition of the interactor is most concrete in its meaning, use, and intent:

> a decision-making participant in the process. The interactor becomes watcher-observer-improviser-adventurer-collaborator. The name plays on the notion of spectator as role-taker in a performance event, while emphasising the possibilities for the spectator to act in close relation to performers, object and space, embracing the reciprocal action and influence that can exist as a consequence of the multiway transfer of information and activity within immersive work. My use of this term also borrows from physics in regard to the potential transfer of energy between the interactor, the space and the performers that is peculiar to many immersive events. By employing 'interactor', my aim is to accentuate the affective nature of such experiences. (Sense-*Making*, 39)

This term is far more promising for general use. If we keep Machon's definitional details in mind, we are able to understand and approach immersive theatre audiences as participants with a range of potential behaviors and states that can be inhabited at the same time. The interactor is a decision-maker, watcher, observer, improviser, adventurer, collaborator, role-taker, and potential transferrer of affective energy, encapsulating the full possibilities that the genre currently offers while also making us aware of a peculiar energy that exists in these experiences.

There are pitfalls with 'interactor' as an immersive audience ontology, however. For one, it is assumed that "the interactor *becomes* watcher-observer-improviser-adventurer-collaborator" (emphasis added), which is not the case for all immersive audiences. The possibilities of taking on these roles exist, but they are not always realized. When Machon speaks about potential behavior, it is in reference to the spectator possibilities to act in close relation to other production elements or the potential transfer of energy. As shown through the other ontologies above, any number of these states can be given or denied to audiences.

Furthermore, this definition does not account for the shifts between states of audience-positioning that productions may offer. To cite an example, Strange Bird Immersive's *The Man from Beyond* has an escape room *portion* of the experience; while the full experience is cohesive, the integrated escape room is a game in its most literal form requiring specific puzzle-solving actions and navigation of game mechanics by audience members. These actions are not necessary or valid elsewhere in the duration of the experience. Thus, audiences must adopt new strategies and behaviors in some basic capacity, thereby shifting between ontological states in relation to the shift in what the production is asking of them.

The last points about the debatable practicality of 'interactor' revolves around its lack of self-evidence for all that Machon wishes it to represent. Unless someone has the list of states from the definition on hand, it is unlikely they would be easily able to infer the nuances of the capacities of interactors. This is not to say that an ontology's meaning must be totally inferable from the term used for it; but the more deducible the multi-state complexity of an ontology is from its label, the better it may function as shared locution.

'Interactor' also frames the entire conversation on audiences around how and in what ways audience members interact with the production, assuming that interactivity is always present and not recognizing a potential absence of it. Machon's ideas about how audiences may subtly and abstractly interact with immersive theatre are quite insightful, yet her argument unintentionally wades into the highly contested realm of interactivity.[35] What constitutes interactivity is heavily debated across academic fields (Biggin 59-60). In addition, immersion and interactivity are different phenomena, and interactivity is only one component of experience that can assist in immersing audiences—it does not define immersive experience nor is it always a priority, as Machon believes. Rose Biggin notes:

> Just as video games are not all about interactivity, but contain movement between more and less interactive scenes, neither is immersive experience in theatre all about interactivity, but consists of movements across lowered barriers to immersion and into various (and varied) modes of engaging with performers or the performance space. (73)
> Interactivity—whatever is meant by it—does not, in itself, guarantee immersive experience. Certain modes or moments of interactivity may facilitate and/or allow for it more than others, being a way to lower barriers to immersive experience and draw an audience member into the work. […] interactivity is an aspect of immersive theatre, albeit it may take different forms and have different effects from show to show, and from person to person. (74)

Whereas Machon expands the idea of interactivity to include energy transfer and the possibility of action of audiences, other practitioners and scholars such as Biggin do not view it this way. It is also worth noting that across Biggin's entire theoretical chapter on interactivity, there are many sources cited from media studies and game studies that have extensively researched and written about interactivity as a phenomenon (59-77). In contrast, Machon's *Watching, Attending,* Sense-*Making* hardly uses any citations from

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[35] Specifically, Machon argues that "Full immersion always involves degrees of interactivity and improvisation on the part of spectator as much as artist, which must be shaped expertly by the practitioner" (37) and that "interaction with the world shapes and transforms potential outcomes of the event" (36).

these fields, ignoring large swathes of theory that have been arguing the meanings and effects of interactivity for decades. This is odd considering that Machon herself argued that immersive theatre is inherently interdisciplinary in *Immersive Theatres* (28), drawing on many sources across disciplines throughout the book. Not addressing the broader field of study on interactivity makes the use of 'interactor' confusing and hollow.

The ontology of interactor is a step in the right direction in indicating a range of audience behaviors and meaningful interaction between audiences and production elements, but it falls short. 'Interactor' does not 1) clarify how productions can expand or limit the roles of audiences, 2) address how the states of audiences can shift across an experience, 3) contain much self-evidence when the term is compared to its complex definition, 4) allow for the absence of interactivity, and 5) adopt an interdisciplinary approach that allows for media and game studies as interlocutors. A more ideal term and method of analyzing/conceptualizing audiences needs to solve these issues while building on Machon's concepts. Therefore, I have conceived of a new ontological reference for immersive theatre audiences that is flexible enough to apply to the entirety of the genre, yet one that is also more specific in addressing audience agency and interactive potential.

The Role-to-Player Ontology

The term I propose is 'role-to-player' since its name not only situates our idea of immersive theatre audiences within considerations of potential ranges of activity, but also prompts questions about their relationships to the performance and what responsibilities and actions they may be encouraged to undertake. I have settled on this particular term precisely because the term as a whole and its components represent the myriad positions audiences may experience across the immersive theatre genre. Below I detail six reasons

for why I find this term to be useful for assisting practitioners in fleshing out how they want their particular audiences to be positioned and to operate:

1) *The meanings of 'role.'* According to the Oxford English Dictionary, role refers to both an actor's part as well as the function assumed by a person or thing in a particular situation. If we explore the intersection of these two meanings, we find that imaginative characterization merges with responsibility via the implication that we usually want the function to be carried out well. With regard to immersive theatre audiences, asking ourselves what roles we want them to inhabit is incredibly important. Are audience members going to be characterized in any way by the performance? Even if they are 'themselves,' will they be ascribed an imagined past or premise for their attendance? Will they have any greater function within the production beyond being present? Clarifying audience roles is to locate or place audiences *in situ*—if we conceive of a production as a stratigraphy of elements, where is and how is the audience in relation to the other layers of the production?

2) *The meanings of 'player.'* Player has myriad definitions, but I wish to draw attention to two in particular: player as someone who takes part in a sport or a game, and player as a dramatic performer, an actor (OED). As mentioned in the introduction, several scholars and practitioners have pointed out that some immersive theatre explicitly has or at least enables a 'gameness' that audience members can sense and deliberately play into. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of immersive theatre, I find it quite useful to partly adopt a game studies approach to productions. Doing so helps us account for the boundaries we need to set—the

limits of the performance—as well as the actions we want to encourage or prohibit of our players, topics to be addressed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three respectively. Yet, much like of defining roles above, player also has connotations of acting and performance. Player, though, is more specific in that it is one who enacts the role/s given to them. For audiences, it is possible they may be asked to play roles themselves in tandem with the performers. Both of these definitions of player implicate audiences as active agents within a production that interact with the performance. The level of interactivity is important to clarify and ask questions of: How will audiences be asked to engage with an event? How might they 'play,' from acting to taking part in a game (both as intentionally designed and as happy accident)? What are the bounds of this play and how do we best facilitate a playful environment?

3) *Audiences as Role-Players.* 'Role-to-players' most obviously harkens to role-playing; however, I wanted to delineate role-playing as a separate aspect to consider given that not all immersive audiences do so. Role-playing, with its niche history and associations, is merely another referential axis on which immersive theatre audiences may be enmeshed. Role-playing is interesting in that it can be both the intentional enacting of a role during a game (e.g. from educational settings to *Dungeons and Dragons*) or an unconscious performance in certain social settings (e.g. occupational behaviors to S&M) (OED). What I find key here is that role-playing is the un/intentional adoption of a performed role that is *improvised*. In many immersive theatre situations, audience members may find themselves playing into the performance in unexpected ways, a notable example

being descriptions of some Punchdrunk audiences that act differently when their masks are on (Papaoiannou; Machon, *Immersive Theatres*). This can be purposeful or not and is unique because these audiences are not necessarily playing a role that is directly part of the unfolding plot of the performance. In contrast, role-playing can also be of more explicitly designated roles for immersive audiences to enact, such as in *You Me Bum Bum Train* (2010-2019) where audiences are encouraged to play multiple roles and engage in games as these roles. Role-playing's unique connection to tabletop games, LARPing, and RPGs can also be enlightening to immersive theatre practitioners; these games see players choosing roles or avatars to represent a fantastic self, a self that is other yet still an extension and expression of personality traits. Some practitioners may actively wish to encourage such fantasy as a means of engaging audiences in personal, intimate ways that still allow for a playfulness to ease the discomfort of vulnerability. In sum, role-playing allows us to consider immersive audiences adopting performative behaviors that are not scripted—something that can increase engagement and immersion (as will be discussed later). What kinds of role-playing might the production encourage, intentionally and unintentionally? How might audiences consciously or unconsciously play within their perceived roles? To what degree does the production allow for audience improvisation, and can it respond in turn?

4) *Responsibilities in service of the production.* Another thing to ask in an immersive theatre dramaturgy is what responsibilities will the audience have in a production that they will be relied upon for? This goes beyond positioning the audience

within their roles and brings up questions about how their roles will affect/effect an immersive performance. When we consider audiences in this manner, we acknowledge that they have a role to play, a hand in the shape of the production. Hence, they are *role-to-play*ers. Audience agency is explored here as an active force that the performance plays into, facilitates, feeds upon, etc. Even for immersive theatre productions that are limiting, such as one only allowing audience members to walk around a single space to adjust their view, they rely on basic mechanics of immersive theatre to shape the perception of the performance. In such a case, even if the everything outside of the audience remains consistent, the slight alterations in audience experience can enable dramatic differences in audience subjectivity. For those purposefully practicing immersive theatre, subjective, embodied experience is part of the artistic intent and event. Audience roles may be heavily scripted, abstracted, personalized, improvised, or minimalized, but audience members in immersive theatre are responsible for interpreting the artistic message and playing into the experience, at the very least on a subjective level. Thus, audiences will always have a role to play. What are the implicit and explicit objectives and actions audiences will be expected or encouraged to carry out? How might their creative responses further shape the artistic experience of the production? How extreme can differences in subjective experience be during the performance and how is this potentially beneficial and antithetical to the goals of the production? What are the ways that audiences may sense and feel about these responsibilities? Are the responsibilities vague or clearly stated, and will they burden or liberate audience behavior?

5) *Shifting from being a role to being a player.* Another bit of reasoning behind role-to-players as a useful term is that 'to' can demonstrate a shift or change. This is meant to capture a unique subset of immersive theatre productions that involve game as part of the broader experience and/or offer certain kinds of shifts in audience positioning. I am not arguing that the shift from role to player or from player to role signals a transition from a state that is static to one that is dynamic; rather, I am nuancing shifts between a defined role and a heightened state of activity where more or something different is demanded. Notable examples of such shifts include integrated escape rooms and one-on-one encounters. In Strange Bird Immersive's *The Man from Beyond* (2017-present), an escape room is used as a theatrical tool to craft dramatic tension as a plot mechanic and immerse audience members on another plane of activity. However, it is not the entirety of the experience. The audience members' roles as guests and within the plot are established prior to the escape room portion, and the plot is well in motion before the game begins. In cases such as this, audiences move out of their roles as present guests or characters that are guided by performers into interactive players. While they may be performing in some sense throughout the production, the escape room phase requires different responsibilities and enhanced physical and cognitive engagement. Such a shift may be seen as a natural consequence and nothing terribly major, but this needs to be carefully managed. This is a shift in agentic behavior and thus play or game logic. Audiences will not understand what needs to be done if they are not prepared for such a shift, and there have also been instances after the conclusion of an escape room portion of a show where

participants began to deconstruct a set in search for clues because they were not aware they had shifted out of that phase. In the scenario of one-on-one encounters, these moments can leave audience members confused or uncomfortable since their prior stasis as one of the crowd or ability to choose to interact is stripped away from them. In Punchdrunk shows, for example, audience members who are wearing masks and ignored by performers for the rest of the experience are whisked away during a one-on-one, have their masked removed, and are often engaged in conversation and touch with the performers. Suddenly, their relationship to the performance has shifted and they have been literally exposed. While it is certainly possible in the larger Punchdrunk experience to avoid crowds, it is difficult to end up alone aside from these one-on-one encounters. In addition, the mask makes audience members anonymous and there has been much discussion about the voyeuristic behavior this entails and enables (see Papaioannou; Biggin; Ritter). Therefore, the removal of the anonymity and the sudden interaction with performers who previously ignored you is a jarring shift from a role as a haunting presence to one as an active player that is having to respond and negotiate continuously with the performers in the moment. For many, the expectations of self-performance and the fear of not knowing how to respond can be paralyzing; thus, the one-on-one must be facilitated with due care since some audience members may find themselves in an intimate game that they did not wish to play. Shifting in and out of heightened moments and gameness can be an integral tactic that immersive practitioners employ to challenge audiences, further engulfing them cognitively within the production by expanding how they

interact. It is highly worthwhile to posit questions about immersive productions in this vein: What are the ways in which audience roles may shift? Will there exist moments in the production where the audiences are asked to engage more in some manner beyond the normalized roles of the rest of the performance? How can the production elements and performers go about facilitating these shifts to prepare audience members for such changes and encourage them to play into the moment (and exit the moment when it has ended)?

6) *The range from role to player.* Finally, role-to-player can also emphasize the range of behaviors from having a role to playing a game. Whereas the prior point focused on shifts in audience positioning, this point is meant to refer to the simultaneous diversity of audience behavior during a performance and the capacity of audiences to adopt new behaviors at any time due to their own subjective wills and goals. Audience members may approach the performance from a more traditional theatrical perspective or one of playfulness and gameness, and due to immersive theatre's emphasis on agency, they may set their own goals beyond what the production wants of them. This is exemplified by some immersive connoisseurs and superfans that try to discover the best ways of guaranteeing a one-on-one encounter or encountering the 'most' that they can. Some superfans, like those of Punchdrunk, even set up their own arbitrary point systems on their own online communities, turning performance attendance into an actual game of striving for the best possible experience as governed by community goals (Biggin). In addition, audience members may even improvise their own encounters with each other, creating theatrical moments between

themselves as a form of play (Ritter). Instances like these extend the imaginative

capacities of audiences and allow them agentic liberty to perform gestures and

choices that go beyond the concrete parameters of immersive productions whilst

still being connected to them. Though it is impossible to predict these situations

precisely because they rely on the creative agency of participants, it is worthwhile

to reflect on the possibilities of an immersive production to permit such

interpolations. How might audience create or alter goals based on the events,

flow, and operation of a production? Are there production elements that might

encourage and/or enable participants to perform in ways not initially expected? If

a production or company's reputation spreads and—in some way—informs

attendees' preconceptions or approach to a show, how might this effect/affect the

performance and what are ways in which that could be managed? Are

improvisations and interpolations like these an artistic goal of the production, a

potential yet unintended consequence, or something that could interfere with the

ultimate objectives of the show?

Situating 'Role-to-Player' in Practice through the Context of *The Man from Beyond*

Now that I have demonstrated the potential efficacy of using the term 'role-to-

player' to theorize about immersive theatre audience members, I will put it in practice by

using the above points to unpack the possibilities of audiencing in Strange Bird

Immersive's *The Man from Beyond*. The reasoning for this is twofold: firstly, to express

the possibilities 'role-to-player' affords as a term that is useful in its applicability to

audiences throughout the entire genre as a flexible, multipronged approach, and secondly,

to indicate how the questions involved with this term allow us to examine audience

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positioning in greater depth that helps us think through the ways it effects/affects an immersive performance.

