THE PLAY IS THE THING:
Gamifying the Theatergoing Experience

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

What motivates a person to go to the theatre? Perhaps she used to participate in the drama club in high school, and now enjoys seeing a few plays a year at her resident theater company. Maybe they are tourists from Europe, in town for spring break, and want to see a Broadway show before they leave New York. Maybe he is an avid theatre fan, who grew up around Original Cast albums, and is an aspiring actor himself. Or maybe he was dragged to *Wicked* on a date. There are several reasons why an individual may be motivated to go to the theatre, and as producers, we want to better understand these different motivators so we can harness their power, and use them to bring more people to our productions.

Unfortunately, there are even more reasons *not* to go to the theater for a lot of the general population. Ticket prices continue to escalate, there is no guarantee that audiences are going to enjoy a particular production, and people are constantly surrounded by infinite entertainment options at their very fingertips. After all, why would people spend upwards of $100 on a ticket just to have to leave their cozy apartment, spend even more money on a taxicab and dinner out, and risk feeling as if three hours of a Saturday night were wasted, if an option is to just stay home and watch an entire season of a television program from the comfort of the couch? We who are in the theater industry understand that attending live theater can be an experience unparalleled by other media, but the challenges posed by these types of questions are what we are up against to get audiences into our theaters.

As technology continues to evolve (in amazing ways, of course, many of which benefit the theatre), in order to remain competitive in the entertainment landscape, the

theatre industry needs to embrace the changing tastes, habits, and expectations of our audiences. A method of user engagement that has already been implemented by many other industries is called *gamification*, and I not only believe that it has the potential to change the way we attract patrons, but also that it is an absolutely necessary and essential element in audience engagement strategy to bring in new audiences and sustain demand for live theatre.

The term gamification was first coined by British computer programmer Nick Pelling in 2002, and began gaining popularity in 2010.[1] The definition of gamification has evolved over the past few years, and it is still defined slightly differently depending upon whom you ask. For our purposes, we will use the term as defined by gamification guru Gabe Zichermann in his book, *The Gamification Revolution*: **"**Gamification: implementing design concepts from games, loyalty programs, and behavioral economics to drive user engagement."[2]

The reason gamification is an important topic to discuss with regards to the theatre industry is that our audience is changing. One can argue that theatre will never die; that is has been around since Ancient Greek times and has persisted through the ages, and no matter how technology advances, people will always have the innate desire to convene with others and experience live theatre together. That may be true, but it is also hard to deny the fact that dramatic technological advances since Ancient Greek times have simply changed audiences' expectations. Today's audiences are in control of their media intake in a way that allows them to be much more autonomous than past

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[1] "History." *Gamification.org*. Badgeville, 2010. Web. January 2015.
[2] Zichermann, Gabe. *The Gamification Revolution: How Leaders Leverage Game Mechanics to Crush the Competition*. McGraw-Hill, 16 April 2013. Print. Loc. 123

generations,[3] and therefore, the theatre industry must try to offer such level of choice and freedom of control as other forms of entertainment. More than just a marketing ploy, gamification is a new way to think about audience engagement. It is not simply a gimmick to hook people into buying a ticket; rather, it is a methodology that has a wide spectrum of uses that allows for it to be applied to a variety of areas in the theatre industry. I believe that by gamifying the theatergoing experience, theatre producers can foster a feeling of loyalty in patrons that can keep them coming back to the theatre again and again, regardless of whether or not the play onstage is a hit. Not only does the gamification of theatergoing have the potential to turn single-ticket buyers into repeat customers; it is also necessary to develop the next generation of audiences.

In this paper, I will use research, case studies, and interviews to argue that gamification is not just a passing fad, but instead, a facet of the audience experience that should be constantly considered when making decisions about audience engagement. While the director has artistic control over what plays out onstage, the producer has more control over the whole audience experience – from how they hear about the show, to what they do after the curtain falls. I believe that by taking responsibility for the experience of our patrons and using gamification to offer them the chance to gain a sense of ownership over their theatergoing experience, theatre producers can set their productions apart by making the act of attending the theatre an exciting and rewarding event in and of itself.

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[3] Brown, Alan S. and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard with Shelly Gilbride and WolfBrown. *Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation.* San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, October 2011. Presentation. November 2014. Page 6.

In order to argue that gamification holds the key to unlocking a new level of audience engagement, I am going to explore what gamification is, the ways the arts have been using it, and what the theatre industry can learn from examples of gamification in other areas. I will begin by delving deep into the fundamentals of gamification in the first chapter, entitled WHAT IS GAMIFICATION? (A CRASH COURSE), where I will break down the elements of gamification to clarify what it is – and what it is not. Following that, in TRENDS IN AUDIENCE MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT, I will take a look at how we have been engaging our audiences in recent years by analyzing the results of an intrinsic impact study through a gamification lens. In Chapter Three, WHY GAMIFICATION NOW?, I will look at several studies that support the hypothesis that today's audiences are primed for gamified experiences.

To see how gamification has been working in the arts to date, I will address CASE STUDIES: GAMIFICATION IN THE ARTS TODAY in Chapter Four to investigate how organizations have attempted to layer game mechanics on their core arts experiences in the past few years – and how they have fared. In the fifth chapter, MOVING FORWARD, I will use what I've learned from my research and interviews to propose some theories and ideas for gamifying the theatergoing experience.

CHAPTER ONE:

WHAT IS GAMIFICATION? (A CRASH COURSE)

While Zichermann's definition of gamification is useful in its brevity, it is also helpful to identify the key elements of gamification by looking at examples. Today, examples of gamification range from relatively straightforward motivational programs such as exercise challenges (think about "Weight Watchers"), to more formal, if subtle, structures in the workplace that exist to maximize employee loyalty and motivation. The goal of gamification, as the definition states, boils down to increasing user engagement – whether that user is a customer, an employee, or in the case of theatre, the audience.

In his book *Loyalty 3.0*, Rajat Paharia distinguishes between superficial loyalty ("Loyalty 1.0") and "true loyalty" – when customers have an emotional stake in a brand, so the relationship between creator and consumer is deeper and based on more than just commerce.[4] Here is a good test of true loyalty: if someone else offers a nearly identical product for a better price, do you switch brands? Or is there something about the initial one that makes you stick with it, despite the higher cost?

The theatre business (like every business) has utilized plenty of methods to cultivate Loyalty 1.0 – almost like "get rich quick schemes" – but in theatre's case, we are striving to amass patrons rather than fast fortunes. In the world of institutional theatre, for example, the subscription model has been in use for decades and has spurred debate over its efficacy for just as long, by offering patrons tickets to shows at a lower price if they commit to purchasing for multiple productions and often months in advance.

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[4] Paharia, Rajat. *Loyalty 3.0*. McGraw-Hill, 18 June 2013. Print. Pages 13-14.

Commercial theatre producers might offer customers a discount code if they use their own social media accounts to spread the word about a particular Broadway show a certain number of times, or the opportunity to enter a raffle (literally, a game) in the hopes of being rewarded. In all these cases, there is only a shallow relationship being formed between the theatre and the audience member. In the not-for-profit example, subscribers may get excited about getting a good deal on theatre tickets – but what happens when a different theatre (or different form of entertainment or leisure activity altogether) offers them a better deal? With Loyalty 1.0, a major flaw is that the relationship often starts out with such excitement and anticipation – but then there is minimal engagement or motivation as the relationship continues. In commercial theatre, the relationship between production and audience member is usually over once the curtain falls; there is little effort exerted toward a deeper relationship, because the primary value of an audience member to a commercial producer is the price of their ticket, with a few producers understanding that the potential for word-of-mouth holds a great deal of value. At not-for-profits, the relationship attempts to be one that mutually benefits both the theater company and the patron: the subscriber gets reliable and consistent seat locations for a discount, and the theater gets a reliable audience member – but not necessarily a passionate one. External rewards will only motivate someone for so long, so we in the theatre need to explore other options to increase audience motivation, loyalty, and engagement – and I contend that gamification is the key.

Gamification's power comes from its ability to tap into Five Key Intrinsic Motivators: Autonomy, Mastery, Purpose, Progress, and Social Interaction.[5] Three of

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[5] Paharia, Rajat. *Loyalty 3.0*. McGraw-Hill, 18 June 2013. Print. Page 24.

these five motivators come from *self-determination theory*, or SDT, which is a theory of motivation developed by Dr. Edward L. Deci and Dr. Richard M. Ryan of University of Rochester: Autonomy, Mastery, and Social Interaction. The other two motivators, Purpose and Progress, are added by Paharia and his team based on their research.[6] These key intrinsic motivators are internal, not external forces, that drive human behavior. The Five Key Intrinsic Motivators can be explained as follows:

- *Autonomy*: The urge to direct our own lives ("I control").

