

# Audience Immersion: environment, interactivity, narrative in the work of Punchdrunk

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## Abstract

The phrase *immersive theatre* has experienced a surge in popularity in recent years, and is often applied loosely. In 2012 ('theatre roundup: advice for playwrights') Lyn Gardner noted that '*immersive* is theatre's new buzzword' and expressed irritation with its often vague and unspecific application, commenting on 'marketeers who seem to be applying the term "immersive" to practically anything that isn't a play by David Hare.' A specialised vocabulary and set of critical approaches are required.

This thesis is about audience immersion in the work of Punchdrunk, a pioneering company working in the form. The thesis proposes that *immersive theatre* (the theatrical form) and *immersive experience* (the sensation) have a reciprocal relationship. The thesis begins with an overview of approaches to audience in theatre scholarship and other fields, and establishes a definition of immersive experience that will be applied to case studies in the chapters. The thesis is divided into three sections that consider topics integral to Punchdrunk's theatre: interactive elements; a fractured and nonlinear approach to narrative; and the creation of scenographically rich environments. The chapters consider the relationship between these topics and immersive experience. The thesis is interested in how immersive experience is created and maintained, and discussed and framed in wider discourse.

The first section is about interactivity and immersion. Chapter 1 considers various approaches to interactivity and proposes a multivalent model. Chapter 2 applies this model to a discussion of interactivity and immersive experience in *The Drowned Man*. Chapter 3 widens the definition of interactivity to consider audience engagement beyond the moment of the theatrical encounter. The second section is about narrative and immersion. Chapter 4 outlines current critical approaches to narrative, and discusses immersion in the interplay of story structure and theatrical structure, using the linear *The Crash of the Elysium* as a case study. Following on from this, Chapter 5 considers how immersive experience is created and maintained in the context of a Punchdrunk trademark: a nonlinear structure, with scenes in non-chronological order encountered only when a wandering spectator comes across them. Chapter 6 draws on the narrative 'vs' ludology debate in the field of gaming; a debate concerned with what a player is actually immersed *in* – the story or the mechanics of play. The chapter considers immersive experience and story in the *Sleep No More* project Punchdrunk undertook with MIT Media Lab in 2012, which used gaming mechanics to explore 'remote and real world interconnected theatrical immersion'. The final section is about environment and immersion. Chapter 7 outlines approaches to environment and draws on methodological approaches from site-specific performance to discuss how immersive experience manifests in the interplay between the original site and the creation of a fictional world in/on that site.

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For some, the moment of highest pleasure is the entrance into the museum: the sudden plunge into a world of delights, the call of the far doorways. For others, it is the gradual losing of the way: the sense, as we wander from hall to hall, that we can no longer find our way back. This, to be sure, is a carefully contrived pleasure, for although the museum is constructed so as to help us lose our way, we know perfectly well that at any moment we may ask a guard to lead us to an exit. For still others, what pierces the heart is the stepping forth: the sudden opening of the door, the brilliant sunlight, the dazzling shop windows, the momentary confusion on the upper stair.

Stephen Millhauser, *The Barnum Museum* (1990)

## Introduction and Literature Review: defining immersive experience

### General Introduction

The essence of Punchdrunk is that you have to *feel* it.

(Barrett in Machon 2013: 163)

This thesis is about audience immersion in the work of Punchdrunk. The project proposes a definition of immersive experience drawn from research in the fields of philosophical aesthetics and cognitive psychology (building on Csikzentmihalyi's concept of 'flow'), and recent research into immersion in computer gaming, to argue that immersive experience is a graded, fleeting, intense and necessarily temporary state defined by its temporal and spatial boundaries; and that 'immersive theatre' is a genre of theatrical work in which certain audience configurations might be expected, but in which immersive experience itself can only be allowed for, not guaranteed.

The thesis considers the relationship between immersive experience and the areas of environment, narrative and interactivity, three areas that make 'immersive theatre' a different experience to (for example) a proscenium arch production: the ability of an audience to wander with apparent freedom through a spatially innovative environment, usually scenographically rich and multisensory; a non-chronological and/or impressionistic approach to narrative; interactive elements and/or characters. What is meant by interactivity, narrative and environment is also discussed at the beginning of each section, since these terms are contested. A working definition of each term is proposed at the beginning of each section, and each chapter considers the relationship between them and immersive experience, using one or two shows by the company Punchdrunk as case studies.

Punchdrunk are the perfect theatre company with which to investigate the phenomenon of immersive experience and its relationship to immersive theatre. They are a prominent company working in the form: 'the kind of work that is being called "immersive theatre" [...] the leading company working in this idiom is probably Punchdrunk' (Nield 2008: 531); by 2011 they were 'immersive theatre pioneers Punchdrunk' (Arnott 2011: np). Or at least, pioneers of the current interest in the form: as will be established later in this introductory section, the trademark

immersive traits regarding space, narrative, and interactivity can be traced back to the early twentieth century in terms of performance history, and immersive experience *per se* can be traced back to long before that. This thesis will consider the etymological root of the word *immersion* to begin its definition of immersive experience. However, the prominence of Punchdrunk in contemporary discussions of immersive theatre makes their work ideal for providing the context and case studies of this project.

A description of the physical structure common to multiple Punchdrunk productions is suggested in Nield's definition of the 'kind of work that is being called "immersive theatre", in which the audience inhabit the space of the play alongside the actors' (2008: 531). This definition makes the spatial and structural elements of a production – its relationship to its environment – key to defining work as 'immersive.' The layout, the shape, a pragmatic outline of what happens in terms of performer action and movement, the basic structure of audience logistics – make a Punchdrunk show immersive in terms of its shape. Nield's definition of immersive theatre continues that the space which actors and audience jointly inhabit is usually 'a tricked-out space [...] perhaps infused with smells, sounds' (2008: 531). The emotional/visceral/multisensory *experience* of a Punchdrunk production is often cited as what makes the company's work uniquely exciting ('last night was a dream sequence I am unable to leave behind'; 'I've never known theatre to be so addictive!' Punchdrunk fan mail archives: np). The structural and logistical aspects of a production and the sensory experience felt within it are closely linked, and the former might be said to facilitate the latter. Punchdrunk's own statements of intent frequently emphasise the latter category, emphasising the role of emotional and sensory excitement, rather than a pragmatic description of the show's logistics, as being what makes a Punchdrunk experience a truly immersive one ('this work only functions if there's a sense of mystery [...] It's about a heightened state of awareness. The more real it is, the deeper it becomes.' Barrett in 'Burn the Seats', 2013: np). The word *immersive*, therefore, might be invoked to describe the shape of a theatre production or the emotional quality of experiencing it, and *immersive experience* can be applied to different theatrical forms. It is possible to be highly emotionally immersed in a piece of end-on performance, or to feel indifferent or bored while moving through a production that describes itself as immersive. This thesis aims to consider what is

meant by immersion across these different contexts; the project considers what is meant by immersive experience, and how immersive experience might be usefully considered as a separate phenomenon to 'immersive theatre'. This project considers when and where immersive experience is claimed to manifest; what it manifests as; and who is doing the claiming.

An overview of Punchdrunk's work during the composition of this thesis might serve as an introduction to the scope of the contents of this project.

This project was begun at the end of 2010, as Punchdrunk celebrated their ten year anniversary. Founded by Exeter University alumni in 2000, their early work showed several now-established spatial and experiential trademarks. Mostly drawing on classic texts (i.e. *Romeo and Juliet* in 2003's *The Firebird Ball*, *Macbeth* in *Sleep No More* England 2003; Boston 2009; New York 2011), these productions turned large non-theatre spaces into design-rich worlds through which the audience was allowed to wander, arriving upon scenes out of the text's original chronological order as and when they arrived to them, and finally gathered together to witness the finale. This thesis begins by considering Punchdrunk's 'breakout' shows of *Faust* (Wapping Lane, 2005) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (Battersea Arts Centre, 2007-8), which were commercial and critical successes, the run of *Masque* being extended due to demand. In their success, these productions established a certain physical grammar of 'typical' Punchdrunk shows. Later productions would be compared to these, both in terms of the structure and logistics, and the quality of their visceral emotional punch. This thesis argues that as well as the 'typical' Punchdrunk shows that came after *Faust* and *Masque* (i.e. *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Drowned Man*) the 'not your typical Punchdrunk' (cf members of the company) such as *It Felt Like A Kiss*, *Crash of the Elysium*, and *The Borough*, atypical in that they had linear narratives or occurred outside, can also still be considered from the perspective of creating immersive experience. If immersive experience is what makes for a typical Punchdrunk show, these latter productions are not as atypical as a description of their logistical structures might suggest.

In the background of this thesis there has been, over Punchdrunk's ten-plus years of making work, a rise in the company's prestige and visibility. During the composition of this thesis, Punchdrunk have unquestionably become more



established: both nationally and internationally, given the success of *Sleep No More* in New York and Punchdrunk Enrichment's international projects. In the 2011 Arts Council England funding reshuffle where many companies received a complete cut, Punchdrunk received 'a hefty rise of 141% (Higgins 2011, 'the great axe falls': np). *Faust* and *Masque* saw the emergence of a community of Punchdrunk fans who continue to engage with the company's work. The relationship between Punchdrunk and this community is a further point of interest in this thesis, as it has consequences for the social placing of Punchdrunk in the wider theatrical landscape. The section on interactivity and immersion considers fan mail regarding the breakout shows as a form, method and means of defining and claiming ownership of immersive experience. A chapter in this section draws on a consideration of fan multiple attendees of *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man* to discuss possible consequences of this in terms of 'reading' the shows and the formulation of immersive experience.

During the composition of this thesis, Punchdrunk have continued to make work. Summer of 2010 saw *The Duchess of Malfi* collaboration with English National Opera, and in the summer of 2011 they created children's show *The Crash of the Elysium* for the Cultural Olympiad. A bigger (final) version of *Sleep No More* was premiered in New York in 2011, and at the time of writing is still running. Summer of 2013 saw the opening of *The Drowned Man*, which at the time of writing is also still running and due to close in July 2014, exactly a year after it opened. These shows are in the spatial/structural tradition of *Faust* and *Masque*. Punchdrunk have also made self-described 'non-typical' Punchdrunk shows. *The Crash of the Elysium* was a show primarily made for children (although adult-only performances did occur); *Elysium* and 2010's *It Felt Like A Kiss* had linear narratives and singular audience paths; *The Borough* (Aldeburgh, also summer 2013 for the Benjamin Britten festival) was unusual for Punchdrunk in that it occurred outside. They have also begun to experiment with an expansion of the one-on-one form to create Punchdrunk Travel, a holiday experience for individual participants at a time. This thesis does not consider Punchdrunk Travel directly, primarily because during the phase of its composition the experience remained in experimental stages, but many of the arguments of this thesis regarding what is meant by immersive experience, and how

it might be constituted and framed, could be applied to this expansion of Punchdrunk's work into the future.

Two further categories of Punchdrunk show have occurred during the composition of this thesis: enrichment and commercial projects.

Since its founding in 2008, Punchdrunk Enrichment has been making excellent work which could be – and deserves someday to be – the topic of a thesis of its own. This project considers the mainstream Punchdrunk productions in order to consider what is meant by immersive experience as it might typically be understood. But a project considering community, education and storytelling in Punchdrunk Enrichment's immersive applied drama projects – such as *The Uncommercial Travellers* which worked with local communities, *Under The Eiderdown* for primary schools, and *The House Where Winter Lives* (Story Studio, 2013) – would certainly be a project worth undertaking.

During the composition of this thesis, Punchdrunk have courted some controversy regarding their making of several commercial projects for brands. *The Black Diamond* for Stella Artois (2010) and experiences especially made for a Louis Vuitton store launch (2010) and W Hotel (2011), have attracted criticism questioning the ethics of this form of immersive advertising. Further accusations of succumbing to economic imperatives have been levelled at the experience of *Sleep No More* (Gillinson asks 'Is this a sell out I see before me?', Guardian 2011: np). The intersection between immersive experience, commercial imperatives and audience care is one of particular tension.

Partly down to the success of Punchdrunk and companies making similarly shaped work, immersive theatre has recently become an oft-used phrase: in 2014 Gardner refers to 'the much overused term "immersive"' in a review of an unsuccessful production that seemed 'more of an aimless wander' than an environment-sensitive theatrical adventure (2014: np.) There is increasing academic interest in the topic of immersive theatre and performance, and these studies often use Punchdrunk as a particular point of focus: Nield 2008; Babbage 2009; Machon 2009; White 2009; Eglinton 2010; Shaughnessy 2012; Gordon 2012; Purcell 2013; Machon 2013; White 2013; Worthen 2012; Frieze (Ed.) 2014 [forthcoming]. The popularity of theatre describing itself as immersive has led to a backlash on

occasion, a sense of immersion fatigue: Higgins asks, 'Immersive theatre – tired and hackneyed already?' (Guardian 2009: np) and describes feeling 'unmoved; bored, even' at finding herself being 'blindfolded *again*' (original emphasis.) The question of whether immersive theatre is tired and hackneyed aimless wandering is founded on an assumption that immersive theatre and immersive experience are one and the same, and that to be awake to the gimmicks of the former is to be immune to the magic of the latter. There is an existing trajectory of enquiry questioning the relationship between participation and passivity in theatre: Freshwater (2008) suggests 'the belief that participation empowers has become a compelling orthodoxy in theatre and performance studies [...] it often seems to be applied reductively and uncritically.' (36) Shaughnessy (2012) draws on Rancière to question the assumption that physical inactivity automatically equates to passivity; referring to a history of unsuccessful promenade productions of *As You Like It*, Dusinberre rightly notes that 'physical participation does not necessarily create imaginative participation' (2006: 67). It is one of the aims of this thesis to contribute to current literature on the topic of audience immersion and immersive performance by conducting a discussion of what is meant by the phrase 'immersive experience', and proposing a vocabulary and set of theoretical concepts with which we might speak about immersive experience that separate it from the physical and structural traits of much immersive theatre.

The first of the two literature reviews consider methodological approaches to the question of audience, in order to provide a framework for the analysis in the body of the thesis. Immersive theatre tends to emphasise its audiences as a group of separate individuals who have unique experiences:

No two audience members within the spaces have the same show and every evening the experience you've had is yours and yours alone, and in fact even if you're holding hands with your loved one when you arrive we'll make an effort to try and separate you because you'll have a better time when you're fighting for yourself and you're selfish for once.  
(Barrett, 2014: talk at 'Experience Economy' Remix Summit)

Makers of immersive theatre define their work's relationship to audience as being what makes immersive theatre unlike any other kind of theatrical shape or structure.

The literature review considers a range of theoretical approaches to the audience from the fields of theatre, film, television and cultural studies to build a methodology used throughout the thesis that best incorporates this. The thesis considers the perspective of an idealised spectator implied by the work, in order to discuss how Punchdrunk craft and facilitate immersive experience in their productions. This is contrasted with data drawn from interviews conducted with audience members and my own presence at Punchdrunk rehearsals and performances, in order to place individual accounts in the context of an implied idealised audience member.

It is the contention of this thesis that ‘immersive experience’ can be defined in a way that allows it to be considered separately from ‘immersive theatre’. The second literature review therefore discusses current definitions and understandings of immersive experience in other fields – cognitive science and psychology, philosophical aesthetics, and virtual reality and computer gaming – in order to build a working (re)definition of immersive experience that will be used throughout the body of the thesis chapters.

#### Literature review: approaches to audience

Since 2000 Punchdrunk have pioneered a game changing form of immersive theater in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds.  
(*Sleep No More* website: 2010)

The importance of the audience has always been a truism in theatre. In Brook’s famous formulation, a moment of human connection created by the act of spectatorship is the defining detail of theatrical experience: ‘A man walks across this empty space *while someone else is watching him*, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged’ (1968: 9; my emphasis). The description of Punchdrunk quoted above appears on the website for *Sleep No More* – a site establishing the company’s international profile. While this description contains language of innovation (‘pioneering’; ‘game changing’), it also places Punchdrunk in the tradition of making work that emphasises the relationship between the work and its audience, which has precedents in twentieth-century performance history. (And in other twentieth century histories: Bishop’s *Participation* (2006) charts a trajectory, in the

field of contemporary fine art, away from a viewer as passive spectator and towards active participant.) The description of Punchdrunk quoted above defines the 'immersive' form by its spectator-performer dynamic ('experience epic storytelling') as well as its audience-space dynamic, emphasising the creation of 'sensory theatrical worlds' and the way in which audience members (are invited to) experience them. It is necessary to consider existing audience methodologies in theatre and performance studies, and other fields that have considered audiences, in order to create a framework for analysis. It is particularly important to note the relationship between tradition and innovation when considering work that describes itself as 'game changing', as it presupposes an understanding of the implied original game. Ways theatre scholarship has considered the question of audience can suggest possible approaches for this thesis, and therefore the first literature review considers three areas: methodological approaches to the question of audience in theatre scholarship; in film, television and cultural studies; and in scholarship of immersive theatre and Punchdrunk so far. In this third section I consider current academic scholarship of, and approaches to, immersive theatre and Punchdrunk, and in conclusion outline the approaches this thesis draws on.

It is also important to note that professional criticism, scholarship and reviews of immersive theatre occupy a landscape also heavily populated by a more casual blog/fan website discourse around Punchdrunk and their shows. The result is a rich ecology of discussion, analysis, and interaction with the concept of immersive experience in the company's productions. The literature review on immersive theatre focuses on academic scholarship, but chapters 1-3 on interactivity are situated within, and incorporate, this wider set of discourses.

#### Approaches to audience: theatre and performance studies

Freshwater argues that theatre academics rarely consider asking theatregoers what they thought: 'audiences are beginning to be trusted by practitioners and by industry. But it seems that theatre scholars have yet to develop this trust.' (2008: 74). She notes a low level of engagement in theatre studies with theories and methodological approaches from the discipline of cultural studies. It is usually the marketing departments of theatres that conduct any audience research; not many studies by

theatre scholars ask people who aren't practitioners, scholars or critics, as television and film studies do. Theatre and film/television studies can even appear mutually exclusive in their interest in audiences: Bennett (1997) deliberately omits television; Freshwater notes 'Theatre is notable by its absence' (2007: 79) in Brookner and Jermyn (2003)'s summary of historical approaches to audiences studies; Barker suggests that 'Academic study of theatre audiences has been, to put it kindly, spasmodic and discontinuous' (2003: 1). This thesis includes some interviews with audience members and as a means to bridge the gap between theoretical constructs and descriptions of actual audience experience.

Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* (1997) was the first study to draw on reader-response theory as a framework for considering the theatre audience. Bennett traces a historical trajectory of the theatre audience beginning with the democratic Ancient Greek amphitheatres in which theatre attendance overlapped with civil duty, and moving through to the separation and darkness between audience and performance in nineteenth century naturalism. The move is towards an increasingly passive theatre audience, a narrative of theatre history that would be seconded by Punchdrunk: 'they [the masked audience of a Punchdrunk production] are removed from the traditional role of the passive, hidden audience' (Barrett in Machon 2013: 160). Carlson states that 'much theatre theory still regards the theatre performance as something created and set before an essentially passive audience', which fails to consider 'what demands and contributions it [the audience] brings to the event.' (1989: 82). Freshwater notes that Carlson was writing in opposition to much theatre scholarship at this time, which was overly literary and relied heavily on the analysis of the text instead of the live event. However, the assumption that traditional theatregoing is inherently passive remains persistent today, not least in the rhetoric of immersive theatre makers.

Bennett emphasises the importance of considering cultural contexts when analysing theatrical production and reception, and suggests that the business of buying a ticket, agreeing to watch the action, etc., constitutes a 'social contract' (204) between the spectator and the production. The concept of the social contract is a useful one for considering the context of immersive productions and the relationship between the work itself and immersive experience. Immersive theatre promises (either implicitly in being so-called, or explicitly in promotional rhetoric) an 'immersive experience' – one of emotional, sensory intensity – before the production has even

been attended. Some criticism of Punchdrunk comes about in response to the gap between the promise of experience implicit in calling a production 'immersive' and the reality of physical pragmatics in the space: a dishonest social contract. Worthen comments on the black-masked ushers who 'intervene to police the spectacle' (2012: 95); Shaughnessy too suggests that,

[the] rigorous and sometimes coercive, stewarding, or policing, of the behaviour of participants in immersive performances means that their freedom of manoeuvre can be quite severely restricted, their range of interactive possibilities relatively limited, and their freedoms more rhetorical than real. (2012: np.)

The pragmatic concerns of immersive theatre get in the way of the promised pleasures of immersive experience.

Bennett's 'Theatre Audiences, Redux' (2006) considers the developments in audience scholarship in the years following the publication of *Theatre Audiences*. She identifies a sociological turn in theatre and performance audience studies, with an increasing interest in drawing on methodologies from the social sciences to consider theatre audiences. However, and particularly relevant to this thesis, Bennett suggests the most significant advances in audience studies continue to occur outside the context of academic research. Studies conducted by the marketing departments of theatres, or audience research reports by government bodies, are where any attempt to understand an audience are situated: 'the audience has become an important object of study, not necessarily or even frequently motivated by the discourses of theatre studies, nor by our theatre history making, but by the economic realities of the cultural industries.' (226). This project draws on research conducted outside of the context of marketing to consider how immersive experience might be described, facilitated and framed by those who experience it; chapters 3 and 6 in particular draw on longitudinal interviews conducted with long-term audience members of Punchdrunk and members of the team involved in the creation of *Sleep No More* respectively.

This project proposes a definition of immersive experience that is strongly linked to an awareness of its boundaries – the outside is as important as the inside.

Bennett notes that 'One result of this expanded interest in the subjectivities and experiences of the theatre audience has been that we are now rarely interested only in the theatre performance but also in the cultural effects it produces in all the contexts involved in its production and reception.' (1997: 225). This thesis draws on Bennett's perspective to consider wider cultural contexts of audience immersion, but in particular the interactivity section considers Punchdrunk's relationship with its audiences in terms of fans and repeat visitors. As a final point about the increased interest in this field, Bennett notes that 'The study of audiences has also reminded the theatre scholar of his or her own implication in the production-reception framework' (226). The situatedness of the writer is of particular interest in this project, as immersive performance is frequently created with individual audience members in mind. The tension between the 'absent idealised spectator' for whom the shows are created, and the individual experiences of actual participants, is one that is very important to studying immersive performance and the creation of immersive experience, and this is something this project is aware of throughout.

Studies that express an awareness of theatre studies' need to include more response from audience members, rather than relying on reviews, include Knowles (2004), Tulloch (2005) and Reason (2006). Tulloch (2005) is aware of bridging a gap between two fields with different histories of audience research, discussing audiences from the perspective of theatre studies and drawing on methodologies from cultural/media studies such as focus groups and individual case studies. Tulloch has written on television fans and the audiences of science fiction television drama (Jenkins and Tulloch 1995), and a background in cultural media studies/ audience research and the more theoretical concept of the theatrical event are drawn on as frameworks for analysis. Tulloch (2005) and Reason (2010) use sociological methodologies such as interviews to obtain primary data, and this data aids a discussion of the relationship between the theoretical study of the theatrical event and details from audience members. The methodologies of these studies are influential on the approaches taken in this thesis, which also contains both primary data and the discussion of theoretical concepts. Some sections draw on my own presence at rehearsals and performances of Punchdrunk productions, but my personal readings of and responses to these are not intended to be definitive and are often not relevant to the theoretical concepts under consideration in the chapters. Personal experiences of my own and of others are used as a starting point to draw



out what might manifest as immersive experience in several theoretical contexts.

An interesting recent approach to immersion to be acknowledged at the beginning of this project is provided by the recent 'cognitive turn' in theatre and performance studies (identified in McConachie and Hart 2012). McConachie (2008) applies a cognitive approach to theatre audiences and argues for 'conceptual blending as the cognitive basis of spectating' (18). Conceptual blending is discussed in more detail in the literature review on immersion, below, and is a useful concept for considering how immersive experience can be a state which is both aware of its boundaries and forgetful of them at the same time. Immersive experience could be described simply as a sensation of complete engagement to the point of forgetting anything outside of the immediate experience, and is described in such a way from the perspective of Punchdrunk: '...we never want anything to happen that breaks the spell. If they [the audience] suddenly remember they're in London in 2007, then we've failed' (Barrett in Gardner 2007: np). However, this thesis proposes a more nuanced definition of immersive experience that is founded on an awareness of its boundaries and the interplay between the 'spell' of the performance and the reality of 'London in 2007'; conceptual blending can be a useful concept for understanding this. Therefore it is necessary to outline some cognitive approaches to spectatorship, before explaining why the field is not drawn on heavily in this project.

The theatrical concepts of doubling, empathy and the business of spectating, in the context of cognitive science (including the concepts of mirror neurons and conceptual blending) can be used to give a neurological basis, and therefore an evolutionary purpose, for many theatrical truisms:

Our muscular, chemical, and neurological responses to others' emotions are often so small that they escape conscious recognition, but they can have a significant impact on our behaviour. In other words, evolution has equipped us to attune our bodies to the emotions of other people; this basis for our sociality as a species is inherited and embodied. Embodying other's emotions produces emotions in us, even if the situation is an imagined or fictitious one. (McConachie 2008: 67)

This reading of emotional empathy defines theatre spectatorship as a set of embodied cognitive processes. Bogart in Hurley (2010) also offers a description of theatrical spectatorship that blends cognitive activity with emotional/visceral affect:

[Affect is defined as] the thrill of being in the presence of actors who are radiantly experiencing the present moment [...] Affect means 'feeling associated with action'. Our blood rushes faster, our mirror neurons spike new synaptic activity throughout our bodies, adrenalin courses throughout the system [...] This visceral experience, one of the leading attributes of all encounters with art, is a large part of why we bother to engage with art in the first place. The increased adrenalin resulting from the experience sharpens the mind and focuses the attention. (Bogart in Hurley 2010: xii).

And a similar approach and conflation of the physical and the emotional can be found in the way immersive experience is framed by the makers of immersive theatre. Describing the questions and considerations that led to the creation of Punchdrunk and informed its earliest productions, Barrett suggests the physical *immersive* shape and the emotional *immersive* experience are connected, and that the manipulation of environment and space results in the emotional (cognitive, even) response in an audience member:

How can I make theatre dangerous again? How can we take an audience out of their comfort zone and put them in a space that's charged, that's got no safety net, and so that suddenly they're adrenalin-fuelled and their synapses are firing and they receive everything tenfold so the theatrical experience can be better received and a show can be higher impact – so we started taking the action outside of theatres and taking it into empty buildings [...] and suddenly an audience is learning on the trot, they're living it, they're in it, and it resonates in a deeper place. (Barrett, 2014: talk at 'Experience Economy' Remix Summit)

This quotation is useful for considering how immersive experience is framed by the makers of immersive theatre. The atmospheric and spatial trademarks of the form came about as experiments in creating the sensation of immersive experience. It is a

contention of this thesis that immersive experience is something constructed, allowed for, and/or facilitated by immersive theatre productions, which is then experienced by an audience member. The cognitive behaviour is part of the theatrical experience; the cognitive behaviour and the theatrical experience have a reciprocal relationship. The problem with perceiving these aspects being so closely linked together it prevents an approach towards immersive experience as a cultural construct. An analysis of cognitive studies' approach to the concept of empathy will illustrate the difference.

McConachie cites Krasner's 'Empathy and Theater' in *Staging Philosophy* (257), which suggests that audiences need to have an understanding of the story/world of performance and have focussed their attention before empathy occurs. McConachie suggests Krasner conflates empathy with understanding, compassion, and sympathy, and argues that 'Spectators do not wait to deploy empathy, but engage it unconsciously right from the start of every performance to help them figure out where to focus their attention, who these characters are, and what their story is about. Empathy is a proactive search engine that is always ready to engage intentional onstage action and mirror it for meaning.' (2008: 72). The methodology of McConachie's study is a very useful one for considering the cognitive functions that occur during theatre spectatorship. But from the perspective of this project's definition of immersive experience, what Krasner points out can be considered to be barriers to immersion in a production. Barriers to immersion are discussed later in the second literature review as they are concepts first created in studies of computer games; described simply they are aspects that might manifest in either the content or form of a work, that must be overcome to allow for a fully immersive experience. Krasner's suggestion is therefore useful to consider immersive experience as a series of graded states which overcomes various barriers to create and maintain the state. Drawing on these models rather than cognitive science also allows immersive experience to be considered from the perspective of artists who seek to create work that enables or facilitates the state. Auslander (1999) argues that our experience of the live moment may ultimately be a mediated one, but McConachie points out that this perspective understands the two things to be a dichotomy, whereas 'live' and 'mediated' actually exist on a continuum, not a binary. For example, a live singer who wears a microphone is both live and mediated (209). This project takes a similar

argument for the definition of immersive experience, which exists as a series of graded states rather than as a felt/not-felt binary. The methodology of applying cognitive studies to theatrical experience is useful, as it reminds us that empathy and emotional engagement are processes that are rooted in embodied consciousness. However, considering immersive experience from this studies perspective risks a reductive, essentialist analysis that defines any experience as immersive if it results in the right kind/amount of cognitive activity. The concepts of empathy and doubling may have become contested by developments in cognitive studies; however, they remain useful metaphors for considering immersive experience as cultural and social constructs. This thesis is interested in how immersive experience is situated in theatrical production, rather than how it physically manifests in the brain.

The quotation from Peter Brook that began this section placed the human connection as central to spectatorship and the creation of theatrical experience. However, Punchdrunk's audience members will often find themselves alone, in spaces empty of performers and/or any other audience members. The perspective of scenography might help to create a methodology for considering the relationship between an audience member and a theatrical space. In a chapter in *Kinesthetic Empathy* about audience experience of scenography from the perspective of immersive theatre (219-235), McKinney describes scenography such as that of Punchdrunk as one that 'challenges and problematizes notions of audience, who are no longer distant spectators of images and pictures that are laid out before them.' She argues that it is necessary, when considering work with immersive/participatory scenography, 'to consider both the audience as a collective entity and the responses of individual spectators within those audiences.' (2011: 221). The tension between considering audiences as a whole group and individual people has been troubled in audience studies (Bennett 1997) but this arguably becomes truer in the case of immersive theatre, where audience members encounter different moments in the show, or (literally) the same moments from different perspectives. Nield's 'The Rise of the Character Named Spectator' (2008) draws on this paradox by combining the results of a small number of interviews into the creation of a single voice speaking varying experiences of Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death*. There is also a tension, in discussing the effects of immersive experience on audiences, in talking about the effect of performance on an absent, mute, 'idealised spectator' – and on

the other hand considering individual responses to immersive work by the methodology of interviews or surveys. From the perspective of creating immersive work, Punchdrunk shows are created without the exact knowledge of audience movements in mind; the shows necessarily change once people are in the space, particularly during the first weeks. As well as this, the shows are not created with individual journeys in mind – not specific paths. Instead, the assumption is that every audience member will find something. This thesis therefore draws on a perspective that considers the creation of immersive experience for an absent idealised spectator, which is how the shows are conceived, designed and rehearsed; but it is also aware of the ways individual experiences change and vary, and therefore individual experiences are used but not assumed to represent the ‘correct’ response to being in a Punchdrunk space. McKinney also suggests that kinaesthetic empathy might be a useful framework for considering a room empty of performers, since ‘empathy, stimulated by kinaesthetic perception, might arise between spectators and scenographic objects as well.’ (2012: 225). This methodology is taken up in the chapter on environment, which considers the relationship between immersive experience and the space.

When there are performers in the room of a Punchdrunk production, it is very possible they will be dancing. Doyle’s choreography has become, along with the masks and free-to-wander instruction, a trademark of Punchdrunk shows. Studies of audience in the field of dance might therefore supply useful methodologies for thinking about audiences. A recent study considering audience methodologies is Reynolds and Reason (Eds.) *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (2012) which grew out of the longer project *Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy*. The project drew together study of performance with the cognitive turn, and the book applies theories of empathy and current research in the field of cognitive science, such as mirror neurons, to consider how performance (and dance in particular) makes meaning for spectators. Reynolds’ chapter (121-136) applies kinaesthetic empathy to spectatorship, emotion and affect when watching dance. She coins the phrase ‘the dance’s body’ to signify ‘a body that is not identified with a fixed subject position of either performer or spectator, but which is both ‘here’ and ‘there’, invested as subject and object in the shared materiality and affective flow of choreographed movement’ (123). This project does not focus on the performer’s body from a

phenomenological perspective but kinesthetic empathy is a useful theoretical concept for considering the manifestation of immersive experience during moments of interaction that are not naturalistically performed one-on-ones, but moments of spectatorship in the presence of dance.

In conclusion, studies of theatre audiences have begun to include methodologies drawn from the social sciences (Bennett 1997, Bennett 2006) and cognitive studies (McConachie 2008, McConachie and Hart 2012). Methodologically they use a mixture of data collection (interviews or the writer's own attendance), and the application of theoretical concepts to case studies. The tension between individual experiences and writing about 'the audience' as a single group is also one that runs through current scholarship on audiences, and becomes particularly relevant to theatrical events that are designed to facilitate individual journeys. As discussed above this thesis does not directly draw upon cognitive science or sociology but it is aware of their methodological approaches towards framing the audience member relative to the theatrical event. The thesis is concerned with a theory of immersive experience drawn from developments in other fields that have analysed the concept in detail, complicating existing definitions of the work that rely on audience-performer shared spaces.

#### Approaches to audience: film, television, and cultural studies

As mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, some scholars have commented on the failure in theatre studies to discuss audiences with any degree of rigour (or trust). The fields of media and cultural studies often consider the nature of audiences and approaches to audience research, usually from a sociological perspective. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) identify a 'sociological turn' in studies of audiences, and propose that it is no longer appropriate to think of an audience as one body, but as a diffuse entity made up of individuals.

The field of cultural studies contains many studies of audiences, often using methodologies from the discipline of sociology: about television audiences (Gorton 2009, Seiter 1991), film audiences (Jancovich et al 2003, Stafford 2007, Staiger 2000) and theatre audiences (Ruddock 2007); ethnographic studies of media audiences (Moores 1993, Nightingale and Ross 2003, Nightingale 2011), and

historical studies of general trends in audiences of theatre and television (Butsch 2003, Spiegel 1992). Writings in cultural studies looking at audiences in new media and digital technologies include Ang (2001) and Jenkins (2008). The particular audience demographic of the fan has been considered mainly in regards to film and television (Jenkins 1992; 2012). This is a relevant audience methodology to consider because Punchdrunk have acquired a strong fan base during their period of making work. At the time of writing, a community of fans are very active on the Internet and keen to seek experiences of Punchdrunk shows. They have a shared interest in comparing stories of repeated visits, one-on-ones, strategies, and jointly compile technical and logistical specifications of the shows, as well as discussions of the comparative performances of many of the actors. At the time of writing, fans' responses to riddles within *The Drowned Man's* content lead to increasingly sophisticated readings of the show's world, story(s), and characters. This highly engaged demographic within Punchdrunk's wider audience base suggests the development of a certain skillset in experiencing Punchdrunk's immersive theatre – Alston (2013) identifies this as leading to the creation of an entrepreneurial instinct of the ideal spectator in immersive work worryingly in line with the creation and celebration of neoliberal value. (Indeed, Barrett spoke at Remix London's conference event entitled 'The Experience Economy' in March 2014).

Of particular interest in relation to the methodological problems of interviewing individual audience members is Barker et al (2007): *Watching Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, a series of essays based on data collected from nearly 25,000 individually completed questionnaires across twenty countries since 2001 (the year the first film in the trilogy was released). Barker and Mathijis write at length about the methodological challenges they faced when attempting to design a questionnaire that would reveal what they wanted to know (the question of what they wanted to know requiring research in itself). Larger concepts such as the audience's relationship to Tolkien as a writer, to the books and the films and the relationship between them, and to the genre of Fantasy itself, were brought out by smaller, more direct and easy to answer questions. These answers were studied in order to identify patterns of answer or common assumptions that may thread across the various answers. Apart from the sheer numbers of people in the study, this looking-for-patterns approach to the data collected seems a useful way to protect against the temptation to apply the reaction of an individual to a group as a whole, or to place

too much importance on a single piece of evidence.

Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2011) considers participatory art in the US and gives an historical overview of socially engaged practice over the second half of the twentieth century. Its focus is on 'art that uses people as its medium' (39), and draws on the context of theatre and performance to consider the political and social implications of spectating in art galleries. Methodologically, Bishop notes the 'unhelpful binary' of active and passive spectatorship that has developed regarding participatory artwork; she also notes a more recent development of a further binary – 'the false polarity of "bad" singular authorship and "good" collective authorship' (8). This thesis is interested in troubling the binary of immersive/not-immersive experience, and also seeks to trouble potential assumptions about passivity and activity in the context of immersive environments. Bishop is interested in the relationship between performance, politics and spectacle, arguing that 'Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it' (277). This concept is similar to the suggestion that masked audience members in a Punchdrunk production in part create the spectacle: 'they become part of the scenography' (Barrett in Machon 2013: 160). The social and political implications of immersive space, and of spectating in immersive space, might therefore be considered to be connected to spectacle. Bishop's study is not directly about theatre, but in its emphasis on social consequences of work that includes people as a medium within its production, and the politics of spectacle and spectatorship, may offer some useful comparisons across different forms.