Concerning roles, *The Man from Beyond*'s role-to-players are merely asked to pretend that they themselves have been invited to a séance. Of course, Strange Bird Immersive's website and its accompanying *Immersology* blog indicate that guests are considered part of the cast—they "tear down the traditional boundaries between performer and audience so both are free to live truthfully inside imaginary circumstances" (Cooper). But while *Beyond*'s actors portray imaginary characters, this is not required or requested of the audience—Strange Bird Immersive wants the focus of its role-to-players to be on the larger experience. The role-to-players will be made to take on greater roles later in the production as part of the escape room portion. In doing so, they themselves will determine the success or failure scenario of the performance; their actions determine the ending.

Beyond's role-to-players will find their experience to be highly interactive throughout the production. At first, they will engage with Madame Daphne, the medium, who will read their fortunes and predict how they might be instrumental to the séance (interestingly, she actually alludes to the *roles* they might take on in relation to their teammates). Of course, this interactivity is brought to greater heights within the séance and then the following escape room game when the role-to-players must work together to solve a series of challenges. The role-to-players explicitly play a game; however, they may also un/intentionally play into the mystery and seriousness of the séance by adopting a different tone or portraying an ideal self. Physically, the play is carefully structured into different zones with clear boundaries. Beyond that the actors improvise to properly

facilitate playfulness while keeping audiences on track. An example of this was when I played a bit too far in a whimsical direction with an answer to a question asked by Madame Daphne,[36] and she wittily chided me in a lighthearted manner; this keyed me into the value of unembellished truth that the performance wanted from me while carefully and playfully keeping me fully invested in the show by not shaming me.

Role-playing comes into the experience as role-to-players pretend they have been invited to an actual séance with the premise of performing some kind of great, important task. As somewhat referenced above, this can lead to the promotion of certain character traits or adoption of personas that the role-to-players believe is best suited for the production. That being said, as shown in the example above where my role-playing ideas changed after my play was redirected, the production advocates and works to shape truthful role-playing. While it does encourage role-to-players to be imaginative and willing to participate and improvise, the performance responds to them with a subtle, guiding hand to channel role-playing of the true self—the people are real while the scenario is imagined. In addition, role-playing arises in a different manner during the escape room portion, where the role-to-players must work as a team to solve a series of puzzles to expose the past and save the lost soul of Harry Houdini. As with any team-based scenario, leaders can emerge and team members with variant skills may take command of certain puzzles or tasks that they are proficient in. In this case, role-playing becomes quite literal as different roles in puzzles are played by teammates. The escape

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[36] Specifically, I was asked if I felt the presence of the spirits at the start of the séance. I responded with something along the lines of "I sense them and their auras engulf me" to which she asked for my hand, smiled, and quipped that she could tell when an individual was lying. Of course, this was accompanied by many subtle nuances in tone and gesture that are difficult to describe—in short, I was aware that my willingness to participate was being honored and that I was being gently steered in a different direction without being singled-out and embarrassed.

room within the production is designed to require thought and creative puzzle-solving as a sort of improvisation of its role-to-players, yet these elements are crafted to allow for trial-and-error while not being destroyed or deconstructed (as can happen in poorly designed escape rooms). The production response here is one of gaming feedback: some event happens or something unlocks to let you know once a puzzle has been solved correctly.

In regard to the responsibilities of *Beyond*'s role-to-players, they are made clear by the performers' interactions and improvisations as well as the framing of the production. Specifically, the actress portraying Madame Daphne is careful to shape role-to-players in conversation, engaging them in the storyworld and playfully, yet firmly, pushing back against unwanted behaviors (such as how she corrected my overly zealous response to a question). This sets the implicit objective of role-to-players to act truthfully as themselves as if this fantastical event is truly occurring in our everyday reality. The actress playing Madame Daphne skillfully and unobtrusively communicates this implicit objective by refusing to break character, using clever responses to facilitate truthful playfulness, and subtly manipulating conversation and action to shape role-to-player behavior. Tension allows the objective to be intuitively sensed by role-to-players rather than explicitly stated. In addition, production elements such as the large countdown clock, Madame Daphne's dramatic exiting directive to role-to-players, and the entrapment of role-to-players in the séance room filled with Houdini's prized possessions clarify the goal of the escape room/production. Beyond the artistic goal for behavior, the more concrete objective of the production (the driving force) is for role-to-players to successfully perform the séance, working together to solve puzzles and collect mementos

in less than 60 minutes to save Harry Houdini's spirit. By channeling the role-to-players

to act truthfully, creative energies are focused on believing the story and interacting with

the performers, meaning the artistry lies in how far one goes in placing themselves firmly

in this fantasy and encountering the 'supernatural.' The extremities of subjective

experience are actually somewhat vast. Each fortune told at the start of the performance

is customized to each individual and improvised to match the truths role-to-players

believe about themselves (a classic fortune-telling psychological trick). Beyond the role-

to-players being interacted with in differing ways, the escape room portion is also unique

in that the puzzles often require teammates to divide and conquer since there is a lot to do

in a limited time. Personally, there were several puzzles I did on my own and others I did

not have a hand in whatsoever. In addition, *The Man from Beyond* does feature a one-on-

one encounter that is bestowed upon a deliberately chosen individual—which in my

experience happened to be me. Not only did I have an entirely separate conversation with

the medium while my teammates were doing other tasks, I was also given explicit

instructions on how to lead the end of the séance as a substitute for the medium. These

subjective differences are beneficial in that each person's experience is unique, yet no

one is being deprived of the narrative or gameplay (unlike other immersive theatre pieces

where the story is fragmented and may be disappointing for those looking for a satisfying

narrative arc and resolution). However, the one-on-one can be a touchy subject for some;

my teammates were certainly curious as to why I was specifically chosen, almost as if it

was the reward of some invisible, competitive game they were not aware of. This can be

detrimental if teammates feel alienated when they are meant to work and triumph

together. Role-to-players will actively sense their responsibility for the performance's

ending as the aforementioned countdown clock continually ticks, a visual reminder of the finite time they have to complete all the necessary puzzles and perform the final séance correctly. While for some the sense of urgency may be exciting, for others it may be stressful. The production tries to counteract any sense of burden by stressing itself as a piece of theatre and not just an escape room, by having a clear end-goal and game with rules that are carefully walked through, and by advocating for audience success. It *is* possible for the role-to-players to fail the escape room and receive the bad ending; however, they are given a few chances to ask for hints that assist in solving puzzles and the creators have told me that they do what they can to make success the more likely outcome without coming across as intruding or lowering the difficulty.[37] In this way, Strange Bird Immersive is focused on the experience as a whole and its guests feeling empowered.

The shifts in *The Man from Beyond* are very apparent in relation to other immersive theatre. Audience roles shift from merely interacting with the medium and each other to engaging in gameplay. Other minute shifts may be found in switching roles while solving puzzles, such as taking the lead or finding something else to work on. Obviously, the gameplay is a heightened moment where more is asked of the role-to-players than in other parts of the performance, though it could be argued that this is somewhat normalized. In that case, perhaps audience members may find the most dramatic shift to be the ending (at least, the successful ending) in which they successfully

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[37] More specifically, those running the experience can make a button glow that supposedly turns on the vintage projector used to provide hints; this is done to suggest to players moments in which they are likely lost and can use the projector's assistance. Furthermore, the game-masters do have the ability to inconspicuously slow the passage of time on the clock if a group is cutting it close, though I have been told this is a rarely needed.

channel Harry Houdini and he materializes and thanks them as a person brought back from the realm between the living and dead. Role-to-players may not expect Harry Houdini to actually come in the room and be a *person* rather than a supernatural spectre that appears from time to time via a mirror. My group certainly thought we had sent his soul to rest rather than resurrecting him, thus making his final emergence a total shock that scared and froze several of my teammates. Since our expectations for the finale were different, our roles were destabilized as Houdini came out exclaiming his appreciation and asking us questions—those engaging in comfortable banter with the medium were suddenly rendered silent by Houdini's surprise. This is significant, and the production purposefully channels this surprise twist and destabilization of roles as contributions to the narrative: Houdini is not aware how much time has passed, and so the awkward silence and people not knowing how to respond serves the theatricality of his slow realization that the world is quite different from how he left it. In this instance, the facilitation of the shift is purposefully hands-off to allow for genuine shock. Concerning the shift into gameplay, the fortune-telling room is distinct from the séance room, and when transitioning into the séance, role-to-players are led by candlelight down a small, dark hallway with portraitures that display a handful of gameplay ('séance') rules. Not only do the successive portraits and the medium's clever dialogue lead to a building of suspense up to the séance, but also this hallway serves as a deliberate, transitionary liminal space. Thus, the entrance into and exit out of gameplay along with the shift in how to play are straightforward.

Lastly, the range of behaviors an audience can exude in *Beyond* are manifold. Crafted narrative goals may range from trying to discern if Madame Daphne is a false

psychic to figuring out whether the supernatural is truly occurring in the storyworld or if it is an elaborate hoax. Of course, gameplay goals are always being created and shifted constantly throughout the escape room portion as the role-to-players must apply themselves to puzzles and ascertain where to turn next based on the clues at hand. That being said, the production elements of the show are made to limit negative behavior. Personal items are locked into a cabinet, the environment in the séance escape room is constructed to prevent use of excessive force, the game design is crafted to have full logical flow and never involve guessing or poorly designed puzzles, and a hint system is in place to prevent frustration with puzzle-solving. However, the role-to-players' behaviors may still be unpredictable in ways the experience does not control for. Given that the experience begins with Madame Daphne judging participants and telling their fortunes all within a scenic environment that teems with the mystical, role-to-players may take this otherworldly atmosphere as a license to play into the mystery or feel the need to be on guard as their vulnerability is interrogated. The role-to-players may often have very different reactions to the haunting special effects that represent the supernatural—I found them surprising and exciting while one of my teammates was genuinely horrified by them. Furthermore, the roles in the escape room can be crafted and change dramatically, making performance both in gameplay and this narrative section of a séance-gone-wrong contingent on the role-to-players actions. Fortunately, it seems that there was not much mention of the production's one-on-one throughout the reviews I read of it, which means participants might not find themselves suddenly trying to gun for it. Yet that does not take away the tense nature of the escape room itself and the disappointment or resentment groups may feel if they fail to solve it in time, meaning the performers must take care to

make the losing scenario be just as personal and narratively rewarding in a sense, even if it ends in slight tragedy.[38]

Therefore, improvisations and unintended behaviors are controlled through careful production design and facilitation. Where they are encouraged or enabled—in the group interaction and teamwork required to solve the escape room—role-to-player improvised or interpolated performance has a direct effect on how connected participants feel to the storyworld and how well they solve (or fail) the escape room. Poor attitudes or frustration could derail the experience; yet the focus on teamwork and the value of truthfulness the performers curate both seem to largely counteract the possibilities of this and prevent its consequences. The ultimate objective of the show of having audiences feel connected and responsible for something significant is heightened by the performances of role-to-players, rarely diminished by them.

I hope to have demonstrated the potential efficacy of re-positioning audiences with the ontology of role-to-player. I believe this will assist practitioners in detailing finer considerations of how their audiences will be situated within an immersive performance. However, audience agency is counter-balanced with limitation and boundaries. In the next chapter, we will explore the borders of immersive works—what audiences are actually situated *within* and what problems such boundaries have. Once we decide what we want audiences to be, we must discover methods of keeping them in that framework and safe.

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[38] The performers try to avoid the losing scenario at all costs; however, if it is triggered Houdini's soul disappears to continue wandering the in-between, and Madame Daphne offers some somewhat snide remarks about finally getting rid of the ghost, genuinely thanking you for your services and escorting you out. While tragic, the performer playing Madame Daphne essentially sells the idea that it was better for the ghost to dissipate anyway.

CHAPTER TWO: UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES AND SAFETY THROUGH GOAL-DRIVEN BEHAVIOR

Across immersive theatre scholarship and discourse, 'intense' and 'intensity' are common descriptors of immersive experience. This genre enables a heightened sense of embodied and cognitive stimulation, priding itself on edgy and experimental dramatic techniques that destabilize traditional audience-performer relationships and theatrical tropes. These include extreme intimacy[39], choreographed physical acts in close proximity to role-to-players[40], transitions and movement across multiple spaces[41], and production design that employs a greater range of stimuli[42]. Such techniques subject role-to-players and performers to 'intensity' due to the novelty and oddity of the stimuli involved and negotiations of space and relationships in the moment. 'Intensity' represents many heightened feelings and is derived from multiple, often concurrent sources in an immersive production. While this may seem vague, I will demonstrate why it is useful to theorize about intensity regarding the boundaries that immersive theatre must construct. To assist my endeavor, I have constructed the phrase 'moments of intensity' to refer to any immersive theatre performative events that evoke strong, intense feelings within role-to-players. As will be shown, moments of intensity coincide with increased risks and concerns for safety, thus making them important to consider when designing for role-to-player experience.

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[39] Nudity, simulation of romantic acts and sex, touching of role-to-players, one-on-one encounters, etc.
[40] Dance, stage combat, interactions of performers within a crowd or previously walkable space, etc.
[41] Such spaces are often artistically arranged and aesthetically curated and can range from permanently accessible to entered only by performer selection/invitation of certain role-to-players
[42] Scents, textures, tastes, environmental lighting, interactive props, etc.

How can we, as theatre practitioners and theorists, safely implement various forms of intensity within immersive theatre, a medium that blurs reality and depends on role-to-player intimacy? Immersive theatre poses unique challenges to the safety of role-to-players and performers because of greater potential for close proximity between them—a situational intimacy that theatre audiences and performers alike have not really had to contend with until this form. Furthermore, it is possible role-to-players may interpret heightened moments as either threatening, un-rehearsed actions outside the fictional world or interactive opportunities encouraging dramatic intervention. Actions based on incorrect interpretations can lead to serious mistakes, injury, or harm, derailing immersion and the safety of those involved. Thus, the immersive world must be tightly controlled to eliminate room for error, especially in moments of intensity. For actors, interactive, combative, and intimate practices must stay safe and repeatable. For role-to-players, any intense moment must have 1) clearly defined boundaries and expected behaviors and 2) the *pretense* of reality that lends to suspension of disbelief while allowing some room for disbelief to assure role-to-players of their safety. The first point deals with infrastructures of productions meant to shape and guide role-to-player behavior. The latter involves properly informing role-to-player perception to key them into what is within the scope of the production. While it is common to hear that immersive theatre deconstructs the boundaries between actors and spectators, this is not the case. Rather, boundaries are *different* from traditional theatre and the roles of audiences are *reconfigured* into new relationships with performers and the production. The walls are not non-existent; instead, the architecture is fundamentally distinct as audiences are asked to engage in ways they have not been invited to before (hence the

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prior chapter's suggestion of 'role-to-player'). Given these changes in parameters and relationships, it is important to understand the fault lines present in immersive productions that can fracture under the stress of moments of intensity.

This leads me to discuss three points. Firstly, I will explore how the boundaries of immersive theatre productions are broken and breakable, and what that means we should consider as practitioners. This topic will flow into the next: a reflection on how broken boundaries and a prioritization of agency mean there is always an inherent risk in immersive theatre. Not only are role-to-players encouraged to risk-take, they navigate rules and limitations they do not entirely know; misperceptions can lead to mistakes that harm role-to-player and performer safety. Following this will be theorization on how ideas from the video game studies field assist us in constructing better boundaries and understanding role-to-player behavior.

Broken and Breakable Boundaries

Faulty role-to-player perceptions of boundaries, rules, and roles certainly contribute to transgressions of production parameters, yet we must recognize that there are problems present within practitioner-constructed boundaries that also lead to error. As with any interactive form (video games are a great example), if the mechanics are flawed or can be broken, then role-to-players can operate outside of the makers' intentions and play can go awry. In immersive theatre, more is at stake because the traditional threshold between audience and performer spaces, between velvet seats and framed stage, does not exist. Boundaries are abstracted in the immersive environment: both physically in terms of space and interactive areas/things, and behaviorally in terms of rules and assigned roles constructed by makers.