- *Mastery*: The desire to get better at something that matters ("I improve").

- *Purpose*: The yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves ("I make a difference").

- *Progress*: The desire to see results in the direction of mastery and the greater purpose ("I achieve").

- *Social Interaction*: The need to belong and to be connected to and interact with others ("I connect with others").[7]

Paharia goes on to identify the 10 Key Mechanics of Gamification, which are helpful to think about when discussing how gamification can be used to motivate theatre audiences. Each of the 10 Key Mechanics of Gamification activate at least one of the five key intrinsic motivators necessary for Loyalty 3.0 as identified by Paharia, which is what makes gamification such an effective engagement tool. Here are the 10 Key Mechanics of Gamification, and the motivators that they connect to:

1. *Fast Feedback*

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[6] Paharia, Rajat. *Loyalty 3.0*. McGraw-Hill, 18 June 2013. Print. Page 27.
[7] Paharia. Page 24.

     a. Motivators: Mastery, Progress. This mechanic provides frequent and instant status updates to keep users aware of the results of their behavior and actions, reinforcing good behavior and addressing mistakes to allow users to quickly learn and adjust.

2. *Transparency*

     a. Motivators: Progress, Social Interaction. Transparency emphasizes the value of statistics and information. The more you know, the more you want to know

3. *Goals*

     a. Motivators: Purpose, Progress, Social Interaction. When there is a clear objective, it gives participants a purpose and makes it easier to envision crossing the finish line.

4. *Badges*

     a. Motivators: Mastery, Progress, Purpose, Social Interaction. Badges represent status, and the effort put forth to earn that status. They convey to the community a level of expertise and skill.

5. *Leveling Up*

     a. Motivators: Mastery, Progress, Purpose, Social Interaction. This concept tempts users to engage more deeply with the promise of higher status and better benefits as you move up a ladder of progress. At higher levels, users have an increased amount of elite access.

6. *Onboarding*

a. Motivators: Mastery. Onboarding is a method of teaching users behaviors without making them feel like they are being taught. It is training that doesn't look or feel like training.

7. *Competition*

    a. Motivators: Mastery, Social Interaction. The presence of leaderboards is a common example of Competition in gamification. A challenge when it comes to using Competition, however, is making sure it remains a motivational tactic and not a discouraging one.

8. *Collaboration*

    a. Motivators: Purpose, Social Interaction. Feeling part of a team, when you have a common goal, is a powerful motivator. Users are driven to not only succeed for themselves as individuals, but also to not let their teammates down.

9. *Community*

    a. Motivators: Social Interaction. Without a Community, many of these mechanics (Badges, Collaboration, Transparency) do not mean much. Humans, as social creatures, want to see what others are doing and how we compare.

10. *Points*

    a. Motivators: Progress, Social Interaction. Points are a way to track progress – whether you are tracking currency, goals, perks, or steps towards a goal or level. Points can be spendable, or simply collectible.

Rewards, conspicuously absent from the list above, is an oft-debated game mechanic that is certainly present in games, but brings up the question of extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation – and therefore, Paharia questions whether it actually contributes to user loyalty. As previously mentioned, the five key intrinsic motivators are internal forces, not external. Since Rewards is an external force, Paharia argues that it should not belong on the list of gamification mechanics.[8] Rewards will still be addressed in this paper as an element of gameplay, though not as one of the key mechanics of gamification.

Throughout the course of this paper, I will be delving deeper into each of the listed Key Mechanics of Gamification above, but it is also important to state early on how gamification differs from games. Gamification is not about creating games; in fact, many definitions specify that gamification can only exist in non-game scenarios (thereby preventing something from being called gamification if it is just, in fact, a game). You begin with the core experience – the product, the activity, the production – and it is gamified by layering the game mechanics on top of it. In an exercise challenge, the core experience is working out – not the achievement of meeting milestones. If I am giving a presentation of my thesis progress to my classmates and I hand out stickers when someone asks or answers a question, the core experience is discussing my thesis topic, not just competing for stickers. If I am offering exclusive backstage content to an audience member who shares a link to my show on their Twitter account, the core experience is learning about the production – not the transaction of exclusive content in exchange for a tweet.

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[8] Paharia, Rajat. *Loyalty 3.0*. McGraw-Hill, 18 June 2013. Print. Page 85.

One example of a gamified theater experience – but one that is more analogous to an actual game - is the exponentially popular "immersive theatre" event that is Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. In a massive multi-level building, the story of Macbeth is told through dance and music in a nonlinear individualized experience that asks audience members to choose their own path through the elaborately decorated hallways, rooms, and mazes to witness scenes and interactions as they play out. They are also encouraged to root through drawers, chase the actors from room to room (if they can keep up), and separate themselves from their party to have the most personal and unique experience they can.

However, *Sleep No More* does not demonstrate the kind of gamification I want to address in this paper. There are certainly some significant motivators and game mechanics present in *Sleep No More*; for example, Autonomy ("I control"), Fast Feedback (is there anything interesting in the room you just entered?), Onboarding (you learn as you go – no manual to read!), and Community (you become part of the audience as soon as you don the anonymizing white mask). Unlike traditional theaters, where the audience is seated in the house and the action takes place up on the stage, *Sleep No More* mimics the experience of "first-person shooter"-style video games (FPS), where the theatergoers' points-of-view are as if they were looking through the eyes of their character in a game. It is easy to identify such game-like elements in *Sleep No More*, but in this paper, I am more interested in exploring the potential of gamification as a tool outside of the artistic choices embedded in the work itself. I believe that gamification can – and should – be applied to the experience of any piece of theatre, not only the immersive works or productions that already have game elements as part of the core

experience (i.e. shows with audience participation, improvised performances, or *BLANK! The Musical*).[9]

What we can take away from the immense popularity of *Sleep No More*, however, is that theatre audiences today hunger for gamified experiences. We can see evidence of this in the demand for these types of interactive artistic experiences and the rise of copycat productions such as *Then She Fell* (an immersive retelling of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*) and *Queen of the Night* (a luxe, indulgent entertainment/dining experience). To further investigate this premise, I will take a look at the results of a 2012 report entitled *Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58 Productions*, which was commissioned by Theatre Bay Area and executed by Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratskin and WolfBrown, as published in *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*.

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[9] "About the Show." *BLANK! The Musical.* BLANK! The Musical, 2014. Web. January 2015. This Off-Broadway show utilized a mobile app to allow the audience to provide suggestions for improvised scenes and songs in real time.

CHAPTER TWO:

TRENDS IN AUDIENCE MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

For *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*, numerous

theaters, theatre artists, and audiences were studied and surveyed to explore how the

impact of art can be measured, almost exclusively in the realm of not-for-profit theater

companies. Among other things, the book of research and essays posed such questions

as: Can the impact of art be measured? How can we communicate the value of theatre to

funders and audiences? How can we better engage audiences and make theatergoing a

more rewarding experience?

What is most interesting to me about the study is the data collected regarding

audience motivation and pre- and post-performance engagement. Many of the key

observations from the study can be addressed by gamification. For example, in the study,

Brown and Ratskin asked participants to rank eleven motivations to attend theater. The

order from highest ranked to lowest is: 1) To relax or escape, 2) To be emotionally

moved or inspired, 3) To discover something new, 4) To spend quality time with friends,

5) To spend quality time with family members, 6) To revisit a familiar work or artist, 7)

To see the work of a specific actor or director, 8) Because someone invited you, 9) To

expose others to the artistic experience, 10) To learn about or celebrate your cultural

heritage, 11) For work or educational purposes.[10] Note the top three motivations to

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[10] Brown, Alan and Rebecca Ratskin and WolfBrown. "Understanding the Intrinsic
Impact of Live Theatre: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58
Productions." *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*. Ed. Clayton
Lord. San Francisco: Theatre Bay Area, 2012. Print. Page 84.

attend the theatre: "to relax and escape," "to be emotionally moved," and "to discover

something new."