A useful theorisation of the relationship between audience member and performer can be developed from a model in Chatman's influential study of narrative structure in fiction and film. Rather than a binary model of writer/reader or narrator/narratee, Chatman suggests a continuum: real author, implied author, narrator, real reader, implied reader, narratee (1978: 147). Considering the 'real' reader as an agent who possibly overlapping but fundamentally separate from the 'implied' reader enables a more nuanced discussion of the aims and achievements of any given text. The 'absent idealised spectator' of a Punchdrunk production (or any theatrical performance) fulfils the same function as the 'implied reader' of a text. A text – a Punchdrunk production – creates its own implied reader/idealised spectator. The *real* reader/spectator then enters and forms their own relationship with and response to the work. Tension – a troubling of immersive experience – may



occur when the reader/spectator can sense a gap between what is implied by, what might even appear to be required by, the work; and what the real reader/spectator is actually able or willing to offer. A thread of enquiry running throughout this thesis is whether a certain kind of ideal spectator is implicitly created and prioritised by immersive performance (empowered, free, totally engaged); and whether this idealised spectator might actually be at odds with another kind of spectator that is created by, and preferred by the work (one who follows the many implicit rules). Both these implied/idealised spectators may be at odds with the experience of an actual audience member in the space.

The methodological questions raised by this concept can be further contextualised by considering approaches to theatre history. Postlewait's twelve 'cruxes' (2009: 225) for theatre historians investigating and reporting a theatrical event and its conditions provide a useful set of contexts for discussing spectator response, as well as serving as a reminder of the problematic aspects of attempting to reconstruct/describe a performance that happened in the past. Postlewait draws on the model provided by Sauter's study of the theatrical event (2000), emphasising the importance of considering elements other than the performance text. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the concept of spectator response: 'All too often, when we reconstruct performance events, we ignore the ways that various spectators respond to theatrical events' (Postlewait 2009: 227). Postlewait also emphasises the political nature of documented performance, which necessarily privileges certain sources over others. It is important to note that any reviewer or writer brings an ideological background as well as artistic perspective to their analysis of a performance; it is also important to note that that certain historical processes might result in identifying a viewpoint as definitive over others that might be considered less well-informed or reliable (and in doing so, come to exclude other perspectives or events). Chapter 3 of this thesis discusses fan interactivity with Punchdrunk as a means of claiming and communicating ownership of immersive experience, in an attempt to consider how immersive experience manifests in spectators. Regarding the politics of considering spectator response as a historian or researcher, Postlewait says that;

we must not only analyse the sources and establish the facts  
but also reflect upon the assumptions and methods that lead

us to set up certain kinds of evidence to support our arguments. [...] For theatre events we need to investigate the agents, the world, the artistic heritage, and the receptions. We need to move beyond basic binaries in order to see how an event is triangulated among these four contributing factors. (2009: 268)

Referring to theatre historiography, Sauter also argues that past performances should not be discussed on the basis of assumptions, but instead can be understood as a reciprocal exchange between performer and spectator:

If the spectator is not reduced to a consumer of theatrical productions, but is seen as an active participant in a theatrical event, then the relationship between the agent on stage and the beholder in the auditorium can be understood to be reciprocal. (Sauter 2012: 173)

In the context of immersive theatre, it is possible, in describing the idealised extremely active spectator implied by the work, to end up describing them quite objectively, even passively. A key contention of this thesis is that immersive experience is not guaranteed by certain performance types or atmospheres; the project does not assume that an audience member is active and empowered as soon as they step into an immersive space, but attempts, in considering immersive experience as a series of graded states that an audience member is in control of, to suggest that the relationship between the agent and the beholder must also be a reciprocal one. A purely hypothetical audience member becomes the passive recipient of a series of assumptions about what immersion is like. The potentially problematic ethical and political consequences of the balance of power tipping too much in the favour of a theatre maker or performer are another reason to theorise the relationship as a reciprocal one. For this reason some definitions and descriptions of immersive experience are taken from Punchdrunk's fan mail, acts of communication where a reciprocal relationship is initiated.

### Approaches to immersive theatre and Punchdrunk

*Immersive* was initially used primarily in the context of developments in technology, and in particular to virtual reality environments where the spectator is instantly 'immersed' in a virtual/fictional world (McKenzie 1994; Moser and McLeod 1996). Later the term was used in the context of museums (Lorentz 2007; Griffiths 2009), and this usage begins to reflect what is meant by contemporary references to immersive theatre: Griffiths argues that 'one feels enveloped in immersive spaces and strangely affected by a strong sense of the otherness of the virtual world one has entered, *neither fully lost in the experience nor completely in the here and now*' (3; my emphasis), and this sense of interplay is central to how this thesis theorises immersive experience. Kershaw uses the term *immersive* to refer to the aesthetics of contemporary performance, in particular tracing a historical antecedent of 'immersive participation created by the post-war, international avant-garde' 1996: 24. In contemporary usage, *immersive* is used either in reference to digital/VR technologies in performance (Dixon 2007) or as an aural phenomenon (Dyson 2009); this usage of the word is closely related to the concept of presence. Alternatively, *immersive* is used in the sense Griffiths describes, to refer to a form or genre of theatrical work characterised by audience movement within structural geography that resembles a combination of promenade performance and art installation (Nield 2008; Machon 2009 and 2013; Shaughnessy 2012; White 2009 and 2013; Purcell 2013). *Immersive* also refers to the possible sensations – visceral, emotional – of experiencing this kind of theatre:

Anxiety and apprehension are central to many of the effects and affects evoked by participatory performance [...] For example, the large-scale installations organized by Punchdrunk are designed to test the audience's nerves. (Freshwater 2009: 65)

This distinction – between a form of theatre and the experience facilitated by that form of theatre – is what this project explores.

Before considering current perspectives on immersive theatre specifically, it is necessary to briefly outline perspectives on the concept of presence, and in particular the relationship between immersion and presence. This thesis proposes a

distinction between immersive experience and presence in order to focus on the former. Presence (Giannachi and Kaye 2011; Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks 2012) is a particularly useful concept when considering the experience of Virtual Reality (Spagnolli and Gamberini 2002) and multimedia/hybrid environments (Kilch and Scheer 2012). Experiences of presence are 'closely tied to a state of liminality, and so to relationships and acts *between* the live, the mediated and the simulated' (Giannachi and Kaye, 'performing presence' 2011: 25). Birringer differentiates between interactive and immersive environments on the basis of the relationship between the physical spectator/participant/artist and the presence of digital media: *Interactive environments* are 'based on sensors and motion tracking, and an evolving dialectic between artificial ecosystem and human agents'; *immersive environments* are 'Virtual Reality based, e.g. the 'Cave' or panoramic installations that integrate the body, *via* stereoscopic devices, into the polysensual illusion of moving through space' (in Giannachi and Stewart 2006: 307). *Immersion* in the context of virtual reality/hybrid environment implies a sensation of being physically surrounded; although not (necessarily) being mentally/emotionally engaged.

An explanation of the difference between presence and immersion in computer games (where the player is not physically surrounded, as they are in VR) offers a distinction between immersion and presence. This thesis draws on this distinction in order to consider immersion in Punchdrunk's theatre. Presence is relatively easy to achieve in VR/immersive theatre, where the player/spectator is surrounded as soon as the technology is enabled/they enter the space. Immersive *experience* is harder to achieve, and therefore drawing on theoretical frameworks from computer games allows this sensation to be considered in detail.

A feeling of 'being there' 'or feeling/reacting *as if you are there*' is characteristic of being highly immersed in the context of computer games: as the player is physically distant from the screen, such responses indicate high levels of engagement: 'total immersion is presence' (Brown and Cairns 2004: 3; also MacMahan 2003; immersion in games is considered in more detail below). However, Fischer-Lichte notes that the sensation of 'being there' is characteristic only of a *weak* level of presence in the context of performance, where 'being here' is a relatively easy state to achieve. The spectator and performer share the same space; *weak* presence is merely the act of being present for the gaze of another. *Strong*

presence describes what this thesis takes to be a key aspect of immersive experience. Strong presence is ‘the actor’s ability to occupy and command space and to attract the spectators’ undivided attention. [...] The spectators sense that the actor is present in an unusually intense way, granting them, in turn, the intense sensation of themselves as present. To them, *presence occurs as an intense experience of presentness*’ (in Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks 2012: 108-9; my emphasis). The concept of presence here begins to overlap with the idea of *stage presence*, and certainly the emphasis on hidden moments of intimacy with a highly charismatic performer employs this source of power or energy as a means to create immersive experience in Punchdrunk productions (see Goodall 2008 for stage presence and charisma in performance history.) However, this thesis suggests that immersive experience is not the automatic result of presence – ‘being there’ may result in a *weak* sensation of presence as defined by Fischer-Lichte, but not in a highly engaged and energised sensation or visceral connection to the work. (Chapter 7 discusses environment and immersion, considering the relationship between immersive experience and the sensation of being spatially surrounded.) This thesis recognises that ‘an intense experience of presentness’ describes immersive experience, and that immersion and presence are closely related concepts. The focus of this thesis is not presence, as I define immersive experience as a different (although close, overlapping) sensation to presence.

A literature review of current academic approaches to Punchdrunk and immersive theatre can establish the critical landscape in which this project is situated. Shaughnessy proposes that ‘the legacy of immersive performance extends back to the communal interactive experimentation of the 1960s avant-garde (2012: np), a similar context to Kershaw’s use of the term (1996: 195-199). This thesis draws on the lineage identified by Griffiths (2009) and Aronson (2012), who consider immersion as a practice with a longer history (see the review of immersion and the revered gaze, below; and immersion and environment in chapter 7). Machon proposes a definition of immersive theatres as a range of work that ‘prioritises human contact’ (2013: xvi), and excludes virtual art and games studies (a field which encompasses both pervasive gaming and computer/videogames). This thesis agrees that virtual art contains concepts such as presence that complicate a discussion of immersive experience as a visceral feeling. However, the possibility for reading

Punchdrunk productions as game or experiencing them as a game (chapter 6), and drawing on developments in the study of games to provide a theoretical framework for immersive experience allows for immersion to be considered as both a sensation experienced by spectators and something crafted and facilitated by makers.

Punchdrunk's convention of masking audience members is a useful focus for exploring current critical approaches to the company. They are tools of anonymity (White 2009), or of visual design (Machon [2007] suggests there is a sculptural element to their visual and physical presence in the space). Freshwater suggests the masks have a threefold effect: they 'distinguish them [audience members] from the performers, hide their responses, and give them a ghostly anonymity' (2009: 66). Nield (2008) considers *The Masque of the Red Death* and the idea of the audience member to interrogate the idea of freedom assumed to be provided by the mask, asking whether the 'enforced anonymity' created by the mask might 'perhaps not be merely to give the audience the illusion of freedom? Does it not also continue to protect the theatre from having to see us seeing it?' (534). Citing Ridout's discussion of spectator embarrassment (2006), Nield concludes that 'without the protective apparatus of characterisation, rehearsal, fictive otherness, perhaps we [as the character named Spectator] risk staring into the black hole of the theatre itself, mute, stage-affrighted, awaking to the actor's nightmare of being on the stage, and not knowing the play' (535). Nield suggests that the apparent freedoms in the interplay between audience presence and anonymity in immersive space come with a risk of embarrassment or awkwardness for audience members who find themselves uncomfortable, unwilling or unable to 'play along'. White's (2009) study of anonymity has a methodological approach combining primary data (descriptions of individual experience and interviews with others) and theoretical considerations of voyeurism and freedom. Gordon (2013) considers the relationship between spectator and performer in the context of voyeurism and intimacy, questioning whether the apparent anonymity provided is a means for 'freeing' the spectator. As the masking of audience members has already been given critical attention this thesis is concerned with other constructions of immersive experience; highly relevant is the risk of embarrassment/awkwardness, which can be theorised as barriers to immersion, and the role or consequences of anonymity.

This assumption regarding audience emancipation is questioned by Gordon (2013) who considers intimacy and voyeurism in *Sleep No More* using a comparison to skin/sex shows – both being sites where rules of intimacy might be negotiated. The spectator-performer dynamic in the show is informed by policed spectator behaviour (the audiences are told the rules upon entry, with certain behaviours/actions clearly banned), with a promise of further intimacy with the performers rewarded by the right behaviour. Such a dynamic invites a comparison to gentlemen's clubs, and Gordon argues that Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* creates a form of interactivity that emphasises spectator 'neediness' that demands performer attention over an emancipated journey through the production space. Gordon points to the constantly sexual nature of the dancers' choreography and the way one-on-ones invariably include a kiss or other contact. She argues that the masks, far from emancipating a spectator, serve to make the (strict) rules of engagement with the performers more obvious. To Gordon, the mask is a mobile fourth wall that results in a clearly delineated spectator's gaze very likely to be compromised by voyeurism or discomfort. While for White and Machon the mask is fundamentally emancipatory innovation, to Gordon the mask perpetuates oppressive frameworks by facilitating a patriarchal gaze above all others. A strand of enquiry running through this project considers how immersive experience is claimed to occur, and when it occurs. The example of approaches to the mask demonstrates an aspect of Punchdrunk productions that can be seen as either facilitating or troubling a conventional assumption of immersive experience. This thesis is interested in the claims made for immersive experience and how it might be constituted, and allows that there might be a gap between what is claimed for immersive experience and what might actually occur. (This thesis does not engage with the convention of masking audience members, as this has been the focus of other studies.)

The methodological approaches of White 2009, Machon 2013 and Gordon 2013 draw on a mixture of idealised spectator analysis and first-hand experiences and interviews with spectators or makers. This thesis uses both approaches in order to consider immersive experience as the effect of a deliberate construct, as well as something that is spontaneously experienced in performance. Many reviews of Punchdrunk shows begin by describing moments or events the individual writer experienced (Clapp 2008), as do some academic articles (Babbage 2009; Randle

2010). This approach emphasises one of the main characteristics of immersive theatre as a form, a necessarily individual experience in terms of its structure that emphasises solitary journeys. Frieze (2014, forthcoming) was unfortunately not available for consultation during the composition of this thesis; however, its publication demonstrates a continued interest in critical approaches to immersive theatre and immersive experience.

White recognises that term *immersive* has implications for both the setup of a physical space and the experience of a visceral sensation:

the suggestion of being inside that comes with the idea of the immersive has resonances with the experience of being able to take action within the work, and with the changed point of view that is gained through the experience that I suggest are the special characteristics of audience participation. To be inside the work, not just inside its physical and temporal space but inside it as an aesthetic, affective, phenomenological entity gives a different aspect to the idea of a point of view, and of action. (2013: 16-7)

This thesis draws a distinction between these approaches to the concept of immersion, in order to consider how immersive *experience* might be facilitated, experienced and described.

Histories of immersive theatre often consider the political implications of the form. White places contemporary interactive/one-to-one performance alongside social and applied theatres, citing theatre-in-education and pantomime as less controversial modes that also use audience participation. It is necessary therefore to discuss the focus of this thesis on the relationship between immersion, interactivity, and politics. This thesis does not explicitly consider the political implications of interactivity as embodied in Applied Theatre. Punchdrunk Enrichment does conduct socially engaged projects that might be considered from the perspectives of imagination (children's shows) or empowerment (the community shows). However, this thesis focuses on immersive experience in the 'typical' Punchdrunk productions, and its definition of immersive experience might be considered entirely oppositional to the aware, distanced, and critical mindset behind the engagement of a Theatre of the Oppressed spect-actor. The wider political consequences of what Kershaw calls



'submission to sensory deprivation' in immersive participatory performance: 'a grasp of virtual community that radically engages with the growth of global risk in the contemporary world' (1996: 24), is not a part of current conceptions of immersive theatre, which are concerned more with the individual. Purcell describes the 'unashamedly escapist ends' of Punchdrunk's immersive environments (2013: 135), and references to the effect of immersion, when related to concepts of empowerment or freedom, are almost always defined in the context of the individual: 'you'll have a better time when you're fighting for yourself' (Barrett 2014). In order to focus on this sensation of immersive experience in a Punchdrunk environment, this thesis is unable to directly engage with other theatrical forms that use conventions of interactivity and participation for more explicitly political ends, such as a participant in a Boal workshop or a reader of Brechtian *gestus*.

The feminist film criticism of Ubersfeld (1982) notes that a spectator cannot touch the object of desire in film, and suggests the pleasure of spectatorship is therefore characterised by an interplay of desire and frustration. Drawing on this, Bennett proposes 'The spectator cannot experience pleasure without experiencing its limits' (73). This conception of the spectator-performer/performance relationship provides a useful theoretical framework for considering theatrical experience as a state with rigidly defined boundaries. The intensity of immersive experience is connected to its ephemerality. These boundaries in Ubersfeld and Bennett are linked to gender and desire in ways that allow for a feminist reading of the spectator-performer relationship. But the boundaries are also connected to form. The temporal and spatial boundaries of theatre and film allow for an experience to be both intense and temporary. As stated below in the literature review on immersion, this thesis takes immersive experience to be an intense state that is defined by a somewhat paradoxical awareness of the finite nature of that state.

The next literature review considers approaches to the concept of immersion in the fields of cognitive science, philosophical aesthetics (the sublime and the 'revered gaze'), and computer games. These fields provide nuanced theoretical frameworks for considering immersive experience in theatre and performance. Studies of computer games in particular has seen a great number of studies into the characteristics of immersion, and therefore provides a number of concepts that allow

for a more nuanced definition of immersive experience than the felt/not-felt binary of VR worlds, or the conflation of space and sensation, the conflation of form and effect, that potentially limits a characterisation of immersive theatre. The literature review on immersion builds a working definition of immersive experience that will be used throughout the chapters to consider immersion in the work of Punchdrunk.

### Literature review: immersion

Immersion *noun* [mass noun] 1) the action of immersing someone or something in a liquid: *his back was still raw from **immersion in** the icy Atlantic sea*; baptism by immersing a person bodily (but not necessarily completely in water. 2) deep mental involvement in something: *a week's **immersion in** the culinary heritage of Puglia*; a method of teaching a foreign language by the exclusive use of that language: *as a teacher she advocates learning by immersion*. [as modifier]: *an immersion school*

Origin: late 15<sup>th</sup> century: from late Latin *immersion(n-)*, from *immergere* 'dip into' (Oxford English Dictionary)

The first definition in this list fits with the common understanding of immersion in theatre: inhabiting – being surrounded by – the space of performance, with the implicit suggestion of an overwhelming or total sensation of being enclosed. But this literature review begins with the dictionary because the earlier use of the word, in the second definition, sheds some light on what characterises immersive experience in a manner beyond a physical description of the shape of the space around you. Considering the etymology of the term might also suggest *why* immersive experience has potential to be so overwhelming, or considered particularly special or desirable.

The etymology of immersion is rooted in the ritual of baptism. The term was first used to refer to being bodily put into water. Immersion results in a change to the person being immersed: an obvious physical change of getting wet but also, and primarily, a symbolic social change – the reason the ritual is conducted. Immersion is an intense, temporary experience, with spatial and temporal boundaries that are

(necessarily) strongly-defined and adhered to. Immersive experience is both physically and mentally all-encompassing, but also vital to the definition is its temporary state. Leaving a state of immersion is as distinct and deliberate as going in. You go in; and you come out, changed.

Immersion is also a term used in the field of educational studies. It is a pedagogy that is considered highly successful as a means of learning new languages, and has been studied in the context of efficiency and effectiveness (Bernhardt 1992; Moudeon et al 2010; Tedick et al 2011; Muhammad 2014 promises to teach readers *How to Get Fluent in Any Language with Immersion*). Immersive experience can be characterised as being initially disorientating, and in the baptism context, remains disorientating due to its brevity. However, in the immersive classroom context, the experience is all the stronger and more effective once the disorientation has passed and the rules of the new environment have been mastered, and the after-effects are much more visible and long-lasting.

These two contexts are useful to state at the outset of a literature review of immersive experience. They suggest a general physical relationship between the participant and the space of immersive experience (suddenly surrounded by) as well as hinting at the sensation of the experience itself (overwhelming and disorientating – either continually, or only initially, resulting eventually in a new and rewarding sense of achievement over challenge). The importance of boundaries to immersive experience is also important in both of these contexts and is worth bearing in mind through a discussion of immersion in theatre. This is especially true as the intensity of the potential visceral impact of experiencing Punchdrunk productions (and immersive theatre generally) could be said to depend upon this quality of its occurring in finite space and time. Drawing on the discussion of baptism above, immersion in theatre could be broken into three steps: 1) you go in; and 2) you come out, 3) changed. Immersive theatre can call itself immersive in shape if it is only 1) followed by 2). But a truly *immersive experience* is what happens in between steps 1) and 2) and results in 3). That is the focus of this thesis.

Although the socio-cultural (baptism) and pedagogy (language education) contexts use the term *immersion* to imply a physical situation, it is a key argument of this thesis that immersive(-shaped) theatre and immersive experience can be

considered as (related, but) different aspects. It is therefore important to consider contemporary scholarship of immersive experience as a psychological/mental state. This literature review begins by considering cognitive psychology/science: in particular, I am interested in how peak experience is defined and manifests in behaviour, rather than cognitive perspective of how the brain responds to stimulus.

### Immersion and cognition

Csikszentmihalyi uses 'flow' to describe optimal experience in the context of psychology (1988, 1990) and aesthetics (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990), and discusses how optimum experience can be constructed and developed in the context happiness and creativity (1990; 1996). Being mentally absorbed in an activity is a defining feature of this experience.

Flow is also called 'optimal performance' or 'peak experience', and is most clearly characterised as a situation, experience or activity which is enjoyable and challenging: enjoyable *because* challenging. When in flow, the challenge of an activity is equal to a person's (sense of their) skill to match it. Constant feedback, and a feeling of control are all central to the experience. A sense of clear, obtainable goals are also important, but in true flow these goals (the completed canvas or reaching the top of the mountain) become only excuses to engage in the activity for its own sake. Activities which create flow are undertaken primarily because they provide pleasure in and of themselves, rather than because they lead to a specific goal. According to flow theory, when an experience is optimal:

- 1) there are clear goals every step of the way
- 2) there is immediate feedback for one's actions
- 3) there is a balance between challenge and skills
- 4) action and awareness are merged
- 5) distractions are excluded from consciousness
- 6) there is no worry of failure
- 7) self-consciousness disappears
- 8) the sense of time becomes distorted
- 9) the activity becomes autotelic i.e. performed for its own sake

(Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 110-3)

Logan suggests this list could be reduced to three: getting caught up in what one is doing, controlling what is happening, and creating variety and stimulation so as to make the activity novel and challenging enough to stay caught up in it (in Csikszentmihalyi 1980: 172). Another important distinction to make about flow is that it does not necessarily mean enjoyment. Rather, the experience is so fulfilling enjoyment does not figure, just as failure does not: satisfaction is felt afterwards, as one reflects on the creative experience of being 'in the flow.' Being caught up to the moment detriment of all other stimulus is a key way psychological immersive experience is framed.

Enjoyment of an activity for its own sake is a central idea to the concept of flow and is a characteristic of immersive experience. Flow is being so immersed in an experience or an activity that all other concerns become less important than the task at hand (or even seem to disappear completely). Aesthetic experience itself is coded as a 'skill' to be acquired and developed in complexity over time in Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990). Appreciation of art can be developed and refined by those who enjoy the activity. This concept of experience as 'skill' can be applied to Punchdrunk's immersive theatre. The idea that there is no 'wrong way' to experience a Punchdrunk production becomes a problematic concept in the context of the need to work towards experiencing aesthetic 'flow'. An immersive production's rules of engagement can be followed or acted against, for example by strategically following certain performers; they might also be considered barriers to immersion (see below) for audience members who feel these rules (some of which go unspoken or implied) need to be discovered and followed in order to have a better experience. Frequent multiple attendees of Punchdrunk shows could be considered 'experts' of immersive theatre. This has consequences for Punchdrunk as makers, and other audience members who by implication miss out by lacking the time/ability/motivation to master the necessary 'skills' to follow the rules of engagement.

Cognitive studies have been applied to creativity and aesthetics (Turner 2006) and theatre and performance studies (McConachie and Hart 2006); cognitive psychology is applied to philosophy and creative thought in Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999). Drawing on Varela (1993), they argue that metaphor has structured thought and philosophy throughout history and that our understanding of the world comes from an 'embodied realism' (1999: 74); our mental concepts of the world are necessarily linked to how our bodies have evolved. The definition of

'immersive experience' used in this thesis draws on the embodied meaning of immersion as given earlier regarding the word's etymology; furthermore this work in cognitive psychology and philosophy demonstrates the link between the physical and mental states of immersion. Although it is a central argument of this thesis that the two states can be separated out in order to discuss immersive experience in more detail, the two also necessarily inform and might be crafted to facilitate each other.

McConachie and Hart (2006) identify conceptual blending as being of particular interest to theatre and performance scholars. The theory of conceptual blending is first put forward in Turner and Fauconnier (2003), a study which uses theatrical production as its main example to understand the process of mental processing. Conceptual blending is a refinement of the idea of Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief, and provides a way of understanding the inherent doubleness of theatre: how actors and audience understand that they exist in both a real and a theatrical world. McConachie offers a definition of conceptual blending: 'to describe this process [conceptual blending] at its most fundamental level, when an actor plays a character, she is able to blend a concept of herself with a concept of the character to be played.' (2013: 20). Citing Eversmann's finding that theatregoers enjoyed 'losing oneself in the world of the stage, of forgetting everyday reality' (2004: 155), McConachie suggests that, 'from a cognitive point of view, "losing oneself" in the fiction of a play is impossible without blending and empathising' (2013: 55).

The concept also questions the idea of an audience's 'willingness' in the process. A spectator consciously deciding to allow themselves to believe in a theatrical production contradicts that very belief, by their having to acknowledge the 'outside' in order to think it away. Rather, conceptual blending might be thought of as the creation of an extra, additional space which actors and audience share. Productions which are especially playful with the actor/character relationship might benefit from the theory of conceptual blending (McConachie 2008), and the concept also complicates the idea of a distinction between the active and the passive audience member (McConachie and Hart 2006). The notion of doubled metaphorical/bodily engagement with theatre might be informative with regard to immersive theatre, which places an emphasis upon the relationship between an audience member's physical presence within the work, and the mental/emotional effects of experiencing it. Conceptual blending offers a theoretical framework for considering the way in which immersive experience might manifest as a 'blend' of the

real world (the audience member, the working performers, the set as the product of designers and craftspeople, the logistical rules of navigating the space) and the fictional environment of a Punchdrunk production (i.e. reading the masked audience member as ghosts or voyeurs, following the relationships between characters).

Given that cognitive studies has implications for the study of how audiences engage with performance, it is interesting to return to Csikzentmihalyi's summary of the optimal flow experience as being ultimately built around the active *production* of art. He suggests the creative process is superior to the consumption of finished works: 'It is exhilarating to build culture – to be an artist, a scientist, a thinker, or a doer. All too often, however, the joy of discovery fails to be communicated to young people, who turn instead to passive entertainment. But consuming culture is never as rewarding as producing it.' (1996: 342) The return to this conservative binary of active production/passive consumption contradicts Csikzentmihalyi's suggestions that aesthetic experience, or peak 'flow' when immersed in an activity, is a highly nuanced experience that builds in complexity over time. The theory of conceptual blending might go towards troubling the idea that the binary is so straightforward, as it suggests the experience of watching and responding to performance is a highly creative act, not just in terms of neural activity (although neuroscience could attest to this) but in terms of the potential for emotional fulfilment and excitement. It is a central argument of this thesis that the sense of intense engagement experienced in a state of flow, as listed in the definitions of optimum experience at the beginning of this section, can be applied to the sensation of experiencing an immersive theatre production – and, to further trouble the active production/passive consumption binary, I argue that it is not an automatic sensation that occurs as soon as one steps into the performance space, but instead requires the overcoming of barriers to immersion to become fully engaged.

Immersive experience is the result of intense psychological engagement (resulting in 'flow'); immersive theatre also constitutes the creation of an internally coherent space a spectator enters. The next section of this literature review therefore considers an oppositional sensation to optimal psychological flow. Instead of being involved and engaged to an extent that is highly rewarding, philosophical aesthetics provides theoretical frameworks for considering the completely overwhelming sensation of sublime experience, also characteristic of entering an immersive theatrical environment, particularly those of Punchdrunk's larger-scale work.

Immersion and philosophical aesthetics: the sublime and the 'revered gaze'

The relationship between a reader and text is constructed as a site of immersive experience in Nell's *Lost in a book: the psychology of reading for pleasure* (1988), a literary discussion of immersion. The concept of the 'revered gaze' provides a highly useful theoretical framework for considering the way humans experience immersive environments. Griffiths' *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, And the Immersive View* (2008) traces a history of the human compulsion to seek out immersive experience. Other studies which propose a 'long' history of immersive experience include Wilson Smith's *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (2007) and Grau's *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (2003). These studies consider the immersive capabilities of art in various contexts, and provide a historical framework for considering contemporary immersive aesthetics. Ryan (2001) provides a long history of the relationship between visual art and immersion:

The history of Western art has seen the rise and fall of immersive ideals, and their displacement, in the twentieth century, by an aesthetics of play and self-reflexivity that eventually produced the ideal of an active participation of the appreciator – reader, spectator, user – in the production of the text. This scenario affects both visual and literary art, though the immersive wave peaked earlier in painting than in literature. (2)

Grau considers immersion to be synonymous with presence, defining both as 'an impression suggestive of "being there"' (7). Grau recognises that immersion is not a felt/not-felt binary, but exists as a movement between states of varying intensity. This thesis theorises immersive experience in a similar way, proposing that 'immersion' in a physical environment does not automatically equate to a highly engaged emotional/mental state. Grau's definition is also useful as it acknowledges that, although critical distance is not mutually exclusive from emotional involvement, the emphasis in immersive work generally tends towards diminishing the desire to adopt a critically distance stance from the work, and instead to increase a participant's sense of psychological involvement:

there is not a simple relationship of 'either-or' between critical distance and immersion; the relations are multi-



faceted, closely intertwined, dialectical, in part contradictory, and certainly highly dependent on the disposition of the observer. Immersion can be an intellectually stimulating process; however, in the present as in the past, in most cases immersion is mentally absorbing and a process, a change, a passage from one mental state to another. It is characterised by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening. (Grau 2003: 13).

The immersive environments of Punchdrunk productions have a 'cinematic level of detail' (punchdrunk.org), and these long histories of immersion provide a useful way of considering this claim, and its implied relationship to immersive experience, in a historical context. The level of detail in an immersive environment facilitates, but does not guarantee, immersive experience. Griffiths addresses the current ahistoricism of much new media scholarship by showing that 'new' ideas of immersion and interactivity have historical precedents. Immersive work, *immersive* referring to both the shape and the sensation of experiencing that work, can be traced historically to nineteenth-century fine art panoramas, galleries and modern museum spaces (Grau 2003, Griffiths 2008), and finds contemporary parallels in the total (multi-sensory) immersion of a twentieth century *Gesamtkunstwerk* or a Virtual environment created by and/or experienced in cyberspace or a theme park (Wilson Smith 2007: 157-86). Griffiths' conception in particular provides a definition of immersive experience that demonstrates the way space and sensation have a reciprocal relationship whilst also being separate aspects. Reciprocity is also central to Sauter's conceptualisation of the theatrical event: Sauter argues that 'theatre manifests itself as an event which includes both the presentation of actions and the reactions of the spectators, who are present at the very moment of the creation. Together the actions and reactions constitute the theatrical event' (2000: 11). The interplay between space, sensation and spectator facilitates the lowering of barriers to immersive experience in a performance event.

Griffiths uses the term *immersive* 'to explain the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favour of a more bodily participation in the experience' (2008: 2) Immersive environments are characterised by 'audience

mobility around the viewing space' (1). The 'revered gaze' is an effect brought about by immersive experiences and results in physical change: head up, eyes and mouth open, it is as if the human body is overwhelmed by the attempt to take everything in.

Like Griffiths, Ryan (2001) is sceptical of ahistorical claims made in the context of new media. The high realism of the nineteenth-century novel made for an immersive quality that interested readers of the time: they became emotionally invested in both the fate of the characters and held in suspense by the development of the plot. Then, 'as happened in the visual arts, immersion was brought down by a playful attitude towards the medium [...] Meaning came to be described as unstable, decentered, multiple, fluid, emergent – all concepts that have become hallmarks of postmodern thought.' (Ryan 2001: 5). For Ryan, the interactive nature of virtual texts allow for a postmodern making of stories or meanings: for example, hypertexts allow for non-chronological readings. Ryan is rightly sceptical about the notion of hypertextual navigation equalling an accession of the role of the reader to that of something approaching authorship, and states that 'aesthetic pleasure, like political harmony, is a matter not of unbridled license but of controlled freedom' (9). This concept of 'controlled freedom' is similar to that of the 'revered gaze' in that it implies an asymmetrical relationship between the level of agency and power in a spectator and in the maker or author of an immersive and/or interactive work. Claims of audience empowerment are frequently made about Punchdrunk's productions; the tension between this concept, and the organisation and powerful sense of authorship encoded in Punchdrunk's own structural and logistical rules is where immersive experience is negotiated. Becoming 'lost' or 'immersed' in productions is, in the context of the 'revered gaze', an act of surrendering authority to a higher power.

Immersion, when described in these terms, might be characterised by the diminishing of the spectator's ability to (or their desire to attempt to) form a distanced, critical response to something, in favour of a more immediate, emotional, visceral reaction to the work. Such a response might seem to be an ideal for an immersive theatre which places an emphasis upon audience effect. The idea of losing oneself is an important part of Csikzentmihalyi's description of what it is like to experience flow. The sensation of overwhelming awe or other-worldliness that results in the revered gaze might be a suitable description of what immersive theatre is created with an aim towards achieving. There is, therefore, a possible tension in the

relationship between this effect of a revered gaze and the idea of audience empowerment. The notions of the revered gaze and interactivity are inherently contradictory. If the central effect of a sublime experience is the confounding of the senses, or, to go back to Griffiths' earliest example of the sensation and the roots of the term, the Gothic cathedral, to create 'reverence' in the spectator in something bigger/higher/better than themselves, the resulting revered gaze begins to sound like coercion or control rather than empowerment. As will be discussed later in regards to interactivity, how interactive an experience feels and how interactive it really *is* may be two different things, and a distance between them may not necessarily be a barrier to immersive experience. Instead, the relationship between the two might reveal the importance of an audience's assumptions and expectations about a theatrical experience, as this will affect how they engage with it. What is meant by immersion, if it is claimed to be linked to an empowerment of audiences? And who is doing this claiming? A strand of this thesis is a discussion of the tension between immersive experience and apparent empowerment.

One approach to examining this relationship – and possible tension – between audience empowerment and the extreme experience that results in a revered gaze, is to go back to the origins of the sensation of the sublime in philosophical aesthetics. A definition of the term might appear self-defeating: the best way the sublime can be described is indescribable. It is a sensation which resists attempts to put it into words, for it leaves you unable to articulate the experience of it. A source of the sublime is often an object in nature, a mountain or the expanse of the ocean; but the word might also refer to an ungraspable idea such as the number of stars in the universe, or an extreme of emotion. The sublime occurs where something's greatness (in size or quality) is such that any attempt to describe it fails. The paradox of this is that the very inability to articulate what exactly this sensation is, and what it does to those who experience it, manages in negative to suggest those very things:

The sublime marks the limits of reason and expression  
*together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits...*  
 descriptive failure raises a negative, even painful,  
 presentation of the ineffable. Sublimity... refers to the moment  
 when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a

thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language. (Shaw 2008: 2-3; my emphasis)

Few things are completely beyond words, and therefore the way the sublime takes away the ability to express it does, in a roundabout way, describe the experience. A person left speechless after an experience does manage to articulate a sense of the magnitude of what they are (not) talking about. Grau suggests that 'Immersion arises when artwork and technologically advanced apparatus, message and medium, are perceived to merge inseparably' (2003: 339). Immersive experience is a response to this merging of content and form into a 'total' whole.

Two major works of philosophical aesthetics in relation to the sublime are Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin of Our Ideas on The Sublime and Beautiful* (published 1757) and Kant's 'Analytic Of The Sublime' in *The Critique of Judgement* (published 1790). Both define the sublime as the opposite to the concept of the beautiful. A central concept to Burke's *Enquiry* is the connection he makes between sublimity and terror. Burke's focus on the psychological effect of fear in those who experience the sublime emphasises the cognitive (and emotional) aspect of the experience. Important to Burke's study of the sublime is his argument that language's (in)ability to adequately capture the sublime shows its superiority in conveying the idea of the sensation – as opposed to painting, which could depict something we have seen before but lacks the indistinctness of language to convey something beyond imagining.