Space is obviously one way in which boundaries are obscured in immersive productions since it typically becomes shared. Performers and role-to-players often inhabit the same spaces without stark physical boundaries separating them. Of course, physical boundaries can exist in plenty of ways: such as a window to a radio studio that allows viewing of but not interactivity with action in DinoLion's *Lionshare*, the desk Madame Daphne occupies while welcoming guests and reading their fortunes (a disguised and performance-integrated reception desk) at the beginning of Strange Bird Immersive's *The Man from Beyond*, and Punchdrunk's costumed ushers used to mark exits and guard rooms intended only for one-on-one encounters. However, much immersive theatre relies upon intimacy between role-to-player and performer, so there are almost always moments when interactions are up-close. In these instances, the obscurity of spatial boundaries may be confusing to role-to-players. As scholar Spryos Papaioannou notes throughout his essay, *Immersion, 'smooth' spaces and critical voyeurism in the work of Punchdrunk,* Punchdrunk spectators occupy an unusual agential status wherein they have the ability and desire to get close to performers yet are mitigated by feeling the need to maintain "polite" distances or even avoid performers to regain a sense of safety/lack of vulnerability. This places them in limbo "between normality and irregularity; that is, between the safety of spectatorial distance and the unpredictability of proximity" (166). It is possible, then, that role-to-players without clear guidance will resort to perceived codes of etiquette to decide how to behave and what is 'respectful.'

Of course, this is problematic. Etiquette and codes of conduct are quite variant, shifting between productions, performance venues, interactive media, cultures, etc. They are also dependent on prior exposure to and education of production rules. Though plenty

of productions put forth strong efforts to define what is and is not allowed[43], time and practicality prevent these rules from being exhaustive—such briefings could continue endlessly if an audience is given a large amount of agency. Ultimately, it is left up to role-to-players to intuit what behaviors they should engage in. Role-to-players are autonomous, physical presences that act in and around the performative space—they must be recognized as crucial to the safety of the space itself. Even if they largely avoid being too close to action, that dynamic could change anytime. Because of increased vulnerability, boundaries within moments of intensity must be recognized and respected. This means we cannot rely upon assumptions that role-to-players will always, consistently, steer clear of intense action; we must devise methods of shaping role-to-player agency and movement as they shift between new behavioral and physical positions.

Facilitating Blurred Boundaries via Shaping the Choreographic Landscape

Papaoiannou presents a useful concept in this vein via one of his interviews with Maxine Doyle, then Associate Director and Choreographer at Punchdrunk. Doyle shared that she stumbled upon the idea of the audience as choreographic landscape. Papaoiannou expands on this in his writing:

> As the audience's agential possibilities are significantly increased compared to traditionally performed theatre, the physical presence of the Punchdrunk spectator becomes a vital 'part of a choreographic landscape', being, at the same time, a part of the architecture, a part of the building, a part of everything that we experience as space (165).

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[43] E.g. within Punchdrunk productions audiences are advised to not touch performers or intervene in interactions.

Conceptualizing the choreographic landscape as including role-to-players begins to reveal the spatial/behavioral boundaries of immersive theatre. These boundaries have not been reduced in the immersive theatre form. Instead, *they have been shifted upon the audience*. The role-to-player audience becomes a landscape, an environment that is acted upon, around, within, and throughout. This is not to say that the role-to-player audience is static, though. Role-to-players form a collective fluid space with its own motives and agency, a medium that performers are choreographed within, as well as a shifting body of bodies that is choreographed itself. Establishing safe spatial boundaries thus depends on the audience-as-spatial-presence and the audience-as-agents-that-act; as a choreographic landscape, these are intertwined. In immersive theatre, then, shaping the audience as environment is also shaping the audience as agent.

However, this dual choreography is not so easy; often, it is composed of subtle negotiations between performers and role-to-players. As noted earlier, spatial and behavioral boundaries are depended on the context given to role-to-players. It is challenging to provide much context in immersive theatre because artistic priority lays in 'immersion,' which to many means allowing the role-to-player the greatest agency possible within loosely structured, obscured boundaries to engender feelings of temporarily dwelling in fantasy. Due to a lack of context, the boundaries of immersive theatre are inherently unstable.

It is necessary to understand why immersive theatre purposefully complicates boundary negotiation via instability. The first reason is because boundary blurring is an artistic value. Josephine Machon elaborates on this in her article *Watching, Attending,* Sense-*making: Spectatorship in Immersive Theatres*:

> Immersive theatres imaginatively combine a range of elements and techniques to heighten and defamiliarise everyday action, and thus establish worlds that hover in-between the felt sensation of the 'reality' and the 'unreality' of the experience. […] Perhaps, then, immersive theatre has become popular because it celebrates this feeling of 'aliveness'.
>
> Expertly executed immersive events are governed by artistic codes of practice that allow the experience to *feel* free and lead to differing modes of creative agency (46-47, emphasis by author).

This feeling of freedom is centric to most immersive productions, at the very least as a desire if it is not truly accomplished. The freedom or illusion of agency is why the role-to-player is necessary: agency can take on many forms in immersive shows and allow many possibilities of audience positioning. Production elements or mechanics that disrupt this alternate reality, either by frustrating and confusing role-to-players or taking them out of the imaginative headspace by being too emergent/visible, are regarded as detracting from immersion and thus must be avoided.

This leads to the second reason: boundaries are obscured to help facilitate the immersive state. As Rose Biggin argues in her book, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game, and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk*, the presence of disruptions to the fictional world are "barriers to immersion" that may inhibit the psychological phenomena of Real World Dissociation and 'flow' that may form a large part of what she broadly considers 'immersion' to constitute (40; 118; 203). Biggin is careful to demonstrate over the course of her book that she believes immersion to be a series of graded states of intensity and not a mere binary of felt/non-felt; however, she does explicitly state that "The concepts of barriers to immersion and the model of immersive experience as various levels of intensity and engagement lead to the challenge, for makers, of lowering these barriers in order to facilitate immersion in their audiences" (124). Therefore, in planning for safety in movement and intensity in immersive theatre,

it would *seem* we have the delicate task of keeping the boundaries we want to impose and our facilitation of role-to-players as invisible/non-obvious as possible.

The issue with this is that invisible boundaries may not be recognized when we want them to be. Many productions and companies try to get around this dilemma by strategically limiting the scope of role-to-player agency right off the bat, via masks which render the role-to-player as voyeur, pre-production rules provided through live briefing or electronically communicated materials, and/or ushers that block or guide movement yet are costumed, disguised, or positioned to be less noticeable. These render boundaries more concrete from the get-go and assist with logistics and safety in the hopes that role-to-players will accept these beforehand and overlook them during the experience (while still abiding by them). However, in being more concrete such acts can also serve as barriers to immersion themselves if role-to-players are constantly cognizant of the limitations and pressures of rule-following on them.

If we cannot solely rely upon concrete boundaries yet must ensure role-to-players stay within all our furtive boundaries, then active facilitation of role-to-players is required. This is especially true given that the boundaries are inherently unstable and can be misconstrued at any moment. Approaching the role-to-player audience as a choreographic landscape provides insight on how to accomplish this. If the term 'role-to-player' helps us tease out the agentic positioning of individuals, then the 'choreographic landscape' situates them in space and focuses on shaping them as a group—a simultaneous environment and instructed body.

Immersive theatre makers need to be nuanced in their decisions on the implementation of boundaries based on how well they can facilitate individual role-to-

players and the choreographic landscape in the moment. Punchdrunk's productions

feature massive explorable spaces with hefty audience numbers, thus their explicit codes

may be viewed as appropriate. In contrast, a small production such as Strange Bird

Immersive's *The Man from Beyond*, which handles 4-8 guests per performance, allows

greater intimacy and minimizes some spatial boundaries due to the greater ease of

shaping role-to-player action. Yet for moments of intensity, such as stage combat, dance,

and other heightened events, the established rules or prior forms of guidance may not be

enough for ensuring safety and ideal individual or group behavior.

Faulty Perceptions of Boundaries: Errant Immersion and Mis-takes

Adam Alston relates a particularly relevant anecdote when speaking of his

experience with the immersive production *Adventure 1* produced by Coney in his essay,

Making Mistakes in Immersive Theatre: Spectatorship and Errant Immersion. Taking

place in downtown London, role-to-players donned headphones and used pre-

downloaded smartphone data (such as audio recordings or texts) to guide them through

the city as they made choices on which of these data to explore. Towards the end of the

performance, the role-to-player audience was reunited and tasked with stealing an

important USB drive in a bag from a character—an actor—they were informed was

significant in the world of the play. The challenge was that the 'set' of the production was

within the normal urban landscape, and the bar in which the theft was to take place was

filled with normal citizens who were not 'in on it'—they did not know an immersive

production was occurring around them. This nearly led to an unexpected confrontation:

> For instance, I remember watching a table of young men in the bar toward the end
> of the performance at the moment when the bag was stolen, one of whom made a
> half-hearted effort to rise and intervene, having clocked the theft. These men were

nothing to do with the performance and presumably were not aware that a performance was going on. While it is perhaps disheartening that they did not intervene if they thought that a theft was actually taking place, it nonetheless made me wonder what would have happened if a member of our group had been assaulted in an attempt to retrieve the bag. The audience's playing at subversive-ness and illegality would collapse into the actual intervention that the performance makes into a space that does not recognise the co-presence of an urban dramaturgy and the performing city (69).

By way of the otherworldly nature immersive theatre commands, fantasy collides with reality. In instances where the production is superimposed on a real landscape or environment, those dwelling within the real are often ignorant of the existence of the fantasy our role-to-players are experiencing in the same setting.

This is clearly a moment in which the role-to-players' previously innocuous interactions with an unknowing city turn into a potentially dangerous moment—an event in which a lack of immersive barriers could result in trouble. The immersive theatre maker is thus caught in a struggle between minimizing boundaries for immersion and maximizing them for safety. Of course, we are not told and do not know what, if any, safety protocols Coney may have had in place to diffuse or prevent such confrontations. However, immersive theatre practitioners must actively seek to prevent disaster by carefully choreographing role-to-players as space and as agents. Safety must be prioritized during heightened moments of intensity where greater risk is present, even if previously established boundaries were sufficient until these moments.

Despite whether such protocols existed in Coney's production, the above encounter underscores Alston's following points about immersive theatre having aesthetic and structural boundaries set by theatre makers *that are inherently flawed and can lead to mistakes via their broken nature*. This discussion, though, requires that we look beyond our guiding hand as practitioners and consider role-to-players' perception of

boundary negotiations, since perception greatly informs how role-to-players act *within* a

framework of rules and structures.

Alston demonstrates the inherently broken boundaries of immersive theatre by

exploring errant immersion, the moments in which audience members go out-of-bounds

while adhering to the parameters set:

> Errant immersion […] precludes deliberate attempts to read against the grain; as
> soon as an audience member goes out of their way to 'break' a performance or
> disengage from a creative investment in the pretence of an involving theatre
> scenario, then the spectator simply becomes errant, not errantly immersed, as a
> sense of immersion dissipates and the broken parameters of an immersive
> environment are revealed as just that—broken. Errant immersion is premised on
> making mistakes that make; rather than reading against the grain, accidentally or
> deliberately, the errantly immersed spectator both conforms to and exceeds the
> intentions of theatre makers, and escapes the aesthetic boundaries that they
> construct (67).

This approach to mishaps in immersive theatre helps us better understand the potential

for things to go wrong and why role-to-players might engage in dangerous behaviors or

insert themselves into situations that pose a danger to them and/or others[44]. We can

assume most role-to-players are not seeking to commit or be subjected to harm. Instead,

they may have misinterpreted the spoken or unspoken rules at hand or transgressed the

production boundaries without realizing so.

Alston uses the phrase 'mis-take' to more accurately describe this phenomenon

(65). 'Mis-take' implies that an error was made but qualifies the responsibility of this

error: the action is by the role-to-player, but the cause is via the immersive environment.

This is an environment with "broken parameters" in which the rules of engagement are in

constant flux, both within and across productions. This means that immersive productions

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[44] Particularly in moments of intensity like stage combat scenarios, dance performances, climatic acting
moments, etc.

require omnipresent negotiations between role-to-players and performers, not only about space and behavior but also action. Asking role-to-players to creatively engage with dramatic material and perform in these alternate, constructed realities means some are so willing to transform or transport themselves that they err in their invested playfulness. Alston frames these mis-takes positively: "The errantly immersed audience member does not digress […]; rather, she enhances further the commitment to creative productivity that they elicit" (65).

Perception of boundaries is important—we cannot render bounds invisible and expect role-to-players to intuit their existence without careful design. Nor can we invite role-to-players to inhabit unique roles in blurred realities while expecting them to treat boundaries as stable entities given their wild variance and across productions. As a personal anecdote, the highlight of my experience during DinoLion's *Lionshare* was when a performer posing as a homeless man wandered through the space seeking to be touched. When two other individuals and I dared to touch him, contrary to the voyeuristic etiquette of the rest of the production, we were whisked away to a private location and treated to a dramatic encounter that others did not experience. In that moment, a boundary was renegotiated, and we were rewarded for daring and taking a leap of faith. Certainly, the performer facilitated that through the gesture of reaching out; however, as role-to-players we were encouraged to engage in a potentially awkward behavior where the reward vastly outweighed the penalties. This is an unspoken rule of much immersive theatre.

Inherent Risk in Immersive Theatre

Role-to-players cannot always be keyed into what is and what is not part of the show. Alston includes another anecdote in which he crossed through an unlocked door with a 'DO NOT ENTER' sign during dreamthinkspeak's production *In the Beginning,* inadvertently entering into a construction zone and not realizing it was not part of the show until he tripped over a toolbox (64). As comical as this instance is, it is a wonderful case study on how immersive productions destabilize normative processes of acting and being. He states, "In the context of an immersive theatre performance, a sign that reads 'DO NOT ENTER' means much the same as a sign that reads 'ENTER'" (64). I agree with this sentiment and will clarify it: in the reality-blurring context of immersive theatre performance, it becomes unclear what is part of the narrative storyworld, which actions are rewarding, and what codes are inflexible.

Scholars have asserted that this inherent uncertainty is one of the most significant tools that immersive theatre uses to impact its audiences:

> The immersive theatre that Punchdrunk proposes offers a radical way of re-introducing fragmentation and incompleteness to the act of engaging audiences, establishing new ideas of theatrical presence. With its disconnected theatrical sequences Punchdrunk challenges the sense of dependency on finite representational outcomes, while the spectators' constant repositioning within the spaces intensifies a critical engagement with the 'here and now' of a theatrical event […] it is the swift undoing of the audience's capacity to connect and codify meanings that gives way to a 'Lynchian', immersive and dream-like perception of their pieces. (Papaioannou, 172)

> The performance required that I, as a spectator, negotiate wave after wave of mixed messages about my relationship to the work and continuously reposition myself, mentally and physically, in terms of its evolving processes […] Through our immersion in the world of the performance we are both part of, and party to, the artistic process. We are implicated through our actions, and increasingly find ourselves unable to identify the boundary between the real world and the fantasies enacted, unable to say how much we believe and how much is make believe. […] It is in this unsettled zone, where expectations of normative relationships between

ourselves and an evolving artwork are confounded, that *Make Better Please* locates itself. (Elizabeth Swift, 144-145)

The active engagement and presence asked of role-to-players beyond mere spatial interaction is part of the unique artistic, meaning-making process immersive theatre offers. The blurring of boundaries and constant renegotiations demand interactive engagement on a multiplicity of levels, both mental and embodied. Yet this must still include a sense of agency on the part of role-to-players—the choices made in response to the performative event and how the performance responds or is altered in turn fuel immersion's drive (at the very least from one's personal perspective). Thus, uncertainty encourages engagement and exploration, resulting in an evolving audience perception needed to situate role-to-players inside the work instead of relegated to its periphery. In shaping role-to-players and the greater choreographic landscape, practitioners not only have to facilitate boundaries, but also ambiguity.