The top-ranked motivator, "to relax and escape," implies that most audience

members prefer their theatergoing to be a passive experience. What is interesting to note,

however, is the popular opinion that many people who play video games – arguably an

active pastime – do so for the same stated reason: entertainment.[11] It should not be

assumed that theatre audiences are going to resist gamification because it asks something

of them; in fact, gamification offers even more potential for escapism by offering

audience members control (Autonomy) and Community. Emotion is also inherent in

games, especially considering the key gamification mechanics of Community and

Collaboration. The feeling of being part of a team affects human beings on a deep

emotional level, and working toward a common Goal is a powerful motivator.[12]

The desire to "discover something new" also speaks to an opportunity for

gamification – specifically the joy and discovery found in the key gamification mechanic

of Onboarding. The idea of Onboarding is that you don't learn the controls or rules of a

game by reading a manual; you learn by doing. I'll put this way: these days, it is

assumed if you buy a new videogame, you don't have to read the instructions. You

should just be able to insert the disc, pick up the controller, and start playing. This is

because so many games include a chapter or prologue at the beginning, which effectively

teaches you the controls of the game – but by somehow making it an engaging part of the

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[11] Bissell, Tom. *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010. Page 26.
[12] Brown, Alan S. and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard with Shelly Gilbride and WolfBrown. *Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation.* San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, October 2011. Presentation. November 2014. Page 9.

story and the experience. Gamification takes this Onboarding concept and applies it to non-game situations, where you are able to learn the rules as you engage in the activity. This satisfying and empowering feeling of discovering something new, ranked third of eleven motivations to attend the theater, can be directly addressed by gamification.

Another observation of the study is that younger theatergoers are more likely to be personally involved at an amateur or professional level in theatre, and therefore more open to engagement.[13] Other studies have resulted in similar findings, showing evidence that people are more likely to participate in activities as a spectator if they have a history of involvement at at least an amateur level.[14] Not only does past involvement imply a certain level of interest, but it also means that they have a degree of familiarity with the activity already. For example, if you used to act in community theatre, you already know the basic rules for going to a show (at least much more so than a first-time theatergoer, who might be intimidated by the perceived stuffiness and etiquette involved). The fact that the data from the *Intrinsic Impact* study also suggests that the younger generation is more likely to be personally involved in theatre than the generations before it is encouraging; perhaps we aren't losing today's youth to other forms of entertainment as much as we thought. Luckily, the Millennial generation and younger (a.k.a. "digital

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[13] Brown, Alan and Rebecca Ratskin and WolfBrown. "Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58 Productions." *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*. Ed. Clayton Lord. San Francisco: Theatre Bay Area, 2012. Print. Page 72.

[14] Pitts, Stephanie E. "Amateurs as Audiences: Reciprocal Relationships between Playing and Listening to Music." *The Audience Experience: A Critical Analysis of Audiences in the Performing Arts*. Ed. Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow, and Katya Johanson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. Print. Chapter 6.

natives")[15] are already primed for gamified experiences, making the time right for gamification as an engagement tool. More on that in the next chapter.

The *Intrinsic Impact* study also explored the concept of anticipation in relation to theatergoing, which I have found to be very closely connected to the ideas behind gamification. The study found that as familiarity with an element of the production rises (an actor, the playwright, director, or story, for example), so does the level of anticipation prior to attending the show – as well as level of engagement pre- and post-performance.[16] Anticipation is also higher for single-ticket buyers (STB) compared to subscribers. [17]

The idea of anticipation in relation to theatergoing is an interesting one. When the level of anticipation is high, prospective patrons talks about the coming event with their friends. They post about it on Facebook, they do research online to educate themselves more about theatre and the specific show or artists, and they effectively curate their own engagement experience. By implementing gamification more consciously, theaters and productions have the opportunity to manage this engagement more, and take more control of what the audience learns – and how. Do you want your potential audience member learning about the actors via the official show website, or through message boards that come up on Google?

Taking firmer control over how audiences get their information could also be a way to address this paradoxical result of the *Intrinsic Impact* study: More frequent

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[15] DeGraff, Jeff. "Digital Natives vs. Digital Immigrants." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc., 7 September 2014. Web. January 2015.
[16] Brown, Alan and Rebecca Ratskin and WolfBrown. "Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58 Productions." *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*. Ed. Clayton Lord. San Francisco: Theatre Bay Area, 2012. Print. Page 73.
[17] Brown, Ratskin. Page 103.

theatergoers report less impactful experiences at the theater than single-ticket buyers, while single-ticket buyers attend less frequently but report more impactful experiences.[18] This may relate back to the previous point about "Loyalty 1.0," and what may be the relatively shallow relationship between subscribers and their institutional theaters – one based primarily on commerce. The subscribers are excited at the outset, but the thrill of extrinsic rewards, such as discounted theater tickets wears away after a while. Many theater companies put in significant effort to maintain an active relationship with their subscribers with events such as pre-show dinners, post-show discussions, and the like. However, the element that is missing from these "perks" is a persistent motivator that drives and deepens the relationship. The subscribers are already receiving the discount, so if that is the primary benefit derived from the relationship, what encourages them to engage more with other programs at the theater, or reach the next level of patronage (i.e. a donor level) if they are not already passionate theatergoers? When I discuss specific case studies a little later, I will examine what some arts organizations are doing right to keep their audiences motivated and truly loyal.

Conversely, why don't single-ticket buyers go to the theatre more often, if they acknowledge their experience there as impactful? Maybe there is a way to take this information and address a need of single-ticket buyers that was hitherto unknown: is there a way to engage these audience members post-show to allow them to express how they were impacted, beyond a formulaic e-mail asking them to tweet about it? If it is

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[18] Brown, Alan and Rebecca Ratskin and WolfBrown. "Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58 Productions." *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*. Ed. Clayton Lord. San Francisco: Theatre Bay Area, 2012. Print. Page 104.

possible to increase loyalty and create an active, exciting, rewarding relationship with an audience member, maybe we can turn this statistic around.

When the study looked into pre- and post-performance engagement, it found that younger patrons are much more likely than older patrons to "read comments on the show written by friends, family members, or audience members (e.g., on Facebook)"[19] as a method of pre-performance engagement, and much less likely than older patrons to read a review by a professional critic. Additionally, younger patrons participated in methods of post-performance engagement more than older patrons in general, especially in terms of word-of-mouth and online activities (i.e. Googling information about a show, or reacting through social media).[20] This is another example of how younger audiences today are less willing to have their theatergoing experience framed for them, and how they are more interested in forming their own opinions through their own channels. This, and other generational differences between audience members, will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

The results regarding pre-performance engagement continued to stand out to me as indicators of significant opportunities for gamification, especially the following: Audience members who are more prepared are more likely to report a more impactful theatre experience.[21] This seems intuitive, but it is certainly encouraging that it is also supported by the data. It tells us that if we can offer more engaging ways for audiences

[19] Brown, Alan and Rebecca Ratskin and WolfBrown. "Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58 Productions." *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*. Ed. Clayton Lord. San Francisco: Theatre Bay Area, 2012. Print. Pages 138-139.
[20] Brown, Ratskin. Page 142.
[21] Brown, Ratskin. Page 152.

to educate and prepare themselves for the theatergoing experience, they have a better chance of coming away with a better overall experience.

How can we use the results of the *Intrinsic Impact* study to increase motivation and create deeper relationships between audiences and the theatre? Next, I will further explore why now, especially, is the right time for the theatre industry to embrace gamification as an engagement tool to do so.

CHAPTER THREE:

WHY GAMIFICATION NOW?

Looking at the recent trends in audience behavior and motivation, it is apparent

that the time is right for the theatre industry to make a concerted effort to engage

audiences using gamification. It just so happens that the Millennial generation, slowly

but surely growing into adulthood, is primed for gamified experiences. Moreover, a

presentation from 2011 also noted the "participatory arts culture" that had – even then -

started emerging as significant across *all* generations.[22] And so, it seems that

gamification of the theatergoing experience could be beneficial for our entire audience,

Millennials and non-Millennials alike.

One indicator of the growing significance of gamification to modern audiences is

the rapid growth of social platforms where the line between art-consumer and art-creator

is blurred, or even nonexistent. On YouTube, for example, you are able to manage your

own level of participation across a broad spectrum, from watching a video now and then,

to occasionally commenting on a clip someone posted, to regularly curating your own

video channel. An amateur filmmaker can post a YouTube video that gets millions of

views, as much as (or more than) videos from professional outlets and celebrities. Via

the online marketplace called Etsy, people can sell their handcrafted products online to

anyone in the world. As technology continues to advance, the world continues to shrink

and it becomes more and more feasible for average people to gain their own fans and

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[22] Brown, Alan S. and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard with Shelly Gilbride and WolfBrown. *Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation.* San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, October 2011. Presentation. November 2014. Page 6.

their own level of celebrity. As users see their number of video views increase, or get great reviews of their handmade crafts, they achieve a sense of autonomy and control over their own experience and they are more inclined to watch other videos or buy fellow artisans' products.