Like Burke, Kant identifies a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, and the former again dominates: the beautiful is self-contained and serves little purpose other than itself, while the sublime is an experience which allows for a transcendence of the human mind. I have said that the defining quality of the sublime is its inherent indescribable quality, which does, in negative, manage to convey something of its quality, its magnitude, its effect. Kant saw the effect of the sublime as (ultimately) a triumph of reason – for it demonstrates, in negative, that the mind can grasp the rational idea of the concept of such totality. A question which has preoccupied critics from the eighteenth century regarding the sublime is the question of its cause: is the origin of the sensation in the objects of nature which inspire it, or the minds of those who experience it? In Burke, due to his emphasis on the emotion

of terror, the source of the sublime begins to move away from objects in nature themselves and into the mind of the spectator. Kant takes this further. Not only does the sublime occur in the mind of the spectator, but that this ultimately can be taken to represent a triumph of that mind. The temporary confounding of the mind is ultimately an expression of its capabilities: “*The sublime is that, the mere ability to think which, shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense.*” (Kant [trans. 2005]: 66, original emphasis). Both Burke and Kant propose there is an ultimate gain following the temporary loss of the self or the self’s mental or rational faculties during an encounter with the sublime.

Sublime experience and immersion might be construed as creating either empowerment or disempowerment. On the one hand, the confounding, overpowering sensation of sublime experience that affects someone so much on an emotional or a visceral level feels inherently contradictory to the idea of empowerment; they are stunned into paralysis, made acutely aware of the scale or power of the work. On the other hand, in the context of Punchdrunk’s visually spectacular finales, the fact they occur at the end of the experience may create a sublime sensation that *is* precisely what empowers a spectator – as discussed in the context of psychological flow, if an audience member feels (whether it is an illusion or not) that they have somehow played an important part in reaching that point, sublime experience might be coded as a reward, rather than a display of asymmetrical power relations. Both these interpretations regarding audience dis/empowerment exist in the context of immersive theatre. This is best illustrated in the existence of two articles about Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* with very similar titles. The article in TCG Circle is called ‘Immersive Theatre and the Freedom of Choice’ (Green 2013), while the New Statesman’s is ‘Immersive Theatre and the Anxiety of Choice’ (Burton 2013). The relationship between immersive experience and choice is particularly relevant to a consideration of the relationship between immersion and interactivity.

In the introduction to his history of sublime experience, Shaw laments that an ‘instinctive feeling for the transcendental is rare these days. As a result of secularism, together with increasing global awareness and media sophistication, we seem less inclined to regard the breakdown of reason and expression as indicators of a higher or spiritual realm.’ (2008: 3) Griffiths rejects such an approach to the existence of new media and suggests that the ingrained human compulsion to enter immersive spaces, to seek out the sublime or overwhelming environments, will

survive increased levels of media sophistication and the rise of secularism. Another important point in relation to earlier examples of the sublime given by Burke and Kant is that the sublime usually has its roots in nature, and is not an experience that is created or controlled – certainly not an experience that is initially imagined, designed and built – by human agency. Griffiths' examples of immersive spaces demonstrate human attempts to recreate the natural experience of the sublime.

The fields of philosophical aesthetics and cognitive psychology give some frameworks for thinking about immersive experience in theatre which will be drawn on in the body of this thesis. The tension between immersive experience, revered gaze and the notion of individual political agency becomes particularly acute in the context of immersive theatre's claims to allow for the empowerment of audiences. Optimum experience, peak psychological 'flow', is a characteristic of how immersive experience manifests: losing track of time; feeling fully engaged and interested; encountering challenges for which your skills are matched; feeling fulfilled and satisfied afterwards. The notion that this state can occur in the context of producing art as well as consuming it (as stated in the context of aesthetic experience) suggests that peak experience might be allowed/facilitated for in the creation of art: the creation of alternate worlds for audiences to get lost in, and the sensation felt in an audience when lost in those worlds.

This thesis draws on the concept of the revered gaze as a definition of the immersion; however, it is necessary to build a more nuanced working definition of immersive experience in order to consider how it is created and claimed beyond the concept of an overwhelming totality. The field of computer gaming is a very fruitful area for research in this direction; immersive experience has been repeatedly analysed and defined in this context and there are many perspectives on what immersion is and how it manifests. The amount of research in this area perhaps has its roots in anxieties around possible (anti)social side-effects of becoming too engaged in computer games (for example Seah and Cairns 2008 on immersion and addiction). The next section of this literature review discusses immersion in gaming. The concepts of immersion as a non-binary state, barriers to immersion, Real World Disassociation (RWD) and the relationship to distractions provide particularly useful approaches to theorising how immersive experience might be facilitated and crafted by theatre makers and experienced by audience members.

### Immersion and computer games

Most scholarship on immersion in this field begins by acknowledging that although it is accepted that immersion is an important and powerful experience of gaming, it is also difficult to define and is often used inconsistently across gaming literature. Put generally, immersion in gaming is said to occur when a player's thoughts, attention and goals are centred on the game they are playing. Beyond this papers differ, but the vagueness of this general definition is in itself quite helpful as it is inclusive of several arguments about immersion within gaming scholarship: that immersion is a graded experience; that it can be fleeting; its relationship to presence; how much of the outside world a gamer notices when immersed; what it is that a gamer is immersed in; how and why it happens. All of these aspects are useful for considering immersive experience in theatre and performance.

Brown and Cairns (2004) is a qualitative study that establishes a definition of the term based on the experience of gamers. This study is the first attempt to define immersion in terms of gaming, differentiating it from virtual reality, interface design, information technology more generally (as in Argorwal and Korahanna 2000, a study of cognitive absorption in relation to IT rather than gaming specifically) or (non-computer) game research. Using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with gamers, the study uses the grounded theory method to build a definition of immersion. As immersion is often thought to be subjective and personal phenomenon, many gaming immersion papers are built around interviews with gamers. (The problem of subjectivity raised by qualitative studies has resulted in papers attempting a more objective measure of immersion, such as eye-movement tracking [Tijds 2006, Cox et al 2006, Jennett et al 2008]. Such studies tend to find a positive correlation between both subjective and objective methods of measuring gameplay experience, suggesting both are useful in attempting to define and measure immersion in gaming. Subjective responses and objective data tend not to contradict each other, and Brown and Cairns' paper is highly influential.)

Brown and Cairns (2004) suggest immersive experience is not a felt/not-felt binary but can instead be graded into three states: engagement, engrossment and total immersion. They identify barriers to all three levels of immersion and argue that

each barrier has to be overcome in order for the player to reach the next level. They also stress that the removal of these barriers does not alone guarantee immersion, but merely allows for it. This has implications for game designers, who cannot forcibly control a player's becoming immersed in their product, but can design work with barriers to immersion lowered as much as possible.

At a level of *engagement*, a player has invested enough time and attention onto the game to have learned the controls and be interested in continuing to play. From the perspective of the computer system itself, the main barrier to this level is accessibility. The player has to be able and willing to learn the (arbitrary) relationship between the game and its controls; once these are learned, they effectively disappear. The importance of this aspect of the 'disappearance' of controls has been noted earlier than Brown and Cairns (2004), notably Laurel (1991) and Newman (2002), who suggests 'many a great game has poor visuals – but there are few good games with bad controls.' It is possible for an experienced gamer to learn the controls of a new game with relative ease, using a combination of existing knowledge and guesswork: an experienced player will have less trouble reaching the state of engagement since they are accustomed to overcoming these initial barriers.

*Engrossment* occurs when a player's emotions are directly affected by the game. The barrier to this level is the actual game construction – here, the designer is concerned less with the controls or the interface, and more on creating interesting tasks for the player to perform, or a plot, world and/or characters it is possible to care about. *Total immersion* occurs when the gamers' attention and emotional investment is so much, the game is all that matters. Describing this level of immersion, gamers used phrases such as feeling 'in the game', 'you feel like you're there'. The game has such impact on the gamer's thoughts and feelings they feel (almost literally) part of it. The barrier to this level of engagement is an extension of those required for engrossment; players go beyond interest to empathy, and the role of atmosphere in the game becomes very important (Brown and Cairns 2004).

Cheng and Cairns (2005) extend the study of the concept of barriers to immersion. By manipulating the graphics of a game in order to make gameplay incoherent (i.e. create a barrier to immersion), the study attempted to deliberately disrupt players' immersion. The results were surprising, as they indicated players



could be so immersed within a gaming environment, even a relatively simple one, that significant changes in the game's behaviour had little effect on their levels of immersion. Incoherence is initially a barrier to immersion, but once immersion had been achieved, incoherence introduced into the gameplay went relatively unnoticed, or at any rate did not seem to affect the players' levels of immersion or enjoyment. Jennett et al (2009)'s study of the component of immersion they term Real World Disassociation (RWD) – in which gamers are so immersed in the game world they become unaware of the real world – further refined ideas around the barriers to, and disruption of, gaming immersion. These studies lead to interesting ideas surrounding how aware a player is of the real world while gaming – and, furthermore, how conscious such awareness is: a player can notice the existence of potential distractions (barriers to immersion) and choose to ignore them. In Jennett et al (2009), gamers played both low- and high-immersion games and were subjected to a series of distractions. Building upon the findings of Cheng and Cairns (2005), the study found players were not only less aware of their real environment while playing an immersive game, but are also able to be less aware of *certain aspects* of their real environment, depending on how relevant these aspects were to them. For example, a switched-on television while the game is played could be ignored or 'tuned out' with relative ease; someone saying the player's name (a more relevant distraction) would affect immersion more. However, this in turn revealed another finding, as gamers were potentially able to choose not to respond, to hear/be aware of their name being called, but ignore it, i.e. make a deliberate choice to stay immersed. Pace (2008) also finds irrelevant factors disappear from a player's consciousness during a state of immersion or flow. Jennett et al interpret this as a defining aspect of RWD: 'at that moment in time, the game is simply viewed as more important than reality.' (2009: 3).

Jennett, Cox and Cairns (2009) builds on the 'three graded levels' definition of immersion. *Presence* is the term used by Brown and Cairns as the defining feature of total immersion – feeling 'in the game', feeling as though one is actually one of the characters, or actually present in the game world: 'total immersion is presence' (3). However, Jennett et al's qualitative study suggested that at the highest level of immersion not every player necessarily experiences this kind of presence. Some of the gamers interviewed used the phrase 'in the game' or 'immersed' to mean only

that they fully believed in the game's world or the story: they did not feel they *were* the character, or have a strong emotional investment in the game's outcome as if the game were real. As one might when watching a play or film, they were able to suspend their disbelief about the world, or its characters or its story, without actually making the leap to feeling as if they were really (physically) present *in* that world. It is the difference between thinking, in the heat of the trigger-pulling moment in a shooter game, 'that character shot that character' and 'he shot me!' Both might be said by a person experiencing a state of immersion, but only the latter indicates a momentary sensation of *presence*. (See also: 'he hit me!' for 'that car hit my car.' Immersive experience here begins to resemble Heidegger's concept of ready-to-hand, in which consciousness of a tool only occurs when it becomes unable to fulfil its function.)

The study of barriers to immersion in gaming has developed as further studies build on and modify the earlier definition of three grades by adding more levels, and suggesting the travel between them is more fluid and fleeting. What has remained constant is the idea that empathy only occurs at the highest level of immersion. The very title of books on gaming design such as Freeman's *Creating emotion in games: the craft and art of emotioneering* (2004) imply narrative/character empathy is not an automatic aspect of gaming, but is something that can be aimed for, and a game will be better off (and might even stand a chance of being considered a work of art) for including and achieving it successfully.

That emotion/empathy/caring about a narrative or the outcome of a character/etc. is what immerses a player, might at first seem the most applicable aspect of gaming immersion to theatre studies. But it is only one argument within gaming scholarship, and another perspective is that this is not necessarily what immerses a player at all. An alternative argument runs that the immersive potential of a game stems from its gaming mechanics, not from its storyline or world design. Jorgensen (2007) defines the basic activity of a game-player as problem solving; Pace (2008) expands upon this by arguing that immersion in gaming depends upon a suitable balance between the challenge of the game and the skill of the player: the problems to be solved, and the skills, and perhaps more importantly, the *desire* of the player, to solve them (Pace's definition of immersion is drawn from the concept of psychological flow). Frome (2007) provides a model for how games generate emotion within a player, and in doing so makes the distinction between

character/narrative games and puzzle games. Frome argues that the emotions games can generate within a player depend upon the type of game, and the player's relationship to the game and role within it.

Following Frome's distinction between narrative games and puzzle games, it is possible to make a distinction between narrative immersion and puzzle immersion (immersion in gaming mechanics.) A key point is that it is not necessarily games that have characters and a narrative that are found to be the more immersive. Tetris is one of the games used as an example in Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004), in which they debunk what they term 'the immersive fallacy' – that is, the idea that immersion occurs when a player is transported to an illusory reality. Tetris could definitely be called immersive, but has no character to become or empathise with, and no world to enter. Salen and Zimmerman suggest that immersion occurs through play itself, and not because the game's environment is indistinguishable from the real world to the player.

At first, it might seem as if narrative immersion would be of more use for theatre studies. Seeing narrative and gameplay as separate aspects that can facilitate immersive experience is useful, for gaming mechanics (problem-solving, rewarding exploration) are a useful way to think about immersive theatre where both aspects are at work. This division does not mean narrative and gaming mechanics are mutually exclusive: a puzzle solution which takes the story forwards would be a way of achieving satisfaction in both. In 1989 game designer Ron Gilbert proposed that adventure games would be better off without redundant puzzles. When puzzles are only included for the sake of making the game longer, and do not take it forwards in terms of narrative or gameplay but instead slow it down needlessly, they detract from the immersive 'intense ride' potential of adventure games:

If I could have my way, I'd design games that were meant to be played in four to five hours. The games would be of the same scope that I currently design, I'd just remove the silly time-wasting puzzles and take the player for an intense ride. The experience they would leave with would be much more entertaining and a lot less frustrating. The games would still be challenging, but not at the expense of the

player's patience. ('Why adventure games suck (and what we can do about it)': 1989)

Chapter 6 in this thesis considers the relationship between gameplay and story in immersive experience.

Having made a division between immersion in narrative/storyline/characters and immersion in gameplay and puzzle-solving, immersion in gaming has been further separated. Pace (2008) separates the concept of immersion into two components – immersion in the gameplay (diegetic immersion) and immersion in the game's representational space (situated immersion, or presence). McMahan (2003) also breaks immersion into two categories:

... immersion means the player is caught up in the world of the game's story (the diegetic level) but it also refers to the player's love of the game and the strategy that goes into it (the nondiegetic level). It seems clear that if we are talking about immersion in video games at the diegetic level and immersion at the nondiegetic level, then we are talking about two different things, with possibly conflicting sets of aesthetic conventions. Narrative and narrative genres are often used as a way of defining the conventions of a world and to help the user align their expectations with the logic of the world. (McMahan 2003: 68-9)

Narrative can help define the conventions of a world, but is only one way of doing so. A player encountering conventions of narrative they already understand (protagonist, conflict, climax,) are a way of getting 'into' the world of a game. The 'immersive fallacy' argument suggests it is not the world which matters the most, but the gameplay. But the argument put forward by McMahan, that narrative can be an important means to draw a player into a world, suggests the two aspects can have a reciprocal relationship. Newman (2002) suggests a player doesn't empathise or relate to a specific character, but instead 'character is conceived as capacity – as a set of characteristics. [...] The primary-player may not see themselves as any one particular character on the screen, but rather as the sum of every force and influence that comprises the game.' (2002: np). The characters of a game are intrinsically bound up in the world of the game, and how a player engages with that world; a

player might see a character as the means/capacity to undertake certain actions within the game's world. This relationship between the character and the game's world is what a player empathises with, and for perhaps a few intense moments feel to really be. This point might seem to run counter to the idea that emotion (leading to empathy) can be generated in games with gripping storylines, exciting plot twists and strong, compelling characters, and there are examples of games with well-written storylines and characters who are not empty vessels for the gamer to fill. The larger point is that characters are only one way in which a gamer might enter the world of the game: a gamer's capacity for action with the game's world is an important component of what constitutes immersive experience.

Newman (2002) acknowledges that many games are sold on the quality of their visuals, and it seems counter intuitive to suggest these might not actually be what facilitates immersion. Newman suggests that the brilliance of a game's graphics are not actually what draw a player in, but that they do benefit those who are playing *alongside* the gamer actually holding the controls; they facilitate social interaction. However, Pace (2008) suggests 3D graphics are an important part of creating an immersive experience, and may even be a prerequisite for it. This apparent contradiction can be resolved by separating the concept of immersion from the concept of presence in computer games. As discussed earlier, presence is a concept also used in the context of Virtual Reality. Presence in gaming may indeed be increased by 3D graphics, but presence is different from immersion.

Describing the highest state of immersion in gaming, Brown and Cairns (2004) state that 'total immersion is presence.' Presence is a feeling of 'being there'. This relationship is complicated in Jennett et al 2009, who find feelings of being 'in the game' may be fleeting or not occur at all. As immersion in computer gaming is defined primarily as occurring within the mind of the gamer – their thoughts, feelings, and so on – studies such as Brown and Cairns (2004) define immersion as a cognitive process. Presence has been studied in relation to Virtual Reality (such as Spagnolli and Gamberini 2002), and in such a setting presence means something different from immersion. In VR a player is immediately 'present', for they can instantly see the virtual environment all around them; in gaming it takes the highest level of immersion for such an effect to be felt, if it is felt at all. It is possible to feel presence but not to be immersed, by being in a VR environment and doing a boring

task. Similarly, a gamer playing a computer game with excellent 3D graphics on a huge screen might be inclined to feel something approaching presence, but a boring storyline or a glitch in the gameplay prevents their feeling immersed; a theatre-goer might stand in a room that has been painstakingly decorated but actually feel a bit bored. Immersion is different from presence, because in the context of VR (i.e. immersive theatre) presence is (relatively) easy, physical, and instant; whereas immersion in gaming (i.e. immersive experience) is more gradual, fleeting, and connected to more cognitive/emotional responses. Feeling 'as if you are there' is nothing particularly special if 'there' is quite dull.

The argument that feeling physically present in the world may not be the defining aspect of immersive experience is a long way from the central definition in gaming that 'total immersion is presence.' The feeling that one is present, or was for a few fleeting moments 'there', may be one of the defining aspect of immersion (in the category of diegetic immersion as outlined by McMahan), but not the only one. In Jennet et al 2009 gamers used the phrase 'feeling in the game' variously to mean they believed in the game's world, and/or felt an emotional attachment to aspects of the story or a character, and/or simply got extremely interested in the puzzles or the challenge, i.e. the actual gaming mechanics. These are all viable definitions of being immersed in a game, and it is useful to separate immersive experience into components this way. After many attempts to define immersive experience, the graded and barriered and individual nature of the phenomenon might mean ultimately that one person's highly engrossed immersive experience is be another's not-really-engaging one. The grounded theory method of defining immersion emphasises subjectivity.

A further difference between Virtual Reality and game-playing concerns the relationship between body and mind. Studies of immersion computer games theorise immersive experience as a cognitive/psychological state, since the gamer is physically separated from the screen. Spagnolli and Gamberini (2002) find that in Virtual Reality the mind of the player is able to spread across the dual environments: it is possible for a player in VR to pick up or interact with a virtual object, while maintaining a conversation with the real-life researcher. Spagnolli and Gamberini suggest the mind's ability to exist between and across the hybrid environment(s) of a VR world and the real world may be an enrichment of a player's VR experience. This

result is somewhat contradicted by Young (2005) in his study of the mind/body split in computer games, particularly first person shooters. Young argues that, rather than allowing a mind to stretch across multiple environments, computer games disembody the player: first by removing awareness of the player's own body by creating a new, virtual one; and then by removing the player's awareness of that second body (the FPS persona), leaving finally only the mind. Indeed, the suggestion that it might be an enrichment of a player's experience that their mind exists in the real world as well as the game world would seem to go against most definitions/studies of immersion in gaming. So far, an accepted general definition of immersion might be that an immersed player is unaware of the world around them and feels that the game is more important than reality, ignoring any elements of the real world should such distractions occur. But both Pace (2008) and Jennett et al (2009) note instances where gamers *choose* to stay immersed – they do hear someone saying their name, and then they ignore it. The idea that a gamer's consciousness can exist across hybrid environments is applicable to an immersive theatre experience, where an awareness of the 'game' (the gaming mechanics – the rules, or the perceived lack of them) might enhance an audience member's experience.

A final point about the difference between immersion and presence in computer games brings up an interesting argument about the social aspect of games, which is something potentially very applicable to the experience of immersive theatre audiences. Jennett et al (2009) note that the distinction they uncover between immersion and presence may be explained by social factors. They suggest some of the differences in responses might stem from a player wishing to avoid the social stigma attached to becoming too immersed, so they talk down whether/how much these effects happened. When social factors are discussed in regards to gaming, they are often negative. Brown and Cairns (2004) note that in their interview-based study, 'No one described an experience of immersion that they did not enjoy. However, this was moderated by guilt from a sense of wasting time on a game' (5). The danger of addiction to games, and whether this occurs because of immersion, is studied in Seah and Cairns (2007).

Immersion in gaming links back to the concept of psychological flow. The relationship between challenge, skill and feedback is an acknowledged part of game design, and a crucial part of how designers get their players immersed. Game design

– the gaming mechanics – can be considered an entirely separate concern from the creation of atmosphere, characters, and storylines. A more reciprocal theorisation is that the characters or the narrative of a game *create* the challenge/skill/feedback relationship, for instance when a breakthrough in the game results in a plot twist. It is useful to separate the components but not to think of them as therefore having a straightforward binary relationship: the interplay between content and form, and how each facilitates immersive experience, is a key question this thesis asks in the context of Punchdrunk's theatre.

Immersive experience is not a felt/not-felt binary, but exists as a series of graded states. Returning to performance can demonstrate how the concept might be applied to immersion in Punchdrunk. Drawing on the notion of 'flow' or peak experience in the context of cognition, McConachie suggests that,

'flow' does not occur throughout a performance. Audience attention at the theatre may be momentarily interrupted, or spectators may choose to stop the 'flow' of a performance by un-blending actor/characters to momentarily think about the work of such singular agents as actors, directors, and playwrights. But usually not for long. The pleasurable effects of 'flow' generally pull spectators back into the cognitive activities of blending and empathizing. [...] we enjoy immersing ourselves in the fictional world of the play, and blending and empathizing are the (mostly unconscious) cognitive operations that get us there. (2013: 56)

This thesis agrees that immersive experience/'flow' is a necessarily temporary state constructed in advance and experienced in the moment of engagement. Its intensity is linked to its temporary nature. This thesis does not draw on cognitive studies directly, but this description reflects the concepts of barriers to immersion and a spectator's being able to differentiate the relevance of various distractions, which are key concepts of this project's theorisation of immersive experience.



### Overview of thesis structure

*Your productions seem to center around this idea of 'mystery.' Why?*

[Barrett:] I think it's because mystery instigates a state of tension in the audience and there's an apprehension and a sort of nervous excitement that comes from not knowing what's going to happen next. And because that's the state you're in when you're exploring, or adventuring, or maybe doing something that's illicit, it's totally charged. *That's why Punchdrunk could never do a comedy, because it's a totally different state.* We're trying to empower the audience by making them feel like they're the most important person in the space, and that they're doing something they shouldn't be and the more they work the more they'll discover. You need that tension to be there in order for that to work. (Barrett interview in Godbout, 2012: np. My emphasis)

This quote explicitly frames immersive experience as the product of instinctive emotional response. It is also linked to a specific set of genres and emotions – fear, mystery, 'nervous excitement', apprehension – and sensations of transgression and danger: 'illicit' activity that goes against certain (sometimes unspecified) rules. This thesis suggests that immersive experience might be facilitated by such tones and atmospheres of menace, and by drawing on the tensions of secrecy and rule-breaking, but that immersive experience, when theorised as a graded and temporary state defined by its boundaries, might also be facilitated by a sensation of interplay between content and form, rather than one being the natural and inevitable result of the other. The sensation of breaking rules might actually be the sensation of adhering to a new set of rules. The project considers various aspects of immersive experience – the emotional, the physical, the sensation of immersion in place, space and story – in order to discuss them in detail and examine what is meant by being *immersed* in different contexts. I argue that immersive experience might be facilitated by a production form or content, or through an interplay of both; atmosphere, logistics and mood are aspects which can be manipulated to facilitate immersive experience but they do not guarantee it, and a sensation of repetition will raise barriers to immersive

experience quicker than innovation within that repetition can allow for it. Implicitly, I argue that Punchdrunk could indeed do a comedy, if ever the desire arose.

The literature reviews above outlined methodological approaches to the question of audience, and drew out theoretical frameworks of immersive experience that are useful for this thesis. It then formulated a working definition of immersive experience which this thesis will use. The body of this thesis will consider immersive experience in relation to various aspects of immersive theatre – interactivity, narrative and environment. The thesis is divided into three sections in order to consider these aspects separately and in detail.

The first section is about interactivity and immersion. Chapter 1 considers what is meant by interactivity, drawing on literature from computer gaming, pervasive gaming in theatre, and interactive performance. The chapter considers what the relationship between interactivity and immersive experience might be, and the ways in which interactivity might manifest – or is claimed to manifest – in immersive theatre and Punchdrunk productions. The chapter considers the type(s) of interactivity, and the relationship(s) between interactivity and immersive experience, that might be going on inside the building of a Punchdrunk: what is typically meant by interactivity; questioning what this is and whether it is really occurring; what its relationship to immersive experience might be. It concludes by describing a theoretical framework drawn from game design theory that proposes interactivity might be considered in four modes. Chapter 2 considers the relationship between interactivity and immersive experience using *The Drowned Man* as a case study, relating its discussion to the first three modes. The chapter considers *The Drowned Man* from the position of inside the performance space – using a mixture of ‘absent idealised spectator’ analysis and individual accounts, from my presence at multiple performances and at rehearsals for this production. Chapter 3 moves outside the building where an immersive theatre production takes place, to consider interactivity in a wider social context. Drawing on access to Punchdrunk’s fan mail archive, the chapter considers comments received about *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death* to argue that immersive experience can be constructed in a wider type of interactivity in terms of discourse with the show itself (such as repeat attendees) and with Punchdrunk as a company. The chapter – and the interactivity section as a whole –

concludes by returning to *The Drowned Man*. This show opened many years after *Faust* and *The Masque of the Red Death* and during that time there was a considerable development in the company's contemporary standing, funding, influence, and an increase in audience awareness and (consequently) expectation of its work. *Sleep No More* also opened and earned Punchdrunk a more international audience of excited fans. The chapter therefore concludes by considering the phenomenon of online fan interactivity with the show from outside the space in which the performance takes place, arguing that this mode of interactivity functions as a means of expressing ownership of immersive experience.

The second section is about narrative and immersion. Chapter 4 proposes a working definition of narrative drawing on a literature review of the recent scholarship on the topic, and considers the relationship between narrative and immersive experience in the light of this theoretical framework. It considers *The Crash of the Elysium* as a case study, a show linear in its structure and relatively straightforward in its logistics, in order to discuss the relationship between immersive experience and narrative events. The chapter draws on my own presence at rehearsals for this production to consider how immersive experience is formulated and crafted in process, in order to allow for immersion in both a well-established pre-existing story and storyworld (*Dr Who*) and a newly made plot (*The Crash of the Elysium*) and the characters of both.

Chapter 5 develops the discussion begun in the previous chapter what is meant by narrative, in order to consider the relationship between chronology, structure and time in relation to immersive experience. A trademark of Punchdrunk's larger productions is that scenes are scattered across the building and will be experienced out of the chronological order in which the original texts were written. Audience members encounter these scenes in different and apparently random order, usually coming together at the show's finale. The chapter draws on *It Felt Like A Kiss* and *The Duchess of Malfi* as case studies: the former of which was unusual for Punchdrunk in that its spectators were presented with a single linear path to follow; and the latter of which had many typical Punchdrunk traits but was generally considered less artistically successful, including by the company themselves. The chapter argues that the climactic scenes of *It Felt Like A Kiss* were highly effective due to a synthesis of shape and sensation acting to structure narrative events, while

*The Duchess of Malfi*'s final moments, though visually spectacular, were narratively underwhelming. This suggestion is drawn from the unplaiting of two separate strands, or types, of narrative that ran through both productions, and generally runs through immersive theatre productions: a narrative development and a score of physical spectacle. The chapter suggests these aspects successfully cohered in *It Felt Like A Kiss* while in *The Duchess of Malfi* they were out of joint to the detriment of immersive experience.

Chapter 6 takes a trait of narrative studies from the field of computer gaming scholarship and applies it to Punchdrunk experiment with MIT Media Lab in their show *Sleep No More*, 'remote and real world interconnected theatrical immersion'. This describes a means for some test subjects (including myself) to experience the New York show in the form of a text adventure computer game. This chapter considers the (false) dichotomy of narrative vs. ludology in computer gaming scholarship, the story vs. the mechanics of play, and applies this theoretical binary an analysis of immersive experience. The similarities between immersive theatre and computer gaming, particularly point-and-click adventures or first-person games, has been noted elsewhere (for example Green (2013) draws a comparison between Punchdrunk shows and *Myst*); this chapter draws on this similarity to consider what is meant by immersive experience, and possible implications for narrative in immersive theatre that contains gaming mechanics.

The final section of this thesis is about environment and immersion. Environment is arguably the most obvious signifier of immersive theatre and has been considered by other scholars elsewhere (i.e. McKinney 2012). The phrase *immersive theatre* most commonly refers to environmental/spatial signifiers – for example, Nield's early description of immersive theatre's key trait is that 'the audience inhabit the space of the play alongside the actors [...] within a tricked-out space' (2008: 531). In immersive theatre you walk around (interactivity/environment), see the characters at different times and in different places (narrative/environment), and you might even get a one-one-one if you manage to be in the right place at the right time (interactivity/navigating the environment). It is environmental innovations that might be most commonly said to signify immersive theatre – the creation of an immersive environment (spatially, scenographically, musically) for the audience to wander about in. Performers in Punchdrunk productions are considered in the

section on interactivity; the third section considers the emphasis with the 'cinematic level of detail' in the design of immersive space. Chapter 7 of this thesis considers the relationship between environment and immersive experience in relation to *The Borough*. This an audio walk production which could be considered unusual for Punchdrunk in that it occurred outside and had a linear narrative in its continuous soundtrack, but was certainly typical in its creation of an immersive experience in an alternate world, its slowly unveiling narrative punctuated with moments of interaction, and its overall spooky aesthetic. At the time of writing Punchdrunk are considering further experiments in productions with a wider spatial barriers than a single building, and by considering *The Borough*, this chapter begins to anticipate this development, and raise questions about what the consequences might be for understanding immersive experience as immersive (typically indoor) and pervasive (typically outdoor) shapes begin to overlap. Finally, after looking towards future environmental experiments, the chapter returns to *The Drowned Man* in order to consider the relationship between environment and immersive experience in a more 'typical' immersive space: one in which audience members and performers share the space rigidly defined by the walls of a building.

## Chapter 1: interactivity and immersion: theoretical frameworks

This chapter outlines definitions and approaches to interactivity from different perspectives, since *interactivity* is a contested term, and discusses theories of interactivity in the fields of digital and multimedia performance, the theatrical event, and computer games in order to consider social, cultural and economic contexts of interactive immersive experiences in these fields. The chapter concludes with a working definition of interactivity, which provides the theoretical framework for the following two chapters' analysis of interactivity and immersive experience in relation to specific Punchdrunk productions. I draw on a deliberately inclusive 'Multivalent Model' of interactivity (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 59) that suggests different (often overlapping) modes of interactivity can take place within, and with, a designed system.

This chapter is the first in a three-chapter section on immersion and interactivity: Chapter 2 considers interactivity and immersive experience in reference to *The Drowned Man* (2013-), and Chapter 3 discusses interactivity occurring 'outside' the building in which an immersive production takes place. Communities of Punchdrunk fans have developed since the company's earlier break-out shows *Faust* (2006/7) and *Masque of the Red Death* (2007/8); *Sleep No More* (2011-) and *The Drowned Man* have active fan communities at the time of writing. This chapter therefore builds a model of interactivity drawn from computer gaming and fan studies in order to provide a theoretical framework for considering such activity as *interactivity* related to immersive experience, occurring between audience members/fans and Punchdrunk.

Existing definitions, theories, taxonomies and models of interactivity can be located in various academic contexts, adding to a longer body of work arguing for the importance of play to human experience (Huizinga 1971; McGonigal 2011). Studies of digital/computer games and analogue gaming have considered interactivity (Bramer 1983; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Dovey and Kennedy 2006). Interactivity is a defining feature of gaming (Crawford 2004), but the field also contains studies that question assumptions regarding agency or control (Perron 2003; Newman 2004). This makes studies of interactivity in gaming particularly relevant to immersive theatre, where similar assumptions about audience agency/empowerment might be

made on the basis of an audience member's ability to interact with performers (O'Grady in Pitches and Popat 2011; Machon and Broadhurst 2012; White 2013). Interactivity in the overlap between gaming mechanics and performance is particularly important to digital and multimedia performance (Dixon 2007; Montola et al 2009; Kisch and Scheer 2012; Rose 2012). Wider social contexts also provide various models and theories of interactivity, such as the notion of the theatrical event (Schani 2004), or multimedia advertising campaigns that seek to involve participants in the brand of (for example) a film (Rose 2012). This cultural context requires some critical engagement regarding the relationship between immersive experience and economic pressures (Alston 2012) or ethical boundaries (Ridout 2009). Having discussed the relationship between immersive experience and interactivity in these fields, this chapter proposes a four-mode model of interactivity drawn from the field of computer gaming (Salen and Zimmerman 2004), as the model that best allows for a consideration of types of interactivity and their relationship to immersive experience. This provides the theoretical framework for the analysis in Chapters 2 and 3.

Scenography and design is an important perspective when considering immersion in the work of Punchdrunk (McKinney and Butterworth 2009: 192-5), as the sensory and aesthetic elements of the work influence how the production is explored and experienced in the moment. The relationship between interactivity and immersion in scenographic immersive performance is also an important aspect of theorising Griffiths's 'revered gaze' (2008), as it considers the effect of physically stepping into an immersive space. These perspectives allow immersive experience to be theorised as something that might be deliberately aimed for by makers, which allows for an enquiry into the potentially problematic relationship between audience agency and empowerment and the creation of an experience that results in a revered gaze.

#### Interactivity and immersion in digital and multimedia performance

Klich and Scheer consider the relationship between technology and aesthetics in performance, 'tracking the kind of performance work that highlights the ways in which representational, largely audio-visual, media can activate new aesthetic

potentials and new spectatorial experiences' (2012: 1). Multimedia performance is defined as a medium which includes both live and mediated elements, both the 'real' and the 'virtual.' They define immersion as 'the way multimedia creates a form of sensorial overload to exhaust the subjective experience of the object or event' (9) and propose two concepts of immersion: cognitive immersion and sensory immersion. *Cognitive immersion* is related to brain activity; *sensory immersion* is more relevant to immersive experience in theatre, as it is concerned with how a participant is engaged in the 'here and now' of performance. Immersion and interactivity are not quite mutually exclusive in this context, but they do not guarantee each other. The purpose of immersion, theorised as a means to create sensory overload or exhaustion, is to place an audience member/participant within the world or the aesthetic of the work. It may not necessarily require them to engage with the work physically, i.e. to explicitly interact with it.

Packer and Jordan give the following five characteristics as being an intrinsic part of computer-based multimedia: integration, interactivity, hypermedia, immersion, and narrativity (2001: xxx). They consider interactivity 'in terms of the extent to which spectators or users can *determine the structure of the work* through their own interactions with the work. This idea of a complex interactivity empowers the spectator or user not merely to experience the work in a more active way but to contribute to a re-iteration of the work in a modulated form.' (2012: 8-9; my emphasis). Interactivity is associated with an audience not merely acting within the boundaries set by the work – going along with its rules – or completing the tasks a show allows/asks for, but changing the work; mattering to the completion of the work. The assumption of empowerment emerges throughout a consideration of the relationship between interactivity and immersive experience. The sensation of sensory overload described by Kilch and Scheer would seem to de-empower an audience member by overstimulation. The relationship between technology and empowerment in embodied digital performance is further considered in Broadhurst and Machon (2012).

Dixon considers interactivity in the following four categories: navigation; participation; conversation; collaboration. These categories are defined by 'the incremental levels of a user's creative freedom they delineate [...] and are in no way relative to an individual artwork's quality, originality, or impact.' (2007: 564).