Relating back to anecdotes referenced above, the inherent uncertainty of immersive theatre combines with a playfulness of role-to-player action and perception, rewarding those willing to steep themselves in the alternate reality yet resulting in potential for boundary-breaking. As Rose Biggin elaborates in her book, this signals toward a 'gameness' within immersive theatre (see Chapter 7, 153-172). Especially in shows containing hidden secrets and coveted encounters for a limited number of chosen people, there are rewards for those who explore, interact, and engage with performers more (164-165). While some brush this off as just being in the right place at the right time, there are plenty of others who modify their actions and behavior through space to have a better chance of finding/encountering these rewards (Klich 226). Biggin cites the existence of a popular, fan-authored points system for *Sleep No More* that gamifies the

experience (153). The rewards available to heighten one's immersive experience, not only in a way that is personally touching but makes it comparatively quite special, often prioritizes a willingness to confront uncertainty through trial and error (Alston identifies this as the value of 'entrepreneurialism,' see below). This is particularly an issue for moments of intensity where role-to-players may be tempted to somehow intervene to unlock new outcomes or pathways—ambiguity can be interpreted as opportunity.

Clearly, uncertainty is privileged in immersive theatre, so what does that mean for rigorously rehearsed and managed moments of intensity which tend to be at odds with the unpredictable? It means that there are *inherent risks* ever-present in the immersive environment that cannot be eliminated but absolutely must be controlled. In another of his articles, *Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre*, Alston seeks to tease out the neoliberal values he believes are part of immersive theatre, an artform that has its roots in the West, draws consumers, enables certain behaviors and ethos, and even attracts advertisers. While he approaches the idea of 'risk' from the context of neoliberalism, his discussion outlines the general risks and negotiations role-to-players take on. If we are trying to control risks in a moment of intensity, then we must first recognize their numerous possibilities. Alston elaborates on this:

> To take a few examples from immersive theatre practice: daring to be bathed in Adrian Howells' *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding*(2011); daring to be kidnapped in Blast Theory's *Kidnap*(1998); daring to say yes to strangers in the street in Look Left Look Right's *You Once Said Yes*(2011); daring to touch, to taste, to dance on countless different occasions... Daring ranges from the confrontational to the trivial, but in all instances there is a sense of putting oneself on the line, often in the presence of others. These examples suggest that it is possible for risk to be encountered in immersive theatre, provided the appropriate mediating factors are in place, such as exposure within a given society to risk in all its guises (such as intimacy, abduction and trust in strangers),

emotional and affective dispositions, education and framing of knowledge-not to mention the influence of a number of heuristics ranging from availability, or ease of recall, to anchoring (using prior knowledge or experience to judge and act upon a new risk scenario) and hindsight (Slovic, Fischhoff and Lichtenstein 2000; cf Tversky and Kahneman 1974). (11-12)

Taking on risks leads to many of the rewards of immersive theatre. However, there exist negative risks as well. Alston builds upon this by citing the major, overarching risks "central" to immersive experiences. He lists the risk of not understanding the protocols of a given theatrical practice, the risk of unclear participatory rules, and the tension between risk and chaos that audiences navigate. These risks derive from the research of others, but Alston importantly adds that:

> the taking of participatory risks also relates to the production of affect and emotion. Embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt and shame become potential risks for participating audiences, particularly when, to recall Sophie Nield, the participatory offer is made and one finds oneself 'awaking to the actor's nightmare of being on the stage, and not knowing the play' (Nield 2008: 535). (12)

These risks are destructive to the immersive state as self-consciousness overrides imaginative playfulness and role-to-players are meant to feel punished by the environment rather than rewarded by it. This stifles future impulses of risk-taking that could lead to positive, intriguing encounters and experiences. Of course, minor mistakes such as opening the wrong door do not disrupt immersion, which is why Alston also argues that errant immersion is possible. However, major errors? where role-to-players unknowingly defy expectations and the production must directly intervene (such as via stage managers and ushers) unravel immersion as a process of negotiations. Role-to-players subsequently would rather remain comfortable and safe than expose themselves to the vulnerability of play. These are risks we must carefully control.

The resulting conundrum is that role-to-players are encouraged to risk-take in an environment that simultaneously seeks to keep them within bounds yet not impede the immersive state. This is problematic; boundaries are inherently flawed and breakable, and role-to-players may mis-take out-of-bounds or off-limits material/actions/spaces as opportunities for discovering/unlocking rewards. While we can shape role-to-players as individuals and choreographic landscape, we must uphold ambiguity. This is a lot to consider and make sense of.

Improving Boundaries and Understanding Role-to-Player Behavior through Game Studies

To ease our approach (and loop in interdisciplinary perspectives like Biggin), it is useful when accounting for risk to consider the gameness of immersive theatre. Immersing role-to-players requires constant series of negotiations, processes of figuring out, and active repositioning. Thus, immersive theatre can be approached as a game whose players seek rewards, avoid penalties, and are behaviorally shaped by in-game mechanics and contexts explicit and implicit. As Rosemary Klich states in her analysis of Punchdrunk alongside video game studies:

> Punchdrunk present a closed product that can be explored only within certain constraints and with respect to specific rules. While these rules are clear and participants may pursue personal or game-identified goals, they may also engage in a less structured, more instinctual form of play. […] immersion and engagement may shift between ludic interaction (self-aware decision-making) through which participants select their path, choose their proximity and test their pace, and paidia (imaginative, instinctive fantasy) by which they respond to encounters, explore the scenery and spontaneously react to, and act upon, the performers and environment. (227)

To Klich, immersive theatre such as Punchdrunk's operate under a similar, rule-based structure to video games—one that encloses audiences and encourages exploration within

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an alternate reality (223). She argues a game studies vocabulary and increased understanding of immersion through ludic and paidic play help us better articulate qualities of immersive experiences (228).

Klich is partly building off of transmedia narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, a somewhat popular citation in immersive theatres studies (also found in Swift; Biggin). While Ryan is most known for her theories on immersion, it is worth noting here her concepts of narrative games and playable stories. In Ryan's essay, *From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative*, narrative games are defined as forms where story is meant to enhance gameplay (ludic) whereas playable stories are forms where gameplay is meant to produce story (paidic) (45). Onto each of these, Ryan broadly attributes an approach of narrative structure. For paidic playable stories, a bottom-up approach is generally taken in which defined personalities generate narrative from their interactions (such as the TV show *Survivor* and the video game *The Sims*). She notes as a drawback the practical inability to craft traditional Aristotelian curves or resolution once a conflict has ended. In contrast, ludic narrative games usually follow a top-down approach where the story is fixed—if choices are available, they are finite and lead to pre-defined endings. These are games in which plot, storyworld, and/or game design are prioritized (52).

Immersive theatre encompasses both approaches through its gameness, structures, and complication of narrative understanding. The bottom-up approach of paidic playable stories can be viewed as more analogous to role-to-player experience. Focus on immersive audience subjectivity means audiences are conceptualized as constructors of their own personal narratives to some degree. Role-to-players' creation of story through

imaginative interactions and environmental exploration are production goals—a purposeful design element. From the perspective of practitioners, ludic top-down design seems closer to immersive practice since we follow traditional theatrical processes of shaping and structuring stories we want to tell—whether crafting actions and effects around role-to-player agency or framing a storyworld with user interactivity.

Yet these approaches can easily be flipped as well: there are role-to-players who actively play a ludic game. Even without a literal scoring method (as in Biggin's fan point system example), some role-to-players have goals aligning more with gaming the experience rather than playing directly into its imagination. Furthermore, there are designers who value immersive theatre for its interpersonally generated events, championing actor improv and role-to-players' reactions to themselves as primary performance events. Therefore, paidic and ludic approaches are not a binary for role-to-players nor designers—Ryan has stated these are not mutually exclusive (53). Immersive theatre pieces may operate within each of these four perspectives, especially given role-to-players and designers switch between forms and foci of play.

Articulating immersive experiences in terms of narrative games and playable stories—ludus and paidia—expands our knowledge of how we enable playfulness and gameness in role-to-player behavior while designing around and for these states. This is necessary if we are to balance boundaries with ambiguity as well as shape role-to-players and the choreographic landscape. More specifically, motivations for risk-taking, testing and negotiation of unstable boundaries, and the appeal to experience moments of intensity are better understood via defining goal-driven behavior.

The Goal-driven Behavior of Role-to-Players

As a thoroughly investigated topic in gaming studies, goal-driven behavior recognizes how goals are supported by rule structures that fuel ludic/paidic involvement—how we purposefully and inadvertently shape role-to-player behavior while accounting for their agency. Game narrative/design theorist Gordon Calleja is a popular citation for immersive theorists[45] primarily because of his extensive parsing and reformulation of what constitutes immersion in his foundational book, *In-game*. Within his multi-dimensional player involvement model (see Chapter Three), his final plane of player experience, ludic immersion, focuses on goals, rewards, and behavior. Calleja argues that ideal paidia[46] cannot be totally achieved by digital games given all in-game possibilities and behavior are bounded by the coded rules of the game. He thus focuses on ludic rules while occasionally alluding to paidic elements that digital games approach. Since I have shown how ludus and paidia are integral to immersive theatre, we can delimit Calleja's argument as we translate it to our medium, applying his insights of goal-driven behavior to paidic approaches as well.

When applied to immersive theatre, Calleja's analysis of rule systems and goal-driven behavior elucidates how our imposed boundaries and limitations *generate* role-to-player behavioral motives and actions, not just frame or restrict them. To demonstrate this, I will walk through some of his major points and build upon them:

> Although rule systems play an important part in drawing players into a game and keeping their attention during the moment of gameplay, rules are not often the focus of conscious attention. Rather, the rule system manifests itself experientially in the form of decision making and the pursuit of personal and game-defined goals. (149)

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[45] See Alston's *Making Mistakes*; Machon's *Watching, Attending Sense-Making* and *Immersive Theatres*; and Klich

[46] He cites Roger Caillois' definition of the form as "uncontrolled fantasy" (147).

This is an important qualification about rules that relates quite well to immersive theatre. Our rules provide structure and frame unique actions like exploration and movement that attract our role-to-players in the first place. However, they are often not the focus of our productions but a way of informing decisions and goals on personal and production-wide levels. Calleja goes on to discuss the nature of these goals:

> Choices in games tend to be made in relation to the pursuit of goals set by the game or by players themselves. Pursuing a goal can be an end in itself—an autotelic experience yielding satisfaction within a rule-based system of meaning—or it can be fueled by the desire of attaining a reward. (150)

Goals inform choices by role-to-players in immersive performances as well. Goals can be set by the game and/or the players, and within our discipline they can be ludic or paidic. Some are more ludic, such as winning, unlocking an exclusive part of the experience, or simply enjoying gameness and challenge in themselves. Others are more paidic, like the reward of aesthetic appreciation or pursuit of diving further into the fantasy and storyworld. Hence, goals range from enjoying the ride to the desire to achieve/receive something.

The environment also facilitates the creation of goals. Calleja adds that "goals are not only present when specifically implemented in rule systems; open virtual environments also support the setting of goals by individual players" (150). He follows this with the example of the video game *Grand Theft Auto IV*, describing it as a series of minigames with scripted linear narrative (150-151). This insightfully complicates the video games of today since they have so much more content, goals, and games than the past. The *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) series is entirely mission-based, and completing missions reveals more of the narrative. However, players are always able to engage with secondary content like bar games, arcade games, etc. Furthermore, each entry establishes

increasingly more detailed environments encouraging exploration and discovery. *GTA* is

notorious for the agency it allows its players and, in turn, how players form their own

goals (e.g. killing everyone in sight or stealing a jet from a military base). Especially with

the growing presence of massive multiplayer online games (MMOs)—which *GTA* has

since joined with the insanely popular *GTA Online*—players can form goals together.

This prompts Calleja to conclude:

> Goals can thus be determined by the game system, set by the individual player, or
> negotiated by a community of players, in the case of multiplayer games. Personal
> goals can be separate from those established by the game, and thus their scope
> depends on the degree open-ended play allowed by the game system. (151)

Therefore, environments with the agentic ability to explore/experience in a non-

processual manner generate vastly more opportunities for player-created goals. Since

immersive theatre often features open environments or at least environments that are

explorable, the genre accommodates personal goals. Large open environments like those

of Punchdrunk that propelled immersive theatre's success are comparable to sandbox

games: open-ended digital games that give players the ability to roam freely and perform

more actions across swathes of space. Perhaps the most important quality of sandbox

games is that they "allow players to decide their course of action in the game

environment without penalizing them for not following the set storyline" (151).

Immersive theatre does this as well—to an extent. The caveat is while players in sandbox

video games can return to and re-engage with the principal narrative where they left off,

immersive theatre ephemerality means you either catch events or you do not, and often

these events occur simultaneously in different locales. Thus, we must deal with a

"fragmentation" of narrative (Papaioannou, 172). Some immersive theatre productions

will employ the use of cycles or loops to increase viewing/interactive opportunities of

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events (e.g. *Lionshare*). Yet in such instances, role-to-players find their goals and resulting goal-based choices carry the weight of profoundly different subjective experience. Some run around and attempt experiencing as much as possible to string together a narrative through line. Others embrace the sandbox environment openness, forming personal goals less concerned with the main narrative and more focused on exploration, aesthetic enjoyment, interacting with secondary characters and their stories, etc. The variety of role-to-player goals increases manifold the more agentic behaviors we enable.

Role-to-players actively sense this agency, and this sense leads to the pleasure felt when a goal is reached. Following his interviews with gamers, Calleja notes:

> The satisfaction of goal completion is made possible by the sense of agency created by allowing players to decide to do something and then to actually do it. This, in turn, is enhanced by the exploration of the game space and game system […]. Players derive a sense of satisfaction from feeling that they have the liberty to create and strive toward their own goals. The players' ability to work toward their own goals is thus important not only in terms of satisfaction derived from reaching the goal, but also because it gives them a sense of freedom of action and control over their experience in the world. (152-153)

Beyond the descriptions of agency already covered and how agency is so highly valued in immersive theatre, this kind of goal-driven satisfaction brought forward by game studies expands how we conceptualize agentic behavior. Immersive practitioners, like game designers, walk the line between providing role-to-players with enough agency for this satisfaction and controlling their goals through system limitations to keep them within bounds. This is because "the lack of a clearly defined primary goals in a game environment can be confusing for players, while the requirement of adhering to a system-determined primary goal can feel restrictive" (154). While scholars and practitioners

debate the presence and extent of actual agency, most agree the sense or feeling of agency is important. Goal-driven agency lends itself to the immersion we cultivate.

With all these points in mind, we are offered a novel perspective on what immersive theatre is doing: crafting an atmosphere that encourages paidic playfulness and fantasy while providing structure and rules that enable ludic engagement. Because role-to-players are situated within states of playful behavior and goal-driven agency, they test physical and behaviorally coded boundaries in search of reward or to accomplish goals—boundaries that shift, are flexible, and/or are rendered imperceptible unless violated. While there are preventative measures such as rule clarification through briefings or subtle shaping of role-to-players and the choreographic landscape, these are insufficient. Boundaries set by theatre makers as behavior-mediating tools are inherently permeable, broken, and breakable—even by role-to-players doing their best to remain within them. Furthermore, these unstable boundaries provide ambiguity, encourage risk-taking, and help generate goal-driven motives and action: all of which facilitate the agentic decision-making by role-to-players that immersive theatre highly values. Immersive theatre environments allow non-processual exploration to differing degrees depending on how akin to a sandbox a production is; the more freedom, the more possibilities for role-to-player generated goals and decision-making. This heightened agency is sensed, these possibilities lead to goal-driven satisfaction, and the pleasure of freedom and choice cultivates immersion. As role-to-players pursue the immersive state, their creative, goal-driven agency ensures risk is always presence given production parameters can be broken as mis-takes of audience perception that ludic or paidic reward/opportunity exists beyond the current boundaries. Since boundaries so often shift

within and across productions, and practitioners render many of them imperceptible to lower barriers to immersion, role-to-players cannot be expected to know what is and is not part of the playful fantasy. This is a major problem, especially for moments of intensity in which the potential for harm and danger is greater. Thus, active facilitation is absolutely necessary, not only through shaping of role-to-players and the choreographic landscape, but also via indication of no reward or redirection of role-to-player action.