In the examples of YouTube and Etsy above, note three of the key mechanics of gamification at work: Fast Feedback, Transparency, and Community. YouTube provides Fast Feedback by allowing viewers to comment on videos, thereby instantly showing you - the creator - what your audience is and is not responding to. Similarly, YouTube's Transparency is evident in the growing number to the bottom right of your screen – the number of times your video has been viewed. You are able to see, in real-time, how your video is performing compared to other ones. Finally, Community is the backbone of both YouTube and Etsy. If you are choosing between similar products on Etsy, wouldn't you be more inclined to buy from the vendor with more positive reviews from customers like yourself? Like all the key mechanics of gamification, these three elements work closely together to increase user engagement: you sell a personalized item on Etsy and get a review saying how communicative you were, and the same customer Favorites your shop (Fast Feedback). You see your number of Favorites increase, and are also able to see how your product ranks in Trending Items on the homepage (Transparency). More customers read your positive reviews and see your product climb up the Trending Items list, purchase your item, and write more strong reviews (Community). At the end of the day, not only are you more engaged as an Etsy user, but so is every customer who reads a review or views your product's page, whether they make a purchase or not.

Now is a good time to note that not all engagement is going to be positive. YouTube videos get negative, often hurtful comments all the time. Over the past few years, several major newspapers have enabled comments at the end of their articles online, opening up any and all topics for public debate. As they say – you can't please everybody. Someone is going to disagree with an opinion that is presented, or maybe you will get a harsh critique of your work. If an organization is using social networks to engage with consumers, it needs to be prepared to deal with negative feedback. However, negative feedback can sometimes be an opportunity for an organization or business to engage directly with its consumers on deeper, more personal levels. One theatrical example is the controversy that surrounded the casting of *The Nightingale*, a new musical that was presented at La Jolla Playhouse in California in 2012. Based on a Hans Christian Anderson short story set in ancient China, the musical featured a mostly non-Asian cast. There was enough backlash on the theater company's Facebook page, on Twitter, and blogs, that La Jolla organized a panel discussion to address the issues in an open dialogue.[23] While the theater and production were overshadowed by this controversy for some time, it gave La Jolla the unique opportunity to engage with fellow artists as well as audience members on a very deep, personal level.

With platforms like YouTube and Yelp, Etsy and Twitter, we have moved from a "sit-back-and-be-told culture" to a "making and doing culture."[24] While this trend is apparent across all ages, the generation whose lifestyle has been most impacted by the

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[23] Lehman, Daniel. "La Jolla Playhouse's Casting Controversy Over 'The Nightingale.'" *Backstage.* Backstage.com, 18 July 2012. Web. April 2015.
[24] Brown, Alan S. and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard with Shelly Gilbride and WolfBrown. *Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation.* San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, October 2011. Presentation. November 2014. Page 3.

Information Age is Millennials. We have grown up alongside the internet, and are therefore primed for gamified experiences. As the age of the average Broadway theatergoer remains hovering around the early-to-mid-forties,[25] it would behoove the theatre industry to invest in ways to better engage all "digital natives."

In 2010, a British market research organization called Initiative did a study on Millennials. It revisited the study four years later in 2014 (*Millennials: Debunking the Millennial Myth*), and after surveying almost 10,000 25-34 year olds in 19 countries, its results identified three common themes that substantially intersect with gamification: *Adapt*, *Collaborate*, and *Create*. The themes were defined as follows:

- *Adapt*: The ability to adapt is their [Millennials'] one indispensable life skill – and the filter through which they see the world.

- *Collaborate*: The way they use technology informs how marketing should evolve.

- *Create*: They recognize the power of innovation and creativity in their own lives, but also in the lives of brands.[26]

It is interesting to note how the three themes above coincide with the gamification mechanics and intrinsic motivators as defined by Paharia in *Loyalty 3.0*. For instance, the ability to Adapt directly relates to two motivators, Mastery and Progress, which both indicate the desire to get better at something, and most significantly, require a "growth mind-set:" the confidence and belief that we *can* get better at something, which is an advantage that Millennials have over certain older generations whose "fixed mind-set"

[25] *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2013-2014*. New York: The Broadway League, November 2014. Web. December 2014.
[26] *Millennials: Debunking the Millennial Myth*. London: Initiative, 2014. Presentation. November 2014. Pages 6-7.

has the potential to paralyze them with fear of failure, and prevent them from trying new things.[27] Collaboration is itself one of the key mechanics of gamification, as we've discussed, and when it comes to Creating, we have already looked at how the line between creator and consumer continues to get thinner and thinner.

What accounts for the adaptability of the Millennial generation? Interestingly, Initiative attributed this to the uncertainty of growing up during a recession in a global economy that feels increasingly competitive.[28] The ability to adapt starts out as a coping mechanism, but ultimately leads to the empowering feeling of being nimble and adept at meeting challenges. As a result of this, Millennials also feel that they have more freedom and choice – albeit in a more challenging world. The nimble adaptability of Millennials means that they expect brands to be similarly diverse and inclusive, and understand that freedom of choice is extremely important to them.

In terms of Collaboration, Millennials use social media outlets heavily to express themselves, as well as collaborate and exchange ideas. This generation appreciates companies that are transparent and communicate openly about their own flaws and mistakes, in addition to their achievements and victories. Organizations that use their social media presence to solicit ideas and feedback from their customers, not just blast marketing and advertising content, will benefit from the Millennial generation, which values collaboration over being talked at and spoon-fed messaging.

Another result of the heavy social media usage by Millennials is that they value creativity very highly - not only in themselves and their peers, but in the brands they

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[27] Paharia, Rajat. *Loyalty 3.0*. McGraw-Hill, 18 June 2013. Print. Page 31.
[28] *Millennials: Debunking the Millennial Myth*. London: Initiative, 2014. Presentation. November 2014. Pages 11-12.

support. Social media has made it possible for everyone (brands included) to receive Fast

Feedback and have a real-time barometer of how they are performing with customers,

and therefore, the competition for Views, Likes, and Favorites has driven creativity

across the board. What is important, though, is that the creativity does not come across

as callous marketing or advertising. Initiative's study showed that the top five brand

attributes valued by Millennials are: Creative, Authentic, Confident, Intelligent, and

Trustworthy.

Initiative concluded its study with the following suggestions for ways in which

brands can better engage the Millennial generation:

- *Adapt*: Millennials have adapted to a level of uncertainly and choice. Show
  empathy for their life circumstances; reflect the diverse ways in which they are
  living. This will make you stand out for the right reasons.

- *Collaborate*: Give fully and authentically to your customers. Watch for how they
  use social media to give you cues as to how collaboration and collective
  experiences can inform the way you go to market.

- *Create*: Take risks and be brave. Take a page from how they succeed; adapt,
  dare, create, don't settle, give back…and eyes on the prize![29]

The intersection of Initiative's Millennials study and gamification is encouraging.

Without using the term, it is as if the research is asking for companies to implement

gamification as an engagement tool to appeal to an increasingly active segment of the

consumer population. Note how the themes identified by Initiative can be found in the

key mechanics of gamification: Onboarding, Leveling Up, and Fast Feedback, related to

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[29] *Millennials: Debunking the Millennial Myth*. London: Initiative, 2014. Presentation.
November 2014. Pages 36-37.

Adaptability; Transparency, Collaboration, and Community, related to Collaboration; and Competition and Goals, related to Creativity. Between Millennials being primed for gamified experiences, and our population's cultural consumption as a whole moving toward more participatory interaction, the time is ripe for gamification to really be embraced as a tool to increase user engagement in the theatre. I am not the first person to think this, however. In the next chapter, we will look at a number of case studies and explore how recent attempts at gamification in the arts have fared.

CHAPTER FOUR:

CASE STUDIES: GAMIFICATION IN THE ARTS TODAY

Previously, I touched upon the unique theatrical production *Sleep No More,* which incorporates gaming elements into the actual work itself. This is one extreme end of the spectrum. However, I believe that there are a variety of ways to incorporate elements of gamification into every theatre experience, in such areas as marketing, education, pre-performance engagement, and post-performance engagement. By taking a closer look at some real-world examples of gamification in the arts, we can try to learn from the successes as well as the missteps.