*Navigation* is the simplest form of interaction, 'epitomized by the single click of a mouse.' Surfing the web becomes a form of navigational interactivity as a user clicks through texts, pages and links. *Conversation* is defined as a more 'meaningful' level of interactivity: 'dialogue ... is reciprocated and is subject to real interchange and exchange.' (584). Such interaction might take place between the user and the objects or the software, or between users themselves. In conversational works 'there is often a complex relationship or negotiation established between the user/audience and the work, which is reliant on such issues as trust, cooperation, and openness' (585). Finally, *collaboration* 'comes about when the interactor becomes a major author or co-author of the artwork, experience, performance or narrative' (595). Although, as Dixon rightly states, these categories cannot be used to draw conclusions about the artistic merit of an individual work, this four-stage taxonomy of interactivity remains fundamentally hierarchical. The level of interactivity is defined not only by the role an audience member is invited to play in the work, but by the effect they have on the final work. The fourth category, *collaboration*, proposes that the artwork will be physically different (it will look, it will read, it will *be* different) because of the input it has received. There is an implicit value judgement in this hierarchical system that focusses on the role of the user. The more an audience member is able to influence and change a work, the greater the interactive experience and the more rewarding for the player. Dixon defines most sensory installation environments (which might now be considered immersive) as *participatory* rather than interactive. He cites Hoberman's *Faraday's Garden* (1990) as one such artwork; the audience was able to operate a series of objects but an overall feeling of direct agency was limited. The link between interactivity and empowerment again becomes prominent in this theorisation of interactivity.

Dixon's system is useful as graded and incremental means of defining interactivity. It also allows that different types of interactivity, even when separated into categories, might begin to blend into the other. The quotation below demonstrates how a single work might exist across all four categories, which emphasises the incremental nature of the system:

In installations where visitors' walking or movement triggers sensors to activate planned events and programmed sequences and effects, it is arguable whether the primary

interactive paradigm is, according to our continuum, navigation (the course the user takes), participation (users helping to bring to life the environment's sensory features), conversation (a dialogue between the user and the computer) or collaboration (the user and computer creating art together). (2007: 583)

Although by definition the user's input is a vital aspect of interactivity, this thesis considers immersive experience to be something which must be accommodated for or allowed; it is therefore useful to consider how interactivity might be crafted and designed as a means to lowering the barriers to immersive experience. The relationship between interactivity and immersive experience is not necessarily suggested by this four-level system, as the quotation above suggests any one of the four types of interactivity might lead to an immersive experience. Dixon's model is used as a theoretical framework for a discussion of interactivity by O'Grady, who suggests that 'interactivity can function as both aesthetic principle and a political ideology. [...] Often, how one can interact is given priority over the *quality* and *significance* of the interactions taking place' (in Pitches and Popat 2011: 146, original emphasis). Dixon's model is useful for considering the quality of interactivity in terms of how an audience member might affect the work; however, when considering the relationship between immersive experience and interactivity the model becomes less useful, as the input an audience member has on the work is not necessarily the most important aspect leading to immersive experience.

There is a further reason to look elsewhere for a model of interactivity. Discussion of interactivity and immersive experience, particularly in reference to performance, is often related to questions of new media and digital technology, especially performance using multimedia and/or Virtual Reality. Punchdrunk shows might not immediately call to mind the label multimedia, as this term is generally used to refer to work that explicitly uses technology. With the exception of *It Felt Like A Kiss*, film does not tend to feature in Punchdrunk shows. In *The Crash of the Elysium*, the physically absent Doctor communicates with his audience via television screens, and Higgin has cited the difficulty of trying to get the televised segments to meld with the physical show in a way that would keep the audience engaged (in Machon 2013: 214-228.) The worlds of Punchdrunk almost always evoke the past,

with the exception of science fiction imagery in *Elsyium* and some maverick wires in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Digital technology is used to create Punchdrunk technical effects, of course, and the shows are highly sophisticated in this sense. But the relationship between interactivity and immersion should be considered separately to the means of engagement with the technology used to create the experience. Feelings of immersion do not stem directly from the use of technology in the way Virtual Reality or multimedia performance seeks to create immersive experience. The goal of any technology used in a Punchdrunk production is to effectively 'disappear' behind the effects this technology creates (lowering the initial barriers to immersion of accessibility), allowing for immersion in the world of the production created by technology, rather than in the technology itself.

#### Interactivity and immersion in improvisatory theatre and pervasive gaming

Izzo (1997) emphasises interactivity as a form of theatre with historical antecedents. Izzo defines *interactive* as performance in which the actor plays a character and conducts conversation with passers-by, and describes the mindset of an interactive performer as being fully (emotionally, cognitively, imaginatively) immersed in the work. The emphasis on playfulness, flexibility and fluidity for the performer is also evocative of definitions of immersive experience. Their performance, emotional journey, and individual lines will alter depending on response from other non-performing audience members (this type of interactivity occurs at the levels of *conversation* and *collaboration* as defined by Dixon's model). The negotiation of barriers to interactivity – overcoming reluctance in certain audience members, for example, is a very similar process to the gradual process of reaching the ideal state of immersion in the performance. At this state, the audience member might forget that they are in (for example) a theme park and become fully engaged with the performer (who is also having an immersive experience as they perform). Though not a book about immersive theatre per se, the study considers interactive performance from the perspective of both makers/performers and spectators, and the positive descriptions of the phenomenon of experiencing this kind of theatre are similar to definitions of immersive experience in games. There is also a wider social consideration as Izzo suggests this form of performance is deeply personally

rewarding for a performer. Social contexts of interactivity are also discussed by O'Grady (2011), who suggests contemporary interactive performance (such the pervasive games of Blast Theory) appears to have a very different perspective and set of goals to Boal's Forum Theatre. O'Grady acknowledges that there are some clear aesthetic and political differences, but that the two forms do share some similarities: in both, the invitation to engage with the content of the performance is integral to the form (146-175). The participant becomes an active co-creator of meaning. A participant, as well as performers, might feel extremely engaged in what is going on, having an immersive experience in the work.

Considering the performance form/genre of pervasive gaming will enable a further distinction to be made between interactive performance and immersive theatre. Montola, Stenros, & Waern (in *Pervasive Games*: 2009) consider interactivity as a defining aspect of performative games and play. Unlike spatially immersive work where the performance is contained within defined walls of a building, pervasive games either have wide boundaries – city-wide, for instance – or no defined geographical limits at all. Players may become mentally immersed in the experience of the game and must overcome barriers to become immersed, gradually becoming accustomed to the game's rules and/or losing themselves in the world or the mechanics of play. Pervasive gaming is not immersive theatre, but it may provide an immersive experience. Like urban exploration, 'Seeing the backside of the city, from run-down industrial areas to shady alleys, is a physically immersive experience that conveys a strong feeling of *being there*.' (85) Pervasive gaming may also have a wide or undefined temporal dimension, as well as a wide or undefined spatial one. Although this thesis does not consider pervasive gaming, it is useful to consider its theorisation of interactivity; some immersive theatre productions, including Punchdrunk's bigger shows, have aspects that resemble pervasive gaming, such as their emphasis on searching or exploration, or the appearance of cryptic clues. These aspects may lead to people engaging with the shows as if they were games. Montola et al consider the notion of *emergent interaction* in pervasive gaming, which occurs when 'playing paranoia-inducing games in public spaces... If the game design succeeds in instilling players with a feeling that it is safe to talk to anyone to try to enlist their help, the game world comes alive socially.' (123) The ideal, therefore, is for the game-world to become blurred with real world, and this occurs when 'play is

not limited temporally, social, or spatially' (122). The relationship between interactivity and immersion is described here as an ideal state, where immersion can be compared to mental engagement and 'flow'. This thesis suggests that an important part of immersive experience is that it is not experienced identically to immersive theatre. Temporally, immersive experience is very intense, fleeting, and temporary; spatially, immersive performance tends to take place within a strictly defined site (three hours in this building; three minutes in this room; three seconds of eye contact). This is the opposite of the aim of pervasive gaming which aims for the real world and the game world to become blurred, both in content ('is that person part of the game or not?') and form ('what if I go over here?', 'is this allowed?'). In immersive theatre, hierarchies within the space tend to be strictly defined, and there are variously explicit or implicit rules about what it and is not allowed.

Popat (2006) suggests that '[I]n interactive artworks the power given to the audience is far greater, and they are made aware of its existence.' (2006: 34). This distinction is key to considering the relationship between immersion and interactivity. Interactive work makes explicit the role the audience has to play. In immersive theatre, and particularly Punchdrunk's larger productions from *Faust* through to *The Drowned Man*, the way an audience member might actually affect the work is never overtly suggested. It might be implied that one-on-ones are dependent upon an audience member's input, but they are not. It is true that where an audience member goes will affect what they see, but they cannot actively alter anything that occurs in performance. Interactive work depends upon a negotiation of hierarchies of space and time and emphasise playfulness; in immersive theatre, boundaries and rules regarding an audience's behaviour tend to be non-negotiable. 'For *interactive* theatre, participants are asked to bring their own experience and understanding to bear on the drama as it progresses and illusion is kept to a minimum' (O'Grady 2011: 172; my emphasis). For *immersive* theatre, participants are asked to lose themselves in the drama as it progresses and illusion is kept to a maximum. Although well-made, tightly structured and carefully crafted, fundamentally 'Interactive performance is always incomplete' (168) and relies on the input of audience members to make the experience whole. Immersive theatre, in contrast – while it may contain moments where something resembling interactivity might occur – is always presented as a totally *complete* creation; a whole world the participant

visits. Bartley's decision to use the term 'narrator-visitor' for members of a Punchdrunk audience (2013: np), emphasises the temporary nature of their experience.

#### A social context of interactivity and immersion: the experience economy

Immersive experience is often discussed in terms of individual adventures or journeys, but it is also frequently framed as something that creates conversation and the urge to share afterwards. Jubb described 'the bar at the end of a Punchdrunk show' as being the most exciting place during the *Masque of the Red Death* run at the BAC, a place of excitement and exchange, where 'everyone wants to share what happened to them' (in Gardner 2007: np). There is a social aspect to immersive experience that is brought about by a desire to share and/or compare what happened on different days, or between people who found themselves in different parts of the building. This mode of interactivity is discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of fan communities. For now, it is important to raise a potentially problematic aspect of this way of defining, and framing, immersive experience. The operationalizing of immersion (the way, as argued above, Punchdrunk's audience members are invited to *experience* a world rather than to explicitly *interact* with it) can lead to potential problems regarding the potential commodification of experience. An aspiration towards the creation of immersive experience from a marketing perspective can lead to a one-way type of 'interactivity' that goes from product to person.

Rose considers interactivity between audiences and media with an emphasis on how interactivity might enhance product marketing and branding and the notion of engagement between a product and its audience (*The Art of Immersion: how new media is revolutionising Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the way we tell stories*: 2012). Rose proposes that a new type of narrative is emerging, characterised by interactive/participatory elements, nonlinear and multimedia. The relationship between interactivity and immersion is quite straightforward and one of positive correlation: immersive experience is framed as empowering participations with marketing. The creation of a fully immersive experience is considered a key way in which to engage fans with products. The fictional world of Pandora from Cameron's

*Avatar* (2009) is cited as a fully immersive and detailed world which can be explored beyond its film, in games or print media. Interactivity in this context becomes an enhancing experience or the engagement with a film/story/product, and multimedia is integral to this approach: interactivity is designed to occur across different media at the same time. The experience of interactivity is a social one in that there is an emphasis on conversation between players (multiple people engaging with a product at the same time can communicate while doing so). Rose's discussion of technology's potential for immersion provides a useful context of some common discourses surrounding immersive theatre, and performance in general that plays with notions of intimacy or individual experience. Rose does not mention theatre, but the book's emphasis on the revolutionary potential of interactive marketing campaigns risks an over simplified assumption about what new media can achieve. *Avatar* is cited as a major success in the art of film-making due to the unprecedented level of detail that went into its three-dimensional world building. The film's strictly one-dimensional story and characters go unmentioned. The success of interactive trailer/game *Why So Serious?* is defined in terms of *The Dark Knight* (2008) box office, and as an innovation in creative marketing. The discourses surrounding interactivity with new media are here framed as successful because of the way in which they immerse players in a *product*: the creation of experiences that fans will want to talk about is the blurring of an experience into sellable content. Gordon's discussion of intimacy in voyeurism in *Sleep No More* (2012) suggests that Punchdrunk's show is more compromised by voyeurism than skin-shows or sex shows, where the rules of intimacy (what is and what is not allowed; the price of intimacy) are very clear. The claims made for immersion in the context Rose celebrates require careful analysis.

The ability to interact with a piece of art or a product (however interactivity is defined at this point) will not in itself make for an immersive experience. It may not even be particularly desirable. The marketing campaigns Rose describes were carefully crafted experiences designed to create an extension of the films' worlds: barriers to immersion were lowered; clues were laid and rewards for them planted; fans who put the effort in to respond enjoyed a unique experience that later tied into the story of the films. These descriptions demonstrate that the campaigns used interactivity to enable, and guide the players towards, an immersive experience. The

commercial imperative behind the crafting of an immersive experience is potentially a highly problematic one. Creative marketing designed to immerse people into brands is something that has drawn criticism already in terms of Punchdrunk's commercial projects. Alston considers the relationship between 'selling out' and the question of sustainable arts funding in regards to Punchdrunk's *The Black Diamond* (2012: 193-208), proposing a critical approach in which 'audience members might assume partial responsibility for recognising and responding to the control of art production at the institutional level' (193). This response to product placement can be theorised as requiring an audience member to create their own barrier to immersive experience: the critical engagement required to consider the wider economic and cultural contexts of product placement takes an audience member outside of the world of the work – the antithesis to becoming lost in a secondary world.

The relationship between interactivity and immersion is key to a discussion of the issue of audience agency and immersive marketing. Punchdrunk Travel is still in developmental stages but promises individual journeys created specifically for an individual audience member. The experience promises nothing beyond itself and is not an engagement with a brand; however, the creation of deliberately individual immersive experiences is an interesting development in immersive performance. This chapter, and the following two in the Interactivity section, consider the relationship between immersive experience and interactivity separately from definition provided by marketing contexts. However an acknowledgement of this trajectory suggests that the relationship between interactivity, immersive experience and commercial imperatives, when considered in the context of the kind of creative marketing Rose describes, reveals a possible interpretation of the purpose behind creating experiences people will want to talk about afterwards.

#### A social context of interactivity and immersion: the theatrical event

Shani considers what qualities constitute 'eventness' in theatre from a context of social science, and distinguishes event from performance through 'the presence of concrete conditions, whose most important dimensions are time and place' (2004: 111) and specific kinds of interactions among the participants. The importance of



reciprocity in the theatrical event might provide a useful way of thinking about immersive experience and interactivity from the perspective of performer as well as audience member. Theorising Punchdrunk shows as theatrical events enables a reading of the shows that encapsulates multiple types of interactivity within the walls of the building, and outside and beyond the moment of immersive encounter. Shani proposes a model of dynamic interactivity that emphasises reciprocity between social situations occurring within the moment of performance, the stage play itself, and the wider cultural situation that surrounds it. The difference between theatrical performance and the theatrical event lies in these relationships between and among the people involved. The concept of theatrical 'eventness' is applicable to immersive experience in the context of Punchdrunk, as the shows considered in the following two chapters all contain some suggestion of reciprocity between participants, the shows themselves, and (particularly between communities of fans) with each other. Considering the relationship between interactivity and immersion in this way enables a further distinction to be made between the theatrical event and the marketing event.

One example of a space existing within the continuum between social event and cultural event are the 'decompression' spaces. *Masque of the Red Death*, *The Duchess Of Malfi*, *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man* all had decompression space in which the atmosphere may be notably different, louder, and more relaxed and sociable. There may be music or other entertainers, and, most notably, masks do not need to be worn. These spaces are the immersive theatre equivalent to an interval. They exist in space, rather than time. Audience members are free to spend as long as they like in the interval space, provided they can find it. Punchdrunk's decompression spaces are a break from the intense atmosphere/aesthetic of the rest of the performance space and allow for a movement between different kinds of interactivity (with the show to a more sociable kind) and a different kind of behaviour (silence to talking; exploring to relaxing.) These spaces are also where the performance ends, and audience members are free to remain in them afterwards. These decompression spaces can be framed in terms of their relationship to the immersive experience in the rest of the show (they provide further boundaries in both time and space); they might also be framed in terms of providing a commercial aspect to the production (the drinks aren't free.) A Punchdrunk production can be

considered a performance event in the sense that multiple strands of interactivity are at play within the space, and also in that they can be considered cultural events that are interacted with from outside by their communities of fans.

#### Interactivity and immersion and computer games: resulting in a multivalent model

Discourses around computer games reveal a history of social anxiety regarding the antisocial consequences of too much immersion. The concept of interactivity is used to suggest a more social, enriching, or educational, experience. Products invoke interactivity to create a 'veneer of respectability [...] Thus, we find certain companies preferring to consider themselves contributing to a world of "interactive entertainment". [...] It follows that the products of an interactive entertainment industry are not games. Rather, they are "interactive fiction" or "interactive narratives"' (Newman 2004; 2012: 7). Interactivity is used as a response to too much immersion: it is its socially acceptable opposite.

Newman emphasises the importance of "*player activity*" (16, original italics) and argues that 'videogames may be characterised by a sense of "being there", rather than controlling, manipulating or perhaps even "playing a game"' (17). The sense of immersion is therefore linked with a sense of control, and the interactive aspects of the game are designed to create and ensure this. A visible (i.e. clear, fair) system of challenge and reward are key to videogames, and important too is that the manner in which a gamer is immersed does not feel contrived. Crafting for immersive experience in theatre has some parallels with the challenge faced by game designers, particularly in reference to interactivity. Game designer Crawford (2003b) states: 'I have long maintained that interactivity is the essence of the gaming experience, and that the quality of the interaction determines the quality of the game.' (84). Crawford suggests a more interactive game isn't necessarily the one with the flashier graphics, but the game that responds the most to the player. What matters is that the player can affect the outcome of the game. Crawford suggests a 'workload versus payoff' model for determining the effectiveness of a game's interactivity, which is very similar to the concept of challenge and skill alignment required to determine a state of psychological 'flow'. The gamer does not wish to become aware of the interface as she plays, as this would break the immersion: 'For

many video game designers, it is important to ensure that there is no explicit detachment and distance from the contents of the game' (Newman 2004: 17-8). Interactivity in gaming is designed to ensure immersion and challenge, rather than to work against it. It is a key argument of this thesis that immersive theatre (like games) can be designed to allow for immersive experience.

The difference between a game and play is that while a game has a way to win or to lose, play has no winning, beyond what a player may understand the term to mean. Open-ended games such don't have explicit ways to win but gamers may aim for certain goals within the sandbox, giving themselves limits or rules or aims. The relationship between a player and the rule(s) of play are themselves a site for interactivity, or player-led modification or manipulation:

once the rules [of a game] have been deduced and overcome, videogames may lose their appeal and new challenges may be sought, either through (purchasing) new games or the imposition of new ludus rules. [...] Deducing, collating, and working within or around a game's rulesets represents a large part of the pleasure of videogame play and further highlights the active, participatory role of the player. (Newman 2004: 21-2).

This game-within-a-game mode of interactivity – interacting *with* the rules themselves – might also occur in some immersive theatre productions, particularly in the context of Punchdrunk's larger shows which give no explicit instruction to audience members beyond 'your bearing shapes your fate' (audio introduction to *The Drowned Man*). Repeat attendees in particular may set themselves additional challenges, games or goals: applying their own ludus rules. It is therefore the case that interactivity has several forms, only some of which might be anticipated by the game/theatre designer; a participant's might be to interact in ways which were not originally designed for. Murray argues that '*Agency and immersion are mutually reinforcing. When we engage with an immersive world and it responds to us as we expect it to, revealing deeper levels of content, greater detail in its coverage, we become more deeply immersed.*' (2012: 102; original emphasis). Murray calls this the 'active creation of belief'. Agency occurs when an interactor-player engages with an imaginary world and experiences a reciprocal response. For Crawford, reciprocity

is also key to interactivity, which is fundamentally 'A cyclic process in which two active agents alternately (and metaphorically) listen, think, and speak' (2003a: 76). By these definitions of interactivity, immersive theatre may seem not very interactive at all.

The difference between games and puzzles provides further illumination about the relationship between interactivity and immersion. Puzzles are relatively self-contained: they may enrich the feeling that play is occurring in a vast world; alternatively they may stall or disrupt the wider gameplay or add little to the overall experience, redundant and defunct once completed. Interactivity is what differentiates a game from a static puzzle. Interactivity means that a player is able to control, or play a part in, the events in a game. This kind of interactivity potentially allows for immersive experience, and these are linked to feelings of controlling the events in a game. In gaming studies, the automatic correlation between interactivity and agency is an assumption that might be questioned. This is a useful line of enquiry to draw into theatre and performance studies, as I am interested in claims made by immersive or interactive theatre regarding empowerment or agency, and who makes these statements. Newman suggests that discussing how interactive games are overlooks an even more fundamental point:

Videogames are highly complex, segmented arrangements of elements. Some of these elements may be seen to be highly 'interactive', requiring considerable player participation and responding to player action, while others... appear to demand little or no direct player input or control, nor do they respond to attempts to exert influence. Yet, this is not to say that the player is not actively interrogating the material, exploring it for clues to aid forthcoming play or reading a presented narrative in order to make sense of past events or those yet to come. (2004: 27).

It is the player's movement between various levels or types of participation – going between passive watching and active strategizing, for example – that creates a rewarding videogame experience: a movement into, and out of, and into again, the sensation of various levels of immersive engagement with a game. Interactivity in gaming requires a response from the gamer, and their input is necessary for the

came to continue, progress, be completed; but this, in itself, does not guarantee immersion in a game. This is a useful criticism of interactivity to consider because it matches the notion, argued in this thesis, that immersive experience is a temporary, fleeting, necessarily temporary state due to its being highly intense – and therefore is an experience that exists as a series of graded states, not as a felt/not-felt binary. The movement between different levels of interactivity – moving between passive watching, emotional engagement, active searching through rooms, for example, in a Punchdrunk show – is what creates an immersive experience, not the sensation of interacting (or not) in itself.

The notion that an audience member moves between different modes of interactivity resolves an apparent contradiction in the relationship between interactivity and immersive experience. Interactivity is not required to be consistent throughout the show. In fact, moving between different kinds of interactivity might be more effective in allowing for immersive experience than suggesting an audience member/game player be fully in control of their own experience throughout. I suggest a distinction between interactivity and activity. If a game is defined by, or discussed primarily in terms of, the input and participation of the player, non-interactive cut-scenes might be seen as problematic or annoying for a gamer, disrupting play. They are plain 'activity', which the player cannot influence, and therefore cannot become immersed in. By this logic, the most frustrating moments of a Punchdrunk show would be when an audience member comes upon performers dancing a scene and are required to give them space, as this stops them from moving freely around and actively engaging with individual performers or parts of the set. Murray writes from the perspective of interactive digital media design. She notes that interactivity is 'a design term that is often used too loosely, and is sometimes confused with mere activity or potential actions.' 2012: (426) Just as in this chapter's discussion of interactivity in performance, the quality and significance of the ways in which a participant/audience member/player might engage with the work are integral to the effect it has, and the relationship activity or interactivity has with experiencing immersion.

This varied experience of different kinds of interactivity – moving between a series of graded states – is an important aspect of considering interactivity in gaming, particularly regarding its relation to a player feeling immersed in a game.

Rather than being simply dismissed as interruptions, cut scenes might be considered alongside level breaks, save points or restarts, as pauses which punctuate gaming and affect its tempo or the overall rhythm of play a gamer will experience. They are all parts of a game's structure and it is these components combined with the moments of actual play that make up the full experience of the game. This theorisation of interactivity is useful to consider in terms of immersive experience in a Punchdrunk production. The movement between different modes of engagement, active exploring followed by a calmer few minutes of watching, makes for a richer experience than constant single level of activity or intensity. Just as videogames are not all about interactivity, but contain movement between more and less interactive scenes, neither is immersive experience in theatre all about interactivity, but consists of movements across lowered barriers to immersion and into various (and varied) modes of engaging with performers or the performance space.

Salen and Zimmerman offer the following four-mode taxonomy of interactivity:

Mode 1: Cognitive interactivity; or interpretive participation

Mode 2: Functional interactivity; or utilitarian participation

Mode 3: Explicit interactivity; or participation with designed choices and procedures

Mode 4: Beyond-the-object interactivity; cultural participation.

(2004: 69)

This taxonomy incorporates the many definitions of interactivity that can be found across studies of both gaming and theatre and performance, rather than attempting to give a definitive, and therefore limiting, description of what interactivity can be. I have suggested already that Dixon's hierarchical continuum of interactivity (from navigation to collaboration) contains an implicit value judgement about the role of the user in regards to making meaning within the work. O'Grady points out that studies of interactivity in performance too often focus on the ways in which interactivity is possible, rather than on the '*quality or significance* of the interactions taking place.' (146; original emphasis). I use Salen and Zimmerman's system as the theoretical framework for my analysis of immersive experience and interactivity in the following two chapters. Drawing on the four 'overlapping ways of understanding any moment of interactivity' (69), the following two chapters consider interactivity and immersive experience in the work of Punchdrunk from the perspective of quality and

significance. The system of four modes allows for imaginative/cognitive/sensory participation to be regarded as interactivity and discussed in relation to immersive experience, as well as more explicit physical manifestations of interactivity (which all four of Dixon's modes resemble) and participation within a wider social context (drawing on a theorisation of the theatrical event). As a final important theorisation of interactivity, Salen and Zimmerman point out that '*meaningful play*' (my emphasis) 'is tied not only to the concept of player action and system outcome, but also to a particular context in which the action occurs.' (2004: 60). This thesis draws on psychological flow as a means of defining immersive experience; barriers to immersion in this context are lowered when a player's actions feel meaningful, and therefore over the following two chapters I consider the context in which interactivity takes place, as this will affect the quality of immersive experience.

#### In(teractive) conclusion

Interactivity does not, in itself, guarantee immersive experience; certain modes of interactivity may facilitate and allow for it. Interactivity might be a way to lower barriers to immersive experience and draw an audience member into the work. Although this chapter has suggested that interactive theatre and immersive theatre may be created to fulfil very different aims, interactivity can be considered a regular aspect of immersive theatre. Interactivity does occur in immersive space. This is especially true in regards the first three modes from the model listed above: audience members might be considered to be imaginatively, functionally, and/or explicitly engaged with a Punchdrunk show at any one time, whether this manifests as imagining worlds and stories from an empty room (mode 1), walking around and exploring (mode 2) or sharing a drink with a performer in a one-on-one (mode 3). The term *interactivity* can also be considered to describe methods of cultural participation, and in this fourth mode immersive experience can be considered as a social/cultural phenomenon. A part of this thesis is considering how immersive experience might be claimed and framed outside of the performance space, and considering interactivity in this context enables such an analysis to be made. The following two chapters in this section consider interactivity and immersive experience in regards to specific Punchdrunk productions in order to consider what the complex

relationship(s) between interactivity and immersive experience in more detail. Chapter 2 looks at interactivity and immersion in *The Drowned Man*, considering how interactivity is constituted and performed, and how this relates to immersive experience. Chapter 3 considers beyond-the-object interactivity, or cultural participation, beginning with *Faust* and *The Masque of the Red Death* and then, via *Sleep No More*, returning to *The Drowned Man*. This chapter implicitly traces a trajectory of Punchdrunk's history: the company's developing status in the near-decade between their earlier 'break-out' shows to their most recent productions. This change in the cultural context and status of the company further informs how immersive experience is claimed, and who claims it.



## Chapter 2: interactivity and immersion in *The Drowned Man*

This chapter applies the theoretical frameworks of interactivity discussed in the previous chapter to the analysis of a specific case study. The production that is the subject of this chapter is *The Drowned Man* (21 London St/Temple Studios: 2013-present). In physical terms, this show is the company's biggest yet, and has all the spatial/structural/atmospheric trademarks of both 'a Punchdrunk production' and 'immersive theatre'. At the time of writing the show is currently still running and due to close a year after it opened. My discussion is based on presence at rehearsals and performances of the show, and conversations with other audience members including long-term fans of the company. The goal of this chapter is to consider the relationship between interactivity and immersive experience using *The Drowned Man* as an example, primarily in terms of the model proposed by Salen and Zimmerman:

Mode 1: Cognitive interactivity; or interpretive participation

Mode 2: Functional interactivity; or utilitarian participation

Mode 3: Explicit interactivity; or participation with designed choices and procedures (2004: 69).

This chapter is concerned with immersive experience within the walls of the building in which an immersive theatre production takes place. Salen and Zimmerman propose four modes of interactivity and the fourth – beyond the object interactivity, or cultural participation – will be considered in the next chapter. This mode of cultural participation includes the context of wider social structures and the community of fans that has built up around Punchdrunk, and considers methods of communicating and expressing ownership of immersive experience. Chapter 4 will consider what kind of 'immersive experience' they might be participating with, and what they might be communicating. This chapter is interested in immersive experience within the show itself. It considers *The Drowned Man* in terms of the three modes listed above, and discusses the relationship between interactivity and immersive experience in terms of interactivity. The theoretical frameworks of how this thesis is defining and understanding immersive experience is drawn on throughout the discussion, mostly the concepts of barriers to immersion and immersive experience as a series of graded states. Finally, notions of audience agency, empowerment, and freedom are questioned in the context of the assumption that interactivity is a central part of immersive theatre. *The Drowned Man* and much of Punchdrunk's work is not

interactive in an explicit sense: the audience do not have the power to change or control the action of the show. This is not necessarily a criticism of the work; interplay between moments of interactivity and passivity from a spectator/audience member might be what gives immersive experience its power. The productions are potentially highly interactive in an imaginative and interpretive sense, and certainly require a high level of interactivity in a functional sense.

#### Mode 1: Cognitive interactivity; or interpretive participation

This is the psychological, emotional, and intellectual participation between a person and a system. Example: the complex imaginative interaction between a single player and a graphic adventure game. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 59)

The creation of an individual narrative (that audience member's experience of the show) and the creation of a wider sense of the show's world (piecing together separate fragmented rooms and/or scenes to create a sense of a whole) are common grounds for discussion of *The Drowned Man* and other immersive theatre productions that emphasise audience exploration (i.e. in Machon 2013). The creation of immersive experience within *The Drowned Man* and other Punchdrunk productions is facilitated (in part) by this mode of interaction – in part, because emotional and intellectual engagement does not have a physical manifestation. In *The Drowned Man*, this kind of imaginative engagement is necessarily linked with physically navigating the space. This mode of interactivity is concerned with acts of *interpretation*, and how they might be related to immersive experience. World-building, clue-solving, path-finding, room/object/performer-discovering and above the all exploratory nature of navigating a Punchdrunk show facilitate imaginative engagement with the production.

A large community of fans has built up around Punchdrunk and *The Drowned Man* in particular, and although I consider this more fully in the following chapter it will be difficult not to refer to this ever-growing database of discussion in a chapter about various modes of imaginative engagement with the show. The act of interpretation, finding clues and solving puzzles, are all concerned with how immersive experience manifests in the moment and is communicated after-the-

moment; it is a large part of how the show it talked about outside of the performance space, particularly between fans who have seen the show multiple times. This discussion constitutes an important part of how immersive experience is claimed by those who experience it; the notion of ownership over immersive experience, and the desire to communicate with others, has been a theme across Punchdrunk shows from their earlier productions: 'the bar at the end of a Punchdrunk show is the most animated bar in the country. Everybody wants to share what happened to them' (Jubb in Gardner 2007). The act of interpretation also extends to the show as a whole, rather than the world inside it – discussion between fans of *The Drowned Man* is not limited to individual immersive experiences but includes analysing the effect of a change in the cast, compiling a diagram of the movements of all the performers, and discussing strategy. These acts of interpretation might appear to contradict immersive experience: it is difficult to remain fully immersed in the fictional world and take notes on the nuances of a new cast member's performance. This contradiction can be resolved by the notion of conceptual blending and the creation of new ludus rules beyond the production's original intent: acts of detailed analysis might also enrich the sense of *The Drowned Man* as a whole, moving from small details to imagining the scope of the show's overall design and organisation. Interpreting the production itself becomes the immersive task.

How might cognitive interactivity, or imaginative participation, occur or manifest in *The Drowned Man*, and what relationship might it have with immersive experience?

The Doctor's Room, one of the spaces in *The Drowned Man*, is the site of several scenes throughout the show and at other times is empty. At rehearsals for a scene in this space, I watched the performers going over a scene where a patient is assessed by the doctor, at one point assuming the pose of Leonardo Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. It is a powerful scene and one rich with sensations and images that allow for imaginative engagement. It occurred to me that, happening upon the scene in performance (as I had happened upon it in this rehearsal), I might not necessarily know that the character under assessment was William, one of the show's two equivalents to the character of Woyzeck. The cast list on any given night of *The Drowned Man* is displayed in the entry space of the building, easily seen before audience members enter the show. The audience are also introduced to the main players in the lift at the beginning of the show. Given the (deliberately) disorientating

effect of the show, however, it is still possible to happen upon a scene not quite knowing 'where' you are. As a scene between two anonymised characters – Doctor and Patient – the scene was very effective and powerful; it would be powerful, too, if an audience member knew who the character of William was and cared about the outcome of his story. The potential for imaginative engagement was very rich even with anonymous characters: knowing who they are might be a key part of being able to follow one story, but cognitive interactivity could occur without this information. Reading the scene as abstract meditation on medicine and the human form is just as complex an act of interpretation as reading the scene as a key moment in William's life. These imaginative interactions with the show both require a level of engagement that suggests an immersive experience.

Having experienced the scene as an anonymous representation, the scene felt immediately less powerful when I first learned the characters' names. I hadn't known them initially, and now I wondered whether I *should* have known them all along. Suddenly I felt the possibility that I had been watching the scene 'the wrong way'. It became a source of anxiety, and would certainly have been a barrier to immersion if I was trying to watch the actual show. The ability to interpret the scene, to imaginatively participate with it, became blocked by the thought that there was a better way to engage with this scene, perhaps with the show as a whole, and that I did not know it. As I have demonstrated, watching the scene either way potentially might allow for a highly effective immersive experience in the space. This is only broken when the potential other way of watching becomes coded as a better way. This is an important aspect of the relationship between cognitive engagement, imaginative participation and immersive experience, and the question of how immersive experience is described in the show's own discourses. The emphasis on freedom (the audience is invited at the beginning to go their own way), suggests there is therefore no wrong way to experience the show. This potentially stands in contradiction to the question of whether certain stories ought to be understood. Audience members are given a plot synopsis of the two main stories of *The Drowned Man* before entering the show. Does this give audience members a path from which they are free to deviate, or suggest that if they cannot 'find' these stories, they have not experienced the show as fully as they could have? The former lowers barriers to immersive experience; the latter might raise them high. Immersion can also be

broken by sensing the scope and pragmatics of the production, as suggested here in reference to *Sleep No More*:

It's difficult to give yourself over to theatre when your overriding emotion is anxiety. Anxiety that you're not seeing the crucial key that will unlock the piece; that you're looking too hard at something that means nothing; that you might have to get involved at any moment; or that you're missing out on something more exciting happening in another room. (Jones, 'Immersive theatre and the anxiety of choice', 2013a: np)

Feeling connected to the composition of narrative elements in the production may count as a piece of 'real world' engagement, as an audience member admires the structural sophistication of the production or the rich design detail of the performance space. Alternatively, a keen awareness of the 'real world' composition of a larger production than an individual plot can encompass might result the kind of response described above.

Disorientation is a key theme of *The Drowned Man*, both in the stories itself and the world the characters inhabit, and in the physical setup of the production. The audience are deliberately disorientated upon entering the show. This has a connection to the notion of barriers to immersion, a key theoretical concept regarding the definition of immersive experience. A piece of art, whether it be theatrical work, a computer game, or any work or activity that seeks to provide an immersive experience for its participants, can never ensure that immersive experience will actually take place. It can only allow for it. Barriers to immersion can be lowered; but the experience cannot be guaranteed; it certainly cannot be forced. A sense of being forced will break an immersive experience very quickly. As a way of exploring this, the very first moments of the show might provide a useful example. *The Drowned Man* could be said to have a series of beginnings.

The production takes place over four floors of the building. Audience members are released from a lift onto one of the floors: there is a randomised element to where, geographically, the experience will begin. Before the lift however, there is further business. A sense of disorientation has been cited by Barrett as being part of a Punchdrunk experience ('If you're uncomfortable, then suddenly

you're eager to receive' [in Hoggard 2013: np]). *The Drowned Man* begins with a dark, narrow maze-like series of corridors to get to the first small space where an audience member (masked, by now) might meet several others. These moments of calm and quiet and semi-darkness, before Mr Stanford's voiceover introduction, might also provide a means of decompressing from the practicalities minutes before, of being in a queue, presenting a ticket, using the cloakroom, etc. After a few minutes to gather in this room, audience members hear the voiceover introduction to the show. This introduction, by a character of the fictional world (Mr Stanford), introduces the fictional film studio and the conceit that the latest picture (*The Drowned Man*) is about to finish being filmed. The lift then opens, and audience members are given a more personal introduction by the character operating it, before being spat out at various floors to 'begin' their exploration of *The Drowned Man*.