Indicating No Reward and Using Negative Feedback to Redirect Role-to-Players

Properly indicating no reward entails understanding the many types of goal-driven behaviors and rewards that exist. Calleja spends the rest of his chapter on ludic immersion doing just this. Rewards can manifest as received objects, unlocked abilities granting increased mobility/agency, new explorable parts of a map or environment, pleasure in completing tasks, satisfaction of racking up high scores or watching points/levels/stats steadily increase, new methods of interacting with other players, revealing cut scenes or parts of the narrative, or emotional impacts by aesthetics (159-164). All these rewards are mirrored in the immersive theatre genre: tokens and objects are given to role-to-players; agency is expanded in one-on-ones where individuals have increased interactivity with performers; thorough exploration reveals secret rooms or locations others do not know about; challenge and task completion provide pleasure; bragging rights are won through audience-developed point systems; excitement is had in being entrusted with special responsibilities that affect interactions; discovering story elements or watching/interacting with important events stimulates the fascination of storyworld and narrative enthusiasts; and the aesthetics of a particular artistic space or deliberately chosen perspectives lend to artistic appreciation. Of course, the value of

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rewards is entirely subjective (159). Since there is vast potential for goals and rewards, whatever controls practitioners adopt for mis-taken perceptions of errant role-to-players must account for this great variety. This is further complicated by shifting rules across and within productions which are unclear or unfelt by role-to-players.

Of course, any strategies indicating no reward or boundary transgression must account for the positioning and functions of role-to-players—the six axes outlined in the previous chapter. This anticipates potential, unwanted behaviors while directing clarification to prevent particular misunderstandings. In other words, barriers to immersion are minimized by pinpointing a revelatory light on boundaries where most needed in a specific moment.

If we turn to the strategies of Strange Bird Immersive's *The Man from Beyond*, we find methods of indicating no reward illustrated across each axis of role-to-player behavior:

Concerning the scripted or designed roles of role-to-players, *The Man from Beyond* establishes that role-to-players are guests to a séance and interactivity with actors is a must right off the bat. Prior to the experience, role-to-players receive themed emails with a formal invitation to the séance. Thus, they know what their roles are before walking in. In addition, Madame Daphne greeting visitors and prefacing action with fortune-telling/card reading accustoms role-to-players to acting with the actors. Roles are clear from the get-go, and role-to-players are eased into role actions that differ between immersive productions. Performing outside these roles is implicitly understood as unrewarding.

The player axis of interactivity and playfulness is addressed through careful design of furniture and props to have clear, discoverable functionalities indicating what is manipulatable, unlockable, and holds no secrets. This allows role-to-players to intuit what is meant to be interacted and played with, without the need to be explicitly told. The knowledge of no reward is conveyed implicitly when design accounts for gameness.

Regarding the role-playing of role-to-players, the performers focus on the facilitation of genuine truth as opposed to gamey responses (e.g. the prior example of Daphne wittily correcting my response to her question). In other words, role-to-players are shaped into unscripted role-playing as themselves and not as invented personalities. Further, they are encouraged to role-play as if the séance is real rather than approaching the production from a purely ludic perspective. With subtle feedback to interactions, ideal role-playing is defined through playful trial and error. This allows unscripted role-playing exploration but communicates when certain role-playing is not going to be rewarded.

In every immersive production, there is a role to be played by its audience in service of it. Thus, it must be clarified what is asked of role-to-players and how it affects the production. In *Beyond*, the closure of the exit door revealing a scrawled command for role-to-players to earn their escape is indicative of the new goal asked of role-to-players. This exit by Madame Daphne also places the responsibility of appeasing Houdini's spirit onto role-to-players. Whether role-to-players succeed or not at playing their role determines the production's ending, and given the escape room format, they often sense the stakes of their performance. The door also keys them into the reality of no reward

back in Madame Daphne's parlour[47][48] —everything pertinent is in the séance room. Immersive practitioners should integrate what is expected of audiences into production elements at pivotal moments to define the bounds of play and reward.

Such pivoting leads to the next axis, any shifts between roles and playing—agentic behaviors and gameness. Major behavioral shifts should be carefully delineated. It is difficult to not be explicit since new etiquettes, rules, or modes are often listed out, but there are ways of incorporating them less conspicuously. *Beyond* has a briefing within its liminal 'rules hall' that clarifies the *shift* in rules, play, and goals. By having the rules on portraits, proceeding through the hall via candlelight, and Madame Daphne play into the pretense of how to do a séance 'correctly,' aesthetic and dramatic elements mask the briefing and lower immersive barriers. Therefore, creative approaches to distinguishing shifts uphold immersion while outlining the behaviors that lead to reward and those that do not.

Lastly, the range of behaviors from a role to a player must be accounted for, given that role-to-players can set their own goals beyond the production's. So long as the scope of these are limited, production boundaries will not be seriously transgressed. *Beyond'*s escape room portion provides a specific primary goal and time-limit to encourage cooperation and focus on puzzles over other behaviors. For example, while some role-to-players may focus on finding all the story elements (paidia) and others on how fast they can complete puzzles (ludus), the clear primary goal and time constraint facilitate balance

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[47] An important note since the door is left unlocked for safety reasons
[48] The creators actually informed me that nearly all their audiences have abided by the note and not tried to open/go beyond the door. This demonstrates the efficacy of directly indicating that there is no reward as well as supporting the assertion that immersive performance works on the active, performance of belief by audiences.

between production and role-to-player goals. The range of behaviors is limited yet remains flexible to permit agentic decision-making and playfulness. Strategic behavioral limitations guide role-to-players away from non-rewarding endeavors.

These examples demonstrate the importance of indicating no reward, as well as how the role-to-player concept refines the targeting of such indications to be narrow, impactful, and undisruptive to immersion. They also provide ample ideas for practitioners. While most of these are preventative measures, a few hint toward another controlling method: negative feedback.

Whenever we step in and redirect players, whether obviously or subtly, we provide feedback that they exited the bounds of play; hence the idea of negative feedback. Negative feedback does not have to be off-putting—it is merely corrective. Going back to Alston's examples of errant immersion, the 'DO NOT ENTER' sign was meant to be indicative of no reward. However, Alston tripping over a toolbox and realizing his err is a form of negative feedback. For obvious safety reasons, negative feedback is best when produced by practitioners. It is even better when integrated into the basic mechanics of the show. A wonderful example is *The Nest* in Los Angeles where role-to-players are given flashlights for navigating a dark space that are remotely dimmed or flickered if role-to-players wander toward areas they have not unlocked yet. In *The Man from Beyond*, the projector that reveals hints is also used by the game masters/performers to correct role-to-player behavior and clarify what is part of the game. This minimizes immersion barriers since the projector is integrated into the narrative and storyworld, so it is not intrusive. Furthermore, because it is remotely triggered by the game masters, they can quickly intervene should something go wrong. Unfortunately, it

is common across other immersive theatre to use ushers and stage managers that hop in and guide role-to-players back to where they need to be (such as Punchdrunk's use of marked ushers, and Talbot's example of an individual being called by producers after wandering in the wrong direction in *You Once Said Yes*). While these are solid fail-safes, more emergent negative feedback is disruptive to the game of immersion—this is perhaps why Calleja hardly discusses game penalties in his book. Thus, practitioners should find inconspicuous ways of integrating negative feedback within productions and ideally construct feedback that positively plays into the goals and gameness of role-to-players. For example, *Beyond*'s projector may resonate with some as a cool, aesthetic effect connected to the storyworld, and *The Nest*'s flashlights may inspire a ludic goal of purposefully testing boundaries to configure current playable space.

Indicating the absence of reward and providing negative feedback are crucial and efficacious methods of guiding goal-driven behaviors of role-to-players; however, they are not enough. Concerning moments of intensity, negative feedback and the implied absence of reward should not be relied upon as mediators of behavior in the moment. In any heightened event, the negative feedback of a role-to-player accidentally clobbered in the face by a performer has serious consequences for safety as well as the integrity of the production. While role-to-players can be preventatively choreographed to shape behavior and indicate no reward in becoming involved in particular moments (meaning boundaries do not need to be tested), there can always be mis-takes of what is in the realm of the playful fantasy and game. If emergent mechanics conflict with artistic goals by impeding immersion yet risks must be minimized in moments of intensity via boundary clarification, then we must sacrifice some aspect(s) of the ideal, immersive event.

But how? Our constructions of boundaries are inherently flawed. Direct guidance via signs or ushers is too emergent, can be mis-taken as concealed opportunities rather than prohibitors, and may intervene too little too late to prevent harm. Assumptions that role-to-players will mediate themselves are misguided; even if most will respect or avoid intense action, inherent uncertainty of boundaries means there are those who will seek to join in search of reward. The only option is to make value judgments on the immersive, intense act itself.

Limiting Intensity through Activity, Proximity, and Realness

I have theorized that dissecting moments of intensity into three referential planes allows better assessment of what largely constitutes these events and what practitioners can adjust to ensure safety. These are activity, proximity, and realness. While the theatrical ideal is to produce heightened events with the greatest impact on all three levels (as appropriate to the intended effect/affect of the moment), this ideal maximizes risk. For example, a performed, violent bar fight that 'breaks out' in the middle of a gathered audience featuring realistic combat can sow total chaos. Role-to-players may not know how respond to the activity, their proximity may make them a liability should a movement go wrong, or some may even be tricked by the dramatic realness and believe a truly real danger is present. All these instances make role-to-players a danger to themselves and others. Thus, some part of activity, proximity, and realness must be scaled back. Concessions and sacrifices to the ideal of the intense event must be made for safety and clarity.

Breaking down moments of intensity along the planes of activity, proximity, and realness better defines risks to safety, thus pinpointing what concessions can be made to

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increase safety yet limit barriers to immersion. Activity is not just what is going on, but the intensity with which it is choreographed. To use an example, the activity of an instance of stage combat is both the contextualized scenario as well as the physical choreography of the fight. Theatre makers are not too keen on minimizing the tension of high-stakes moments in dramatic texts, so it is unlikely concessions would be made on the scenario, though it is an option. This typically leads to sacrifices in choreography by default. If the intensity of the moment (here, the choreography itself) is scaled back, risk is minimized and safety is increased as there is less likelihood for something to go wrong. Simplification is one method since more complicated choreography means greater potential a mistake will happen. In addition, a reduction of intensity is another method of boosting safety; choreography with reduced energy means performers maintain more control over the situation and their movements. It is also worth considering marking the activity as a break in normal action, signifying a mode in which role-to-player agency is placed on hold, much like a cut-scene in a video game[49] (perhaps like the massive moments Punchdrunk bottlenecks role-to-players into). But as Calleja noted, this can lead to player frustration at the removal of agency (163), so this may disrupt immersion.

Proximity, or closeness to role-to-players, can also be manipulated to reduce risk. While immersive theatre's desire for action is to be up close and personal, sometimes safety needs it to be far away and separated. If the activity is complex, intense, and as realistic-looking as possible, then increasing distance between role-to-players and performers can mediate the event, providing performers plenty of space to execute

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[49] Biggin comes close to this in her discussion of interactivity, pointing out how cut-scenes in video games may serve to punctuate action and shape the story in a positive way than just being annoying interruptions of player control. Unfortunately, she never muses on a potential relation between cut-scenes and immersive theatre (73).

choreography with a degree error while keeping role-to-players out of harm's way (out of the actual action and out of the possibility of intervening). This also gives role-to-players a greater sense of feeling physically safe, better immersing them through comfortability in vulnerability or via less focus on securing themselves. A creative way to concede proximity is relying on separation of impassable, physical boundaries rather than large swathes of space. For instance, a role-to-player could sense closeness to choreography witnessed through a window to an adjacent space or across some inaccessible part of the dramatic space, such as performers on an above catwalk or level role-to-players cannot travel to. In stating open virtual environments allow for players to make their own goals outside of rule systems (150), Calleja implies more closed or controlled environments diminish capacity to act outside of rule-based goals. Thus, innovations in the spatial framing of intense events maintain the heat of action and keep everyone safe by reframing the goals of role-to-players (e.g. to witness, spectate, or aesthetically appreciate). Integrating this perspective of game design provides a tool for greater comprehension and consistency to spatial approaches for practitioners.

Lastly, realness is perhaps the most important aspect to consider in mitigating risk during moments of intensity. This is not about immersive practitioner's craft of alternate realities but rather the extent role-to-players recognize what is within the bounds of the playful scenario and what is of the real world. Unlike video games which are separated from us by a digital medium, immersive theatre lacks such total separation from reality. While we could consider some immersive environments as liminal spaces distinguished from the quotidian world, this is certainly not the case for all immersive performance (especially those imposed onto an urban landscape, for example).

Let us take a few examples to clarify this point. It is a steep challenge mitigating risk if performers are posed as invading masked gunmen due to contemporary fears and horrific trends of mass-shootings—role-to-players may perceive greater risk in trusting that the gunmen are part of the show instead of doing everything possible to preserve their lives. Even orange-tipped weapons and a performance disclaimer may not be enough for the negative and likely dangerous ways some role-to-players can respond. Since immersion demands the blurring of boundaries, harmful misinterpretations of the alternate reality can easily outweigh any artistic benefits. Even a normative performance of fisticuffs can lead to dire consequences if role-to-players have any inkling the fight is real. As interesting as realistic choreography and special effects are, if role-to-players jump into action, start freaking out, or are traumatized by what they watch, the risks and negative potential outcomes of the production skyrocket.

Of course, there are productions featuring masked gunmen taking role-to-players hostage or other violent scenarios. Thrill-seekers are goal-driven to challenge themselves via the intensity of such simulations, relishing such productions. *66 Minutes in Damascus* had role-to-players cast as tourists, kidnapped and hooded by actors posing as armed Syrian military, and taken to faux interrogation cells and torture chambers. However, Adam Alston's *The Promise of Experience* and Lyn Gardner's review for The Guardian call out a host of ethical issues by this performance. They brandish strong critiques of the show's callousness in trying to replicate, simulate, or give role-to-players the illusion of approaching the reality of those victims who experienced such traumatic brutality. Clearly, ethical questions extend to the implications and politics of certain experiences.

Despite the pursuit of realness in immersion, replicating the 'real' in some intense events goes too far regarding safety and ethics. Unlike traditional theatre where intense events aim to be just real enough to pass, perhaps in immersive theatre their ideal is to be grounded in the real yet just fake enough to be recognized as performance. Regarding sensitive topics, this would also mean making known they are not attempting to stand-in for real experience. This limits barriers to immersion since less-emergent fakeness can be consciously overlooked through the performance of belief (Hunter, 97) and appropriately situates the event within playful and ethical boundaries, cueing role-to-player perception into what is real and what is fantasy.