4.1: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

At the G Summit San Francisco conference in the fall of 2014, Erik Gensler (president of digital strategy firm Capacity Interactive) gave a presentation entitled *Gamifying the Arts: How Leading Arts Orgs are Transforming Engagement*. He spoke about how gamification utilizes "permission-based marketing" rather than the traditional "interruption marketing." Interruption marketing is the concept behind buying ad space in a certain newspaper or on a certain TV channel, because their audience is your target audience. This is how most advertising agencies tend to operate. Permission-based marketing, alternatively, notes actions that users take (often during gamified engagement)

and asks the users for things based on those actions, such as their e-mail addresses or a

Facebook follow, which could lead to deeper engagement and potential ticket sales.[30]

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was one of Capacity Interactive's first

clients, and after analyzing Ailey's marketing strategies, Capacity Interactive identified a

challenge: how do you acquire new audiences who are not familiar with dance, let alone

the company? When Robert Battle took over as artistic director in 2011, Capacity

Interactive saw an opportunity to introduce people to Battle, as well as other basics about

the company itself. With partner Situation Interactive, they created a gamified

experience on the website called "Ask Robert Battle," where people could learn about

Battle and what performances Alvin Ailey was offering. The program utilized

permission-based marketing, and presented users with a series of questions:

"How familiar are you with Alvin Ailey?"

"What kind of experience are you looking for?"

"Which element is most important to you?"

"What type of music do you like most?"

Based on the users' answers to these questions, the program suggested four performance

options for them to attend, and then called them to action with a "Buy Tickets" button.

The program was also able to push certain dates that may have had more availability at

that time, in addition to using the data provided by the users. The questionnaire resulted

in 10,000 visits to the page, with 25% of users clicking the "Buy Tickets" button (moving

them forward in the process, but not necessary finalizing a sale), and users spending an

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[30] Gensler, Erik. "Gamifying the Arts: How Leading Arts Orgs are Transforming
Engagement." *GSummit*. Online video clip (presentation). *YouTube*. YouTube, 11
November 2014. Web. January 2015.

average of five minutes on the site, up from the usual two to three minutes. Additionally, the tool paid for itself in just a few weeks.

4.2: Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

On the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival website, there is an area called "Dance Interactive" where users can access an archive of historical photographs and video footage. The user experience was initially not optimal; the company didn't quite know how to best present the material, and the interface was stylistically and technologically out-of-date. To address this, Capacity Interactive created an actual game – a "Guess Game" – where users would be shown a video of historical dance footage and they had to guess who the featured choreographer was. Based on the answer, the program would lead the users to other informational material, pages about the choreographer and his or her work, and the users could share their results on social media. In his presentation, Gensler noted how the sharing element was inspired by an interactive experience for the television program *Mad Men*, where immediately after watching an episode (the "core experience"), viewers were prompted to answer trivia questions about the episode and then share their results on Facebook or Twitter ("I got 7 out of 10 questions right!"), thereby challenging their circles of friends to do better (the gamification of the experience). The users became advocates, spreading word-of-mouth by having enjoyed their engagement and wanting to share it with others.[31]

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[31] Gensler, Erik. "Gamifying the Arts: How Leading Arts Orgs are Transforming Engagement." *GSummit*. Online video clip (presentation). *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 November 2014. Web. January 2015.

4.3: Rango

      In 2011, the animated movie *Rango* was released. The quirky pseudo-Western starred Johnny Depp as the voice of a lizard in a world full of anthropomorphic rodents and reptiles, and to promote the film, Paramount and Nickelodeon's digital marketing strategy went beyond the typical banner ads and pop-up trailers. Rather than just shout information at consumers, the campaign also sought to engage and entertain. The website for *Rango* engaged the user with traditional movie-marketing tactics (i.e. allowing the user to research ticket prices, sign up for e-mail updates, and follow the social network), but it also offered an immersive opportunity to explore the world of the film. It included actual games, but more importantly, it had hidden items and features (called "Easter Eggs"), offering users the chance to discover surprising and delightful elements for themselves. Through exploration and experimentation, users could gain access to exclusive desktop wallpapers or a personalized "Wanted Poster" generator, for example. The only clue the site gave that was any indication of the existence of these elements was a progress bar that slowly filled as the user stumbled upon the hidden Easter Eggs.[32]

      By gamifying the experience of learning about the film via the website, *Rango* was able to harness the power of gameplay (which commands the full attention of the user) to lead potential customers to an engaging experience which made them feel like they were discovering it for themselves. It is also important to note that the gamified

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[32] Armero, Alexander. "Rango's Gamified Marketing Takes Aim at Teens." *Alexander Armero: Blog*. Alexander Armero, 7 May 2011. Web. January 2015.

experience did not work in a vacuum; *Rango* still used all of the traditional big-budget

Hollywood marketing tools such as trailers, digital and print ads, and product

placement/partnerships with other companies and media. However, the gamified element

of the marketing campaign made *Rango* stand out in the crowded movie scene that year.

In terms of measuring success, *Rango*'s opening weekend at the box office in

early March, 2011 yielded $38 million, making it the 50th highest-grossing opening

weekend for an animated film between 1980 and today.[33] At the time of writing, *Rango*

is currently ranked 64th in highest-grossing animated films between 1980 and today in

terms of total grosses.[34]

4.4: The Museum of Old and New Art

The case studies in gamification that we have looked at thus far have primarily

been concerned with the marketing angle of the arts: getting on the consumer's radar,

conveying information, and getting the customer excited about the product with an

engaging experience and/or fascinating information. However, there are some

organizations that have raised the bar further, by incorporating gamification into how the

patron experiences the work of art itself.

If you were to visit three or four of New York City's world class museums this

weekend, you would likely have a more or less similar experience as you wander through

the various exhibits. You would approach a painting or display, and right next to it there

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[33] To put this in perspective: the highest-ever opening weekend for an animated film was
Shrek the Third in 2007 at over $121 million.
[34] "Animation: Total Grosses/Opening Weekends 1980-Present." *Box Office Mojo*.
IMDb.com, Inc., 2015. Web. January 2015.

would be a wall label with information about the artist, and perhaps a paragraph or two providing additional details. You might be very impressed if you could rent a personal "virtual guide" device, on which you could indicate the piece of art you were admiring, and have it play or display tidbits of information. It would be rare if such a device were offered to you free of charge, or included in the base admission price. But the vast majority of museum attendees will roam from room to room, crowding around wall labels, attempting to peer between bodies to read the tiny print. However, there is a museum in Tasmania, Australia, that has completely changed the museum-going experience by making it incredibly personal, customized, and replicable.

This institution is called The Museum of Old and New Art, or MONA. Every single visitor to MONA is given a mobile device called "The O" that acts as a virtual guide. Beyond simply spewing information, however, The O also tracks the users' route, steps, and preferences – giving it the ability to offer an unprecedented level of service and detail, even after the visit to the museum is over. As you explore MONA, you notice that none of the works of art have any labels or identifiers. The O tells you what is in your field of vision, and you are able to curate your own experience of the museum. The O also tracks how much time you spend at each exhibit and asks you to record what you think about certain pieces; for example, if you tell it that you "Love" or "Hate" a particular work of art, it provides Fast Feedback by instantly letting you know how many other people agree with you. The O not only acts as a highly informed personal concierge to the guest, but also provides the museum with a wealth of valuable data about you and your preferences. When your visit is done, you are asked if you wish to save your tour and, if you do, you will later receive an e-mail from the museum with a virtual

recreation of your MONA experience. The e-mail's header would likely be a piece of art

that you rated particularly highly, and it would provide you with a link to view a 3D

model of the museum and retrace your steps through the building, while perhaps listening

to a piece of music that you recorded a positive reaction to. The level of technology

MONA uses to operate The O does double-duty, giving the guest a uniquely engaging

experience, while also benefitting the museum by recording and storing a wealth of

significant data that it can use to analyze attendee behavior.[35]

Aside from the impressive use of technology, The O is also revolutionary because

of its content. For example, you can choose the "Gonzo Tour" and listen to the eccentric-

billionaire-gambler-founder David Walsh's musings and rants about some of his

acquisitions. "Ideas" are simple talking points about certain pieces, to encourage

socializing with your group even as everyone is guided by their own personal O. Even

the more traditional descriptions, "Media," are not your stuffy, anonymous narrator

voice; they are casual interviews with artists, sometimes in cafes rather than sound

recording booths, or even songs specially commissioned by the museum.[36] These choices

offer the patron an incredible level of autonomy and control over their own experience,

and make a museum – an institution often viewed as elitist and antiquated – feel

accessible, modern, and cool.

4.5: "Tweet Seats"

[35] "The O." *Museum of Old and New Art.* Web. March 2015.
[36] "Experiencing The O At Mona – A Review." October 27, 2011. *Fresh & New(er).*
Web. March 2015.