These varied beginnings contain both deliberately disorientating elements and a layout of the rules of engagement with the show that are designed to make the experience less disorientating. These introductory instructions are concerned with both the imaginative element of the show, and the more real-world physical logistics. In the lift you are given an in-character assessment of the main players at Temple Studios, and are also advised that it is better to split up: you are given an introduction to the logistics of the show as well as an introduction to its fictional world. In the opening voiceover, Mr Stanford invites you to explore the studio while they shoot the final scenes of their latest picture. From these introductions the audience are given an overview of the fictional world, and the official story of the fictional world (that they are merely shooting a movie; introducing the possibility of an unreliable narrator; there is also aesthetic and atmospheric introduction in the sinister music and dim lighting). *The Drowned Man* contains multiple beginnings, then, which contain invitations to explore, imagine and interpret the show.

Through these graded starts to the show, *The Drowned Man* enables imaginative interactivity. The task of interpretation and exploration are immediately set up and allowed for by the characters (both in the voice-over and the in person introduction in the lift.) There is a mixture of deliberate disorientation and carefully mediated instruction. These invitations for imaginative engagement (cognitive interactivity) can be theorised as lowering the barriers to immersion. The audience members have been gradually taken away from the real world in which they put the masks on, and invited into (the world of) Temple Studios. It is possible that barriers

to immersion are set up here, however. The rules of engagement with the show are quite strict: anxiety over breaking them, or witnessing others breaking them, might lead to a break with the fictional world of the show and the real-world experience of immersion.

A key element of this thesis' conceptualisation of immersive experience is that it exists as a series of graded states. This can be seen in the gradual building up of information about the production/the world/the characters as an audience member wanders through *The Drowned Man* might facilitate a slow entry into what will become an environment that invites immersive experience: exploring the differences in atmospheres from room to room, space to space; following characters, or making a deliberate decision not to do this and wander at random instead, might all build up to create a sense of being immersed in the production. There are many examples of this kind of interpretive participation within *The Drowned Man*: piecing together the individual characters' stories to get some sense of a whole; following an individual character; exploring the rooms; reading letters; watching scenes between characters or group performances; scenes of dance, scenes of dialogue; piecing together the relationship between the two worlds of the show, inside the Studio and outside; following all the references to horses in the decor; all the references to black magic; following themes – fame, unhappiness, jealousy, spite. These acts might lead to an immersive experience as an audience member might lose track of time, an effect of total immersion (Brown and Cairns 2004). An audience member has some degree of freedom over how close is the attention they pay to the set. Punchdrunk's attention to detail has been praised elsewhere over multiple reviews of their shows, and *The Drowned Man* contains details that potentially 'reward' someone who finds them. Alternatively, an audience member might focus on the structure of the show as a whole, following actors to get a sense of the production's logistics; or they might vary between thinking in this way and exploring the fictional world. The invitation to exploration, while appearing open-ended, might create a feeling of frustration in being lost, as opposed to a welcoming of it. This would obstruct immersive experience.

Referring to *Masque of the Red Death*, Barrett stated the production 'failed' if an audience member was to 'suddenly remember they're in London in 2007' (in Gardner 2007: np). Later, *The Drowned Man* has a similar aim regarding the relationship between the real world and that of the show: 'We're trying to build a

parallel universe. [...] For a few hours inside the walls, you forget that it's London 2013 and slip into this other place' (Barrett in Hoggard 2013: np). These quotations demonstrate a desire for intense engagement – total immersion at all times – with the fictional world of the show: total cognitive interactivity, total interpretive participation. This understanding of immersive experience could be nuanced by incorporating the concept, from studies of computer games, of Real World Disassociation (RWD) (Jennett et al 2008). Very engaged players could choose to pay attention only to very relevant distractions. Remembering that you are in London in 2007/13, and then throwing that thought away again to get back to the Masque/Temple Studios, might demonstrate a more thorough experience of immersion than if this thought never occurred.

Having discussed the importance of disorientation, and how it creates a highly receptive state of mind for cognitive interpretation, and therefore allows for (lowers the barriers to) immersive experience, it is worth considering briefly the apparently contradictory the idea of an audience member knowing, in some detail, the layout of the building or the design of the show: knowing 'what to expect'. This perspective is potentially allowed for within the show itself. The Drafting Studio, a space on the basement floor which only Premium ticket holders are able to access, contains a diagram like one the company used during rehearsals to plan, design and tech the show. It outlines where the characters will be at any one time, their looped actions spelled out across a grid. The character who occupies this space knows when and where the characters in the show will be next, and what they will be doing. She shares this with the audience member in the room, and they are advised to go and see what she has just told them will happen. This diagram enabled the production and rehearsal of the show; incorporating it into the performance adds something of the mastermind element, not just to the world of Temple Studios which has Mr Stanford as a mastermind, but of the world outside the Studios too. This knowledge lends something of the inevitability of classical tragedy to *The Drowned Man* as an entire production, and the notion of hidden knowledge and secrecy may make for a more compelling immersive experience in the space, watching the scene having been told it was going to happen. Alternatively, if interactivity is theorised as being more rewarding when truly collaborative, this discovery only makes the audience member's ultimate lack of agency to change or alter the course of the action even more explicit. The relationship between this kind of knowledge and immersive



experience might at first appear mutually exclusive – a detailed diagram of the space might seem to go against the exploratory nature of imaginative participation that allows for immersive experience, which is how audience members are advised is the most rewarding way of experiencing the show.

### Mode 2: Functional interactivity; or utilitarian participation

Included here: functional, structural interactions with the material components of the system (whether real or virtual). For example, that graphic adventure you played: how was the interface? How ‘sticky’ were the buttons? What was the response time? How legible was the text on your high-resolution monitor? All of these elements are part of the total experience of interaction. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 59)

In any theatrical event occurring outside of ‘traditional’ shapes or forms, utilitarian participation is a formative part of the experience. It is concerned not with the imaginative but with the real. Initial physical barriers to immersion fall under this category – could you see over everyone else? Was the mask comfortable? Were you able to navigate through the space without worrying about tripping up? This mode of interactivity is concerned with what must happen *before* the suspension of disbelief, the plunging into a new world, the going off to explore, can occur. This mode of interactivity is concerned with what must be accustomed to before any of this imaginative work of mode 1 can take place – navigating and negotiating the physical/structural/logistical rules of the performance space. Questions of accessibility in immersive theatre are also raised by considering interactivity in regards to this mode.

What might the relationship be between interactivity and immersive experience in *The Drowned Man*, in reference to this particular mode of utilitarian participation?

The theoretical concept of barriers to immersion plays a large part in considering this mode of interactivity. The very first utilitarian means of participation in the show are logistical. They are about preparation: the queue; the cloakroom; any physical discomforts or boring necessities surrounding the initial getting into the

space come under this category. As discussed above in regards to mode 1, *The Drowned Man* has a series of multiple beginnings which lower the barriers to immersion caused by this initial business, steadily moving the audience members from the real to the fictional world. Premium ticket holders have a separate entry queue (rarely a queue at all) and cloakroom, which makes the entry into the show a little easier; it seems likely that an awareness of this might make Standard ticket holders more acutely aware of the business *they* go through getting into the show. The introductions to the show's fictional world, in the form of Mr Stanford's voiceover and the personal introduction in the lift, are means of lowering barriers to immersion regarding the physical means of navigating the show, as well as laying out the rules of the fictional story.

The effect of Punchdrunk's decision to mask their spectators has been discussed in regards to ghostliness and the liberating aspect of anonymity (White 2005) and more problematically as an aid to voyeurism, acting as a kind of portable fourth wall that separates the spectators from the show in an alienating fashion: 'By issuing masks to spectators, the company introduces, as it understands, a fourth wall stand-in' (Gordon 2013: np). Regarding the most obvious criticism of the mask, in terms of this mode of purely functional interactivity, the potential problem is of physical discomfort, which makes it more difficult to forget the mask and be able to become engaged in the space beyond it. Punchdrunk have been continually refining the style of mask used in their shows, and *The Drowned Man's* carnivalesque mask comes away from the face over the mouth (it remains non-compatible with glasses). Another functional point about the mask is that, from the earlier show discussed in White (2008), *The Masque of the Red Death*, the convention of masking audience members has become a trademark of Punchdrunk shows rather than a surprise or novelty. The masks are given out with a few rules: do not remove it during the performance; don't speak to performers; tell the black-masked ushers if you have any problems. This means of beginning one of the most important physical ways in which audience members navigate *The Drowned Man* could become, potentially, an intimidating list of Dos and Don'ts which act as barriers to immersion, rather than a more intriguing list of invitations to an audience member which would result in a sense of freedom.

The question of rules of engagement is key to experiencing *The Drowned Man*, and other Punchdrunk/immersive theatre productions. As mentioned above, masks are given out with a set of rules, and the in-character introductions to the show, while beginning to immerse the audience in the fictional world, also outline certain guidelines for how best to move through the space. Utilitarian participation here is concerned with the physical – such as discomfort with the mask – and with emotional or psychological wellbeing connected to utilitarian participation: becoming anxious about a sense that you might be missing something more exciting elsewhere; becoming anxious about whether you have seen everything; becoming anxious that you have got the wrong kind of lost; wanting to go back to a certain room and being unable to find it, or wandering with no real sense of *why*. A key problem of creating a Punchdrunk show on the scale of *The Drowned Man* was to make sure audience members would still be able to feel the excitement of intimacy and secrecy while in a much bigger space (Barrett, personal interview, 2011). In terms of barriers to immersion, the size of the space risks preventing an audience member from achieving immersive experience due to getting lost, or being unable to find something of interest, or feeling overwhelmed. A key way the company has dealt with the size of the building is by creating smaller spaces within it. *The Drowned Man* includes a large sandy desert-like space and a town centre, as well as much smaller rooms and spaces. The effect of disorientation, discussed in the earlier section, might allow for the size of the space to become more of an elastic concept that does not directly affect how an audience member might experience moving through individual rooms and settings.

Other audience members may also provide barriers to immersion, particularly in the case of *The Drowned Man*, which invites both those well accustomed to the rules of play, and people experiencing a Punchdrunk show for the first time. Long-term followers of the company have spoken to me about noticing a change in audience behaviour over the years the company has been making work. In *The Drowned Man*, there is a tendency for audience members to clump together to follow a performer. The notion that you might find a performer and follow them, rather than being merely one way to experience the show, a certain choice no better or worse than others, has potentially become a kind of unwritten rule for the way you ‘should’ experience *The Drowned Man*. Follow a character to see the most action, to get the

most out of the production. The result is swarms of white-masked audience members following characters around, making it seem impossible to stumble upon a private moment or to accidentally find yourself the sole spectator of a scene, or even to be able to have a good view of the performer you are following. This appears to prioritise finding performers over wandering through the space on your own time. It also prioritises the performers over the set. This is a problematic development for some of the long-term followers of the company I have spoken to, who suggest that this implies a whole host of competitive behaviours which, I would suggest, are potential barriers to an immersive experience. Complaints about certain audience members also suggest that there are more rules to experiencing the show than there might first appear. Clapp comments on the changing nature of a Punchdrunk audience (the first sentence places this changing audience in the context of work with an increasing sense of 're-tread'):

This is billed as Punchdrunk's biggest show, but the expansion is of square feet rather than imagination. [...] Now aficionados poke eagerly into a place, suss out whether there is any action and move on. They run. They follow the action in packs. They elbow. Maddeningly, some hold hands. They know how to winkle out a narrative. There is less baffled loitering and fruitful lingering. That is something of a loss. (2013: np)

There are no explicit rules against these behaviours, but in this case it is perceived as inconsiderate, both of the performers and the rest of the spectators. Frustration over this kind of behaviour reveals an implicit agreement that audience behaviour ought to consider the group as a whole. Black-masked ushers move audience members away from the sites of imminent dance sequences; there are rules to watching.

The audience are advised to split up, if they have come with friends. This 'rule' is not always followed in *The Drowned Man*, as is mentioned in reviews such as Clapp's above, as well as in more informal discussion I have had with some long-term followers of the company. Couples cling together or groups hang on to each other; some people talk and text. This behaviour can only detract from the chance they will have an immersive experience, as well as bothering the audience members

around them, detracting from theirs. On the other hand, remaining with friends during the show might be part of the social experience of it, and perhaps should not be dismissed outright as 'not doing it properly'. I saw one audience member scream, and her friends laugh at her; I waved to a couple taking a few minutes' rest on the swing seat, and they waved back. These moments were not really occurring in the fictional world of Temple Studios, and were technically against the rules of engagement; but as exchanges of human connection they reinforced a sense that theatre might be about moments of human connection. Immersive experience may be constantly (re)negotiated in the moment by audience members, at times with each other.

The decompression space is an important aspect of Punchdrunk productions and has existed in all of their larger shows. In *It Felt Like A Kiss* the decompression space was a high-school dance-hall screening the eponymous Adam Curtis film. More commonly – in *Faust*, *Masque of the Red Death*, *Sleep No More*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Drowned Man* – the decompression space is a bar. The purpose of the decompression space can be theorised in regards to the mode of functional, utilitarian interactivity and immersive experience. The bar space is where masks can be removed, talking and socialising is allowed, and drinks are available. The potential for release from the quiet intensity of exploring the show proper allows for both states to be experienced more fully.

Accessibility is an interesting point regarding immersive theatre which relies heavily on audience members having the physical means to move themselves through the building, to negotiate multiple sets of stairs, to feel comfortable (or the right kind of uncomfortable) in the darker, closer, more intimidating spaces. In these instances, the perspective of utilitarian participation offers a key reason why achieving immersive experience would seem to be impossible – the barriers are raised beyond hope of passing in the very form of the production. The ticket price, while average for larger productions in London, ought also to be mentioned as a barrier to immersion from a utilitarian perspective.

Mode 3: Explicit interactivity; or participation with designed choices and procedures

This is 'interaction' in the obvious sense of the word: overt participation like clicking the non-linear links of a hyper-text novel, following the rules of a board game, rearranging the clothing on a set of paper dolls, using the joystick to manoeuvre Ms. Pac-Man. Included here: choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other procedures programmed into the interactive experience. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 59-60)

This is the most explicit kind of interactivity, and as it takes a physical manifestation it is the first thing that might look like interactivity from the perspective of an onlooker. Most work calling itself interactive exists in this mode: the player/participant is given something specific to *do*. Mode 1 can be engaged with without physically doing anything – it is imaginative immersion, world-building. Mode 2 is concerned with navigating the space, and so it does include physical aspects of experiencing an immersive production. As immersive experience exists as a series of graded states, utilitarian participation is required before explicit interactivity can occur: you have to be comfortable in the mask (or, at least, willing to wear it) before you are allowed to enter the performance space. Included in this third explicit mode are moments of interactivity that give an audience member a *choice*: making decisions regarding navigating the performance space or which detail of the set they might spend time looking. In terms of interactivity and immersive theatre, it is also important to mention that it may only appear to be choice. Moment of one-on-one performance in the show would also be categorised under this mode: although the performer leads the audience member into the one-on-one scene and remains in control of the action, it is a moment where words, tokens or other exchanges may occur between them.

This is the mode of interactivity where the participant's contribution is the most obvious, as it has a physical manifestation. Its relationship to immersive experience in *The Drowned Man* might therefore appear to be straightforward: the show's invitation to go where you wish, to pay attention to whoever or whatever you wish, to imaginatively engage with the show and its characters, are all means of empowering audiences and creating a sense of freedom. One-on-one scenes occur when a lucky coincidence of position and timing result in an audience member being taken into a smaller space with a performer, where they experience a short scene alone with

them. The intensity of the moment is highly conducive to immersive experience, but perhaps not to audience agency. These scenes are pre-scripted, and there may be space for an audience member to respond, but their input will not determine the outcome of the scene. The performer remains in control at all times. These are moments that feel intimate and secretive; this is made explicit by the performer locking the door once they have taken their chosen spectator inside. Similar to the theorisation of mental 'flow' created when the challenge of an activity is equal to its achievability, an audience member who accepts Punchdrunk's invitation to wander will have a fulfilling immersive experience. This relationship between interactivity and immersion is a commonly suggested one, including by Punchdrunk: the company description 'theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside unique sensory theatrical worlds' suggests that the physical signifiers of interactivity (the roaming, the sensory stimulus) are an integral part of the 'game changing' aspect of their theatre (description from the *Sleep No More* website, Punchdrunk's website, and multiple company profiles). Explicit interactivity is what results in an active, rather than a passive, spectator.

Although interactivity may appear to be linked to immersive experience, the one-on-one examples suggests Punchdrunk shows more generally are not particularly 'interactive' at all, at least not in the sense defined by this mode. *The Drowned Man* and other Punchdrunk shows are highly interactive in the sense of the first two modes; they invite imaginative engagement and interpretation, and require co-operation with the rules of play. But in the sense of explicit interactivity, the show may not provide as much freedom as might be assumed from statements about liberated, active audiences (Barrett in Hoggard 2013; Barrett in Machon 2013). I am interested not in debunking assumptions of empowerment, but questioning whether, in terms of immersive experience, it actually *matters* how interactive *The Drowned Man* is.

Apart from one-on-one moments, explicit interactivity occurs when an audience member shares a moment of eye-contact with a performer, when they rifle through letters in a drawer, or when they decide to go through this door rather than that one. Interactivity with designed choices and procedures, in *The Drowned Man*, refers to the wider layout of the space and the looping structure of the choreographed scenes. These are not choices an audience member can make, and

they do not inform the action of the stories. The scenes would continue if they were not there. The structure of the show implies a series of designed choices, as, theoretically, at any moment they can make decisions about what they want and act on them. The final part of the definition of this mode of interactivity is ‘and procedures.’ The procedures of being an audience member in *The Drowned Man* have been discussed throughout this chapter. They are the routine activities: don the mask, explore, interact – with the space, possibly with a performer – and allow your imagination to build the stories of a world. Routine is not intended to imply tedium in this context, but to suggest that these are the base level rules of engagement with the production.

A question might be whether making these decisions allows for immersive experience. As already suggested, experiencing anxiety about somehow making the wrong choice raises barriers to immersion and potentially breaks it. The emphasis placed on an audience member going their own path and choosing where they would like to go and what they would like to look at is intended to be a liberating freedom, rather than a constricting one. It is possible, however, to theorise choice paralysis as a barrier to immersion, and a sense of wishing you were somewhere else, or sensing that there is something exciting going on at the moment that you are missing, are not conducive to immersive experience. This physical layout and structure of the show with its looping scenes could be read as providing an audience member with a wide range of potential choices and procedures – but this type of interactivity cannot guarantee immersive experience. The reading of the production below finds a gap between interactivity promised and interactivity perceived within the space, and the result is a lack of immersive experience:

The Drowned Man is strangely unsatisfying and for me this is because of what I perceive as an increasing shift of focus within Punchdrunk’s work from creating human connections to building movie set worlds ... my sense throughout was of that the type of voyeurism being encouraged was disempowering rather than thrilling ... a little contact would do so much to enable the actual thing live up to the heart-racing promise of this production’s electric trailer. (Bayes 2013: np)



The key word in the definition of this mode is *designed* choices and procedures. Punchdrunk create the space of Temple Studios and choreograph a series of stories going on within it. This building therefore allows for a series of choices which an audience member can make within this space regarding where they might go. Framing this as the freedom to create your own experience, build your own narrative and/or piece together the narrative(s) of the show, creates a strong sense of control at either end of the production. The show's carefully crafted beginning(s) have already been discussed, and the entire audience is brought together for the finale. This can be linked to the concept of immersive experience as a series of graded states, as these opening and closing scenes of *The Drowned Man* do not require any explicit interactivity on the audience member's part: they cannot alter what happens in these scenes barring gate crashing the stage. But they allow for the whole experience of the show to be bracketed by a strong sense of the production (or, through it, Punchdrunk) explicitly taking charge of the event and of what the audience will experience. The choreography and action of the final scene is the opposite of the gradual graded beginnings of the start of the show, and brings events to a climax in terms of performers (all together for the first time, as indeed are the audience members) the stories (the two Woyzeck characters – William and Wendy, if you know their names – finally facing each other), spectacle (the sheer size of the space and the energy of the choreography) and sound. This final scene allows for immersive experience as the audience members watch it as in any theatrical spectacle: immersive experience does not have to occur in a tiny, dark, intimate space. The final dance sequence feels very clearly to have been designed with maximum audience experience in mind. Many of the group choreography scenes during *The Drowned Man* (a line dance in the bar; a party/orgy in one of Mr Stanford's rooms) are scenes of stunning virtuoso movement and dramatic spectacle; but they require the audience to stand back and watch, much like the passive spectators immersive theatre is claimed to work against.

Immersive experience is theoretically linked to the concept of barriers to immersion. In this mode, having trouble or discomfort with any of the moments of interactivity will break immersion. The ethical issues concerning one-on-one performance in Punchdrunk particularly have been discussed elsewhere, in regards to in regards to intimacy and voyeurism (Gordon 2013), performer/spectator

responsibility and care (Silvestre 2012), and consumer consumption (the above plus Alston 2012). Many non-Punchdrunk one-on-one performances have this kind of interaction guaranteed – indeed, they will be the sum total of the performance. In *The Drowned Man* one-on-ones are rarer, and might perhaps be coded as a reward for a dedicated enough explorer: or alternatively, as a reward for lucky timing or for wearing a Premium ticket holder's ID card. Immersion might be broken by a lack of empathy; just as in a naturalistically acted production within a proscenium arch theatre, engaging with a character and caring about their story will keep a spectator engaged. Of course, the broken up nature of the scenes means this is not necessarily the way in which the show is best experienced. Reviews of earlier shows recognised that attempting to experience the show in this way is a set up for disappointment; or they did exactly this, and were disappointed. (Clapp 2007: 'If you doggedly try to map Poe's narratives onto Punchdrunk's scenes you will have a frustrating evening. '; Billington 2010: 'Then you go in search of the nine scenes to which Webster's story has been reduced in Ian Burton's libretto. ') However, the importance of caring about a character should not be dismissed as an unnecessary part of immersive theatre, and being affected by the emotional power of the scenes or a single performance might constitute a strong immersive experience in a spectator. The problem might be reaching the moment where this can be the case. The structure of the scenes and their episodic nature (especially in that the characters' stories repeat), and audience behaviour might both work against this moment becoming viable. The second section in this thesis on narrative considers the relationship between interactivity, immersion and story in more detail; Chapter 5 suggests that immersive experience occurs in the interaction of an audience member's own plot and Punchdrunk's original storyworld.

The mode of explicit interactivity includes choices, random events, and dynamic situations. Random events are part of Punchdrunk productions, not least because the shows are created without any audience present and the change once the production is in previews. The movement and behaviour of an audience can never be fully predicted during rehearsals (discussed further in Machon 2013). This process of creation and rehearsal, and constant modification and changing to reflect the behaviour of its audiences, can be theorised as a continual attempt to lower barriers to immersion. Some criticisms of *The Drowned Man* in audience interviews

(and some reviews, such as Clapp 2013) come from a context of considerable knowledge of the company, and therefore a familiarity at the level of mode 2, utilitarian participation. Accustomed to the logistical trademarks of the company's previous shows, one audience member I spoke to (who wished to remain anonymous) called *The Drowned Man* 'Punchdrunk by numbers.' This makes mode 2 a barrier to immersion, resulting in an audience member unable or unwilling to progress past it to achieve an emotional, imaginative immersive experience within the show. Paradoxically perhaps, although physical manifestations of interactivity are required to be engaged with and overcome in order to be immersed, immersive experience is defined by being completely in-the-moment mentally, in effect forgetting the physical conditions around you.

In longitudinal interviews with long-term Punchdrunk fans, moments of one on one interaction are often picked out as being an early memory, or a stand out moment, of the show. The other memory type is less distinct in terms of time. It is often a sense of being overwhelmed by the atmosphere or by the level of detail of the space. The experience as a whole blurs together, with a few stand out moments that are often to do with human interaction. This matches the descriptions of immersion in studies of computer gaming, where often afterwards it was difficult for players to sense just how long they had been immersed (Jennett et al 2008). This mode of explicit interactivity therefore does allow for immersive experience, but it tends to alternate with the first mode of imaginative engagement. The second mode, of utilitarian engagement, is required before either mode 1 or 3 might occur. This mode of interactivity is concerned partially with the suspension of disbelief, and partly with the excitement of being able to be directly involved in the world of the show. One-on-ones do this explicitly, but the action of following performers between their scenes might contribute to this sense.

As demonstrated already, *The Drowned Man* invites a great amount of interactivity regarding the first two modes discussed in this chapter but in this most explicit mode, the show is not particularly interactive. Its audience can choose where to go but they cannot affect the action, or even seem to do so. They are ghosts, drifting through Temple Studios and watching its characters re-enact looping scenes of action and dance. The phrase 'designed choices' might be of use here to understand what is meant by freedom in this context, and its apparent links to

audience empowerment or agency. *The Drowned Man* presents carefully designed choices or options, in terms of its physical structure and the looping scenes; the audience member to some extent has free choice about what to do within this time, but there are many rules of engagement which might result in an intervention from a black-masked usher if not followed. Rooms are occasionally locked, and some are hidden. Whatever sense of choice or freedom there has been during the majority of the performance, the beginning of the show and the finale scene bracket the sense of choice, with a strong sense of authorial control from both (in-character) Mr Stanford (in some ways the author/controller of the show itself) and (real-world) Punchdrunk. It would be possible to suggest that the shows not being fully interactive in this explicit sense means that the shows are creating entirely passive audience members, in opposition to what is often claimed for this kind of work. As demonstrated, this is true at times, but the movement between passive and more active engagement with the production – movement between freedom and following rules – allows for immersive experience more than a totally free production, whatever that might look like.

It is useful to consider imaginative participation, functional participation and explicit interactivity, or participation within designed choices, as separate ways engagement within an immersive theatre production might occur. Separating these aspects also allows for the question of what an audience member is being immersed *in* to be considered, i.e. is being able to walk around the space creating a type of interactivity that allows for immersive experience, and if not, what is the relationship between physical and mental/imaginative exploration? The model allows for what is going on when an audience member interacts with *The Drowned Man* to be considered in different ways, and questions the oft-assumed relationship between interactivity and agency. Varying degrees of engagement within *The Drowned Man* can therefore be theorised as aiding immersive experience as a series of graded states. A movement between following a performer and being led, reading a letter on a dressing table and then taking in, more passively perhaps, a large dance scene, could result in a more powerful immersive experience by virtue of its gradual changes in tone and form. Alternatively, a spectator might be at their most active (cognitively, imaginatively) while watching a dance scene than when they wander through rooms in no particular order – passively. Considering the difference between

designed choice and free choice helps to further nuance the relationship between interactivity and immersive experience; an overall wide selection of choices is provided by Punchdrunk (the layout of the rooms, the ordering of scenes, the number of characters) and this is very carefully designed. An audience member has some freedom of where to go in relation to these. Immersive experience occurs when there is interplay between a feeling of choice and control, and a feeling of surrendering to the structure that is already in place.

### Chapter 3: social contexts of immersion and fan interactivity

Immersive theatrical experiences take place within defined boundaries (i.e. the walls of the building) and lasts a finite amount of time. Having discussed interactivity within these borders in *The Drowned Man*, this chapter considers how immersive experience might manifest outside of the performance space, and outside of the performance time. Drawing on the fourth mode in Salen and Zimmerman's taxonomy: 'beyond-the-object interactivity, of cultural participation' (2004: 56) and the fields of fan studies, particularly investigations of fan communities and discourses (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins 2006; Duffett 2013), this chapter argues that fan activity can be considered a type of interactivity – with the production itself, with each other, with Punchdrunk as a company – and that it constitutes beyond-the-object claiming of immersive experience. The chapter begins with a qualitative analysis of a very specific kind of discourse that functions essentially as fan mail: comments submitted to the theatre company Punchdrunk via their website during the runs of *Faust* (2006-7) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-8). These earlier 'break-out' shows began a trajectory of fan interactivity strongly connected to immersive experience. This chapter considers how the live performance event might be valued and communicated beyond the moment of encounter. The chapter's discussion is also drawn from longitudinal interviews with long-term Punchdrunk fans who have followed the company's work for, in most cases, several years. The structure of the chapter tracks the development in fan interactivity over the course of the company's history: beginning with this earlier fanmail, I then reflect on the development of Punchdrunk's fan base since these earlier shows, cumulating (at the time of writing) in *Sleep No More* (2011-) and *The Drowned Man* (2013-), shows with a larger and more visible fan community, and with their own in-built interventions and interactions within and between the shows themselves, Punchdrunk, and this section of its audience.

Regarding the e-fanmail discourse, I am interested in what people talk about when they talk about Punchdrunk – and how these topics might reveal relationships between the fan and the shows, individual performers, Punchdrunk as a company, and 'immersive experience'. Trends in tone and subject matter across the comments – such as cryptic references to one-on-one encounters, descriptions of childlike joy in discovery, and accounts of the social resonances of audience members who

visited with a group – can be considered a means of interaction with the company beyond its more obvious purpose of an honorary curtain call or a giving of thanks, but of a means of claiming ownership of immersive experience. These comments are considered within the wider context of the company's own statements of intent and the ways immersive theatre is (increasingly) marketed and framed, and the chapter suggests studying the discourse of fan mail might contribute to a further understanding of how audience immersion is created and maintained. There are also possible problematic aspects and practical ramifications of looking at this kind of text which will be discussed in conclusion.

#### Mode 4: Beyond-the-object-interactivity; participation within the culture of the object

This is interaction outside the experience of a single designed system. The clearest examples come from fan culture, in which participants co-construct communal realities, using designed systems as the raw material. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 60)

Immersive experience is framed not just as an individual experience, but one which allows or demands to be shared and talked about afterwards. In this way, immersive experience is a phenomenon which has a life beyond the show, not just in memories but in comparisons and discussions with others. Experiences are created not just in the moment, but they also projected beyond. Cultural participation is therefore an important mode with which to discuss the relationship between immersive experience and interactivity. The co-construction of communal realities occurs in the creation of fan art and fiction inspired by the shows and shared between fans, and in the creation of comprehensive diagrams or synopses of the action.

#### Social contexts of interactivity in theory: fan studies

A consideration of fan studies requires returning to the field of film and television studies. Jenkins (1992) discusses fan culture as phenomenon, in particular the making of new and creative work beyond-the-object of the (television) show. This is relevant to the fan mail for *Masque* and *Faust*, as a context for considering a relationship between the audience and the work, and also to the more explicit fan

activity, response and creation that *Sleep No More* accommodates. Jenkins (2006) observes a development in the relationship between fans and works of media between the two books. Lewis (2002) includes several essays that consider active, reciprocal relationships between fans and the producers of the original work. Hills (2003) and Duffett (2013) consider the state of fan research and culture.

Many studies of fan communities begin by outlining the ‘media-fostered stereotypes of fans as cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers’ (Jenkins 1992: 23. Lewis 2002 and Hills 2003 also begin by outlining the typical traits of the stereotypical fan.) Jenkins draws on the work of de Certeau to propose a conception of fans as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture. Fans of *Punchdrunk* can be theorised in a similar way. Fandom in theatre is not unheard of and has historical precedents in the eighteenth century cult of the actress, but discussions of fan communities tend to be in relation to media other than theatre. The fan community around *Punchdrunk*, both around *Sleep No More* in New York and *The Drowned Man* in London, are quite extraordinary by theatre standards. Jakob-Hoff comments on the role of *Punchdrunk*’s fan communities and the relationship between these communities and the company’s shows:

Attempting to understand the show in its entirety is perhaps something of a losing battle – but that hasn’t stopped people from trying. *The Drowned Man* has spawned online communities on Facebook and Tumblr numbering thousands of individuals, all working towards a greater understanding of its many mysteries. (2014: np)

When the stereotype of the obsessive social misfit has been introduced and shown to be simplistic, multiple studies of fandom suggest that there is more to being a fan than merely loving the media in question. The gaze of a fan is characterised not by unquestioning adoration but critical engagement:

[Fan response] typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media. [...] Far from sycophantic, fans



actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. In the process, fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings. (Jenkins 1992: 23-4)

In considering how fans watch their chosen shows, Jenkins describes a phenomenon of 'double viewing' which allows fans to see the fictional characters/actions/world as real and constructed simultaneously. A combination of 'both suspended disbelief and ironic distance' enables them to react to the world and characters as if they are real, whilst at the same time they are able to enjoy/critique the production or writing. Rather than consuming the media as presented, awareness of the construction behind the world enables a creative re-reading of the texts. (66) This theorisation of 'double viewing' is key to considering Punchdrunk fans and the relationship between immersive experience and the forms of interactivity which they enjoy, with the company and with each other. Jenkins' studies of fan culture are primarily concerned with television shows, which live beyond the constraints of the shows themselves in merchandise or conventions. Punchdrunk shows might not have explicit means for co-creation, but they do live beyond the walls of the building in fan blogs, websites, discussions as well as the more formal spaces of reviews and academic criticism. The fan mail and websites considered in this chapter use 'double viewing' to enable both an immersive experience in the show, and the ability to engage with it critically. 'Double viewing' becomes a way of claiming ownership of immersive experience.

This mode of engagement is facilitated by the very shape of Punchdrunk shows ('typical' Punchdrunk shows – *Faust*, *Masque of the Red Death*, *Sleep No More*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Drowned Man*). A physical grammar of Punchdrunk shows has been established over the course of the company's history, which results in a form, structure and set of rules and behaviour with which long-term fans (or any repeat visitor) are familiar. Fans could therefore be coded as being very 'good' at immersive theatre, particularly 'skilled' in knowing where to go, who to follow, when to act, what to do. 'They know how to winkle out a story' (Clapp 2013: np).

As a final reason for considering fandom and interactivity in relation to immersive experience, Jenkins reminds us of the importance of fan communities' social qualities: 'For most fans, meaning-production is not a solitary and private process but rather a social and public one' (1992: 75). Popat's discussion of online dance communities proposes interactivity as a mode of rewarding social engagement, as well as an opportunity for developing creative practice: 'in a situation where the group members perceive themselves to be connected in some way, a single individual interacting on behalf of the group can lead to a strong sense of participation being felt by others within that group' (2006: 32-3). The social element of fan engagement with Punchdrunk's work is worth considering in this context, in spite of – or because of – the marketing rhetoric around immersive theatre which can often emphasise the audience member in the singular.

Reading fan mail: communicating immersive experience in *Faust* and *The Masque of the Red Death*

I am in dark, twisted love with your theatre group

Comments submitted to Punchdrunk via the company's website <[www.punchdrunk.org.uk](http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk)> during the runs of *Faust* and *The Masque of the Red Death* are valuable documents for considering relationships, interactivity, and the concept of immersive experience as something to be communicated outside of the performance space.

The language and the subject matter of these comments reveal, or make manifest, a relationship to the shows, to individual performers within them, and to Punchdrunk as a company. Themes that can be found across this discourse, such as the description of overwhelming sensory excitement, childlike fascination and exploration, reflect the ways immersive theatre as a whole is often described, understood and talked about outside of fan discourse such as marketing and reviews – 'professional' voices from both within Punchdrunk and in newspaper reviews frequently draw upon similar themes of individuality of the shows' form and the aesthetic qualities of the shows' content.

Punchdrunk were only able to keep an archive of a minority of the vast number of comments they received, and so the data of audience response had

already been authored into a smaller selection before selection for my own research. These web comments contain in some instances highly personal reflections on an audience member's experience and frequently use the language of shared relationships, particularly when discussing one-on-one scenes. This is especially relevant in relation to a theatrical form that invites the creation of relationships, relationships that are referred to and revealed, or (first) made manifest, in these comments.

While remaining aware of the temptation to read too much into these comments, it is true that short, throwaway phrases can often be very telling. Instant reactions and heat-of-the-moment responses immediately after a show may be interesting and illuminating because of how they are said as much as because of what people say. Web comments, of course, are not made in the immediate aftermath of seeing a show, as messages in comment books/verbal responses are. Some comments place the author in a temporal relationship to the production they saw, giving the specific date of the production. Revealed here, perhaps, is an assumption that the production they saw was unique, or that a certain interaction/moment of performance occurred at that one performance only. It is assumed that the performer will remember exactly which interaction/audience member that is being talked about. This is particularly relevant in relation to a theatrical form that so emphasises the importance of emotions, visceral reactions to the work; and the creation of, or the appearance of, unique and individual experiences.