Summary: Balancing Boundaries, Risk, and Role-to-Player Agency

In summary, immersive theatre practitioners are responsible for facilitating role-to-player agency, engineering boundaries and mechanics guiding goal-driven behavior, choreographing performers and role-to-players as landscape and agents, recognizing inherent risks in immersive theatre, and taking responsibility to mediate those risks—especially in moments of intense action. Given boundaries are inherently imperfect and role-to-players engage in gameness where rewards are presented to risk-takers, we absolutely cannot assume role-to-players will mediate themselves in every moment of a performance. Yet since we prioritize role-to-player agency, we must refrain from controlling them with strict limitations on actions and goals, providing emergent negative feedback for mistakes, or composing too loose of a structure in which they could be lost. We must carefully stage and frame the environment and choreography in order to minimize risk and control for mis-takes and boundary testing. Simultaneously, we must lower barriers to the imaginative ludic and paidic games that constitute immersion. This

includes indicating a lack of rewards beyond concrete and behavioral boundaries via the

role-to-player axes, and providing integrated, less-emergent negative feedback. In

moments of high intensity—such as dance, stage combat, or other intimate scenarios—

where the action is heightened, vulnerability is increased, and risks are manifold, we must

also concede ideals for complex action, close proximity, and portrayed realness to ensure

the safety of performers and role-to-players.

Incorporating games studies recognizes how practitioners and role-to-players

construct and structure experiences via top-down and bottom-up narrative approaches as

well as ludic/paidic goals of gameplay. This exposes how our structures enable and

generate goal-driven behaviors that contribute to immersion, thus allowing us to pinpoint

potential problems and develop solutions or responses that keep role-to-players in bounds

without disrupting immersion. It may even be necessary to make sacrifices to the ideal

immersive event. If executed correctly, such sacrifices foster immersion by allowing

performers to better perform their roles and allowing role-to-players to focus on other

immersive negotiations since their safety is sound.

CHAPTER THREE: EXPANDING IMMERSION THROUGH CONSENSUAL EXPERIENCE

We have covered how to position audiences as role-to-players and discussed how we can best craft boundaries knowing that they are porous and that audiences will test them via goal-driven behavior. Now that we have a framework that recognizes agency and types of behavior, we need to talk more about the facilitation of the immersive experience. Given that the immersive theatre genre is so diverse, it is not practical to generate a list of guidelines for how practitioners should go about putting their audiences into immersive states. That would be futile as immersion hinges on a host of factors, many of which relate to the myriad audience positionings, goals, and boundaries of different productions. Rather, it is far more useful to explore the tools used to germinate immersion as a cognitive, embodied state, and what we can unanimously do as a discipline to support our experiences. This leads me to discuss consent: a mechanic often misunderstood, under-utilized, or even outright feared.

In this chapter, I discuss consent in the context of shaping role-to-player behavior within production boundaries, re-framing it as useful for the betterment of immersive goals and audience-performer connectivity rather than something negatively detracting from the immersive state or burdensome to integrate.

I argue that consent is imperative to facilitating immersion as a method of carefully directing role-to-player goal-driven behavior, and that it expands immersive capacity along all three axes of immersion by enabling deeper, more meaningful engagement. I go on to highlight several common tools experiences use for facilitating consent and then evaluate them to discover improvements for shortcomings practitioners

often overlook. Ultimately, it is my hope to demonstrate how practitioners are responsible

for maintaining a consensual space. Lastly, I close the chapter with a brief exploration of

how Strange Bird Immersive's *The Man from Beyond* relates to the model and to consent.

Why Consent Is Imperative to the Immersive State

When talking about consent in immersive theatre, I am referring to informed

consent, which LARP[50] designer and immersive scholar Aaron Vanek defines as

"participants know what is happening or going to happen to them on a real-world level,

and they still choose to participate" (Vanek). Many current discussions about consent

focus on re-framing it as an active, ongoing participatory process. But there are ways in

which consent is treated as an obstacle or goal rather than the useful tool that it often is

and can be. Consent is often spoken about in terms of audience-performer interactions as

well as restrictive behaviors cited in things like waivers, but rarely do we talk about the

other ways in which it manifests within immersive experiences.

Consent can in one way be framed as clarifying the murky boundaries of an

immersive production and keying audiences into what actions are permissible. As in the

No Proscenium blog post, 'Constructing Consent in Immersive,' author Leah Ableson

relays how friends of hers new to immersive works did not know what to do or what all

they could do during an experience because of uncertainty of what was allowed. Not only

did this perpetrate something like an ongoing anxiety in these role-to-players, but it also

highly restricted their interactivity within the immersive production because they wanted

to ensure they were staying within the immersive bounds. While to many the "magic of

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[50] LARP is a common abbreviation for the term 'live-action role-playing.' An example would be groups
that organize and perform live battle reenacts. However, plenty of other LARPS are not historical, but
instead deal with fantastical role-playing.

immersive lies in your own agency," role-to-players can be "be trapped by the uncertainty of what they are and are not allowed to do" (Ableson).

As noted in the last chapter, the boundaries of immersive productions are inherently broken and breakable, and it is the blur between reality and fantasy that often gives immersive productions their power over imagination. So, we often find that we do not want immersive boundaries to become so emergent that they become an obstacle to the immersive state. But the flip side of that is that if we do not clarify the boundaries to frame role-to-player goal-driven and risk-taking behavior, role-to-players may not feel safe taking risks or even be able to glean a sense of what goals the immersive production allows for, thus inhibiting their ultimate engagement with the piece. Thus, while obfuscating boundaries may be seen as a method of fostering feelings of greater agency in role-to-players, this can inadvertently have the opposite effect: the creation of an anxious trepidation of rule-breaking that undermines agentic behavior.

Not only does this diminish risk-taking and goal-making, it also has the potential to limit the planes on which role-to-players operate. Considering that audience positioning and boundaries shift between and within immersive theatre productions, role-to-player knowledge of what they are consenting to and what they have received consent for shapes perception of boundaries they must act within and the planes of behavior they can inhabit. This traces back to the role-to-player ontology itself, elucidating what roles are available, how they can play, what they might role-play, how they have a role to play in service of the production, how they may shift between inhabiting a role and playing a game, and whether they have roles to maintain while playing games simultaneously. Obviously, this frames agentic decision-making. More profoundly, clarifying the

consensual relationship between role-to-players and the production allows role-to-players the ability to position *themselves* within boundaries as they see fit.

Consent becomes a navigational tool empowering role-to-players with potential directions in the negotiation of boundaries and customization of individual interactive playstyle. Since each role-to-player forms different goals suited to their preferential prioritization of experiential axes (system immersion, challenge-based immersion, and narrative immersion), the self-positioning possible via clear consensual relationships means role-to-players can orient themselves in ways that maximize their unique capacities for immersion.

Consent, then, is a methodology of alignment, not just of rules and boundaries, but of immersive capacities between role-to-players and productions. This synchronization is imperative to the immersive state. By limiting the scope of risk, consent channels role-to-player goal-driven behavior in ways a production is more likely to reward. This encourages increased engagement from role-to-players wary of too much intensity or boundary-breaking and gives all role-to-players better sense of how to wield their agency, thereby levelling the immersive playing field through greater safety for unique risk-taking and exploration.

How Consent Expands Experience Rather Than Detracting from It

If appropriately balanced and justified as to not be disruptive to gameplay, environment, or the storyworld (keeping them from being barriers to immersion), consent mechanisms expand immersive capacity along all three axes of immersion: system, challenge-based, and narrative.

Concerning system immersion, this is accomplished through the creation of a safe environment. A safe environment is one in which audience positioning capabilities and boundaries have been clarified, ensuring the relative physical and emotional safety of role-to-players while being an environment they consensually subject themselves to. If system immersion capacity is determined by the conglomeration of high-fidelity artificial stimuli, then greater exposure to and playful exploration of these stimuli under the intentional performance of belief by role-to-players means increased system immersion. Feelings of unsafety hinder awareness of these elements as attention is drawn to oneself and also discourage exploration that could reveal more of these elements during an experience. Simply, fearing for safety and wellbeing disrupts belief in the imaginary storyworld. A safe environment allows for greater role-to-player engagement and interaction with the stimuli that constitute this immersive axis, the environmental elements meant to subsume players into a fictional world.

> I believe most attendees would agree that they are better able to relax and enjoy an imaginative space and beautiful performance if they feel safe while doing so. There can be only a positive impact in letting audience members feel *more* able to explore things safely and without serious physical risks (Abelson).

Consent mechanisms expand challenge-based immersion by opening role-to-players to challenge as well as potentially allowing for transformation through challenge. Role-to-players will always have varying goals that motivate different behaviors; therefore, it is up to practitioners to provide the framework for challenges, an environment that encourages challenge, and concrete optional challenges for role-to-players. Whether it is having role-to-players roam around and create their own subjective experiences or planning moments of intensity in which role-to-players are asked to risk-take by vulnerably engaging with the show in some specified manner, challenge forms

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much of the fabric of immersive theatre and must be *managed carefully*. If challenge is

managed incorrectly, it can ruin a production for role-to-players. An example would be a

role-to-player being pulled in front of a crowd of others and made to do something they

are uncomfortable with.[51] On the part of role-to-players, willing discomfort is challenge.

Forced discomfort is violation. Thus, consent can allow challenges to be maximized

while preventing violations that ruin immersion.

Success in high-risk challenges can result in transformation. But what exactly is

transformation as a phenomenon? In her design reference work, *Patterns of

Transformation*, experience designer Ida Benedetto describes transformation as a

"fundamental change […] big or small, but what makes it transformational is how close

the change is to what makes someone who they are […] a state of disoriented awe [that]

allows for the participant to reorder their world view and sense of self in order to make

meaning out of what they went through. Transformation is an unraveling, followed by a

slow and sometimes prolonged stitching back together." Benedetto goes on to discuss the

importance and great responsibility of skilled facilitators to hold the space of

transformation that "recognize the bounds of safety and challenge to ensure that

participants do not venture past where their skills, the support of the experience structure,

and the care of the group can carry them." In 'Let's Play with Fire! Using Risk and its

Power for Personal Transformation,' LARP theorists Bettina Beck and Aaron Vanek

directly build upon Benedetto, adding that "a personal transformation converts the human

being through the process of the human doing. It can shatter parts of the previous self,

and reconstruction takes time." In addition, Beck and Vanek note that designed

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[51] Such as what Alice Saville discusses in her article (see the following sub-section).

experiences have power in their potential to "reach profound intensity within hours or even minutes" as well as to "create a space for the mind, body, and emotional self to work out in a controlled manner." Clearly, robust facilitation of consent is helpful in achieving such transformations, not just extreme challenge.

Clear cues and systems of consent allow for confident risk-taking in a more controlled environment, giving role-to-players the power to assess which challenges they wish to undertake. As Aaron Vanek points out in his No Proscenium op-ed, 'Informed Consent for Immersive Events,' some role-to-players may choose to pass on a challenge, some may accept, and others may even express they want to go farther, likely in search of transformation. Risk-taking requires the testing of boundaries with an element of the unknown. Though the emergence of boundaries can in some ways be a barrier to immersion, in other ways the clarification of boundaries encourages risk-taking. In her article, 'Saftey and immersive theatre: where should the boundaries be set?,' Anna James quotes Brodie Turner, a Consent, Safety, and Inclusion Consultant on how clear boundaries can be positive for immersive experience:

> "The nature of the show and the show's intention will be made clear, and
> expectations will be set," Turner says. "The idea that once you put in rules you're
> starting to eat away at the magic is not something we fully subscribe to – rather
> we think the boundaries give you freedom because once you know where they
> are, you have a full space to enjoy without worrying where the line is."

Here, the clarification of some consensual boundaries establishes hard lines that direct role-to-players to the areas that challenge, and thus possible reward, exist. Giving role-to-players a comprehensible, comfortable space to inhabit between consensual boundaries means providing them with safe actions that do not carry negative consequence. In having a safe set of behaviors and a better idea of what boundaries can/cannot be tested, role-to-players are better encouraged to take risks via better chances of success, the

absence of constant anxiety over whether they are following rules or not, and the ability to self-select when and how to take a risk.

Narrative immersive capacity is enlarged by consent mechanics that level role-to-player/performer dynamics and the ways in which role-to-players can interact with storyworld elements. Performers are obviously other parties that actively consent in the immersive landscape. Due to often interactions with and around role-to-players, performer consent is a huge current issue in immersive theatre (see below) as their safety can be put at risk by role-to-players who test the wrong boundaries or altogether ignore some. Just as role-to-players need a safety and control to better immerse themselves, so do immersive performers. Unsafety detracts from performance or disrupts it entirely, which can shatter the storyworld and break narrative immersion. Performers that feel empowered and have expansive knowledge of a production's boundaries can best play into the immersive storyworld as well as subtly shape role-to-player behavior toward rewarding outcomes that further build narrative, both in-storyworld and to role-to-player subjective experience. In addition, guiding role-to-players on how to consensually engage with performers makes them more likely to do so. Role-to-players afraid of negatively affecting immersive performance may refrain from performing action or speaking up. This is problematic given the abundance of productions that reward interaction with performers. Though an experience may be designed to unlock new or alternative narrative pathways from role-to-player interaction, if role-to-players are totally unsure about how they may interact with performers in a given situation they will often err on the safe side, withholding interaction to prevent harm to the experience of performers and fellow attendees. Even in immersive productions without live performers, there can be

anxieties about what narrative elements can be more deeply engaged with. For example, in an experience where one can discover world-building texts or artifacts by manipulating or searching through objects and space, there can be trepidation to explore if there is no clarification as to what is within bounds and what is off-limits. It is important for role-to-players to have a basic awareness of how a production consents to object and space manipulation. While the secrecy of an unfolding and possibly responsive narrative elements can further engross role-to-players into the storyworld, complete uncertainty of how to consensually engage with these elements can stifle engagement entirely and severely limit narrative immersion.

Now that I have shown how consent aligns and expands immersive capacities between role-to-players and production elements, I will explore current consensual issues and demonstrate some important methods for addressing and integrating consent within our immersive theatre context.

Addressing Issues of Consent in Immersive Theatre

First, we must start by evaluating current issues with consent in immersive theatre. Negotiating boundaries and consent is a two-way process, meaning both role-to-players and performers are at risk. Performers are notably at risk of being subjected to role-to-player actions that violate their autonomy—the most extreme transgressions are often sexual assaults. In contrast, role-to-players are more in danger of being exploited through assumptions productions make about what is best for their experiences. Secrecy and unclear boundaries are used to facilitate dramatic transformation which means role-to-players may not know what they are supposedly consenting to, and ill-guided moments of intensity may be forced onto role-to-players without them having the clear option to

revoke consent for particular moments. I will walkthrough recent articles that have exposed how immersive theatre has the potential to systemically harm either side.

Starting with performers, consent is shown to still be difficult to maintain even with increased awareness stemming from #MeToo and the presence of safety mechanics for performers within productions. Buzzfeed News dropped a bombshell report in 2018 about sexual assaults at the immensely popular *Sleep No More*. After speaking to more than 30 former and current Punchdrunk performers and staffers, 17 incidents of sexual assault by groping or misconduct were confirmed. This is in spite of the presence of ushers and crew, written policies of what to do when things go wrong, and performer training of how to handle such instances (Jamieson). The juggernaut of the immersive theatre world still failed to prevent such instances. Other examples abound as well. Emma Burnell cites in her article for the Independent how an immersive piece in London, *The Great Gatsby*, had two incidents in which police had to be called after audience members sexually assaulted performers. As Matthew Hemley writes for The Stage, the Equity theatre union in the UK announced last May (2019) that it would be addressing immersive theatre to solidify acceptable working standards that prevent performers being abused due to recent concerns. Lyn Gardner builds on this conversation in another piece for The Stage:

> "I've also had conversations with theatremakers about how audiences have become much bolder in their interactions with the cast as immersive theatre has become more common. But [recent] incidents of sexual assault on performers in their place of work show the dark side of these interactions."

Beyond the occurrences of sexual assault, it seems that role-to-players in the UK have become more comfortable with the practice since it has been popularized. Thus, they are

not as afraid to risk-take and test boundaries. In general, the loss of timidity may pose a danger to performers if safeguards are not properly implemented.