Speaking of experiencing art through electronic mobile devices: a less obvious example of gamification in the arts is the recent emergence of theaters and productions experimenting with so-called "Tweet Seats." At certain performances of *Million Dollar Quartet* across the country, for instance, a small number of seats in the rear of the theater are designated "Tweet Seats," where audience members are asked to live-tweet during the performance. Using a special hashtag, these audience members tweet their reactions to the production in real time as part of an effort to connect the live in-person theatre experience with the virtual world of social media.[37] The concept ties in such gamification mechanics as Fast Feedback (the ability to share real-time thoughts, and get real-time responses from patrons and artists alike), Transparency (i.e. an understudy tweeting remarks from backstage), and Community (i.e. a group conversation on Twitter, linked via the special hashtag). This idea has caught on not only with other theaters and productions, but also other forms of live arts such as ballet, opera, and symphony orchestras.[38]

Not everyone is on board with the idea of live-tweeting in the theater, however. The Huntington Theatre Company in Boston introduced "Twittermission" in 2013, which was an opportunity for audience members to have questions about the show answered via Twitter during intermission by artists and creative team members – but tweeting during the actual performance was not encouraged - or allowed.[39] Huntington Artistic Director Peter DuBois addressed the company's choice to forego Tweet Seats by saying, "I am

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[37] "Providence theater experiments with 'tweet seats'." *USA Today.* USAToday.com, 27 January 2013. Web. February 2015.

[38] Prushinskaya, Anna. "How Can Tweet Seats Provide New Opportunities for Audience Engagement?" *Arts Fwd.* ArtsFwd.org, 7 February 2013. Web. February 2015.

[39] "Providence theater experiments with 'tweet seats'." *USA Today.* USAToday.com, 27 January 2013. Web. February 2015.

thrilled by how dynamic and compelling our social media outlets are becoming, but I believe that from the moment the curtain goes up to the moment it comes down, the art on stage is all the engagement the audience needs. That onstage moment you miss to read or send a tweet could be the one that sends chills up your spine, stirs you with empathy, or sends your imagination wild."[40] Another drawback to the *Million Dollar Quartet* Tweet Seats is that those tickets were given to the Tweeters for free. How do you weigh the potential social media impact of a Tweet Seat against that lost ticket revenue? I imagine that it will take several seasons of steady implementation of such an initiative to really get an idea of how Tweet Seats affect the bottom line – and it is even more challenging to measure the impact on audience engagement, including whether a Tweeter's individual experience of the performance itself is diminished.

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[40] Teitell, Beth. "Local theaters ready to bow to tweeters in the audience." *Boston.com*. Boston.com, 29 December 2011. Web. February 2015.

CHAPTER FIVE:

MOVING FORWARD

How do we begin to design gamified theatre experiences for modern audiences? I believe that we must start by accepting the premise that our patrons desire these interactive experiences, whether they belong to the Millennial generation or not. In the course of my research, I have come to realize that I tend to underestimate the average theatergoer by assuming that they may be resistant to gamification. I think that if other theatremakers also come in with this preconceived bias, it severely limits creativity and originality when it comes to designing gamified experiences for audiences.

Alli Houseworth, founder of online engagement consulting company Method 121, makes an important distinction regarding gamification when she says:

> I also think it's important to acknowledge that "gamified experiences" doesn't mean something has to turn into a game, or at least a 'game' as we know it…I think the best gamified audience engagement experiences won't feel like a game. The best games – with the best gamification elements – suck in their participants/players/audiences through the very subtle and psychologically-based elements of game design. There's no reason why we can't do the same in the theatre, with our theatre audiences. To me, age is not a factor when we talk about gamification.[41]

With that in mind, let's explore how various facets of the theatergoing experience could be gamified, using Paharia's 10 Key Mechanics of Gamification as a foundation.

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[41] Houseworth, Alli. Personal interview. 24 February 2015.

Some of these ideas have been attempted previously in some form, or to a lesser degree, or in other fields, but my hope is that these proposals further spur and inspire theatremakers to experiment with just how deeply we can instill gamification into the theatergoing experience to better engage audiences. It is also important to note that none of these ideas are being presented as fully fleshed out, ready to launch, step-by-step instructions for how to execute these concepts – but it is somewhere to start.

5.1: ADVERTISING - How do people find out about the show?

We have discussed the significance of the feeling of discovery; the importance of feeling as if one has discovered something on one's own, as opposed to simply being handed information. This knowledge, combined with the effective gamification mechanic of Competition, can be used to our benefit when it comes to advertising for the theatre.

Certain companies have already started being stingier with their information – in a good way. They have gone through several iterations since, but the websites for *Sleep No More* and its creators Punchdrunk used to be very sparse, to a puzzling - but not detrimental - degree. To uncover information, you were previously forced to take initiative and explore on your own (much like the experience of *Sleep No More* itself). There used to be no navigation bar, no clear icons, but there was an immediate sense of excitement upon the site loading and being presented with what seemed like infinite possibilities. When you did uncover a piece of information, you really felt as if you had earned it.

So, what if we changed how press releases and advertising for the theatre presented information? What if we asked the audience to work a little harder to learn about the show? The traditional mind-set is that you should highlight all of the production's best assets: spell out the names of the stars, the key creatives, and write dynamic copy to hook the reader in. But the problem I see with this method is that the way we currently write press releases and create ads does not let audiences discover anything on their own. My proposition is not to confuse people; it is to tease them, to entice them into doing some of the legwork, to meet us halfway, to give them a sense of ownership over what they learn about this upcoming production. As people's natural competitive nature is engaged, they will want to find out more about the show (more than their friends), to Level Up, and increase their status relative to their peers.

Rather than issuing a press release to announce the full cast of a show, for example, what if we tweeted that the full cast is set, and provide a link? Rather than directing to a pick-up on Playbill, the link would take users to the show's website where they can learn about each cast member, each role he or she plays, and more about the plot, through a controlled game-like process – hopefully engaging the users, allowing them to discover things about the show themselves, and making them feel committed to following the show as more news develops.

5.2: MARKETING - What motivates people to buy tickets?

Once consumers know about the show, what makes them take the next step to becoming an audience member and purchasing a ticket? I believe that the key lies in

making the ticket mean more than just attending the show; rather, they are buying a ticket and thereby gaining access to the whole experience: the anticipation in the days leading up to the event, planning the entire evening out, and sharing in the communal experience of live theatre. Competition also factors into the feeling of exclusive access that we have the ability to give audience members. Not everyone has the means to purchase premium seats to a Broadway show, where the price point and seating location act as examples of Badges, one of Paharia's key mechanics of gamification. However, by appealing to different intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, we have other ways of marketing to broader audiences.

For example, some retailers already implement the following game-like element into their discounting strategy that could also prove effective in the theatre. Now, it is one thing to receive an e-mail from a clothing store that says, "One Day Only! 30% Off Any Item In The Store!" In this case, you know what the offer is, and you're either tempted by it or you're not. However, imagine receiving an e-mail that says, "One Day Only! Win Up To 50% Off Any Item In The Store!" This e-mail goes on to challenge you to a game of chance – often designed like a slot machine, dice, or other actual game. Intrigued by the opportunity to win 50% off, you click the link and are taken to the store's own website, where you find the game. You play (simply by clicking usually, activating the random coupon-generator) and win a coupon that offers you 10%, 30%, or 50% off any item in the store.

Some customers will win big, and some won't – but each and every one will get that rush of adrenaline akin to playing the lottery, without the risk of losing any money. The store is then obliged to give certain customers 50% off, and others as little as 10%

off, but the company still benefits in two ways: 1) they have given customers a reason to visit a store location in person, where they might purchase more than one item, and 2) they got each player to visit their website where there are infinite other ways to engage that customer, and that means even more opportunity. There is also potential for a third benefit: once users play the game and win their coupon, they could share their win on their social media networks with the click of a button.

Imagine this strategy applied to the theatre. Ticket lotteries have existed for some time now, but this is an exciting way to layer on another level of gamification. We could send an e-blast that says, "Buy Tickets To *On The Town* Today And Win Up To 50% Off!" Customers click the link, are taken to the website for *On The Town*, where they try their luck at the game of chance. Maybe they win 50% off, maybe just 10% off – or maybe we can play this game with perks that are unique to our theatre industry. Maybe they can win a free seat upgrade, signed poster, drink/snack voucher, cast album, t-shirt, Twitter follow, etc. – and then we give them the opportunity to seamlessly share their win with their online networks, encouraging other people to engage and play. Even if people don't win big, they still win by having the game-like experience, and can then associate the show with fun and possibility.