A note on the phrase 'fan mail'. The method of engagement is a crucial factor when considering the communication between audience members and Punchdrunk, and these website comments are not physical letters. It requires more time and effort to contact Punchdrunk with a letter. The website is not only quicker, but facilitated; the comment box provided. A letter might be considered a mode of interaction with the company that has been made with more time and effort – and therefore, more dark, twisted love – than the website allows. However the speed and ease of contact via the website facilitates communication in an instant: the relationship(s) are established as soon as the comment is made ('I've just got back from seeing Masque of the Red Death...' 'Last night was a dream sequence I am unable to leave behind...') The ease of making comments through the website is perhaps what allowed many of the shorter comments to be made in the first place – without the

Internet many of the shorter comments would probably not be worth buying a stamp for. The comments are mostly very short – rarely more than a paragraph of a few lines – and the overall picture built up by them is an impressionist description of audience member’s best experiences of *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death*. Interactivity is a means to communicate, describe, and claim ownership of immersive experience.

An initial and most common trend across these comments is a simple mode: feedback of short, intense praise.

I have just been to the Masque of the Red Death this weekend and was completely blown away by the production!  
An absolute inspiration!

The Masque was the best thing I'd been to in years.

I enjoyed “The Masque of the Red Death” more than immensely.

Astonishing. Please do something else soon.

I was at The Masque of the Red Death last night and it was quite simply the most amazing show I've ever seen in my entire life.

I have just had the most brilliant night out I have had in a long time.

Comments that give more specific references to what people loved might reveal more about how these reactions are formed, particularly relationships between audience members and single performers. Most often, this occurs in the one-on-one experiences. These moments are often alluded to as being a formative element of the theatrical experience, something the audience member particularly wants to tell Punchdrunk about, and thank them and/or the performer for. The line between the performer and the character they play is often unclear.

I finally managed to see The Masque of the Red Death.  
Amazing. I wish I could go back and dance with Tom

Lawrence again! Thank you.

That Red Masque show was great. The man (actor!) who locked me in a closet with himself (scared the living daylights out of me for 30 secs) must shake his hand! Or buy him an abtinthe -- top show cheers PJB MUST BEING MY PALS TO SEE YOUR NEXT PROD!!

There is a sense of shared knowledge to these comments that mention a one-on-one encounter: the performer being discussed, or (the anonymous and mastermind-like) Punchdrunk, know what is being referred to. This sense of a personal relationship is heightened in comments that, rather than sharing knowledge explicitly, instead hint at a secret that only the right person will be able to understand.

LOVED the show, especially your attic vault and the bedrooms and the tall blonde young guy who gave me a very seductive experience in the boudoir room!

A quick note to say congratulations on the production! I attended last night at the BAC and came away feeling that I had experienced something very special. A particular mention of thanks to the actors behind 'Madeleine' and 'the Nurse' characters whose interaction with me on a 1:1 basis left me thoroughly moved by the intensity and immersive nature of their performance. From the man in the red sweater and stripy scarf!

These kinds of comments are generally quite cryptic, phrased in a way that suggests the atmosphere of the interaction rather than describing exactly what happened. This tone of the in-joke, cryptic reference or secret code is in accord with the atmosphere of secrecy and discovery that characterises the way in which a spectator might encounter and engage with Punchdrunk's work.

The one-on-one encounter could be considered the ultimate in personal and individual theatrical experiences. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these scenes are quite tightly scripted and the performer remains in control at all times. However, they represent interaction at its most explicit in terms of the attention paid to the audience member, and the feeling that it makes a difference that they are there.

Immersive experience is frequently expressed terms of these relationships in the web comments, but this is not the only way. A second trend among the comments – and one that complicates the notion of immersive experience as a private sensation – is that many are very social. They often place the author of the comment within a wider group; expressing the joy they had in their individual experience, commenters also define themselves in relation to the social group they came to the show with.

I came to see Masque last night and would just like to say congratulations on what was, for myself and the friends I went with, quite simply the most amazing night out we've had in years. Part dream part film set, in our wildest dreams we could not have come up with anything remotely as fantastic. Can we come back, please?

The authors' memories of *The Masque of the Red Death* are not only shared with Punchdrunk in these comments, but they gesture towards memories that exist between the authors themselves. The comments usually thank Punchdrunk for providing an amazing individual experience that, precisely because of its individual, unique, personal nature, is a joy to talk about with other people.

[...] I'd love NOTHING more than to go back there, but part of me feeling like that's cheating. Greedy even. Like going back in time and meddling with events, not to your advantage nor disadvantage, but just because you can. If I think about it rationally, I'm MORE than satisfied with my memories of that one night. As well as the stories of Sarah's, Sean's and Lucy's (My companions TO, but not AT, the Masque) experiences of the Masque, which I'm sure we will talk about for years to come. Only trouble is, it's hard to be rational about something as breathtakingly indulgent as this! This was so close to my heart it's uncanny! Thanks, LOADS!

The importance of the individual experience, of each audience member being not only allowed but encouraged to make their own journey through the show, informs not only the individual experience but how the show is talked about and remembered afterwards. The way the show was experienced outside of the spatial and temporal

boundaries of the show itself – arriving in a group informs how a Punchdrunk show is experienced and engaged with. As the above comment suggests, it is the difference between companions *to* and companions *at* the masque. Choosing to separate becomes a formal decision. This decision is aided by the suggestion of Punchdrunk, in many reviews, and/or by word of mouth, but it is one that consciously has to be made by the participants. The joy of attending in a group is often what the author of the comments wants to thank Punchdrunk for – for the show itself, but also for giving an opportunity for group reminiscing, storytelling, and comparison. This may make the individual quality of a Punchdrunk experience more potent when the author is in a group, as various moments that were missed or shared can be directly discussed. The individual experience in itself also becomes the basis for further social interaction and two of the levels of interactivity under consideration, the individual and the private, begin to affect the other.

[...] My partner and I attended last week - we decided to split up immediately and each go on our own journey throughout the production - which was a great idea - on the way home we were abuzz with how different the experience had been for each of us - some rooms having not been visited by one - and a discovery being made by the other - we had had the most incredible and unrivalled theatrical experience [...]

I went to see Masque of the Red Death on Saturday. To say I found it completely bizarre is to undervalue the different approach to theatre. I have to say thank you as I went as one of a group of five and we all had different experiences and saw something different to the point we could have gone to five different events. The finale, big band and dj were fantastic and worth going for those performances in their own right. My only regret is that we were too late in the season to see it once more to attempt to see other rooms I didn't find at my first attendance.

The very existence of these web comments suggests that, just as much as the sharing with friends after the show, the act of sharing such memories with Punchdrunk can be an equal part of the pleasure. The comments function as an

honorary curtain call, allowing an audience member to thank the performers when the form of the show left them unable to do so in person via the convention of applause. I would argue, however, that the purpose of these comments goes beyond that, and that as well as existing as a form of giving thanks, they function as a means of claiming ownership of immersive experience. A description of particular moments in the production, or a wider non-specific sense of sensory/emotional overload, mirror theorisations of immersive experience as state of intense engagement. Describing this experience, and sharing it either with friends or in writing to Punchdrunk, is a means of stating that such an experience took place.

Before a discussion of childlikeness, it is worth mentioning that as well as friendship or family groups, several comments refer to a school group. The author might be a student or the leader of the group, and in either case some comments refer inspiration for their own projects. Thanks are given to Punchdrunk not just for the show itself, but for the resonances that continue after the show. The examples below reflect a desire to continue engaging with immersive experience from the perspective of creation and design.

I took my group of A level students to see your production last night. We came away inspired, moved and very excited, thankyou. Feelings like that are not evoked very often from a piece of theatre. It was a triumph.

Hi — I just wanted to say myself and my whole drama class came to see The Masque of the Red Death, and we all thought it fantastic, we've never ever seen anything like it before. You've really opened our eyes to what theatre can do, and really inspired us as we're starting our A-level devised coursework projects at the moment! Thankyou, and good luck with all your shows and future projects!

Secrecy, discovery and shared relationships characterise these comments. Another trait that is central to the definition of immersive experience is a returned emphasis on a state of childlikeness. I would like to discuss this trend across the comments before looking at the ways in which this language is mirrored in Punchdrunk's own. A further relationship might be created, or made manifest, here: the relationship



between the author and their previous experiences of theatre and performance.

Saw the performance last night and was blown away. It's good to know that at 43 years of age I can still be surprised and challenged. Thanks!

Comments that refer to friendship or school groups are the few contexts where the age of the author is implied. But a childlike openness and willingness to explore are often given as the ideal states of a Punchdrunk spectator, and many comments refer to being in this state. Experience, and age itself by virtue of the childlike metaphor, are therefore coded as baggage: pre-formed ideas of what theatre ought to look like. Only letting go of these preconceptions enables a full commitment to getting the most out of a Punchdrunk show, in order to return to the 'childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and experience a real sense of adventure' [Punchdrunk's own description on the *Sleep No More* website]. The audience member's own unwillingness to engage is coded as a barrier to immersion. Openness to a new and unusual theatrical form and a willingness to abandon any expectations that may remain from past experiences of 'traditional theatre' (a linear narrative, or seats) are held to be the key to experiencing a Punchdrunk show. This emphasis on individuality found across these comments mirrors in the way the shows and the company are talked about outside of fan discourse.

A key question of this chapter is how immersive experience might manifest outside of the spatial and temporal boundaries of the performance space. The comments below all refer to what could be called an immersive theatre 'hangover' after engaging thoroughly with a Punchdrunk work; they all express a wishing-to-be-back. Whether the metaphor is a parallel universe or a dream, the experience becomes something it is impossible to return to.

Last night was a dream sequence I am unable to leave behind. All day today has been like the dream and the reality is me still in those corridors looking for another room watching from behind my mask the life and death struggle of the actors. Truly brilliant theatre as it hits hard into the subconscious and stays there. Please put me in as a friend of Punchdrunk.

Thank you very much for “The Masque of the Red Death”. I went to see it three weeks ago, and I still feel as if I’m waking up from a dream. You have given flesh to all my darkest gothic fantasies! I’m coming back to “Masque” in March, and bringing lots of friends. Can’t wait to see it again, and I’m really looking forward to your next projects.

My wife and I are still reeling from our experience at the Masque of the Red Death last night. It was simply sublime, and we’re pleased to be attending it again in April for our anniversary.

Thank you for one of the most amazing experiences at Masque of the Red Death; I’m still feeling withdrawal symptoms. I’ve never known theatre to be so addictive!

I attended the 29th December performance and was wondering if you could divulge the recipe for the perfumer’s atomizer cologne. I think it’s lavender and rose, but I’d love to replicate it for personal use. Thank you and can’t wait to attend your next production.

I’ve just had the privilege of performing with some musicians at your late night Masque soiree at the BAC. We also saw the whole show and I just wanted to say it was the most amazing thing I have ever attended and I loved it! Atmosphere detail and the whole psychology of the interactivity - just jawdroppingly brilliant. Head’s still buzzing about it now! I actually feel I left the country... Big thank you to the inspired creators and performers and just, well all involved!

Some spectators do attend multiple times, rather than simply wishing that they could and/or being satisfied with their limited time in its world. (And as the discussion of current fan communities later in this chapter demonstrates, some have seen the

production a great number of times.) These audience members will have a different framework of knowledge to build on each time they experience the show, and different expectations that affect how they engage with the work. An audience member's relationship to immersive experience itself develops and changes across multiple viewings of the same show.

A final trend across these comments is, as has already been hinted at above, the suggestion of Punchdrunk's relationship to what are perceived as conventions and traditions. A comment that begins by placing the author in a group (of students) might introduce this:

Dear Punchdrunk, I went with my schools A-level drama students to see your and BAC's production of *The Masque of the Red Death* and quite simply since then my eyes and soul have been opened to what theatre and performances should really be like: emotional, inspirational and immensely powerful. Thank you Punchdrunk!

The word *should* is interesting, but not as interesting as the fact that 'what theatre and performance should really be like' refers to the emotions stirred and the visceral reaction had, rather than specifically what happened in the show. This comment reflects the reciprocal but ultimately separated nature of immersive theatre and immersive experience. The compliment focuses on the atmosphere and emotional impact of the production. It is the same decision, and has the same effect, as choosing the phrase *a very seductive experience* over *a kiss*. Its emphasis is on how the performance felt, rather than what it specifically included. It describes, and demonstrates ownership of, immersive experience.

The comments below similarly phrase their praise of Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* in relationship to wider ideas of what theatre could or should be:

Hello, I was recently abroad based in London this fall and was fortunate enough to see my first performance of Punchdrunk. I would just like to thank you for an amazing, unforgettable experience that has challenged my definition of live theatre. Thank you so much.

Hello, I came to see Masque of the Red Death on Friday and thought it was a theatrical revolution! I absolutely loved it, and it has filled me with inspiration.

Everyone involved, This was by far the most extraordinary night I have ever spent in the theatre. Your production gave me the same joy that I had when I was 5 years old and decided I wanted to work in the theatre. What you have created here should be at the core of ALL we do in the theatre. Thank you for making it so clear what we should all be aiming for. I look forward with great anticipation to your next work. With the utmost respect and admiration.

I was completely blown away by The Masque of the Red Death, it has changed my perception of theatre forever. Thank you and well done to those involved for all the hard, brilliant work you do.

These comments also do not mention specific events in the show, suggesting that immersive experience is not necessarily the automatic result of several physical or structural signifiers. Instead they indicate that a truly immersive effect refers to a visceral, emotional, mental response (close to Klich and Scheer (2012) definition of sensory immersion as what it is like to navigate the 'here and now' of a theatrical encounter). Being able to physically travel through rooms is not enough, in itself, to create and maintain immersive experience. Neither does it automatically lead to interactivity, mental or emotional engagement, or freedom, or any 'questioning of typical theatrical conventions.'

In concluding, the following comment is worth giving in its entirety. It discusses the material conditions of viewing, hints at the experience within a production, suggests cognitive and sensory immersion and willingness to navigate both, and initiates a relationship between participant, production, and company.

Last night I attended the Masque of the Red Death. It was my first venture to a Punchdrunk performance, and I was

lucky enough to attend only because my friend had won tickets via the Goldbug website. I just wanted to thank you for creating such an awe-inspiring production. For three hours, I was totally absorbed in the performance, and rendered completely oblivious to the world outside the show. As a child, I had a magical imagination - I spent hours roaming the countryside with my siblings, creating alternative worlds that only we inhabited, but as I've grown, my ability to disassociate myself from the wider world has diminished. For the first time in decades, I was a child again. I know this sounds rather trite, but it's the best way I can describe the effect your performance had on me. I was terrified, excited and confused; totally lost in a world that I could never have conceived of myself. Today, I am back in the real world, gazing onto the urban jungle of London from my apartment and mourning my return to the present. Thank you for opening a window into the past.

And finally: these examples have the tone of short, intense praise that characterises the majority of the comments; are cryptic but at the same time highly evocative; place the author socially, one way or another; and certainly earn being used alongside the word 'relationship':

My friend was right - Faust is better than sex.

Saw Faust last night: alone. Best Valentine's Day I've ever had.

#### The Development of Punchdrunk fandom: immersive experience, new media and fan interactivity in *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man*

There has been considerable development in the Punchdrunk fan community since *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death*. Spectatorship is a potential site of unruliness (Lancaster 1997) or disruption (Blackadder 2003). Silvestre describes *Sleep No More* superfans as being actively engaged with the work:

Since the show opened in New York, it has acquired a cult following of 'superfans' who attend the show repeatedly and extend the experience online. One superfan, a woman in her

fifties, travels in from out of town to see all the weekend shows—up to 12 hours of *SNM* in two days. Another superfan I spoke with has attended the show 37 times and counting, and runs a blog called *They Have Scorched the Snake...but not killed it, bitches!*, where fans share their experiences of the show, confess crushes on performers, and post fan-art and fan-fiction. On other blogs such as *The Bloody Business*, the participants engage in role-play, take on personae such as ‘Thane of Glamis’ or ‘Cawdor’, and joke about 12-step programs to quit the *SNM* habit. (2012: np).

Since this list was written, some fans can say they have seen *Sleep No More* a hundred times; I know of at least one Punchdrunk/*Sleep No More* themed wedding.

I discuss *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man* together in order to consider a general trajectory of Punchdrunk’s work as increasingly both cult and popular, based on the company’s communities of superfans and commercial successes respectively. However, the shows and their community/communities of fans ought not to be considered interchangeable. The fan community for London-based *The Drowned Man* is not quite as active as its US counterpart. From the opening of the shows, London audiences could be expected to be more familiar with Punchdrunk and able to consider *The Drowned Man* as part of the company’s decade-long trajectory of making work. The *Sleep No More* audience in New York had never seen a Punchdrunk show before. (Punchdrunk had made work in America before *Sleep No More*, including an earlier version of the show in Boston in 2009/10 and performances of *Faust* in Boston in 2005; but this was their first production to open in New York.) Generally speaking however, across these two productions it is possible to see a development in fan engagement with the shows, with Punchdrunk, and with immersive experience, from their earlier work. The bloody business of fan interactivity happens to a far greater extent, and at a much more detailed and intense level, than it did during the shows discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

The list of selected highlights of *Sleep No More* fan activity above is enabled by new media and social networking. Jenkins (2006) describes fan engagement with work as the collision of old and new forms, and particularly interesting is his

discussion of the relationship between acts of grassroots creativity from fans, with its implications of high level of value of the original work, and the official outputs of the media industry (131-168). Frequently a site of creative and occasionally legal tension, Jenkins suggests 'corporate media increasingly recognizes the value, and threat, posed by fan participation' (169). Punchdrunk has yet to take legal action in response to creative or critical outputs from fans, but it is true that beyond-the-object interactivity, as manifest as grassroots creativity, can occasionally come into conflict with the artistic aims of the original work. To return to a show discussed earlier in this chapter, during the run of *Masque of the Red Death* Punchdrunk became aware of a crowd-sourced wiki attempting to 'map' the show in its entirety, including details such as the timing of performer loops and the exact layout of the show's spaces. This was understandably perceived as compromising the emphasis on discovery and aesthetic of mystery that pervaded the show, and the company asked for the website to be taken down (Barrett and Marsh, personal interview: 2010).

I suggest that this act was near-identical in purpose to the reasons walkthroughs are compiled by players of computer games, particularly sandbox or open-world games. Not only might a player wish to discover how to achieve a certain level, for example, but such documents often detail the full extent of what is available in a game that has a large world in which it might be impossible to see everything – and/or takes so many hours to play through, it is unlikely to be played again. Easter eggs, in-jokes and hidden quests and references are all available in gaming walkthroughs as a resource for players. Attempting to map a Punchdrunk show in a similar way, in this context, becomes an act of respect for the intricacy and detail of the design, and an understandable desire for a sense of completion. It still goes against the way Punchdrunk preferred their audience members to experience the show, and on this occasion the desire of the original authors of the work took precedence.

The desire to know the show as a whole becomes even more understandable when considering such shows are likely to be only seen once, due to ticket price or availability; although it should be noted the wiki was compiled by – and in many ways for – repeat visitors, who would use it to aid their strategy for the next visit. This could be considered a method of creating immersive experience: it describes

choosing a goal and getting lost in the pursuit of it. However, it suggests a way of engaging with the show entirely at odds to that desired by its makers:

‘We don’t ever spoon-feed the audience.’ says Barrett. ‘My idea of a nightmare is saying, ‘Here you go audience, here’s a mask, here’s a map, at five-past-eight you’ll be able to pick up Wendy’. Because it wouldn’t work. I know from experience, because I’ve taken audience to the action, that if they don’t find it themselves, they don’t have ownership of it and it doesn’t work.’  
(in Jakob-Hoff 2014: np)

The wiki-map was a way of knowing when and where a character could be picked up; but it was a way of knowing that an audience member had worked/found out for themselves. In this sense the conflict between a desire to map the production and the ways the company wanted its audience members to experience the show became integral to how immersive experience was being claimed and described.

*The Masque of the Red Death*, although containing many similar structural and aesthetic signifiers to *Faust*, was still an early Punchdrunk show and one that introduced many audience members to immersive experience (as seen in the fan e-mail comments, discussed above.) I discuss this episode in *The Masque of the Red Death*’s history of beyond-the-object participation in order to contextualise current fan activity with the show, and to place it in the trajectory of the company’s development. *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man* have inspired many blogs and websites in which fans discuss their experiences; the Facebook group for the latter show includes a project very similar to the *Masque* wiki. A group effort of compilation has created (and, at the time of writing) is continually updating documents of the show’s structure, cast list, character loops and soundtrack playlists. This activity has not received a discontinuation request by Punchdrunk, perhaps due to developments in the relationship between these communities of fan communities and the company. The *Masque* map was compiled without permission and entirely separately from Punchdrunk. *The Drowned Man* map, whilst not having sought for or been given explicit permission, is constructed by repeat visitors to the show and long-term fans of the company who are in closer contact with Punchdrunk than the fans who worked on the *Masque* project. The company is aware of the Facebook group and several performers are members. There is, if not straight permission, an awareness of this



community having a symbiotic relationship with the show: building a diagram of the show's structure, layout and timing has been explicitly coded as an act of respect, rather than a misguided attempt to ruin the immersive experience of others. The information is also quite clearly marked as providing spoilers for anyone new to the show: they are advised to see it without such information first, and then, if they wish, they can consult the maps and diagrams and playlists to learn more. Rather than fan activity being at odds with the company's desires for how the show ought to be engaged with and experienced, as it was with the *Masque* wiki project, fans of *The Drowned Man* here act in allegiance with the company. Immersive experience is framed as something that is desirable, and the way to achieve is to follow the company's own advice.

The relationship between fans' framing of immersive experience and the company could be seen as growing steadily more reciprocal. The fan comments discussed earlier in this chapter were strictly a one-way discourse, and the company intervened at a distance to discontinue the *Masque* wiki. During the run of *The Drowned Man*, the company created a Twitter account which occasionally drops cryptic hints about the show which are eagerly picked up and discussed between fans and followers. Punchdrunk announced about the multiple extensions of the show's run in the guise of fictional press releases by in-show studios boss Mr Stanford. There has been a gradual development in interactivity between the company and its audiences. (In terms of building a reciprocal relationship between immersive experience and their audiences, Punchdrunk Enrichment ought to be mentioned here as being a vital part of the company's growth and development in this direction.) The run of *The Drowned Man* has included several opportunities to engage with the company and the work, including workshops on the set for performers, and pre-show talks about site-sympathetic set design. These acts of cultural participation show Punchdrunk answering back to their audience, becoming more vocal in an increasingly wide conversation about what immersive experience, and 'immersive theatre' as a form or a genre, might mean, and what the opportunities or implications might be.

*The Drowned Man* represents the apex of Punchdrunk's work with now typical structural and aesthetic signifiers that suggest both 'a Punchdrunk show' and 'immersive theatre.' Conversations with long-term followers of the company place the

work in this trajectory, and discuss *The Drowned Man* in the context of earlier shows. These comments also reveal an emphasis on repeat visits to fully appreciate the depth and complexity of the work:

[...] I've seen *The Drowned Man* eighteen times already and no doubt will be going to see it again, it's always interesting seeing how new performers play the roles and the meaning of the show perceptibly changes depending on the mix of actors playing the parts. It probably took me about eight visits before I had seen as much of the show that you could and pieced it together to my satisfaction, the first four visits being in previews so that I could see how the show was worked on and changed (I'm a drama teacher so watching this happening is invaluable to me). To me this is Punchdrunk's richest show with its depth of potential meanings, its range of characters and the all encompassing design.

Having been back several times [to *The Drowned Man*], it's definitely right up there with the best. I think it's far more layered than, say, *Sleep No More* – but possibly all their shows are that complex if you delve into them enough. It's hard – and probably wrong – to compare them, as they are all so different. Only about three of the PD shows I've seen have been on this scale, for one thing – but the bigger the show (and consequently a larger audience), does not always make for a better one. Personally I tend to prefer the smaller shows, parts of *Black Diamond* and *The Borough* were just as thrilling.

There has been a change in audience behaviour over the years Punchdrunk have been making work, no longer the nervous anonymous ghosts that populated *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death* (Machon 2007; White 2008; Clapp 2013). Descriptions of such earlier behaviour suggest a connection to the novelty of the shows' forms and structures, and the convention of the mask. They suggest an audience willing to engage with the rules of these earlier shows, wearing the mask and wandering – willing to overcome barriers to immersion, resulting in immersive

experience. In *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man*, changes in audience behaviour have resulted in barriers to immersion, concerned with audience agency and freedom in the context of an audience increasingly familiar with Punchdrunk's techniques, conventions and forms. This frustration is felt in both directions. The relationship between interactivity and immersive experience is complicated by a stratified audience containing members who are very willing to explore and members who are not. Fans are frustrated with 'normal', new-to-Punchdrunk audience members who talk or hold hands. New-to-Punchdrunk audience members are frustrated with superfans – masked, but not quite anonymous – who rush through the space, following performers or searching for items (Hecate's ring, in *Sleep No More*, is a particularly hot prop). 'Rules of engagement' and questions of politeness begin to chafe against notions of freedom and interactivity, as fans discuss being frustrated with new-to-Punchdrunk audience members who chase performers, rather than leaving a respectful gap that enables sightlines all round. For all audience members, superfan or otherwise, in these later shows there is the possibility that an audience member's methods of utilitarian participation – the way they engage physically and logistically with the space and with performers – will create barriers to immersion for the people around them. Awareness of fellow audience members could be a considerable barrier to immersive experience, as it prevents forgetting the real world and being able to focus attention on the performances in the space, or the atmosphere or design of the space. Forgetting the real world is cited by members of Punchdrunk themselves as a key aim of their productions. As audience members change and 'immersive theatre' becomes a genre with certain tropes and techniques, utilitarian participation and imaginative participation – the first two modes of interactivity – come into conflict.

The sensation of conflict between the first two modes of interactivity is felt during the shows but naturally can only be discussed outside of them. The fourth mode of interactivity is useful for contextualising the conflict and its relationship to immersive experience. The fact audience members might engage with productions in ways that adversely affect those around them would immediately seem to be in conflict with immersive experience. Awareness of other audience members in this context could not be considered a site where Real World Disassociation (RWD)

might occur, since it is not a disruption of immersion that an audience member might choose to ignore (although they might try).

Conversations with long-term Punchdrunk fans often lead to a discussion of *The Drowned Man* in the context of ways in which the structure of the show is problematic:

I saw *The Drowned Man* shortly after it opened (flew from Boston to the UK to see it) and I thought it was too big and too crowded. It's such a gargantuan show that I don't think it's all that possible to make any connections or get any sense of what's going on in one visit (I liked it a lot more on my second visit), so I think it rewards repeat viewings, but I also think that the fact that it doesn't work in just one visit is a bug rather than a feature. [...] too many sections seemed like a redux of their previous shows (reusing music from 'Faust', and having some scenes that are too reminiscent of 'Sleep No More') Even though 'The Duchess of Malfi' didn't entirely work, I appreciated it as an attempt to do something new with the form (incorporate opera) and, ultimately, I think I preferred it to TDM because of that. TDM too often felt like 'Punchdrunk by Numbers'.

It has some beautiful, memorable moments, but it rather feels like Punchdrunk treading water: it's playing the hits, without advancing very much (although in saying that I'm acknowledging that I've seen lots of them before, and to a newcomer it would be astonishing) [...] As ever, it's a hard balance between creative ambition and commercial sustainability, but perhaps the epic production model is now more of a burden than an opportunity?

Punchdrunk's increasing commercial success has heralded accusations of selling out, in the creation of business/corporate immersive experiences for brands (Gillinson 2012; Alston 2013), but, more relevant to the discussion of beyond-the-object interactivity, within the shows themselves. *Sleep No More* in particular has received criticism for including several in-show purchase opportunities for audience members. The including of an in-show working bar (and recently in *Sleep No More*, a

restaurant) are devices and sites that represent a type of beyond-the-object interactivity, although they occur within the space of the production. They are sites for participation with the culture of the object: the object being the show, and the culture being capitalism. These instances of interactivity incorporate real-world financial transactions into the fictional dream world of the immersive space, and Gillinson is not the only commenter to question what this represents about the motives behind a commitment to the creation and maintenance of immersive experience. In Chapter 1 I noted a trajectory of thought embodied in *Rose 2012* that celebrates the relationship between immersive experience and brand management.

Returning to progressive relationships between immersive experience within the show and interactivity with the wider culture of the theatrical object, as mentioned above in the discussion of fan mail, many school groups have thanked Punchdrunk for the inspiration. In these comments and my own conversations with teachers who have taken student groups to see Punchdrunk shows, there is evidence of fans of the company claiming ownership of immersive experience to the extent that they may seek to create it themselves. Student engagement eventually becomes work in the professional sphere, and Punchdrunk's position as internationally influential 'pioneers of immersive theatre' has been suggested elsewhere (Hoggard 2013).

Fan response to Punchdrunk has also entered other media. Morgenstern's novel *The Night Circus* (2011) pulses with Punchdrunk throughout, and the book explicitly cites her debt to the company on its closing acknowledgements page. Morgenstern credits experiencing Punchdrunk's worlds with the desire to (re)create a world of her own with a similar sensation of magic and otherworldly transportation: she credits 'special recognition' for 'the immersive experience of Punchdrunk, which I was lucky enough to fall into thanks to the American Repertory Theatre of Cambridge, Massachusetts' (295-6). Visitors to Morgenstern's *Le Cirque des Rêves* experience physical immersion in the world of the circus and once characters are inside, they experience sensory, visceral sensations of childlike joy and freedom of exploration that sound exactly like a definition of immersive experience from the perspective of cognitive/imaginative/emotional engagement. Those who love the circus the most might become Dreamers, a group who follow the circus around the world in order to visit it as often as they can. The novel is a piece of Punchdrunk fan fiction; the mysterious semi-magical circus in which most of the story is set is not

based on a specific Punchdrunk show, but its atmosphere, organisation, magical appearance, and strange beauty is clearly the invention of someone enamoured of the sensation of exploring the company's works. Morgenstern's world-building (or atmosphere-building) with its hat-tip to Punchdrunk, is I think the primary reason for the novel's success. Readers became immersed in a fictional immersive experience.

#### Conclusion: problematic aspects of fan interactivity and research

Research into fan discourses and immersive experience is potentially problematic. The first potential problem is concerned with the research itself, and includes concerns about the ethics of drawing on the particular discourses under consideration in this chapter. The e-fanmail comments were not written for me, and were not intended to be read – much less analysed and studied – by any outside party. They were submitted anonymously to Punchdrunk, and there has been no way of contacting these audience members to ask their permission for the comments to be used. The longitudinal interviews with long-term fans were not anonymous, and were conducted with an agreement about the purpose of my research and with permission for me to use the material. Most interviewees wished to be anonymous, by virtue of familiarity with the company or other reasons, and so to preserve unity across the study I have anonymised them all. These participants were happy to talk about their experiences with me and I have attempted not to take any of their words out of context. In interviews, I asked specific questions with the potential for longer explanatory answers (drawing on methodology discussed in Barker and Mithijs 2007) and gave no preferred word count for responses, inviting interviewees to give as much information as was comfortable. The interviews are not intended to comprehensively describe immersive experience, and no answer represents the opinions of all fans. There was a large variance of opinion regarding *The Drowned Man*, from Punchdrunk's most spectacular show yet to a 'by numbers' rehash of their now-old structural and logistical techniques on a bigger scale. These discussions are intended to demonstrate the varying ways in which a spectator at a Punchdrunk show (or any immersive theatre production) might be theorised. The individual responses are designed to nuance the theorised 'ideal spectator' of their work, and to suggest that it is not desirable to attempt to speak for everyone in an audience;

even more so than usual when there is such an emphasis on individual experiences and journeys in this kind of theatrical work. To this end, I have considered traits and coded themes that run through the web comments discussed earlier in the chapter, but do not intend to suggest that they are definitive.

The second way fan interactivity is potentially problematic is concerned with the activity itself. Is it problematic for Punchdrunk to interact with their fans in this way, adding extra experiences or exchanges in the show for long-term fans or their repeat audience members? A key issue for Punchdrunk in creating new work since *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death* has been the question of enabling immersive experiences for repeat attendees that can be as powerful as those of a first ever Punchdrunk show. An audience member familiar with Punchdrunk's work could be expected to know the physical grammar of the shows and anticipate certain techniques. They would be familiar with Punchdrunk's techniques to defamiliarise form, and this could result in boredom, or less strongly simply an awareness, which detracts from the experience of exploring a completely new form and set of aesthetics, and instead raises barriers to immersive experience by reducing the number of things that are being discovered. Another key issue for the company in creating new works is the question of how immersive theatre's trademark intimacy might be retained in much larger spaces, designed to contain many audience members at one time, than Punchdrunk's earlier shows. These are problems concerning the design and craft of interactivity and these problems potentially affect immersive experience. Familiarity with certain aspects of the show such as its form, structure or rules might make these very aspects potential barriers to immersion. These parts of the show become something known which must be overcome before the immersive experience can occur, characterised as it is by exploring the unknown and the surprise of discovery.

High levels of fan interactivity potentially create a problematically stratified audience. Some rooms in *Sleep No More* are sometimes locked; some rooms in *The Drowned Man* appear to move. *The Drowned Man's* Twitter account gives cryptic messages now and again, including on one occasion the combination of a safe that nobody has yet been able to find (having been on repeated visits to search). These are all ways the show interacts with its fan community, and its relationship to immersive experience in terms of ownership and communication suggests the

activities can be extremely rewarding. A potential problem, however, of this kind of interactivity is the suggestion of elitism. Punchdrunk might seem to prioritise repeat attendees over other audience members, and therefore alienate those who 'don't get it' as they develop the show to cater for a certain demographic. In reality it is not such a simple binary as this. The Facebook fan group for *The Drowned Man* strongly advises against posting spoilers or information that might be to the detriment of others' experiences of the shows, and the various websites devoted to *Sleep No More* are similarly between only those who desire this kind of extended creative discourse, and could not be said to exist at the expense of others. But as a model, the opposition of the fan/repeat attendee against a spectator entirely new to Punchdrunk is a useful one for theorising potential problems of certain kinds of interactivity. The sense of a stratified audience within the production might create a system reminiscent of 'restricted seats', not only in regards to the Premium ticket passes these audience members wear around their necks but in how interactivity manifests within the show itself. Behaviours inside the show might make physical an audience member's comfort or discomfort with the apparent rules of engagement. Similarly, and running parallel to this relationship between immersive experience and physical behaviour inside the show, beyond-the-object interactivity or cultural participation occurs in relation to the immersive experience felt inside. The increasing intensity of fan engagement with Punchdrunk might represent the development of democratising space for grassroots creativity and engagement (as discussed in Jenkins 2006; Silvestre 2013) as demonstrated in the numerous blogs and discussions devoted to the company's work. In these spaces, immersive experience is claimed to be an integral part of experiencing the shows, and at the same time the shows might be discussed in terms of physical details and the creation of maps and diagrams, or engaged with critically from the perspective of audience access or commercial pressures.



#### Chapter 4: immersion and narrative

This chapter is interested in the relationship between immersive experience and the idea of 'story'. It begins with a theoretical overview of attempts to define narrative and formulates a working definition drawing on Cobley (2001), Abbott (2002; 2007), Herman (2009) and a methodology drawing on the 'fuzzy-set' definition offered by Ryan (2011). I consider the relationship between story and plot, between plot and character, and the role of causality in defining narrative in order to create a theoretical framework with which to consider immersive experience. This chapter is interested in how immersive experience might occur in the interplay between physical immersion, the movement through an atmospheric/logistical score of the production, and the crafting of story events.

The chapter discusses the relationship between narrative and immersive experience using Punchdrunk's *The Crash of the Elysium* (Salford Quays, 2011) as a case study. This show might be considered unusual for Punchdrunk because of its fundamentally linear structure: the audience were led throughout by guides and followed a single path. *The Crash of the Elysium* is an extremely useful model for considering the relationship between an audience's journey through an immersive space and the structure of story events. In *Elysium*, these are experienced simultaneously: in both story and spatial terms, Punchdrunk are in charge of the plot, and lead the audience on the course through it. The sense of a trajectory from A to B, the concept of narrative as 'a sequence which starts and moves inexorably to its end' (Cobley 2001: 9), is made literal in *Elysium*, physically embodied by audience members and performers.

There is an additional aspect to *Elysium* in terms of narrative and an audience's relationship with immersive experience and story, in that the production was set in a well-known pre-existing fictional universe. The relationship between Punchdrunk and *Doctor Who* is a further site for investigation of the interplay between physically immersive worlds, a constructed discourse (the plot of *Elysium* and how it is encountered by its audience) and the wider pre-established fictional world in which the story is set.

As mentioned above, *Elysium* could be called a linear show, and as such an atypical Punchdrunk production. It is useful to begin considering the relationship

between immersive experience and narrative without the additional complication of scenes experienced out of chronological order; this is a defining structural trait of Punchdrunk's larger shows and as such is considered in further detail in the next chapter.