While it is certainly worthwhile to think about why role-to-players may think such nonconsensual interactions are acceptable in the context of immersive theatre, focusing purely on the possible psychologies of all role-to-players belies the fact that there are systemic issues that allow assault to occur in the first place. In spite of boundaries and consent mechanisms, there may always be role-to-players with ignorant or blatant disregard for performer consent if no options exist to immediately stop that unwanted behavior. The problem with many of the safety mechanisms that currently permeate the immersive theatre world is that they still prioritize maintaining the immersive storyworld over enforcing consent. Asking performers to clandestinely inform ushers or press secretive buttons means the onus is on them to navigate harmful behavior while upholding an illusion. Even when they are trained on how to stop nonconsensual interactions from role-to-players, performers may feel pressured to scale back reactions as to prevent shattering immersion for other role-to-players or souring the total experience for the violator in the possibility that the role-to-player made an honest mistake. Giving performers all the right tools matters little if they are thrown out the window for the prioritization of immersion over safety. As practitioners, we must reckon with ways in which we inadvertently place artistic goals for the production and performers over consent.

In a similar vein, another primary issue of consent in immersive theatre is that, occasionally, artistic vision is put before the best interests of role-to-players. Role-to-players can be exploited by pieces that thrive on dramatic transformation through

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uncomfortability yet have not thought through how role-to-players might react (let alone revoke consent). Alice Saville has written an excellent essay for Exeunt exploring this, called "Immersive theatre, and the consenting audience." Saville starts by talking about an extreme immersive production, *Barzakh*, in which role-to-players were put through a gauntlet. *Barzakh* was a show about how people bond in extreme conditions (Saville)— its name being an Islamic religious term for purgatory (Bear-McGuinness). Leo Bear-McGuinness of Wired UK paints a haunting picture of the show along with artistic insight from its creator Sean Rogg:

> Staged within an old factory in Welwyn Garden City, a misleadingly idyllic town north of London, entrants will be grilled through a four-hour-long trial of reverence and rebirth. Their clothes exchanged for uniforms, the willing group will be subjected to blinding light, chilling darkness, biting sound, and, ultimately, a palpable sense of a higher power. This is not a pleasant trip to the gallery. "We use every phobia you can imagine: suffocation and isolation and degradation, just one after the other, slapping the outside world out of them; cleansing them, and then preparing them for the final moment," says Rogg. Indeed, given its hellish toll, it's hard to imagine why anyone would want to experience Barzakh at all. But Rogg insists that entrants experience far more than just distress; they achieve true empathy.

Bear-McGuinness's article uniquely discusses how psychologists became interested in the show based on participant's having reactions akin to "extreme religious experience." *Barzakh* clearly prioritized transformation and subjected its role-to-players to extreme challenge and intensity to achieve this. Despite the tone of overwhelming artistic success and wonder McGuinness conveys, Saville raises more nuance and concern. Saville recounts the contradictory reactions of attendees:

> One woman who'd been through *Barzakh* compared it directly to torture. She told me that "They made us change our clothes to vest and shorts (it was 2 degrees outside when I went), force-feeding us jelly and liquids, making us walk barefoot on concrete and gravel." Emily Jupp's fascinating, wittily-written write-up on her blog calls it an "evil day spa", and raises concerns that the show's candles and curtains are a fire risk, and the warehouse's custard-smeared concrete floors are

something of a trip hazard. But I also talked to someone who sunnily commented that "anyone who'd done a mud run or military training would find it pretty breezy".

Saville also details how some attendees were made unwell by a strobe-light sequence meant to induce a mind-altering state, and how attendees were assigned to security guards opposite to their assumed gender. Not only is assuming gender bad practice, but gender dynamics are not equal. Saville points this out, elaborating how unequal gender dynamics fundamentally affect how role-to-players may respond based on differing traumas and lived histories.[52] *Barzakh* certainly may have succeeded for some in being transformational, but for others its intense challenges to physical and mental safety turned exploitative:

> One person who did *Barzakh* told me that "I felt like [the director] was playing the role of a god, thinking that through the torture he can take us to the feelings of empathy and connection. It actually created a completely opposite effect in me. In the part where we were supposed to surrender and feel like we are going to the other side I was just angry and repulsed by the whole thing. All I received was shock value" (Saville).

Though *Barzakh* is a somewhat radical example in the immersive theatre world,[53] it reveals how practitioner intent makes harmful assumptions of the role-to-players being facilitated.

In pursuit of dramatic transformation, practitioners sometimes subvert the well-being of their role-to-players as well as their artistic goals. Saville laments about moments across other productions in which she felt coerced, such as being taken on stage

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[52] For example, in another production Saville was walking down a street before being grabbed and taken to the side by a performer. As a woman rightfully conditioned with decades of warnings of such encounters along with the imposition of a fictional storyworld atop a real-life landscape, the inability to immediately gauge her safety was fear-inducing.

[53] That being said, it is not alone in its high intensity. Immersive horror experiences, such as from companies *Delusion* and *Creep LA*, are immensely popular and renowned for challenging audiences through touch, total darkness, and frightening intimate moments.

against her will, being fake-flirted with and made to dance with men under the assumption she was straight and would like the attention, and pressured into sharing sensitive information as part of fake group therapy. She states that not only have such occurrences often ruined the show for her, but "each time, the stress of the situation landed me in this heartpounding space of panic – feelings totally unrelated to the ideas that the artist was trying to explore" (Saville). Saville goes on to demonstrate how assumptions about role-to-players exercises a power dynamic over them since they do not command the performance space:

> The act of bringing someone on stage involves making assumptions: about their level of mobility, about whether their level of anxiety will allow them to participate in the required way. Sometimes these assumptions extend to their gender, sexual orientation, political leanings and ethnicity too (oh, so many shows hunting for their next white-straight-male victim). When performers assume wrong, it's painful. And I think that because artists are so experienced in performing, and working with other performers, they also forget that they own the stage. It's a comfortable arena with clearly defined parameters for them. But for 'normal' people it's a baffling, treacherous space, and artists often overestimate audience members' ability to understand its rules, and to respond to new situations on the fly.

Practitioners must take care to realize just how subjected role-to-players are to the whim of the experience—they are not allowed a full picture of the boundaries and may also feel pressured in the moment to uphold the illusion out of fear of ruining the show for others, the promise of reward, uncertainty on how to bow out, or even fear of missing out (concerns *Barzakh* attendees shared with Saville). Ultimately, improving consent in immersive contexts requires the recognition of power dynamics and exploitation between role-to-player/performer/production as well as how we tend to uphold immersion at all costs rather than shatter the storyworld for safety. So how should we navigate risk-taking with consensual safety?

As established in the last chapter, there must be a balance between risk and safety. Increased safety often translates into risk reduction, as seen in my proposal for sacrificing some aspect of activity, proximity, and realness. However, without risk-taking role-to-players are not allowed the agency promised of them and lose a central drive that compels them in their gameness to seek reward, thereby shutting down several planes of role-to-player activity. Risk must be allowed and it must be appropriately scaled, and consent is a way of allowing role-to-players the ability to scale up or scale down the risk in their experience. For those who wish to engage more greatly within a moment of intensity, consent mechanisms can allow them to take a jump into the unknown and possibly achieve transformation. Others may find that the potential rewards or the risk itself of a particular situation does not appeal to them and can opt out appropriately. This sometimes goes against artistic wishes in which creators want their audiences to experience a particular intensity for artistic value and the possibility of a changed perspective; however, in giving audiences agency we must also offer them trust and relinquish claims to their experience. This requires a balancing act in which the creator must shape an artistic experience to convey a particular set of messages while allowing for the possibility that audiences may react in a way that is unexpected or take away perspective that was unintended. Creators must be prepared to deal with the consequences of that, whether they be good or severe. This is often why those in the realm of consent and intimacy call for a check in after a few days or a week after which a person has had time to reflect and process their experience. If this is taken seriously, creators can then take this feedback and apply it to the design of the experience to shape

it in a way that is more beneficial to future audiences and perhaps even the artistic vision of the show.

The power of immersive theater to fundamentally alter a perspective or offer a life changing experience through transformation is severely diminished by a lack of risk. Yet, risk-based transformations will not result in positive change if consent is violated and role-to-players feel exploited. Thus, creators are fundamental to the negotiations of consent, pivotal to the boundaries that they create and the navigational capacity that they bestow upon audiences and performers. Though role-to-players negotiate in real time with performers and production elements, they are also abstractly negotiating with the structures practitioners have crafted. This means creators hold vast responsibility to appropriately frame consent and provide the correct tools to guide safe role-to-player/performer behavior.

Integrating Consent

Now that we have more context for the issues with consent in immersive theatre, I will tease out more specific assumptions about safety and consent, point out the flaws with them, and cite immersive practitioners/scholars that have came up with solutions. Since the immersive theatre genre is amorphous and diverse, I wish to shine light on how we can improve consent on a variety of fronts. I have chosen to focus on consent mechanisms that are or can be commonly integrated within the genre. These are waivers, detailed rules/briefings, standards of behavior, opt-out abilities, and transparency of safety.

For obvious legal liability reasons, waivers are commonly used across immersive theatre experiences and, unfortunately, they are overly relied upon. Waivers are often

used to provide proper warning of any particular dangers in a show (such as strobes or theatrical haze) as well as to communicate to attendees what behaviors are expected of them and what is prohibited. While these are beneficial, the problem is that immersive productions may lean upon the waiver far too much as a communicative tool. Waivers are often dense and/or unapproachable for readers since their primary function is as legal documents to waive liability and hold attendees accountable for serious violations. Important information about the dangers and expectations of behavior for a production should not be relegated to waivers that role-to-players may skim over and/or not even subsequently remember. Vanek offers two important insights on this front: that "most waivers are boilerplates with small type and intense social pressure to sign without reading, because the slow reader holds up the line" as well as that waivers may be too vague about production content, easily leading to misinterpretations. He demonstrates this confusion via a hypothetical waiver that says the show contains nudity and states "you will be touched by the actor." Vanek asks, "does this mean there will be a naked performer and a different clothed actor holding your hand? Or are those two things combined, and the audience will be unexpectedly kissed by a naked actor? People who consent to the first compartmentalized information may not consent to the combination of the two effects." This brings us to another point: waivers are one-time agreements and are not stand-ins for ongoing negotiations of consent. Saville is frank about this, writing that "consent is not signing a one-off waiver at the beginning: it needs to be ongoing, and informed, and accompanied with enough clarity that all audience members understand what they are 'meant' to do in a situation, and how and when they can say 'no'." Immersive creators may not want to dive into the deeper details of consensual issues in a

waiver out of fear of spoiling surprises, nor should they. Waivers should primarily serve the purpose of documenting liability, consent should be a continuing negotiation across the experience, and there exist additional, more efficacious methods of communicating and negotiating consent with audiences.

The primary way of setting consensual boundaries with role-to-players is often through clarification of rules and briefings at the start (or prior to) immersive experiences. Much like waivers, rule briefings are sometimes vague as to not spoil surprises, distract from the storyworld, or ruin role-to-player perceptions of agency. However, failure to adequately convey hard rules leads to unwanted behaviors as role-to-players take risks and test boundaries, especially if they are new to these types of experiences. Anna James quotes Andrea Moccia, senior producer at Secret Cinema, on setting rules and boundaries:

> "I do not think behaviour is getting worse, but there are more people new to this form of entertainment being exposed to it. It's up to us as the organiser that they know what the rules of the game are. So we know there can be absolutely no instance in which the audience member can say: 'Sorry, I didn't know that was out of order.' By being here, we know you've acknowledged our communications."

When performed correctly, briefings can have a vast impact in informing role-to-players of boundaries, establishing consent mechanisms, and ensuring that role-to-players agree to abide by the rules clearly communicated to them. This is because access to the immersive space is provisional—if agreed to, the door is opened; if refused or later ignored, ejection from the experience occurs. For example, in Spy Brunch LLC's immersive spy-thriller *Safehouse '82*, role-to-players were escorted from a meeting point to the house where the experience took place, then stopped at the door before entry and given a briefing over allowed/disallowed behaviors. This culminated in a quick, serious

warning about ejection if persistent rule-breaking occurred followed by the literal

opening of the door to the experience upon acknowledgement.[54] This tactic is built upon

and masterfully used by the House of Yes in Brooklyn, New York. A nightclub

specializing in maintaining a highly-consensual environment, the House of Yes employs

'consent guardians' that are trained in handling issues of consent and engage with guests

waiting to enter about the club's consent policies. Not only do they carefully explain how

to be a consent-minded guest and easily follow the club's rules, but they also have the

power to refuse entry to potential guests hostile or unconcerned with their policies and

philosophy (Pazos). For rules and briefings to be effective for immersive experiences,

they should be detailed, easy to remember, and strictly, continually enforced without

contradictions. Communicating clear and hard boundaries through rules and briefings

creates a controlled environment that healthily directs role-to-player risk-taking.

This bleeds into the importance of setting standards of behavior. While standards

of behavior do include having role-to-players follow the rules, they also encompass

giving role-to-players and performers tools to extend or rescind consent. Beyond frank

boundary-setting, it is necessary to establish what kinds of behaviors are allowed across a

particular immersive landscape as contexts and situations shift and role-to-players and

performers make implicit and explicit negotiations in real-time. Rules are clearly

communicated, unchanging boundaries; standards of behavior are spoken and unspoken

negotiations of social contracts and the ways in which role-to-players and performers

calibrate, or consensually align moment-to-moment. Ableson argues that "it should

always be okay for a performer, employee, or audience member to express the need for

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[54] Not only did I staff this experience, but I was also often in charge of giving these briefings.

help, or walk away from a situation that is putting them in danger" as well as from a part of the experience they have a change of mind about. Ableson is actually the scholar who directly calls for "setting standards of behavior" by "letting the audience know what *is* and *isn't* permitted," but her nuance about negotiating consent allows this concept to encompass in-moment performer/role-to-player interactions and communications. An example of setting a new standard of behavior comes from Persis Maravala and Jorge Ramos. Having realized how actors are not traditionally trained for the improvisatory, consensual work of handling audiences in immersive theatre during work on their *Hotel Medea* trilogy, they eventually adopted a terminology of referring to performers as 'hosts' and audience members as 'guests.' They've reconceptualized actors as those who perform, and audiences as those who are invited to attend as a means of focusing on the unspoken contracts between parties they find central to their immersive work (Maravala and Ramos). In the context of their particular production, the ontology of 'host' and 'guest' translate real-life standards of etiquette and interaction onto the immersive landscape as standards of behavior for performers and role-to-players to follow as a guide for negotiations and power dynamics. This helps sync role-to-players with performers, serving as a form of calibration. Specifically, calibration means "the many explicit and implicit ways that players have to negotiate playstyle, play intensity and sometimes things like genre" in order to ensure the maintenance of consent of all who are involved (Koljonen). So in the context of *Hotel Medea*, the customs of politeness, high respect, and thoughtful asking that frame 'host' and 'guest' interactions in real-life translate as standards of behavior to the immersive production, allowing for easier calibration of consensual alignment/agreement.