5.3: POINT-OF-SALE - How can the ticket-buying process be more engaging?

What if the ticket purchasing process felt less like a business transaction? I think about the Alvin Ailey case study, where patrons were asked a series of questions to determine which options to present that will appeal most to them. Rather than a muddled

process of drop-down menus and vast, confusing seating charts – what if customers are just asked a series of questions like this? For example:

- What day of the week would you like to attend the production?

- What price range are you looking for?

    o   Under $70

    o $70 - $150

    o $150 - $250

    o   Over $250

- What area of the theater would you like to sit in?

    o   Orchestra (ground level)

    o   Mezzanine (2nd level)

    o   Balcony (3rd level)

Based on these three simple conversational questions, the ticketing site can then offer consumers performance options, or, say something like, "There are no Orchestra seats available within your price range. Would you like us to report results that are a) Within your requested price range, or b) Within your requested seating area?" This activity also incorporates one of the key mechanics of gamification, Onboarding, by showing users how the ticket selection process works by doing it, rather than taking the extra steps to give instructions and subsequently asking users to perform the necessary tasks. It is all one smooth process; users learn that by indicating their preferences via their answers to the questions, they are provided with appropriate options for purchase.

5.4: PRE-PERFORMANCE - What builds anticipation?

Sometimes, it seems as though the goal for theaters and productions is simply to make the sale. However, we must put just as much care into curating the audience's experience between the moment of purchasing a ticket and the performance itself, as the amount of effort we put into getting the customer to buy the ticket and how much energy goes into producing the work on stage. This pre-performance period is a prime opportunity to engage audience members, manage their expectations, and provide some additional education and excitement to build up to the performance itself.

There are already some ticketing services that, along with confirmation of ticket purchase, include links to access behind-the-scenes content in an effort to build excitement about the upcoming show. But how can we go further with the sort of content we provide access to and the level of customization for each individual audience member? Not everyone is interested in the same things, of course; some theatre avids want to know all about the inner workings of a production, while those with a more superficial knowledge may be captivated just by how actors warm up. If we give audience members the chance to individualize their own experience as they learn about the show, they are bound to become more engaged and have a deeper connection to the work.

This concept of providing access to backstage content utilizes the key gamification mechanics of Leveling Up, Transparency, and Community. The more audience members engage with a show's website, for example, the more they may Level Up and "unlock" special areas with exclusive video, photos, or interviews (think about the way the film *Rango* surprised users with access to hidden Easter Eggs). Transparency

comes into play when we open up the world of how theatre works to the public; it is still a magical sort of universe to many people who are not familiar with it. By providing a sneak peek behind-the-scenes, we can instill feelings of connectedness by making the process more transparent. The feeling of Community that exists amongst theatre fans is a large part of why people are drawn to the theatre in the first place, and this sense of belonging can be emphasized by providing opportunities for learning and connecting with like-minded patrons. For people who aren't yet "fans," we have the chance to draw them in by letting them self-select their level of engagement during this pre-performance period, find their comfort zone, and learn what types of things they are interested in so we can offer them other bits of information to further build anticipation.

What if, upon the first visit to the show or theater's website, you are greeted with a welcome screen that asks you to select what elements you are most interested in? You can select things like "Dressing Room Décor," "An Actor Prepares," "Theatre Magic," "Rehearsal Videos," "The Design Process," and "News/Updates," and then each visit to the website and e-mail blast can be customized to meet your requirements and highlight your desired topics. Maybe by personalizing each audience member's preparation process this way, by curating the tweets they see, and the articles and blog posts they read, we can make them feel like their individual preferences are being addressed and that they are not just an anonymous butt in a seat.

There are other simple methods of building anticipation that we already know we have the technology for. What if whenever you visited the show's website, there was a countdown clock ticking down to the date and time of the performance you purchased tickets for? What if we engaged the key gamification mechanics of Goals and Points as

users explored a theater company's website, where it was possible to earn perks by engaging with certain pages ("You just read all these actor's bios – you win a free drink voucher!")?

The significance of the pre-performance period as an opportunity for engagement is too easily overlooked. We make the ticket sale, and celebrate the fact that this transaction has taken place and we can count those dollars in our advance. The dollars are important, of course; however, we need to be able to see the whole picture and not solely focus on the box office. If audience experience is positive, that can lead to more dollars, and the best way to make the experience a positive one is proper preparation.

5.5: ATTENDING THE PERFORMANCE - How can audience members feel like they are having an individualized, yet communal experience?

Once the audience is at the theater, there are already certain key mechanics of gamification at play. Community and Collaboration are inherently present, as the audience becomes an integral part of the event. Live theatre also provides opportunity for Fast Feedback, in more than one direction; the actors hear the audience laugh, applaud, or gasp (receiving feedback on their performance), and that could lead the actors to react in turn, with slight variations of timing or rhythm. There are even (for better or for worse) elements of Competition, Badges, and Leveling Up already at work when attending the theater: imagine how you feel when seeing other audience members walk past your row, further down, to those premium seating locations closer to the stage!

While these game elements are already part of the theatergoing experience, what can we do to gamify the act of attending the theater in a collaborative, yet individualized fashion? One option is to embrace the idea of Competition to drive engagement. Some productions and companies already issue signifiers (Badges) that indicate certain audience members are "fans," or part of a special club (i.e. a theater company's "young donor" program). Then there is the fact that those audience members in better seats appear to be at a higher Level than you, having achieved some sort of more elite status. I believe that Competition can be a healthy way to drive engagement, as long as the Goals that people are working toward seem achievable. If people think that they can never afford a premium seat, then there is no benefit in pushing those audience members to work toward that Goal; it only results in frustration. However, if it is apparent that audience members can earn better seats (Level Up) by increasing their engagement in some way (i.e. participating in a pre-show discussion, entering a contest, etc.), the Goal shifts from being unattainable to achievable, and the audience members can be motivated to work toward it.

I imagine that there are ways to employ the key gamification mechanic of Transparency at the theater, as well. I think about how when flying in an airplane, you can plug your headphones into the armrest and listen to a variety of radio stations. One channel you can select transmits the communications between the pilots and ground control. Having this ability to eavesdrop while flying offers the passenger a glimpse behind the curtain, educating them at the same time as deepening the connection between them and the activity. This sort of idea could be incorporated into theatergoing, by giving the audiences access to some of the behind-the-scenes communications. Imagine

a lobby where there are already touchscreens and displays to interact with, where one option is to tap into the communications system that the stage managers are using so you can overhear them calling "Half-hour!" or "10 minutes!," or observe a fight-call or warm-up happening on stage. This is a tricky line to toe, to be sure, in terms of confidentiality and privacy – but this idea of Transparency holds great possibility in terms of deepening the connection between the audience and the theatre, if we develop effective ways to implement it.

Theater companies like Woolly Mammoth in Washington, D.C. and Signature Theater Company in New York City already have interactive displays in the lobbies for audience members to engage with, and while they are filled with interesting content, I think these companies can take a page from the sports industry book when it comes to imagining different ways to allow audience to interact with them. If you attend a Rangers hockey game at Madison Square Garden, your tweet or Instagram photo might pop up on the Jumbotron if you use the special hashtag. Maybe theater companies can take advantage of this sort of technology, as well, by offering audience members the chance to see their photo up on a large display if they tweet or post to their followers that they are at the theater. Perhaps they even get the chance to win a piece of show merchandise, or a snack at intermission. The idea is not only to give the audience member a thrill, but also to encourage them to use their own social networks to broadcast the fact that they are at your theater, about to see your show.

When I spoke with Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Program Director for the Arts, Ben Cameron, he agreed that the theatre industry could stand to improve the way

we customize the experience for our audiences. Cameron used online games to make the following analogy about the dense notes commonly found in programs:

> …You can choose to play the Simple Game, the Intermediate Game, or the Master Game; what would happen if the program notes were similarly written? So there's the Neophyte Level, the Comfort Level, and the Esoteric Level, so instead of getting one general sense of program notes, which aren't very interesting to anybody, you could choose…stratified levels according to skill – the user can elect his or her level of participation. That structure would have huge resonance for many dimensions of the theatre…[42]

The "huge resonance" that Cameron indicates a gamified structure could have for many facets of the theatre is connected to the importance of making audiences comfortable, and giving them some control over their experience by offering them options, and the chance to choose. We all want to push our audiences out of their comfort zone at times, but they must be given the chance to find that comfort zone first.

5.6: THE PERFORMANCE ITSELF - How can the performance have maximum impact?