### Defining narrative

For a history of recent developments in narrative theory, particularly on the influence of Genette, see Fludernik (2008), and for an overview of historical perspectives and current approaches see Herman (2009: 23-36). A useful definition of narrative is provided by Abbott: 'narrative is *the representation of an event or a series of events.*' (2002 12: original emphasis). This definition is a useful starting point for considering narrative and immersion as it opens up the two areas for immersive experience to take place: in the *event or series of events* (the structure and order and the content of scenes) and the effectiveness of their theatrical representation.

Herman (2009) develops a definition that is useful for contextualising a discussion of immersive experience and narrative. Herman defines narrative as 'a mode of representation that is situated in [...] a specific discourse context or occasion for telling'. This representation 'focuses on a structured time-course of particularized events'; these events introduce disruption into a storyworld, and the representation (narrative) 'conveys what it is like to live through this storyworld-in-flux' (189). The notion of narrative as a mode of representation has been established; further to this, Herman's definition emphasises the importance of causality and disruption (conflict) into the making of a narrative. This model of narrative also introduces the concept of a storyworld and a 'storyworld-in-flux' which is useful for thinking about reader/audience engagement in the story. Also key to Herman's theorisation of narrative is the exploration of, and representation of, 'what it's like' (xvi) to experience the disruption of a storyworld. This experiential aspect of narrative is relevant to considering story and immersive experience and runs throughout discussion of the case study.

The term *storyworld* is very useful to draw on when considering immersive experience and narrative in the context of theatrical performance. The term refers to 'the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative', but it might also refer

to a storyworld drawn on in the creation of a text (Herman 2009: 106). *The Crash of the Elysium* had its own internally coherent storyworld that was created, maintained and developed by the interplay between performers, text and design. But it also evoked the wider, pre-existing and well-established storyworld of *Doctor Who*. It did this implicitly, incorporating a science-fictional aesthetic into elements that clearly came from Punchdrunk; but primarily the *Doctor Who* storyworld was explicitly evoked. The connection was of course central to the marketing, and the production included televised scenes with actors and sets from the show and incorporated well-known tropes and imagery into its design, musical score and text: 'To the Tardis!' Immersive experience and narrative in the context of *The Crash of the Elysium* can be contextualised by the existence of interplay between previously-known elements and tropes which were there to be recognised, and unknown elements and story events which were there to be discovered.

Cobley (2001) also emphasises the role of representation in narrative, and the way narrative functions in three dimensions: 'narrative is a particular form of representation... it is necessarily bound up with sequence, space and time' (3). The concept of *sequence* is important to considering narrative, as it suggests that the organisation of events and the way in which those events are encountered are important to how narrative affects a reader. The notion of sequence becomes physically embodied in Punchdrunk's form of immersive theatre, as the reader/audience member is invited to move through a space in order to physically encounter events. Sequence, space and time are necessarily bound up with immersive theatre; the question then becomes one of narrative and immersive experience.

From Abbott and Cobley, a narrative is a representational form which presents a sequence of events. From Herman, the concept of storyworld can be added to this: a narrative draws on a wider storyworld in order to create a discourse and/or evokes a fictional storyworld as part of that discourse, and represents the events that occur in the storyworld in response to disruption or conflict. Cobley's description of the achievements of narrative also incorporates the notion of the *ending* event, and narrative form depending and adjusting depending on the technological context (the media used to tell the story):

[Narrative] re-presents time, space and sequence; it facilitates the remembrance and exploration of identity; it imbues its representations with causality; it envisages an end; and it does all of these according to the specificities of the technologies in which it is embedded. (2001: 228; original emphasis)

As a final theoretical model, Ryan's (2011) methodology for approaching narrative ties in to the discussion of immersive experience offered throughout this thesis. Ryan argues for a 'fuzzy-set definition' of narrative, proposing a series of categories and questions that go towards considering how much of a narrative any given text is, and what kind of a narrative it is. The key question should not be whether any given text *is* a narrative or not: this mode of enquiry is not particularly fruitful or, ultimately, useful. Instead, Ryan proposes that narrative should not be considered a binary category, but rather one that exists as a more flexible category into which texts might fit: 'Because judgments of fictionality affect what the reader will or will not believe, they are much more important than judgments of narrativity' (2011: 32). Similarly, Abbott argues that it is restrictive to require narratives to contain more than one event or to suggest causality between events in order to qualify as narratives (12), and suggest instead that a wider scope allows for the study of a wider range of texts. My working definition of narrative drawn from these models therefore include these traits: narrative is a representation of a sequence of events; narrative occurs within and creates a storyworld; it exists in space and time; is bound up with sequence and causality; and changes its form depending on its context. My methodology is more 'fuzzy-set', less concerned with whether Punchdrunk productions *are* narratives, and more how approaches to narrative are useful for considering immersive experience within them. The concepts of plot, story and discourse are useful for considering what kind of invitation Punchdrunk offers to its audiences. The relationship between the narrative of a Punchdrunk show – whether this is the story-as-told (performed, enacted), the story-as-experienced, the structure of story events and how an audience member engages with this framework – might be usefully considered in relation to immersive experience (which I would suggest is part of 'what the reader will or will not believe').

Ryan identifies three ways a spectator/reader might become involved with narrative: 'spatial immersion, the response to setting; temporal immersion, the response to plot; and emotional immersion, the response to character' (2001: 121). *Immersion* can describe both a physical and a mental state; considering immersion in narrative using these separate components allows for the separation to continue. The first concept is particularly useful: prose fiction and a computer game do not physically surround a reader; immersive theatre and virtual reality are able to create a space that is immediately immersive. However, for 'spatial immersion' to occur, merely being in the space is not enough – it is the 'response' to setting that determines whether the space will facilitate immersive experience, and the level of such experience that might be reached. In the context of 'flow', immersive experience is a highly intense, temporary and fleeting state. Ryan's discussion of pace and suspense makes clear the relationship between narrative immersion and a varying of intensity:

This experience of being transported onto the narrative scene is so intense and demanding on the imagination that it cannot be sustained for a very long time; an important aspect of narrative art consists, therefore, of varying the distance, just as a sophisticated movie will vary the focal length of the camera lens. (139)

This notion of suspense – and the writer's craft of creating narrative suspense – is an important concept of considering narrative and immersion. Immersive experience requires varying pace and structure in order that the experience not become overwhelming (or sublime; or 'revered'). Immersive experience exists as a series of graded states of which either the author/creator (Ryan's theorisation) or the spectator/reader (Punchdrunk's theorisation of the active audience member) is in control. Ryan distinguishes four types of suspense: what suspense (what will happen next?); how suspense (how did it come to be like this? / how did this happen? the reader desires to learn prehistory that results in the present moment); who suspense (commonly found in the whodunit: there is no sadness in the murder, merely an interest in the puzzle); and metasuspense, 'critical involvement with the story as verbal artefact' – for instance, wondering how the author is going to finish the story, what will become of all the threads (2001: 143-5). This multiple layer approach to

theorising suspense is useful when considering the ways in which immersion is also an experience of multiple layers. Existing as a series of graded states, it is possible to feel suspense about multiple 'layers' simultaneously: to both wonder what will happen when, for example, you follow a character ('what suspense') and for the Punchdrunk fan to wonder how on earth they will top their show of the previous year ('metasuspense').

### Discussing narrative: story, plot, discourse

Having established a working definition of narrative, I want to consider the relationship between immersive experience and three key aspects of narrative studies: the relationship between story and plot; between plot and character; and the role of causality in narrative.

A problem in narrative studies is the relationship between *plot*, *discourse*, *narration* and *story* – the concepts themselves and the words used to indicate them. Some narratologists (Lodge 1980) use terms taken from Russian Formalism, such as *fabula* and the *sjuzhet* meaning story and plot respectively. While I do not use these terms, Abbott shows the importance of making this distinction:

The distinction between plot and story, like that between narration and story, is an implicit presumption that a story is separate from its rendering. Just as a story can be narrated in different ways, so it can be plotted in different ways. This analytically powerful distinction between story and its representation is, arguably, the founding insight of the field of narratology. (2011: 40)

This distinction is further complicated by the fact that the discourse (the wider story) only makes itself known in the telling, as it is only through the story (reading/encountering story events) that a reader is able to deduce the discourse.

Abbott draws on Chatman's work on narrative in order to suggest the distinction between story and discourse: 'The difference between events and their representation is the difference between *story* (the event or sequence of events) and *narrative discourse* (how the story is conveyed).' (13) A writer often invents the story

that is going to be narrated and revealed through the organisation of the discourse. But narrative discourse – the representation of events, how the story is told – is what the reader experiences. It is through narrative discourse that a reader comes to experience the story, and it is narrative discourse that a writer or artist is able to consciously manipulate and organise; narrative discourse is ‘infinitely malleable’ (Abbott 2011: 15). A key aspect of narratology is therefore distinguishing the difference between the story itself, and the story-as-discourse (Abbott 2011; Genette 1980; Chatman 1978). There is a difference between the story events themselves and the story-as-told. The story events will necessarily happen chronologically, but the story-as-told might present story events to its reader in any order.

To consider this in the context of immersive theatre is to physically embody the distinction between story and story-as-told (or story-as-encountered). Punchdrunk’s larger shows separate story from discourse; events are created and ordered, and the audience members are invited to build their own discourse or plot. In a Punchdrunk show that has the structure/logistical form most common to the company, the *story* is what is happening across the building, and as an audience member wanders through the space, they build their own *plot*. There is construction and craft in how these story events have been made, designed and ordered – but there is less a sense of deliberate design in the path an audience member takes: indeed, they are invited to ‘steer [their] own course’ (*The Drowned Man* opening voiceover). The wider storyworld is the whole building of a Punchdrunk production; and is certainly a storyworld-in-flux, with conflict and drama occurring throughout the space.

Framing an audience member as their own narrator of events within an immersive storyworld-in-flux helps to explain a potential problematic way in which these story events might be navigated, one that might result in frustration, disorientation and ultimately a raising of barriers to immersion. Rather than enjoying the sense of freedom to create their own plot and see whatever scenes they come across, instead a desire to understand the wider storyworld – Punchdrunk’s *story* – places the story and the plot (the events of the show and the audience member’s own journey, their own narrative discourse) in conflict with each other. This will adversely affect immersive experience as it raises barriers to immersion that interrupt a sense of psychological ‘flow’. Flow occurs when there is a sense of

challenge and skills that match. It may not be explicitly coded as a game or challenge, but a sensation of being 'unable' to do something is a key barrier to immersion at the level of accessibility. In this context, a conflicting relationship between story and plot means a Punchdrunk production presents an impossible task, demonstrating the existence of a large storyworld full of events it is impossible to successfully navigate. It is impossible to see everything, to build up an understanding of the whole story via the path of a single discourse. When the story and an audience member's own plot come into conflict the result is the sense of a missing or unclear narrative. This problem occurs when, for all the invitations to exploratory freedom in the marketing of immersive theatre, and explicitly in the words of the ushers or voiceovers at the beginning of a production, there *does* seem to be a proper way to do it.

A second explanation of the difference between *story*, *plot* and *narrative* will allow for this discussion to take all three words into account, and apply them more precisely to the context of immersive experience:

'story' consists of all the events which are to be depicted.  
 'Plot' is the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that they are therefore to be depicted in relation to each other. 'Narrative' is the showing or the telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place. (Cobley 2001: 5-6)

In this theorisation, the plot and the story are both concerned with what the original storyworld is, what the original events are – and narrative is how the story and the plot are (simultaneously) conveyed to a reader. The organisational aspect is key to considering narrative in this context. An important component of experiencing a narrative is the sense that there is a writer (or a director, or a theatre company), who has invented, crafted and ordered the events which the reader/audience member will encounter. The sequential element is important, as is the sense of causality bringing about the movement between events. Applying this model to the discussion of Punchdrunk might explain why story, plot and narrative often work together to facilitate immersive experience rather than to block it. An original selection and organisation of events is experienced by an audience member as they move through the space. I distinguish between the creation of a wide storyworld (*story*), the design



of several story events that are enacted across the space and/or embedded in its mise-en-scene (*plot*), and the audience member's own experience of these events, some of which they miss and some they see (*narrative*).

In *The Crash of the Elysium*, story, plot and narrative did function together; as a physically linear show, in which the audience experienced the story events in chronological order with their actor-guides throughout, these three aspects of narratology were experienced simultaneously. Narrative and immersive experience were closely intertwined in this production, which was built with the purpose of avoiding any lost wandering or conflict between the events of the story and the physical events of moving through the space.

#### Discussing narrative: the importance of causality

E. M. Forster cites causality as being the crucial difference between story and plot. If a story is a series of events (as suggested in Abbott's deliberately wide and all-inclusive definition), in a plot one event can be seen to naturally lead to another:

‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. [...] Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: ‘And then?’ If it is in a plot we ask: ‘Why?’ (1963: 87).

One of the most cited works on the study of narrative, Barthes' ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’ (1966), also considers causality as being a key component of how humans engage with narrative. Indeed, for Barthes it is a ‘confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*’, that is central to narrative; the instinct for causality becomes an embodiment of the logical fallacy *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. (94) Other studies of narrative have suggested the importance of causality and meaning-making. To Brooks, plotting (the act of shaping or crafting a narrative) is how a story is given meaning: ‘Plot as I conceive it is the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning.’ (1984: xi) Narrative is structured into plot. The reader encounters plot and follows it, creating

meaning and interpretation as they go. Brooks describes plotting as ‘that which makes a plot “move forward”, and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning’ (xiii). Ricoeur (whose study of narrative and time is discussed further in the next chapter) also suggests that meaning and causality are connected. He defines *following a story* as ‘understanding the successive actions, thoughts, and feelings in question insofar as they present a certain directedness. [...] There is no story if our attention is not moved along by a thousand contingencies’ ([1970] 2000: 259).

Causality allows an audience member to become immersed in a linear narrative. As demonstrated in Forster’s ‘Why?’, wanting to know the reason for one event following another is a major, if not the major, reason for continuing with a story to the end. This can explain why a physical separation of story, plot and narrative might affect immersive experience in theatrical performance. If events can be experienced in any order, a sense of causality might be lost in an audience member’s journey through a space; if a performer’s action loops are repeated, then a sense of causality in the story they are enacting becomes questionable. An internally coherent fictional world lowers barriers to (psychological, cognitive) immersion and a well-plotted story that allows the reader to deduce the fictional world. The *plot* need not be linear (as in Pinter’s *Betrayal*, Churchill’s *Top Girls*), but the *story* told by the plot will be linear. The importance of causality is particularly interesting in the context of immersive theatre, as it can provide a means for immersion (for example, one discovery or encounter leads to another) or raise of barriers to immersion (for example, sensing a frustration of mode 3 of interactivity). These definitions and theorisations of narrative suggest that an immersive experience production will be made problematic by separating story, plot and discourse. A difference between a production’s storyworld and an audience member’s journey through the space has been interpreted as a site of problems regarding interpretation or understanding. Abbott also suggests that narrative comes from, and is the result of, desire to find sense and meaning:

our narrative perception stands ready to be activated in order to give us a frame or context for even the most static and uneventful scenes. And without understanding the

narrative, we often feel we don't understand what we see.  
(2002: 11)

Conflict between the wider story/structure of a Punchdrunk production and an audience member's journey through the space will adversely affect immersive experience; story and plot are separated to the detriment of the overall experience. However, this separation might also be considered in the context of gaming. The non-linearity of story events and the relationship between the story events and an audience member's experience of these events (some found, some stumbled upon, some followed for a while) might be precisely what *is* immersive, rather than being what interrupts or frustrates immersive experience. The sensation of searching and finding and engaging with the story as part of the formulation of an audience member's own narrative discourse becomes a similar task to solving a puzzle. In this case, theatrical immersion becomes very similar to immersion in a computer game.

The relationship between linear narratives, non-linear structures and immersion is considered further in Chapter 5, but for the purposes of considering narrative and immersion in the context of *The Crash of the Elyium*, a show which was physically linear and experienced in-chronological-order, it is important to state that *story*, *plot* and *narrative* could be considered separately, even as they are experienced together in the moment of the theatrical encounter. The puzzle-solving aspect of piecing together a non-linear plot was also a part of this show, as the content of the plot involved solving a mystery. The content and the form of the show allowed for immersion in a storyworld.

The relationship between narrative and gaming mechanics therefore becomes important and this is considered further in Chapter 6. Just like immersive experience itself, immersion in the storyworld and immersion in the structural mechanics of how one might 'play' within a production are not a binary; rather, it is the interplay between them that facilitates immersive experience.

### Discussing narrative: character and plot

The relationship between character and plot has always been a key question in narratology. Aristotle prioritises plot over character in *Poetics*: 'plot is the course and (as it were) the soul of tragedy; character is second' (trans. 1996: 12). Characters are agents that function to further the plot.

there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be one without character. [...] the most important devices by which tragedy sways emotion are parts of the plot, i.e. reversals and recognitions.' (12)

Later discussions trouble this binary: screen- and play- writing guides in particular often emphasise that 'plot is character in action' (McKee 1999; Fountain 2007); the character *is* the plot, as they bring about the story events by their choices and actions.

In interactive theatre (of the third mode, with explicit presentation of choices that lead to outcomes) audience members are these Aristotelian agents that function to forward the plot and/or initiate the events of the performance. In immersive theatre, the audience members more resemble the second model, wandering freely and choosing to explore and fundamentally bringing about their own experience. As discussed earlier, immersive theatre and particularly the work of Punchdrunk tends not to include explicit interactivity, and might not be considered interactive theatre at all. Immersive theatre productions do allow for a great amount of imaginative participation, and Punchdrunk shows in particular facilitate participation in the wider culture of the production. But immersive theatre and interactive theatre could be considered different forms – even though an immersive production might involve some interactivity, and an interactive production might allow for, or create in its participants, the sensation of immersive experience. In *The Crash of the Elysium* the role of the audience was built into the text and the spatial dynamics of the production, and the relationship between plot and character resembles an Aristotelian model. In terms of performers' characters and the wider plot, most Punchdrunk productions tend to follow the Aristotelian model; a performer's movements are structured across the space of the building, and their adherence to following this prescribed course brings about the performance events.

Immersion and narrative case study: *The Crash of the Elysium*

The concept of barriers to immersion and immersive experience functioning at various levels of intensity and engagement leads to the question, for makers, of how to lower these barriers in order to facilitate immersive experience in their audiences. Structure and craft are required in the composition of scenes and the rehearsal of performances, with the aim of bringing about immersion in the *narrative*: the audience follow a *plot* and experience a *story* that takes place in a wider *storyworld*.

*The Crash of the Elysium* was part of 2011 Manchester International Festival and the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. It was primarily a children's show and part of Punchdrunk Enrichment (although adult-only performances did occur) and told a story set in the Doctor Who universe. The audience were led throughout by in-character guides, who interact with the audience throughout. The audience do not explicitly affect events in the production, but the layout and performance of the story events means that they seem to. At the beginning of the show the group is informed that they are urgently needed for a special mission. Throughout the show they are told to line up, to be careful, to signal ok before the group proceeds. These gestures and signals are safety precautions built in to the show's performance vocabulary to continue immersion in the fictional world. The two guides never leave the audience on their own, and a medic (an actual medic, who is explained to be a medic within the fictional world of the story) also travels with the group. Immersive experience and narrative here work together to ensure audience wellbeing, fictionalised as dynamic mission-solving teamwork.

As mentioned previously, *The Crash of the Elysium* was linear in its form, as the audience were guided along a single performance path. The show was also linear in its content, even though there were some instances of time-travel (the audience avert one monster attack by jumping to a Victorian fairground in the Tardis, and then appear to leap forward into a far-future spaceship before returning, as the performance ends, to the present). However the structure of the production was fundamentally linear as one performance event caused the next. Causality was maintained throughout the narrative discourse.

The relationship between the performers was more straightforward than the ambiguous relationships established in one-to-ones with or scenes involving

Punchdrunk performers in other contexts. The form of the show did not allow the free wandering that characterise the sensation of audiences choice that occurs in more typical Punchdrunk spaces.

To demonstrate the relationship between immersion and narrative in *The Crash of the Elysium*, and the relationship between the story of the show and the plot followed by the performers and audience, it is possible to read several performance events as narrative events. The audience travel through a series of a series of highly atmospheric spaces and experience different kinds of interactivity (television screens; in-character guides asking their advice; crawling, running, lining up in the space) which can potentially create a highly immersive experience in terms of exploration, discovery, and excitement. I would argue that these performance events were also narrative events which allowed for immersion in a world and a sense of 'what it's like' to experience the storyworld-in-flux (Herman 2009). These events built to a climax of spectacle, music and narrative/character elements in the last scene, functioning as both a performance event and narrative ending that brought the experience of the show as well as its story and plot to a close.

The story has a deliberately boring prologue – a professor's lecture on the history of the crashed Elysium – and a strong inciting incident: the guides enter the lecture space, recruit the group, and the real adventure begins. The first video of the Doctor sets up the world ahead and its dangers ('... and *don't* b-') and in asking the audience to help them discover the Tardis, the relationship between them and the guides is established; from this point on the world is internally coherent, adhering to this dynamic. The protagonists are established (the audience; their guides), as is the conflict between the secondary characters (the Doctor; River Song) and the antagonist presence (the Weeping Angels). An attack by the Weeping Angels (unplanned by the guides, but of course planned by Punchdrunk – I return to this in the discussion of craft and structure) results in a trip to the Victorian age: the second act climax in which everyone is thrown off the path, and seem to be the furthest yet from their goal. In the spaceship (the production's final space, apart from the corridor back into the real world), everyone puts their hands on a tree to join their powers together and bring the plot to a climax, and music and lights lend to the tension and gravitas of the moment. The actor-guides and the interventions from screens add plot exposition and intensify the conflicts and what is at stake for the characters. The

final dash out through a corridor containing trapped weeping angels demonstrates the successful change the audience members have achieved in the world: their achievement at the final event. The end of the *story* is also the end of the audience's *plot*, and this is made very clear both in content and form: the guides salute and say goodbye. The end.

Immersive experience can occur in a linear plot; in *The Crash of the Elysium*, the linear plot enabled this kind of intense engagement through its sense of causality, as well as making the audience appear to be the agents of change in the storyworld-in-flux. Punchdrunk of course has manufactured the overall movement score and progression of the show and there is little left to chance, just as in a linear playtext. However, deliberate spaces are left in the performance text for conversation and discussion which may influence the state of immersion at any given moment. Audience members are able to create the some sense of change and effect upon the immediate experience of the show in the moment of performance, and this was allowed for in rehearsal. An example from early on in the show describes a moment in the performance where narrative and immersion were incorporated into the rehearsal process. After the first filmed section from the Doctor, the guides inform the audience that the group need to find the Tardis. They ask the audience if they can provide them with some information about this unknown object: 'we don't know what it is; we don't know what it looks like' (2011). The audience is encouraged to respond to this prompt. In rehearsal of this scene, this line at one point was changed to include 'We don't know what colour it is.' This was discussed, and eventually rejected as an overly leading question. It was too specific – if you don't know what something is, do you think to wonder what colour it is? The line was changed back. This decision represents a movement between levels of interactivity (a child might be more able or willing to give a definite answer to the closed question of 'what colour is it') and narrative coherence.

*Elysium: an internally coherent immersive world*

An immersive space is physically internally coherent, as it exists within strongly defined spatial and temporal boundaries. Immersive experience is also a temporary sensation, all the more intense and powerful for its being finite and (in the case of peak experience or flow) sometimes even fleeting. In terms of storyworld, the rules of *The Crash of the Elysium* also had to feel complete and make sense: the show needed a story that the audience could follow, not just in terms of their physical route, in order to become successfully immersed in the storyworld and experience the storyworld-in-flux. An internally coherent world is a requirement for effective fiction.

There is another way in which the world of *The Crash of the Elysium* had to aim for internal coherence, a way that could be considered both a bonus and a difficulty in terms of creating a story for its audience. The production takes place within the well-known, pre-established universe of long-running children's television programme *Doctor Who*. It is a universe with known characters and relationships, known dynamics, boundaries, and rules of the world. The Tardis and the Weeping Angels are recognisable figures in the world with known skills and abilities; the audience would be very like to have seen them functioning as plot elements in the show, and now are incorporated into a plot in which they feature. The show's aesthetic elements, not just its characters but its sets and its soundtrack are also immediately recognisable. Within this internally coherent, known and recognisable universe, the story of the *Crash of the Elysium* sits – and important is that it does not shift or alter the universe of the show. It fits within it. The relationship between the show and the *Doctor Who* universe is of course a foundational aspect of the show and the cornerstone of its marketing. The world of the story had to fit within this universe, and allow its audience to function as important agents whilst not upsetting the dynamics of the *Doctor Who* universe. For an audience member, the excitement of being involved in an adventure within this universe might go hand in hand with being aware of anything that is wrong or inaccurate.

In rehearsal, the relationship between scripted lines and deliberately-created space for improvised dialogue and answers to questions were important to the actors. Inconsistencies in the script were discussed at length and the rules of *The*



*Crash of the Elysium's* universe worked out in order that any and all potential problematic questions by children could be answered. Whether or not these questions came up during performances, the anxiety in rehearsal to get this element right demonstrates the importance of story-based internal coherence and the dangers of a script with internal inconsistencies on an audience who might well be likely to spot them and point them out. The relationship between the actor-guides and their audience relied on the exchange of information, exposition, guidance, and occasionally the deliberate suggestion of ignorance or powerlessness which could only be solved by one of the audience members. The manipulation of story events and plot elements in rehearsal went towards creating a narrative that, in terms of its content and internal dynamics, made recognisable sense, and functioned logically within the *Doctor Who* universe. This was as important as the work towards creating physical immersion and atmosphere. The wider cultural narrative of the television programme and its history was incorporated into how the show was structured, rehearsed, and performed.

#### *Elysium: structural and soundtrack linearity*

Rehearsals for *Crash of the Elysium* involved some improvising, working around moments that concerned the show's story-event coherence, discussing how to fix the plot holes and contradictions in the script and preparing for any unexpected audience responses or behaviour. The creation of the show also involved working towards narrative linearity in terms of crafting the audience's physical journey.

The rhythm of the show was produced by its soundtrack. The soundtrack was a constant throughout an audience member's experience of the show, and although the actor-guides would cue the soundtrack at the beginning or end of each scene, once it was going they had to adjust their performance and amount of speech to match the music and make pre-rehearsed pauses and climaxes. Every beat of the audience's journey along the route was accounted for, and rehearsed to be maintained. During rehearsals the whole soundtrack might be remade with three seconds added to one scene so the audience would *enter, beat, take in the space, beat, THEN move – beat. Can you put the BAM Then-Move bit in?* And so on. The audience were moving along a pre-determined path and were led by the actor-

guides, but the scenes themselves were cued by musical/sound-effect scores, which were cued (in secret) by the actors. The soundtrack functioned as a score throughout the audience's journey, adding pace and tone to the structure of the scenes. Music and sound are capable of creating highly immersive effects. They lower the barrier to immersion, create an internally coherent world (drawing on the soundtrack of the television show as well as Punchdrunk's own score) and create mood and atmosphere. The soundtrack and its tightly structured rhythm that influenced the sensation of experiencing the show as a whole, allowed for immersion in the *storyworld* (again, the television show and Punchdrunk's) through which the audience were led by the actor-guides, learning the *story* (the Doctor's relationship to the *Elysium*) through their own *plotted* course through the performance (the actor-guides' relationship to the audience, and the audience's relationship to the set). The soundtrack functioned as a structural aid within the scenes themselves as well as the show as a whole. The relationship between the rhythm of the music and/or sound effects, performance of the actor-guides, and significant story event would occur simultaneously to create a moment of excitement (immersive experience in the space), participation (immersive experience in the performance) and adrenaline (story experience – what will happen next?).

This was a well-known and easily recognisable soundtrack: music from the show and famous sound effects functioned as highly performative intertextual references that situated the production within the universe/wider storyworld of the *Doctor Who* television show. This added to the atmosphere of the production and affected its internal narrative consistency, but there is also an interesting relationship to be distinguished between immersion in a fictional narrative and a fictional world, and a real-world event. Immersive experience is often theorised as temporarily forgetting about outside world, and Real World Dissociation is part of the definition in many studies of the experience. The production was crafted, planned and rehearsed to ensure the audience remained in the world of *The Crash of the Elysium* throughout. The intertextual references drawn on in performing and attending *The Crash of the Elysium* come from real world experience of fictive world exposure. The generic and aesthetic elements of *Doctor Who* narratives would influence immersive experience in the production. The real world cannot be forgotten about – disassociated from – during *The Crash of the Elysium*, since it is a fictional world

from the real world that is the setting for its story and referenced throughout. Immersive experience when watching television could be considered more passive than experiencing a *Doctor Who* adventure in the real world, and physically it is less immediately active; but engagement with the story elements, aesthetic and soundtrack while watching the show might also make for a powerful immersive experience in narrative. The relationship between narrative and immersion in *The Crash of the Elysium* was supported by the structure of the show, and internally coherent performances and rules of the storyworld-in-flux, and the relationship between the performers and the audience members which emphasised the importance of the latter.

### Conclusion: narrative and immersion

In her summary of *The Crash of the Elysium*, Machon hints at an interpretation of the relationship between narrative and form. She describes the production as:

an immersive event that exploits the action-led, mystery-solving narratives of *Doctor Who* via the Punchdrunk process to encourage high-paced interactivity. The format borrows from Punchdrunk's recent explorations in pervasive game-playing [...] Rather than via Punchdrunk's trademark complex layering in form and content, audience-participants are engaged by the dynamic clue-solving participation, involving interaction with the Doctor via a series of video messages, and sensory stimulation. (2013: 3-4)

Machon's description suggests the show emphasised – and facilitated – interactivity, both in content and form. The mode of an audience member's engagement with narrative was a more active 'dynamic clue-solving participation' than the solitary, slow-paced exploration of Punchdrunk's trademark more 'complex' shows. The content and form of the show did suggest interactivity – in narrative-terms, the actor-guides clearly communicated the relationship with the audience members that their role in the story was very important, and in form terms, there were moments of interactivity that went beyond imaginative engagement and required physical input. However, as has been demonstrated, the production's content and form were tightly

controlled, and this relationship between narrative and form was what led to the facilitation of immersive experience. Although as discussed earlier, in rehearsal the performance text was deliberately designed to incorporate responses to audience behaviour, opportunities for interactivity were as limited as they are in Punchdrunk's other productions; audience participants in pervasive gaming experiences are much more actively engaged in the creation of content.

In *The Crash of the Elysium*, the audience's journey was structured in terms of the story they were experiencing. The story and the show were one and the same, proceeding at the same time, at the same rate, and in the same space. The relationship with the actors was also more straightforward than might be considered typically Punchdrunk. This was due in part to the intended audience for the work, but the relationship between rehearsed movements and the space for interaction and dialogue between the audience and their guides was factored into the show, and the relationship between narrative and immersion needed to be navigated throughout the rehearsal and performance of the production. The audience are invited to change the world of the story and influencing the outcome of events, and are also aware that they are being technically and structurally cared for; they are working through a pre-rehearsed and pre-cued set of events and effects. (It is interesting to note that the non-linear shows are also rehearsed in this way, as discrete 'segments' of performative encounter.)

Immersive experience comes about at the moment where spontaneous reaction in audience members – response to Machon's 'sensory stimulation' – meets the carefully rehearsed and well-crafted environment which has been specifically designed to bring about such a response. This phenomenon can be theorised in terms of lowering the barriers to immersion: in this case, the barriers are physical – to be able and willing to move through the space following the actors – and atmospheric – to be engaged in the story and interested in the world, both of the show and of the wider *Doctor Who* storyworld.

The relationship between narrative, immersion and craft that has been discussed in reference to *The Crash of the Elysium* can now be considered in the context of Punchdrunk's bigger productions which are less linear in form. In particular, the relationship between audience member and story when they

encounter scenes out-of-order, is considered in the next chapter. In shows where an audience member might stumble upon event B before event A, this nonlinearity is, in itself, part of that show's internally coherent world; and the order in which an audience member experiences them is part of their own narrative, which *does* proceed from A to B – even if their (*plot*) event A is the performer/Punchdrunk's (*story*) event B. The mixed up chronology might bring up themes of destiny, time, causality, history, or choice, if Punchdrunk's interpretation is considered in a literary context – alternatively, it might be taken as a puzzle-solving form requiring a different kind of immersed engagement.

## Chapter 5: chronological order: immersion, structure and time

'Büchner died before he finished it [Woyzeck] and just left a series of scenes with no order. And it doesn't really matter which order you digest them in – still the conclusion is inevitable and it's always the same. That is the Punchdrunk way.' (Barrett on *The Drowned Man*, in Hemming 2013: np)

What happens to immersive experience when narratives are out of order? This chapter is interested in the relationship between immersion and story, in the particular context of a trademark structural element of Punchdrunk's larger productions: that performers enact scenes on repeating loops throughout a building, and audience members are invited to wander through the space, finding these scenes or moments of performance whenever and wherever they manage to do so. No two audience members encounter the same events in the same order; although, as argued in previous chapters on interactivity, Punchdrunk productions are not as individually tailored as they may appear. Bartley uses the term 'narrator-visitor' for members of a Punchdrunk audience (2013), and this term emphasises the importance, with a Punchdrunk production, of an audience member's invitation to create their own sense of story or plot. Rancièrè proposes that 'an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators' (2009: 22). This chapter considers the negotiation between apparent interactivity, audience empowerment, and the sense of being 'immersed' in a story: especially when 'the conclusion is inevitable and it's always the same.'

The chapter draws on theoretical models and concepts proposed by Genette and Ricoeur on the relationship between narrative and time, and applies these theories to an analysis of moments of performance in *It Felt Like A Kiss* (2009) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (2010). These shows are a useful bridge between the linear story experience of *Elysium* considered previously, and the larger fragmented gameplay of *Sleep No More* discussed in chapter 6. *It Felt Like A Kiss* was fundamentally a linear show in terms of structure, and it featured no actors. The audience's relationship with the physical space was therefore the key way in which they were invited to engage with the production, and the production therefore provides a useful case study to discuss immersive experience in the context of structure and time. *The Duchess of Malfi* was in the structural tradition of most

Punchdrunk shows, with looping scores of action from performers (and, uniquely for Punchdrunk, opera singers and musicians) in a large building which audience members were invited to explore freely. In both *Kiss* and *Malfi*, audience members experienced the phenomenon of ‘discovering’ a scene – but only in *Malfi* could this be said to truly resemble discovery, as in *Kiss* the path through the production was more controlled. There is also a question of audience prior knowledge of the text Punchdrunk are adapting. The two productions considered in this chapter drew on stories with which an audience member might be expected to be partially, but not wholly, acquainted; a relatively unfamiliar Jacobean tragedy in the case of *The Duchess of Malfi*, and American post-war history in the case of *It Felt Like A Kiss*.

Finally, the ending of both these shows demonstrate a difference in the relationship between immersive experience and narrative in terms of the physical/temporal structure of the production. At the end of *It Felt Like A Kiss* audience members left the building individually, having been deliberately split into individuals in the final scene(s). *The Duchess of Malfi* ended in a more typical Punchdrunk mode. The audience were ushered into a large (previously closed) space and watched the spectacular finale together. I analyse the endings of these two productions to argue that immersive experience is profoundly affected by the relationship between the physical structure of the show, and the narrative events enacted by performers or embedded within the *mise-en-scene* of the space. Indeed, when chronology is disrupted, structural and logistical elements of the show *become* the narrative events.

#### Narrative and time: theoretical frameworks

The relationship between narrative and time is fundamental to narratology: ‘*narrative is the principle way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*’ (Abbott 2002: 3, original emphasis.) For Brooks, the relationship between narrative and time reveals a central exploration of the human condition: ‘It is my simple conviction [...] that narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality.’ Plot is ‘the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless’ (1984: 23; 323). It therefore becomes important to consider the relationship between plot and time.

Aristotle's *Poetics* emphasise the importance of 'completeness' in plots: 'a *whole* is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end' (13). Heath notes in his commentary on the *Poetics* that: 'Aristotle is often quoted as if he had said that a *play* has a beginning, a middle and an end. This is wrong. It is the *plot*, the underlying sequence of actions, that has that structure' (Heath 1996: xxiii-xxiv). Punchdrunk productions do have a wider plot that contains beginnings, middles and ends; the difference is an audience member might not encounter them. They will instead encounter events that are the beginning, middle and end *to them*, as they build their own plot. Aristotle's *Poetics* also discuss unity of time and action in performance: 'the structure of the various sections of the events must be such that the transposition or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole' (trans. 1996: 13). *The Crash of the Elysium* was unified in time and action as the adventure began and concluded in the space of one journey. This chapter is concerned with productions that break this rule in the way they structure and invite engagement with scenes.