Calibration involves many calibration mechanics—"tool[s] for active player-to-player communication about playstyle intensity in a specific situation" (Koljonen)—with a particularly important subset being opt-out abilities. Opt-out abilities are more than just being able to walk away; they involve the standard of behavior that it is okay to do so at any time. These are great calibration mechanics that ensure continual consent. The group non zero one has made sure that there are always opt-out abilities for all offers of interaction (143-144). In their words, "Opt-out clauses allow participants to push themselves further, without the artist forcing those who do not. The responsibility of the offer always lies with the artist" (144). Non zero one tries to make their opt-outs "as comfortable as possible," having their performers cue the potential to opt-out by giving role-to-players a simple action to perform if they wish to bow out of that moment, such as "if you can't manage this heavy lifting, turn away now" (144). While non zero one has their artists present a cue for opt-outs, other companies and productions give role-to-players more control over when they can opt-out. Emma Burnell references how the theatrical company ONEOHONE Theatre uses a system of clearly visible sashes to maintain consent. If one removes the sash, they remove themselves from participation in that moment of the show; they are still present and witnessing, but they are not expected to take part in whatever interaction is occurring. This allows role-to-players the ability to explore something risky, but back out the moment they become uncomfortable. While these are incredibly positive examples of opt-out abilities, there are currently ways in which opt-out abilities inadvertently result in penalties when used. Returning to some concerns about *Barzakh* detailed above, while some guests felt they could leave at any moment, others felt pressured to stay since they thought they would miss out or did not

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want to ruin things for others (Saville). These are real penalties that cause those who

might normally opt-out to hesitate and then be exploited as they are pushed too far. In

addition, Vanek rightfully underscores how opt-outs can often be harshly all-or-nothing:

> In many immersives, saying a safeword (revoking consent) means ejection
> without refund. This can be perceived as exceptionally punitive, and some
> consider this frame to be coercive, especially when the ticket was expensive. A
> participant forced into a binary choice between "dealing with it" and losing $150
> is unlikely to walk away satisfied. An option to revoke consent for a specific
> interaction that does not jeopardize the patron's entire experience can at least in
> part address the issue of coercion.

For an opt-out ability to exercise maximal consent calibration with little coercion or

hesitation, it must be momentary and allow for role-to-players to opt back in. This just

means creatively structuring mechanics or the production to support opt-ins, such as how

ONEOHONE allows role-to-players to put their sash back on and join into the action

once again. When executed correctly, opt-outs are an incredibly effective method of

prioritizing role-to-player and performer consent.

Lastly, policies around consent must always be as transparent as possible.

Unfortunately, transparency is often seen as a negative trade-off since emergent elements

can be barriers to immersion and the genre prizes secrecy. Saville uses her article's

description to ask a question: "But can you really consent to an experience you know

nothing about?" Role-to-players do not know what 'role' they are supposed to perform or

what 'play' may be asked of them. If immersive theatre is intent on maintaining a high

level of secrecy for the surprise and novelty of experiences, then practitioners must be

more forthright on certain risks. Informed consent does indeed require being informed.

Alice Saville poses transparency as a unique moral question for immersive theatre. Aaron

Vaneck presents a creative, potential answer. Deriving and adapting concepts from Evan

Torner's essay, "Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games," which is focused on

tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, Vaneck introduces us to transparency of expectation and transparency of information. Essentially, transparency of expectation "tells the audience what might happen," whereas transparency of information "specifies what will happen" (Vanek). Transparency of information generally shapes transparency of expectation given that the information revealed is immutable and role-to-players make educated guesses of experiential possibilities based upon the hard facts and what is reasonably likely to occur (Torner; Vanek). Understanding nuances of transparency is important for Vanek because he later flips transparency as consent on its head, discussing how we might allow role-to-players to consent to being informed. While some role-to-players want to know precisely what risks they will encounter, "some people hate spoilers. They do not want to know what is coming even if it is extreme and personal, and in some cases, they attend the show *because* they want to be shoved off an emotional and possibly physical cliff." These people are often those desiring high-intensity transformation. Therefore, Vanek advocates for an "audience-empowered transparency" in which role-to-players can choose whether to view production information about risky elements or not. For example, he personally created two spoiler pages for *One Last Thing Before You Go*, an immersive play he co-created. One was for physical elements, the other for emotional ones, and both were linked in the main event description online (Vanek). Here, the production spoilers are transparency of information, while the general event description and contexts of his style of immersive theatre are transparency of expectation. Through this audience-empowered transparency, role-to-players are able to know the specifics, have a vague idea of what to expect, or go in totally blind. Maximizing transparency is certainly ideal for maximizing consent, but this

can be accomplished in ways like audience-empowered transparency that allows creators to retain secrecy for role-to-players who appreciate it while clearly disclosing details to other role-to-players who need the knowledge to feel safe.

In summation, practitioners hold much power and responsibility for making sure immersive experiences are as consensual as possible—something we must accomplish in our individual experiences and also as a larger genre/industry. Maravala and Ramos assert that "We must be more than just role models for ethical and responsible practice. As practitioners, we must share our methodologies" (Maravala and Ramos, Exeunt). This is part of a larger argument of how immersive theatre and audiences must be handled with care—a conversation happening across the industry as we incorporate how to handle consent in our practice. As I explored above, we must collectively realize the ways in which consent is integral to the immersive experience by acting as a methodology of alignment of immersive capacity. Furthermore, we must reframe consent as a tool that expands immersive possibilities by creating a safe environment that can be more deeply engaged with in which role-to-players have the ability to take risks and uncover additional narrative elements or undergo risk-based transformation. Experiences should thus be designed with consent in mind to appropriately control risk and protect role-to-players and performers. This requires re-evaluating some of our most common tools, such as waivers, rule briefings, standards of behavior, opt-outs, and transparency, and figuring out how to maximize consent and improve role-to-player experience. These strategies will ensure that immersive theatre can facilitate immersion to a greater extent; if performers and role-to-players consistently feel safe and respected, increased playfulness, vulnerability, and challenge acceptance will result. Facilitating immersion is highly

contingent on role-to-players and performers being able to lend themselves to these states and play into the illusion. Therefore, we must always place the welfare of role-to-players and performers first, making sure the fantasy of immersive theatre continually acknowledges the reality of consent.

How *The Man From Beyond* Exhibits and Enacts These Consensual Qualities

I will close this chapter with a brief walkthrough of how *The Man from Beyond* goes about consensually facilitating its role-to-players. I wish to relay the strategies that Strange Bird Immersive has used to foster greater immersion through high regard for consent.

Like many immersive experiences, *Beyond* begins with the signing of waivers; however, Strange Bird has found a clever way to make a normally trivial task attention-grabbing. Thanks to the warm-up period in the parlour role-to-players are given, more attention can be paid to waivers. All role-to-players are given hollow books as Madame Daphne welcomes them in and asks them to make themselves comfortable among the furniture. The books contain a small libation, a unique riddle for each to find a fateful card somewhere in the room that may offer a helpful perspective for the séance, and printed waiver designed to be a single-page, highly legible, and just as rustic as the props around it. While Daphne does not necessarily require a finished waiver for her to read a role-to-player's tarot cards, she does make a point about the necessity to read, sign, and hand waivers back to her. Not only are waivers a price of admission to the séance, but they may also be interpreted as a price for the tarot card readings. While it may seem that role-to-players eager to solve their riddle or get their cards read would hastily skim over the waiver, the concise and quaint design of it encourages brief yet focused engagement.

The waiver conveys necessary information like warnings about theatrical effects, but it is not leaned upon for establishing hard boundaries.

Strange Bird makes sure that boundaries are clear through consistent rules and an engaging briefing. Notably, they have their liminal space of the Rules Hall[55] before the séance in which role-to-players are given five rules to follow as a method of respecting the production. This clarifies that they will not need to perform any extreme actions such as breaking objects. By having rules framed as portraits in the dark and encountering each through the dim, focused light of a candelabra, learning the rules is akin to a series of dramatic revelations—its an exciting process. Strange Bird's creators are also passionate about keeping rules consistent across the experience and maintaining a controlled environment. This is made vastly easier with the integration of a well-designed escape room, and thus, puzzle logic where a definite path of solutions exists and the primary goal is to solve these puzzles. No puzzle contradicts the rules received nor requires non-standard behavior (such as breaking or climbing something). Consistency eliminates much confusion on the part of role-to-players; they may still test boundaries, but they understand that the basic rules are not changing without their knowledge. When the rules are revealed prior to the séance/escape room portion, audiences know that a transition is occurring and that rule-following is now a priority.

Concerning setting standards of behavior and negotiating with role-to-players, Strange Bird's practitioners take their craft very seriously. The creators, Haley and Cameron Cooper, informed me that the performers (including themselves) are all trained in the Meisner technique. They focus intently on reading people's reactions and body

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[55] This is a colloquial term they have coined for that hallway.

language, and adjust their behaviors based on their readings. While this is a more hidden negotiation, the actors particularly look for signs of trust in role-to-players and base their improvisations on that. Performers guide role-to-players around spaces with movement and body placement—it is apparent where you are going and where you should be. In addition, as I mentioned previously, they use subtle techniques to guide role-to-players back inside the boundaries to preferred behavior. When I was being a bit too ostentatious, Madame Daphne quipped me back to a place of truth. Furthermore, the premise of a séance the playing up of group interactions before the puzzling begins reinforces the importance of teamwork, which is central to the immersive experience as well as the escape room. In the rare cases some role-to-players decided to be antagonistic toward the show, either by trying to reveal Madame Daphne as a fraud, joking at Houdini's pain, or just not abiding by the intended path of the narrative by interrupting and making themselves the center of attention, the performers actually *lean harder* into their characters, showing confusion and hurt. As the creators put it, if the performer refuses to shatter the illusion and plays hurt as truth, audiences are less inclined to continue engaging in negative behaviors. All of these set the standards of behavior that role-to-players should follow the lead of the actors, engage with the performers in truthful, honest manners, and cooperate with their broader team to achieve the room's goals together.

When it comes to opt-outs, Strange Bird Immersive is very proactive in its approach to ensuring role-to-players feel safe, respected, and able to bow out if necessary. It is helpful that the moments of intensity in the show are one-on-ones (they count the tarot card reading as one as well) and mere spooky occurrences. There is no

intimate touching, nudity, sexual simulations, combat, laborious physical tasks, etc., which greatly reduces risk. During one-on-ones, performers make sure to keep role-to-players comfortable and to select those who demonstrate a desire to opt-in. In addition, they recently updated a puzzle which would trap a role-to-player inside and require both sides to work together to solve it. Previously, the performers had been very meticulous in asking if anyone has claustrophobia early on and pulling them aside to warn them about tight spaces. Yet after a handful of rare instances in which they had to open the puzzle because of a frightened role-to-player, the creators decided to eliminate the possibility of such a negative occurrence altogether. Their solution was to redesign the puzzle so that it could remain unlocked while keeping the same communicative challenge. The same goes for the door to the escape room; it is shut to mark the start of the escape room but never locked, meaning role-to-players can exit if needed. Role-to-players are never forced to stay in the experience or engage with something they do not want to.

Finally, the company does have some interesting measures for transparency. While a good degree of secrecy has to be maintained due to puzzle-solving nature of the experience, Strange Bird is fortunately very open with its role-to-players who approach them with questions and concerns (they often clarify that the experience is suspenseful, not horrific, and that no strenuous tasks are required). Yet what is more remarkable is their high value on having consistent open conversations involving all the actors. They want to make sure their performers feel safe, they value honest feedback on things that could be improved, and they truly embrace new ideas to continue building the best experience possible. Empowering performers through transparency is just as important as empowering role-to-players.

I have demonstrated the necessity of clarifying our approaches to consent in immersive theatre. In order to continue our immersive practice and immerse audiences, we also need to account for the total necessity of consent. Consent must take a central role in the discipline to protect role-to-players, performers, and other staff from violations while also being used to expand immersive experience as the tool that it is. The onus is ours to ensure consent is an active, ongoing, informed negotiation not confined to just a waiver, that boundaries are respected and clarified, that standards of behavior are calibrated between role-to-players and performers, that opt-outs are allowed and not penalized, and that we uphold transparency in unique ways that better serve everyone involved in an immersive experience. Practitioners ultimately have the duty of facilitating immersive experiences ethically—accountability for safety and consent is something we must own.

APPENDIX—A BRIEF HISTORY OF NARRATIVES IN VIDEO GAMES

The narratology versus ludology debate raged at the turn of the millennium because narratives occupied a tentative relationship to videogames at the time, most often being incorporated to *support* gameplay instead of making plot a primary focus. Before the past decade, only a comparatively small number of games contained intricate, detailed plots. The history of narratives in video games is complicated and hard to come by. Below is a concise account of the evolution of storytelling in this medium—it is important to keep in mind that exceptions to the rule have always existed in gaming history. However, larger patterns in game development have continually informed scholarly perceptions on narratives in gaming.

The first wave of accessible video games in the 1970s were incredibly basic with little to no story elements. As Atari founder Nolan Bushnell stated, "The technology was so difficult that it was exhausting to get the game to play without worrying about story" (Byrne). Story elements would start to be added more frequently across the 1980s as computing technology improved. This exemplifies a trend in gaming that has continued up until now: focus on narrative increases as the technological capacity of games increases. Except for early text-based adventures like *Zork* (1978/1980), some point-and-click adventures, and quirky games like *Dragon's Lair* (1983),[56] video game narratives were either confined to a beginning and ending cutscene or to supplementary gaming

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[56] This game has been described as an 'interactive movie' of sorts. It was entirely cartoon animated and gameplay consisted of quick-time events—players had to follow on-screen prompts to avoid game-ending death scenes.

manuals where much more plot could be written. This held true until 1985/1986 after

gaming resurged from the 1983 gaming crash, largely due to the incredibly successful

launch of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Scrolling text became a lot more

common in games like *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), and other games like *Ninja Gaiden*

(1988) incorporated flashy, text-based animations that were the predecessors of modern

cut-scenes (The Act Man). By the early 1990s, the video game industry was a juggernaut

and computing technologies were a million times more powerful than the decade prior—

experimentation with form and storytelling became more frequent since more time and

resources could be used to support detailed narratives (Byrne). The 1991 release of the

Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) meant more power; thus, games like *The*

Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past (1991) and *EarthBound* (1995) crafted intricate

stories, and the role-playing game (RPG) *Chrono Trigger* (1995) popularized multiple

endings—video games could have branching pathways. The 1995 PlayStation console

along with the 1996 Nintendo 64 console marked the explosion of 3D gaming; cutscenes,

dialogue, action, and environmental action were more detailed and, for the first time,

could largely be experienced in the first-person perspective. From this time through the

early 2000s, the games with focused narratives were mainly RPGs, such as *Final Fantasy*

III (1997), *Morrowind* (2002), and *Fable* (2004), that had vast environments filled with

optional areas, hidden dialogue, and branching pathways (The Act Man). Despite another

console generation, including the PlayStation 2 (2000), GameCube (2001), and Xbox

(2001), most games still used story to contextualize quests or goals rather than narrative

being rewarding in itself (Stone).

Murray was writing in 1997 and the ludology versus narratology debate reached

its peak in the early 2000s. In that zeitgeist, video games were showing great potential to be complex, narrative-driven mediums as Murray insightfully noticed and remarked. Yet, they hadn't shifted focus to narrative en masse. Ludologists had strong evidence to believe that gameplay would always be the top priority because that's what it had been for the past 30 years save for a few exceptions. It wouldn't be until the late 2000s and early 2010s that all sorts of video games would integrate complex narratives, such as the notoriously action-driven first-person shooter (FPS) genre embracing 'campaign' modes with increasingly evolving character arcs and climatic plots (such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007)). The next phase of video games, like *Mass Effect* (2007), *Heavy Rain* (2010), and *The Last of Us* (2013), highly prioritized narrative (Nix; Homan and Homan). Of course, many games have since still been more about gameplay, but we've now ended up in an era where experimental indie-developed games like *Gone Home* (2013), *Until Dawn* (2015), and *Firewatch* (2016) are completely centered around narrative—the gameplay is the uncovering or choice-based evolution of story and plot (Byrne).

Some of the most prominent game developers/moguls were interviewed on their thoughts about the growing importance of storytelling in gaming for a 2015 IGN article. A significant majority of them agreed that narratives in games have rapidly matured over the past 10 years, and that newer technologies are enabling more methods of conveying stories. Instead of relying upon cut-scenes, environmental storytelling is becoming more detailed, meaning player interactivity is driving narrative rather than games pausing action to deliver plot. That being said, they also mostly agree that storytelling in games is still in its infancy; games are just now starting to figure out what they can do as a

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narrative medium that is different from literature, film, and theatre. Simply, narratives

have only recently become a possible primary focus for video games. The technologies of

the future will continue to strengthen and expand video games' capacities to craft

intricate tales (Nix).

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