When discussing how the piece of theatre itself might be gamified, we have pointed to examples such as *Sleep No More*, where the very experience feels like a video game (so much so that it does not quite fit our definition of gamification). The 2012 Off-Broadway production of pop-rock musical *bare* even invited fans to contribute Instagram

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[42] Cameron, Ben. Personal interview. 12 March 2015.

photos, which were collaged together to create the backdrop on the actual set.[43]

However, as we've discussed, the work itself need not be gamified for the production to take advantage of gamification techniques to engage audiences, and not every piece of theatre is going to lend itself to inviting the public to participate in the actual creation of it. This is just fine. It is the job of the directors, designers, performers, and musicians to create a quality production, while we as producers have the opportunity to design an engaging experience around that core event.

5.7: POST-PERFORMANCE - What encourages patrons to reflect upon their theatre experience?

After the performance itself, we have yet another opportunity to nurture the relationship with the audience. We can extend the feeling of Community and Collaboration by encouraging audiences to reflect upon their experience via online social networks such as message boards, chat rooms, and surveys. Perhaps there is a way for audiences to remember their shared experience by noting a particularly exciting performance, or a unique and unexpected incident that occurred when they attended (maybe an understudy had to go on mid-show, and absolutely won over the audience, for example). As we've discussed previously, these sorts of forums are a great method of providing Community and Fast Feedback, but will only be authentic if differing opinions are welcomed, and not censored, so the production must be prepared to accept this if they open themselves up to critique.

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[43] Kahn, Robert. "'Bare' Fans Help to Design Musical's Set." *NBC 4 New York.* NBCNewYork.com, 15 November 2012. Web. 22 March 2015.

Maybe there is also a way to, once again, implement the key gamification mechanic of Competition. For example, audience members could record how many shows they have seen at a particular theater, or starring a certain actor (Points), and earn discounts or simply bragging rights. Imagine a leaderboard, much like the ones found on arcade or online games, that display the Top Achievers in each category. The key, in the case of post-performance engagement, is to maintain the relationship with the audience beyond the curtain falling – but without immediately jumping to asking them for donations or to purchase a subscription to your theater company. If they remain engaged, even just once in a while, then the odds increase that they will come back to see another show and make the choice to continue the relationship with your theater on their own.

5.8: BUILDING LOYALTY - How do patrons convert from audience to advocates? What motivates them to tell their friends about it?

The ideal scenario after a performance is that the audience members tell all of their friends, family, and acquaintances that the show is a can't-miss, amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience that they all must immediately go out and buy tickets for. The audience-turned-advocate is an incredibly powerful marketing tool, primarily because a recommendation from a human being that you know and trust means much more than a production being able to afford to buy space on a billboard. Personal recommendations also hold so much meaning because an authentic and enthusiastic response is not something that can be bought. What the production can do, however, is make the path as

smooth as possible for newly converted advocates to blast the message out to as many of their contacts as possible, as often as they want.

If we begin from the premise that certain audience members adore the show, what is the next step to allowing them to become mouthpieces for the production, in a gamified manner? We have already discussed ways that they can immediately reflect upon their experiences, via their own social networks and through public forums and channels, but is there a more structured way in which audience members can be given the tools to share their enthusiasm for a show? In thinking about this idea, my mind first goes to the recent ubiquity of those sales machines like Arbonne, so reminiscent of pyramid schemes. We don't want to use rewards to push patrons into only posting about the shows that they want people to see, just so that they can earn the rewards. We want the recommendations to be organic and natural, and to not change people's posting habits so much so that they alienate their friends.

I believe that the key is the gamification mechanic of Transparency, rather than Competition. When Competition and Goals are the driving forces behind making recommendations, then it no longer feels organic; the referrals just feel like stepping stones toward achieving your own personal reward – be it a discount, special access, or what have you. I believe that for audience members to make earnest recommendations to their friends, there should not be a rewards program involved at all. Transparency, in this case, is the main element in successful references, because when recommendations are authentic, the patrons' friends may actually trust them and go out and buy a ticket.

Theaters and shows may already send their ticket buyers an e-mail post-performance that says, "Did you enjoy the show? If so, tell your friends!" But I propose

that theaters take the next step, and give audience members more access to shareable content after seeing the performance. This requires a few things, including: 1) We need to avoid giving everything away in the effort to engage pre-performance, and 2) We need to be more open-minded with what we are willing to share in the first place. As it currently stands, if I see *The Invisible Hand* at New York Theatre Workshop and want to spread the word about how great it is, I have just a few options. I can post on Twitter and Facebook about how great it is, and that everyone should go see it. I can also mention it to my family when we talk, and suggest that my parents see it next time they are in New York. I can bring it up at parties, at work, or when hanging out with friends and encourage everyone I spend time with to buy tickets. But if I want to get more creative with it – or really convey my passion for the show – it requires a bit more legwork on my part. If I want to share the poster on Facebook, I need to take the necessary steps to search for the show on Google Image (or go to the NYTW website), download the show art from the internet, and post it with a message on Facebook.

What if we make this process more seamless? What if, when audience members reply to a post-performance e-mail with a positive response, they are outfitted with a whole set of marketing materials? In this form of permission-based marketing, we take their positive feedback as a sign that they would be willing to help spread the word about our production. We can send them shareable images that they can easily download and share, or even links to very special content to share with their social networks. The key gamification mechanics at work in this scenario are Fast Feedback (we quickly assess their feelings about the show, and swiftly respond with materials to follow-up), Transparency (sharing behind-the-scenes news and content), Leveling Up (being

"chosen" as one of the audience members who we entrust with access to special content), and Badges (being perceived by your social circle as the one with inside info, or the one to trust with theatre recommendations, is a valuable commodity). Maybe there is even a sustainable way to offer some sort of reward – or, less of a reward, and maybe more of a "perk" – if audience members buy tickets to attend the show a second time. If their friends buy a full-price ticket, maybe they can attend for free (or to put it differently, offer them two half-price tickets). Weighing the costs vs. benefits of such a deal will be specific to each individual production – and it teeters on the slippery slope of offering rewards, or commission, for having audience members sell the show to others – but it is an idea worth keeping in mind to cultivate a relationship with the audience member beyond their one visit to the theater.

CONCLUSION

Gamification has become an indispensible tool in the marketer's toolkit, but it is time that theatremakers recognize it is also an indispensible tool if we are in the business of engaging audiences at all. Today, consumers of any type of product expect a level of customization, and this expectation is only heightened when it comes to the theatre, an art form that some see as non-essential and over-priced. Gamification is not just some passing marketing fad; it is a significant way that audiences can be engaged, and something that they inherently desire.

By applying game mechanics to every step of the theatergoing experience, we have the chance to transform something like online ticket buying from an arduous, confusing endeavor to an opportunity for engagement, education, and yes, even fun. It is an element necessary to hold onto theatre audiences as we move toward a future that is more and more dependent upon technology and consumer choice. It is also important to remember that gamification is not the same thing as turning everything into a game; rather, it is the process layering one or more of the 10 Key Mechanics of Gamification onto the core experience: Fast Feedback, Transparency, Goals, Badges, Leveling Up, Onboarding, Competition, Collaboration, Community, and Points. By putting these mechanics into play, we are able to activate the five intrinsic motivators (Autonomy, Mastery, Purpose, Progress, and Social Interaction) to drive people to the theatre.

I believe that the future is bright for gamification in the theatre industry. I predict that not-for-profit theater companies will expand from just using game-like elements in some rewards programs, to having dedicated marketing staff members whose job it is to

focus on audience engagement, not just sales. I can see communities being galvanized by gamified theatergoing experiences in a refreshing way, so that their resident theater company is more than just a place to see plays – but a hub of communal activity. I envision commercial producers embracing gamification in a range of ways – from subtle improvements to ticketing systems, all the way to using gamification to encourage repeat customers. Gamification will be most useful to companies and producers who want their productions to stand out from the crowd; it is a method that can reenergize older audience members and attract new ones.

Quantifying the effects of gamification is a challenge, but if we give ourselves the time to experiment with new techniques and strategies, and dutifully record results, we may collect enough data to come to conclusions about applying gamification to the arts. When asked about what we might learn five or 10 years from now, Alli Houseworth mused, "We might realize that all of this added programming around a show is either a) way too much work for little effect on our bottom line, or b) finally start to see the bottom line results in this added programming."[44] I believe that with technology continuing to advance at the rate it is, and with humankind's proclivity for play, we can only expect a more gamified society, and therefore, more demand for a gamified theatergoing experience.

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[44] Houseworth, Alli. Personal interview. 24 February 2015.

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