Genette undertakes a systematic analysis of narrative from the perspective of structuralism, in the context of prose fiction and in particular the novel; several of the concepts concerning narrative and time can be drawn upon to begin a vocabulary to consider chronological order and immersive experience in performance. I will outline the concepts most useful for my discussion, and how they might be applied to Punchdrunk productions.

Genette gives several 'problems' of narratology in his study on time and narrative in Proust (1970):

the problems of narrative discourse can be classified under three main headings: the categories of time (temporal relationships between the narrative [story] and the "actual" events that are being told [history]); of mode (relationships determined by the distance and perspective of the narrative with respect to the history); and of voice (relationships between the narrative and the narrating agency itself: narrative situation, level of narration, status of the narrator and of the recipient, etc.). (93-4)



Concepts in Genette (1980) that are drawn upon in this chapter are types of narrator (homodiegetic and heterodiegetic), evocations that disrupt the chronology of a story's telling (analeptic and proleptic), the concepts of frame and embedded narratives, and the difference between mimetic and diegetic narrative modes. These terms expand the vocabulary available for theorising narrative and chronology in immersive theatre.

Genette distinguishes between types of narrator. A homodiegetic narrator is present as a character in the story. A heterodiegetic narrator is an outsider (243-5). An omniscient narrator is by definition heterodiegetic. As a spectator creates their own plot as they move through the space, it can be said that the audience member in immersive theatre in essence functions as the narrator of their own experience: the question then becomes one of type. Generally Punchdrunk audience members, masked and anonymous, are heterodiegetic, experiencing the world of the show from outside. When a character makes eye contact and/or initiates a one-on-one scene, a spectator temporarily becomes homodiegetic: the movement between these two modes might go towards drawing an audience member into immersive experience. Finally, above the audience members and performers in a Punchdrunk show, a vast and semi-anonymous character called 'Punchdrunk' might be said to function as omniscient heterodiegetic narrator.

Genette recognises there is a difference between the time of the story (the narrative) and the time of the *telling* of the story (the plot). Stories often begin *in media res* – halfway through the action – and the telling may include *analeptic* scenes which evoke events that went chronologically earlier in the larger narrative, and *proleptic* scenes which evoke events or action yet to come (40). Punchdrunk's larger shows certainly (seem to) begin *in media res*: both literally in that the productions often stagger the times of entry, and in sensation, in that scenes will often be encountered halfway through due to the logistical structure of the show.

In his discussion of narrative levels (228-31), Genette distinguishes between primary narrative and secondary narrative, also known as frame narrative and embedded narrative (this distinction is further clarified in Barry 2002: 235-7). The frame narrative is the wider setting or interpretive framework, or (cf Herman 2009) the storyworld. The secondary or embedded narrative is the story that is being told:

the sequence of events drawn from this wider storyworld; the plot. A character's looping scenes in *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man* is an embedded narrative within the larger frame narrative of the McKittrick Hotel and Temple Studios respectively; an audience member searching through drawers and reading letters will encounter hints at further narratives embedded in these larger framing storyworlds. These smaller instances of story could also be considered 'a narrative within a narrative' or a meta-narrative (Genette 1980: 228n), and it is possible for frame and embedded narratives to interplay. A frame narrative is 'intrusive' when it interrupts a secondary or embedded narrative. In the context of a Punchdrunk production, the sensation of an intrusive frame narrative might occur when solo exploration is interrupted, or an audience member suddenly comes upon a scene in the midst of the action. This movement between the frame narrative and various embedded narratives can either lower or raise barriers to immersive experience depending on whether they are experienced as a welcome or refreshing addition, or a rhythm-breaking interruption. Key here is that the audience member has control over the movement between these narrative modes.

Finally, Genette distinguishes between mimetic and diegetic narratives, or '*showing vs telling*' (162-70). In prose fiction the difference between mimetic and diegetic narration might manifest in direct speech 'vs' reported speech. Mimetic and diegetic are more useful terms as they lack the implicit value judgement of 'showing and telling'. The latter two are often more used in regards to prose fiction. In a Punchdrunk production I would consider the detailed performances of the actors and certain part of the set design (the ones adhering to the company's trademark 'cinematic realism' in their levels of detail, and in their replicating) to be functioning in mimetic mode; more abstract set designs or symbolic, extra-daily performances function as a diegetic demonstration of story events, emotions and themes. The actors in a Punchdrunk production are engaged in mimetic performance; the dancers are concerned with diegetic performance. Barry suggests that mimesis and diegesis 'need each other, and often work together so that the join between them can be difficult to discern' (2002: 232). In the context of a Punchdrunk production these two modes coexist in both performance and design, and the sensation of movement between these modes is what accounts for a richness of experience.

For Ricoeur, narrative and temporality have an important relationship:

the art of storytelling places the narrative 'in' time. The art of storytelling is not so much a way of reflecting on time as a way of taking it for granted. ([1970] 2000: 259-60)

Ricoeur defines *plot* as 'the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story'; a plot 'places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity' (259). The relationship between narrative time, event chronology and the structure of scenes in an immersive production can be considered as a means of creating immersion during the time in which the production takes place, as well as during events and scenes within the wider timeframe of the production. Key to this thesis' theorisation of immersive experience is its temporary nature; fleetingness and intensity too have a reciprocal relationship. The relationship between story-time and event-time is made explicit in immersive theatre where scenes may be experienced in any order; events which are significant in terms of the narrative of the story may not impact an individual audience member's own plotted course.

#### General discussion: immersive experience and the question of chronological order

Immersive experience, narrative and time have a reciprocal relationship that is characterised by an oscillation between differing states. Immersive experience is a fleeting state of engagement which might assume different forms and different levels of intensity. These can be considered in the context of Punchdrunk's arrangement of narrative events. Referring to *The Masque of the Red Death*, Babbage describes the relationship between the structure of the show and the arrangement of narrative events:

in place of controlled narrative composition, the company substitute event composition – and for that event to be possible, narrative 'wholeness' was sacrificed, perhaps gleefully abandoned. (2009: 17)

The organisation of the production was 'highly sophisticated' (17), and the elaborateness and level of detail within this structure might affect how an audience member engages with the story events in the production. Genette's concept of evocations that disrupt the chronology of a story's telling (analeptic and proleptic), in the context of immersive theatre, are scenes that are not deliberately intended to

reflect events that have happened or what are yet to come. A Punchdrunk production like *The Masque of the Red Death* or its similarly structured shows, such as *The Duchess of Malfi* considered later in this chapter, evoke the sensation of an overarching narrative architecture and an overall finite timeframe. Musical cues and repeated images may occur throughout the space, but whether scenes might be analeptic or proleptic in an audience member's own personal journey through a performance depend on when and where an audience member encounters them.

An audience member moves between the types of narrator identified by Genette, becoming during one-on-ones or other small interactions a homodiegetic participant who a performer temporarily treats as belonging to the story and the storyworld. After this, there would be a movement back to spend time as a heterodiegetic spectator who watches a scene or moment of performance, inside the world of the production physically but not actively belonging to the storyworld in the same way as the characters. These graded states of relationship within and to the production and its storyworld and characters might facilitate immersive experience. This movement between types of narrator – different states or levels of immersion – may be a barrier to immersive experience if the move between them occurs in a way that jars for an audience member. The sensation of being moved between states in a way that produces discomfort or disorientation, forcefully moved by an usher for example, would find the overall performance score affected by the immediate moment by moment sensation of navigating the space. The difference between mimetic and diegetic narrative modes of discourse also has the potential to affect immersive experience, and affect the relationship between immersive experience and story. As discussed above, a movement between these states might facilitate immersive experience more than either individually.

The concepts of frame and embedded narratives are interesting to consider in the context of chronology. Causality is an important aspect of narrative, and is what separates a story from a mere series of events. A potential problem with encountering Punchdrunk's structure of original story events out of order (or rather, re-cast and rehearsed in a new order, which in any case cannot be experienced all at once) is that a sense of causality is lost. The sense of this may depend on a performer's interpretation of their character's action loop. Some performers endeavour to create a sense of flow between each scene, and some move between

scenes in a more episodic manner. The sensation of one action naturally leading to another may become problematic if there is also a strong sense of a tightly organised performance score from which performers (and audience members) are unable to deviate. There is still a sense of causality, but this now occurs in the context of Punchdrunk's real-world production – drawing attention to the overall structure of events, scenes, characters and design – and away from the fictional *storyworld* that is being depicted within the production.

Ricoeur suggests that plot (the structure and organisation of story events) places a reader at a crossing point of temporality and narrativity. Physical moving through a performance space contributes to an immersive sense of chronology because we are always aware, not just of the character arcs or time spent in a single room or wandering through a certain space, but of the overall theatrical arc of the show. The show does not last forever, and an audience member gets to explore only within a finite time frame. The theatrical event has an endstopped chronology even as the actions within it occur on a loop and go through repetitions – the event is also likely to have a climactic ending the production and its performances are working towards. Just as immersive experience is not a felt/not felt binary, the sensation of moving between specific (immersive, finite) encounters and being aware of the wider (immersive, finite) theatrical arc of the show as a whole produces the richness of experience – it is the moving between these states of awareness that characterises immersive experience in the temporality of the production. Referring to Ricoeur's model of time a psychological formation, Erikson suggests that:

to refer to theatre as a 'time-based art' seems a misnomer, simply because it is not the case that performance is somehow based on or grounded 'in' time: rather performance actually *produces* time (or, if you will, a sense of time – but what's the difference?) for the audience through the principle of tension and release. ... if what Ricoeur says is true, then one can ask if producing an experience of time for the spectator and producing time for the spectator aren't in fact the same thing. (2012: 89)

Watching performance that appears to be occurring in a separate time (the fictional time of the *storyworld*) to the spectator's own time (the real-world time of the

*performance*) is a potential site of negotiation between immersion in the production and in narrative.

It is possible to consider the relationship between theatrical structure and chronology and in the context of cognitive science. The relationship between immersive experience and chronology, in this context, can be explained as a cognitive process. Hogan differentiates *story* and *discourse* in a way consistent with other discussions of narrative: 'A central distinction in narratology is that between story and discourse, what happens and the presentation of what happens' (2003: 115). The reader of a text is 'presented with an array of materials – partial, fragmentary, disordered, perhaps contradictory, untrustworthy, or irrelevant. From this, it is up to us to figure out "what happened"' (116). Hogan describes this process of making sense of a narrative as resulting from 'procedural schemas', 'cognitive structures of action [... that] allow us to construct the story from the discourse' (117). An important cognitive task as a reader or viewer of a text is 'assigning *significant* temporal relations' to a series of events (122: original emphasis). The temporality of story events is an important aspect of how a reader interprets a text at a cognitive level. A problem with considering the relationship between immersive experience and chronology in this context is that it risks an essentialist interpretation of audience/reader cognitive behaviour. Any event that requires a certain amount of cognitive behaviour is therefore immersive. This makes it difficult to distinguish between different kinds of engagement with the physical structure and chronology of a production; it is measured instead in the amount of cognitive behaviour that takes place. It also tends to collapse art and life into one; Hogan rightly notes that the cognitive work required to distinguish discourse and story is the same kind of work that occurs in a court jury sorting through evidence. It is difficult to consider procedural schemas in the context of theatrical performance as the cognitive behaviour is essentially the same.

Non-linearity may be theorised not as an aid to immersion as Hogan suggests – as the brain sorts discourse from story and creates the sensation of meaningful temporal relationships between events – but as a tantalising puzzle which might be explored further or solved. In the context of gaming the question of narrative immersion and sensory immersion is highly relevant to what a participant is immersed *in*. Real World Disassociation (RWD) can be a useful concept to help a

consideration of temporarily and the relationship between a source text's *storyworld*, Punchdrunk's *story*, and an audience member's *plot*. In the discussion above I have suggested that suddenly becoming aware of a real world element such as a black-masked usher, or feeling aware of fellow audience members, might jolt an audience member out of an immersive experience.

RWD is a phenomenon that occurs at high levels of immersion (Cairns et al 2006; Jennett et al 2008). At a high level of immersion, characterised by an extreme engagement or sensation of 'flow', reminders of the real world such as ushers and other audience members might not necessarily adversely affect an experience inside an immersive production. Bartley suggests '[t]he most pervasive form of limitation imposed on narrator-visitors in *Sleep No More* is the presence of Stewards' (2013: np), and these limitations by Punchdrunk might come into conflict with an audience member (or a narrator-visitor)'s own journey towards immersive experience in a Punchdrunk production: 'the narrator-visitor cannot escape the influence of Punchdrunk's restraints' (2013: np). Although this is the case, the concept of RWD can provide a theorisation for how distractions and difficulties might be spotted and then ignored (seemed insignificant to the audience member's plot through the production's storyworld), in order for immersive experience to continue in spite of an awareness of these limitations or restraints. RWD is useful to consider in the context of immersive performance and narrative because it provides a means to explain how an audience member might retain awareness of real world events and also continue to experience a sense of immersion in a fictional landscape. An audience member will have to negotiate with their immediate surroundings and retain immersion in the storyworld and the atmosphere (narrative immersion and sensory immersion respectively; both of which might provide immersive experience. An example from performance to illustrate this relationship could be drawn from many of Punchdrunk's productions: opening a door. Opening a door and entering a new space is an action that marks a liminal transition moment in an audience member's own personal narrative discourse or plot through the show. The action is also, of course, a literal one that is required to further the successful navigation of the physical structure of the show. It is an example of a logistical action required to further physical immersion in the production. But it also acts as a metaphor for a scene change, or a time change; it is a new event in an audience member's narrative discourse. In a

Punchdrunk production, immersive experience itself changes as you open a door and walk through. If this new room/space is as yet unknown, the moment demonstrates a very literal development in the audience member's own narrative score; from what they find, they will deduce a story or explore a wider storyworld that Punchdrunk performers enact in the space or that designers have embedded into the *mise-en-scene*. The seemingly ordinary action of opening a door becomes a metaphor for both physical and psychological narrative events. It is an example of content and form facilitating immersive experience simultaneously, as an immersive event and a story event.

#### Case studies: two immersive endings

*It Felt Like A Kiss* (2009) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (2010) had endings that demonstrate different relationships between immersion and the experience of story events. The former created a synthesis of story, plot and narrative that resulted in an effective relationship between time and immersive experience; the latter suffered from conflict between an audience member's physical journey-score through the production, and the company's design of the immersive space and the structure of story events.

An ending can be considered as two things: the final event, chronologically, that occurs in a story; or the final event, not necessarily chronologically, that is told in a plot or a narrative discourse. The two are often experienced simultaneously, when the telling of a story ends with the final event of that story; but distinguishing the difference allows consideration of narrative discourses that play with chronology. The ending of a *story* will be the last chronological event that occurs in the wider storyworld; the ending of a *plot* is the last event that a reader/audience member will experience.

The ending is the most important event in a narrative discourse. The ending – in both story and plot – only happens at the end of the story, and, most importantly *can* only happen at the end of the story. The ending event changes the world of the story irreversibly (McKee 1999). At the moment of its happening, the ending must seem surprising and the audience should not have been able to predict it with detailed accuracy ahead of time. But neither should it be inappropriate: once the final



event has been revealed, it must become clear that the whole of the previous story event has been leading up to it, and that in retrospect, the story could not have ended in any other way. As Ricoeur states, 'rather than being predictable, a conclusion has to be acceptable. Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions.' (1970; cited in McQuillan 2009: 259).

I want to conclude the discussion of immersive experience, narrative and time by considering the final events or scenes of these two productions. The first occurred in a show with a linear path; the audience were not led by any performers. Indeed, the show did not feature performers at all, with the exception of black-masked ushers, some performers in an ushering role (putting audience members into groups for the final scenes) and a single surprise performer during this final event. *It Felt Like A Kiss* had an ending that, like Ricoeur's description of a conclusion, was certainly not predictable, but was acceptable in the context of the rest of the narrative discourse. It maintained an internally coherent world. *The Duchess of Malfi* had an ending that followed the by-then trademark Punchdrunk finale which combined spectacle with narrative. The ending of this production was not as successful in creating immersive experience because its physical plot and its narrative plot were at odds with each other. First – a linear immersive narrative ending.

Punchdrunk's collaboration with Adam Curtis for the 2009 Manchester Festival *It Felt Like A Kiss* included a section which illustrates the description of an ending above being an event that changes the story and storyworld that has gone before. Images and sets echoed and repeated across the time and space of the production, and the ending used these to create a synthesis between narrative discourse and the audience's physical plot through the building.

The show began with a lift-ride to the top of the building, and the first rooms the audience wander through are the rooms they will encounter again later. The rooms depict an American household in the 1950s: bedroom, lounge, dining room. Beyond the dining room and outside the front door, the audience find themselves in the space that would indeed match the outside of this 50s dream house, even down to the picnic on the green lawn. These spaces are without people (although a mannequin watches the television screen in the lounge). A laudanum bottle, the

abandoned state of the picnic, and the sinister all-pervading soundscape made this moment in the show highly atmospheric, although not actively frightening.

Fast forward to the half-way 'interval' space, decorated like a high-school hall in turn decorated for the prom. This was where the Adam Curtis film *It Felt Like A Kiss* played on a continuous loop. Footage from this film occurs throughout the show, and the show also echoes the film in its spaces, settings and soundtrack. Specifically for this example, part of the film shows Doris Day opening a door; the number on the door is the same number of the door that leads an audience into the bedroom and then the living room of the house.

Fast-forward again to an event in the second half of the show. A group of nine audience members have been put together and sent through a human-sized rat maze, a climactic event of which is a high-speed and high-panic chase that felt straight out of the horror-schlock B-movie evoked in the show's earlier setting of a high-school prom. At the sound of the chainsaw, the group starts to run. They run out of the maze and find themselves travelling through a series of rooms: some of these rooms look exactly like rooms that were encountered earlier, although with some distinct changes. They run out of these and into another, bigger, rat maze for the show's climax proper; but this moment of running through familiar-and-yet-unfamiliar rooms illustrates a point about narrative endings, physical endings, and immersive experience.

During the first half of the show people went through at their own pace and in their own numbers. Now a group has been formed that has been through the first rat's-maze, and are running from the sound of a chainsaw. They run out of the maze. They run into the same rooms as before. A series of rooms with the exact same dimensions and overall layout as the American household they travelled through before. They are at this moment in the living room. The living room is different; it is messy, the furniture has been overturned. They have a moment to pause and breathe and assume that the chase is all over, perhaps that the worst is all over, when the television screen suggests that they run, and the chainsaw revs again. The group sprint out of the living room and into the dining room, through it without stopping, out of the house. Instead of a front-lawn with a picnic they are now in a moonlit forest. Running through this takes the group into the second rat's-maze area.

There is a while to go, yet, before they will find themselves running out of the building and the show is properly over; but these moments signal through their use of space that a finale is approaching via the combination of repetition and change. Although not the 'ending' in the sense that they occur during the final moments of the show – the final events, in the instance of *It Felt Like A Kiss*, was the series of moments in which the audience group is un-grouped and leave the building and the show as individuals (or stubbornly still holding on to someone, as I personally managed to do). But this moment of repetition in *It Felt Like A Kiss* created immersion in narrative by signalling a same-but-different story event that implied a relationship to time.

An ending occurs at the end because it changes the world of the story irreversibly. These moments of *It Felt Like A Kiss* did not occur during the last moments of the show and so might not be an ending in the strict temporal sense (that was the final rat's-maze passages), but these moments occurred closer to the show ending than when it was beginning. This is key to how the events signified immersive- and narrative- endings. When the audience first wandered through these rooms that made up the 50s house, the show was beginning. When they travelled through them perhaps two hours later, things had changed. They had 'been through' a lot. They had been through many different rooms, corridors, spaces; they had experienced roughly two hours of *It Felt Like A Kiss* to reach this point, maybe more.

Circumstances had changed. They were not with all of the same people they had come in with. They were in a heightened state of fear of agitation. They were running, very fast. They might have screamed, although if you ask them now they might deny it. The rooms had an identical layout, but were different in their decoration: the furniture was entirely gone from the dining room, leaving only the layout of the space to make it familiar. The tiny children's bedroom had been trashed; empty squares replaced the pictures on the walls. The space was the 'same', in the sense that the audience were running through the 'same' rooms. But the audience 'saw' it differently. The rooms looked different, but this was only partly because they were physically altered (messy, empty); the rooms were different because the way the audience saw it had changed; the audience saw it differently because of everything that had gone before. The repetition with differences enabled the audience to experience how much things had changed, in the multiple senses

listed above. They had come a long way. The audience saw the world differently, and not simply because there were different things to see. The irreversible change to the story's world, defined earlier as what makes for a satisfying ending, was physically and emotionally apparent. The design, structure and narrative of the show (both the storyworld and the audience's own plot) synthesised together to facilitate a highly intense immersive experience.

*It Felt Like A Kiss* created a physical narrative ending that was very satisfying as it achieved the same function as a narrative ending in terms of story and plot. Punchdrunk's later show *The Duchess of Malfi* (2010) is an interesting example of multiple narratives existing at cross-purposes within the same show and acting to raise barriers to immersive experience rather than to lower them. A narrative discourse of my own illustrates how the immersive plot and the narrative plot functioned without a satisfying synthesis.

The instructions at the beginning of the show were a mixture of invitational ('go where you wish') and didactic ('do not talk or remove your mask, do not touch the performers'), but they did not suggest a specific quest such as, in my case, finding the Duchess of Malfi. There seemed to be no right or correct way to navigate the space and no right or correct way to navigate the show. If it is possible to never see the Duchess, it becomes a barrier to immersion for an audience member to sense that finding the Duchess is the correct way to get the 'full' or 'best' experience of the show. Billington's review of *The Duchess of Malfi* described the process of immersive spectatorship as if it had begun with a sequence of clear instructions that had been deliberately snared by the theatre-makers: 'then you go in search of the nine scenes to which Webster's story has been reduced' (2010). The show did of course share the title with Webster's play and in doing so invited an engagement with its story. However, audience members were never told explicitly to 'go in search of the nine scenes', and a quest this specific will lead to disappointment when it remains uncompleted. It is much easier to see all of the scenes of a story when they are played in front of you one by one in the order the playwright put them. Naturally therefore, Billington found the production wanting; he called the show 'a fragmented, fitful experience that lacks the emotional intensity of a linear work of art' (2010).

The assumption of a quest to find all the scenes reveals preconceptions about the work, and assumptions about the way the work needed to be approached to get the best experience out of it. Billington's approach to the show meant that, in narrative terms, Punchdrunk were almost doomed to lose from the start. I would argue that the way Punchdrunk treated Webster's playtext did lead to an unfulfilling narrative experience, but not quite in the way Billington suggests.

As discussed earlier, an ending event happens at the end of a story because it irreversibly changes all that has gone before. A description of the show and an illustration from my personal plotting of the events of this production illustrate how immersion and narrative were at odds.

I didn't see the Duchess until the finale of *The Duchess Of Malfi*, and I believe this happened through no fault of my own. I simply never found myself in the same space as the performer. We wandered through the performance space and our paths never crossed. If at the beginning of the show I was told that my quest was to find her, then I might consider my not finding her a failing. If, as I was given my mask at the outset of the show, I had been told that it might be fruitful to find and then pursue the Duchess' own narrative journey (plotting my own course to make her *plot* and mine the same), I might look back on an encounter-less experience with the conclusion that it was my fault. I hadn't searched hard enough, or gone to the right place; I hadn't done the right thing to have the most satisfying experience. I might wish the show had provided more help, but I had known what I needed to do, and it was my own failing I hadn't done it. Before the show's finale I did not feel this was affecting my experience of the show adversely.

The finale of Punchdrunk's *The Duchess of Malfi* was a narrative ending as well as a finale of spectacle. It was also a finale of audience, as this moment was it was the first time the whole (very large) group occupied the same space. For an audience member unfamiliar with Webster's play (or one like myself, who had not seen the actress playing the Duchess at all that evening), watching this scene without an awareness of the play's story – of what was at stake for these characters – would be an unsatisfying experience. In the narrative of the show's spectacle, and design/musical score, it was certainly a grand finale. The audience were together for the first time; the orchestra was fully assembled; there was the final reveal, with a

huge musical flourish as the curtain was pulled, of the warehouse-sized space full of hanging cadavers. In this sense, it was easy to know what was happening – the spectacular finale – but in another, narrative sense, there could easily be less immediate understanding: what had just happened between those characters? (Who are they? Am I *supposed* to know?) I felt that if I had encountered the Duchess and learned more about her character, this finale would have meant more to me; it occurred to me that I might have done the show ‘wrong’. There didn’t seem to be much I could do about it. The instructions at the beginning of the show had been deliberately open and vague; the finale suggested that certain knowledge was required.

A further way in which this ending lacked an internal narrative coherence was in regards to the way the format of the show had been constructed and arranged before the finale took place. Looping individual characters’ journeys during the show suggested a notion that time itself was fractured and cyclical, that there was a relationship between the present and the past. This idea of cyclical time was negated by an ending event explicitly showing the death of a main character. As mentioned earlier, a satisfactory narrative ending such as that of *It Felt Like A Kiss* does change the storyworld. But the relationship between the story’s chronology and the show’s emphasis on repetition and history meant the emotional purpose of the finale was unclear.

The production as an adaptation of a pre-existing text also affects the relationship between narrative and immersive experience. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon proposes that ‘multiple versions of a story in fact exist laterally, not vertically: adaptations are derived from, ripped off from, but are not derivative or second-rate’ (2006: 169). Even without imposing a value judgement on the texts, an audience member’s understanding of the source text will affect how they engage with Punchdrunk own interpretation of the source text, and their composition and structure of its scenes and events. Aebischer and Price discuss *The Duchess of Malfi* in the context of contemporary adaptations of Jacobean drama, and suggest the production was in line with ‘a larger trend’ of responses to, and readings of, Webster’s play:

The co-production of *The Duchess of Malfi* by the ENO and Punchdrunk was representative of a larger trend, since it

emphasised the non-normative sexuality of the lycanthropic Ferdinand. [...] Here was a production that not only enshrined, but that was contingent on, an understanding of *The Duchess of Malfi* as a canonical text exploring alternative, 'queer' identities and sexualities. (2012: 2)

Writing about *The Masque of the Red Death*, an earlier Punchdrunk production that had a similar structural layout and logistical composition of looping scenes, and was also an adaptation of pre-existing text(s), Babbage comments that there were 'narratives in play here that derive neither from host nor ghost, but are brought by the spectators themselves' (2009: 16). An audience member's sense of themselves as a heterogietic narrator of their own plot within Punchdrunk's production will be affected by their relationship to the wider existing storyworld(s) of Webster or Poe. Babbage writes that Punchdrunk's 'fragile, hazy impressions of Poe's tales [...] left space for my own (pre)-readings' (18). *The Duchess of Malfi*, in contrast, demonstrated a clear interpretation of several themes and characters in the Webster's play, and this reading affected the relationship between narrative event, story event, and immersive experience in an audience member.

Optimum experience or 'flow' in the context of psychological peak experience occurs when problems can be easily overcome and there is a feeling of constant challenge and achievement. Clear, knowable goals and a sense of skills that can match them facilitate mental immersion. Assumptions of the 'goal' of an immersive production will influence how people approach the shows and navigate the space once inside. Narrative techniques can be used to draw on a larger *storyworld* (in this case, an existing Jacobean text) to create a *story* that an audience member navigates (the design, the layout of scenes, the performances by the singers, dancers and musicians), building their own *plot* or narrative discourse as they go (I saw *this* and then I saw *that*). The story events of the production and immersive experience events of the design and audience member's engagement with the production have a reciprocal relationship that, when they work together, results in a highly engaging experience. When they are perceived to be at odds they might result in frustration or disorientation, or a sense of anxiety over doing the right thing. For Ricoeur, narratives that evoke the concept of experiencing 'now' suggest a Heideggerian notion of making-present. Ricoeur suggests that 'These narratives [...]

represent a person acting, who orients him-or herself in circumstances he or she has not created, and who produces consequences he or she has not intended. This is indeed the time of the “now that...”, wherein a person is both abandoned and responsible at the same time’ ([1970] 2000: 261). The relationship between a sense of choice and/or freedom to wander in how an audience member engages with Punchdrunk’s narrative, and the inevitability of how that narrative is directed and designed to be enacted in the space – a relationship described as fundamental to ‘the Punchdrunk way’ in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter – destabilises linearity and causality in narrative. An audience member who finds narrative, chronology and immersion to be at odds with each other might feel something resembling this combination of abandonment and responsibility.

The last two chapters have discussed immersion and narrative using concepts from the fields of literary studies and philosophy. The next chapter in this narrative section uses a framework from the field of computer gaming, in order to explore one way of theorising immersive experience in a theatrical form that is close to gaming in several respects. The troubled relationship between narrative and ludology (the story of a game and the actual mechanics of playing that game) has been part of the field since its beginning. The question it asks is about what a player is immersed *in* – are they immersed in a story, or the game of finding that story? A very similar tension exists in immersive theatre. Punchdrunk’s larger productions can be read as games, approached as first-person adventures or with the addition of individual ludus rules (such as those proposed in *The Golden Amulets of Agnes*, a *Sleep No More* points system available online that rewards certain achievements or encounters). The chapter outlines the history of this ‘vs’ relationship between story and gameplay and applies it to an analysis of immersive experience in *Sleep No More*, a production which made its relationship to computer games even more explicit than usual.



## Chapter 6: immersion, narrative 'vs' ludology and *Sleep No More*

Just like television and film studies, and drama before it, the field of videogame/computer game studies met with resistance to legitimacy at its beginnings. It drew on literary studies and philosophy in order to establish itself as a form of academic enquiry. Early studies of the form suggested that games share traits with other earlier forms, such as theatre and literary studies (Lauren 1993 and Murray 1997 respectively). Games can therefore be considered alongside other narrative forms and via the theoretical concepts of these other art forms. This notion was met with resistance from scholars who later would come to be considered ludologists. Aarseth (1997) Juul (2001) and Frasca (2003) have argued that games are worthy of study not because of traits they share with pre-established forms. Computer games are not sub-films or not-quite-television and should not be read as such; they are a form all of their own capable of artistic and technical endeavours, and as such require their own specialised academic vocabulary and expertise to study them appropriately. What makes computer games an artform of their own is the gaming mechanics: puzzle, challenge, interactivity (with designed choices and procedures, and with quantifiable outcomes). Games' potential for immersion is concerned with cognitive, psychological immersion in the gaming mechanics and the present moment of play, not sensory immersion in detailed art design or emotional engagement in the arrangement of narrative events. Ludologists argue that games should be studied *as games*, not as a(nother) form of storytelling media.

The arguments of ludologists implied a binary relationship between ludologists and narratologists. Jenkins has referred to the relationship as 'a blood feud' ('Game Design as Narrative Architecture', 2002: np). This is an interesting development in the history of computer game studies, and can be drawn on when asking the question: what are players immersed *in*? Narratologists argue for games' abilities to tell stories and work with imagination and empathy, and suggest that games deserved to be considered in this context (Murray 1997). Ludologists suggest that the mechanics of gameplay are the most important aspect of studying games *as games*, and that this is the perspective that will reward enquiry (Aarseth, Juul). Later, Frasca referred to 'the non-existence of this ludological/narratological debate' and suggested that games scholars had never been actively hostile to the concept of studying games from a narratological perspective ('Ludologists love stories, too:

notes from a debate that never took place' 2003: 3). However, Ryan suggests that, although the debate 'may have been a one-sided affair, rather than a dialogue', it was never as neutral as Frasca retrospectively claims: 'if these articles [by Frasca, Aareseth and Juul] don't take a stance against the idea of games telling stories, what will it take to start a polemic?' (2006: 296). Both Ryan and Jenkins situate themselves in a more neutral position, proposing that both perspectives provide useful tools and frameworks for considering games. Ryan proposes a 'functional ludo-narrativism' that would allow both perspectives to be included in reading and analysis: 'By connecting the strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world, this approach should do justice to the dual nature of video games.' (2006: 291). Studies in the field no longer take a side in a 'blood feud', but have opened out to include many more nuanced perspectives on the relationship between games, gameplay and narrative. Although the ludological/narratological debate is no longer at the forefront of the field, as a theoretical binary it continues to provide a framework for analysing games (such as Atkins 2003, which contains readings of gaming mechanics as creators of implicit ideological narratives).

Whatever the relationship between these two schools of thought for games scholars, a theoretical model of narratology and ludology as a binary is a useful framework for thinking about immersive experience in theatre. This chapter considers immersive experience in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (McKittrick Hotel, New York: 2011-) in the context of this binary/debate. It will consider the production in performance and in relation to an experiment in 'remote and real world interconnected theatrical immersion' conducted between Punchdrunk and MIT Media Lab in 2012. This experiment involved turning *Sleep No More* into a (primarily text-based) computer game that could be experienced at a distance from the show itself. I 'played' the New York *Sleep No More* from London. The chapter considers immersive experience in the context of narrative/ludology and the transfer of *Sleep No More*'s story/characters/aesthetic (all subjects that would interest a narratologist) and the structure/framework/logistics (how you might 'play' the show – the domain of ludology) as the production was transferred and adapted between the two forms of theatre and game. The discussion draws on my own experience as a participant in the experiment in 'remote and real world interconnected theatrical immersion', and research drawn from feedback/reflection documents by members of the MIT team

who designed and operated the experiment in New York. I argue that the gameplay/narrative binary is a useful theorisation for considering how immersive experience might be created, maintained and situated in the work of Punchdrunk.

In the design and implementation of the project the team considered telic and paratelic gaming modes (Higgin 2012). Telic mode is when play consists of enjoying the movement towards a goal; paratelic is where satisfaction derives from play itself. In an important paper in the field of games studies, Bartle divides players into four personality 'types': Killers, Achievers, Socialisers and Explorers (1996). The approach to gameplay in the behaviour of each of these player types them a different relationship to immersive experience in the game. Killers and achievers are telic; socializers and explorers are paratelic. The former are engaged in goals, know their targets and work towards them, and have specific reasons for engagement in the game; immersion comes from this and can be quite clearly linked to the experience of psychological 'flow'; the latter enjoy a lack of goals and pursue the activity or game for its own sake (or for its social or outcomes that are outside the reward-remit of a game). The former play to win; the latter play to play. This theorisation is useful not just in the idea of personality types (Bartle's list was later expanded to eight types in reference to 3D/virtual reality gameplay [2003: 145]). The idea of an audience member's *character* (in the sense of personality as well as their taking on the role of a separate fictional being within a storyworld) creating behaviour that will result in different ways of engaging with a piece of work enables us to see how immersive experience can come about in different ways. It also provides context for a central argument of this thesis which is that immersive experience cannot be guaranteed by designers or makers, and it certainly cannot be forced; it can only be allowed for and facilitated.

Punchdrunk first experimented with a virtual and real world interconnected experience in a piece called *The Last Will* in 2008, the result of three months' research and development with Hide&Seek, HP Labs and Sleeper. 'Players working in pairs of two [one physically present in the performance/game space, and one via computer interface] had to collaborate in real time, linked by sensors, comms & actuation technology, to unlock the secrets and escape the house.' (Hide&Seek, 2008: np). The rooms had communicative 'rules' that, once understood, enabled meaningful play; the exploration and discovery of this grammar in itself was one of

the subjects of play. In 2011 Punchdrunk experimented with real/online interconnected immersion in a project worked with the Bluebeard story at Rose Bruford. In 2012, the MIT Media Lab project created an experience which occurred between an online player and an in-show counterpart. *Sleep No More* was experienced as a primarily text-based computer game for the virtual participants, and for the present audience members, an experience with added moments and equipment incorporated into their mask.

The live experience of *Sleep No More* involves a high level of sensory immersion, in a soundscape and sets that draw on light, design and scent. If sensory stimulation is considered to be a key aspect of immersion, to film the production would be possible, but would remove this important aspect of immersive experience. Watching back a film of the actual, physical experience of tracing a route through a Punchdrunk show would resemble going through a ghost train with a night-vision camera. It might allow for a straightforward description of 'what happened' but the atmosphere of being there would be lost. It might provide a sense of presence within a place, but could not be expected to provide an immersive experience within a fictional or theatrical world.

The MIT project as a whole had three strands: the first an experiment to make a world as visual, ephemeral, as viscerally immersive, as the show in real life; the second the goal of heightening the *Sleep No More* experience in the physical world, with more interactions and extra narratives for participants; and finally to find a way to connect these first two goals. The MIT project ultimately aimed to enable interaction between the two worlds and the experiences of the two participants – one in the real world and one elsewhere.

The system was designed to not be noticeable by other audience members, and to be as unobtrusive as possible to those wearing them. The system also had to work within the conventions of the production – i.e. that audience members do not talk, and wear masks. The result was a modified mask that contained speakers, bone conductors and access to Bluetooth technology in order to connect the onsite audience member to the Portal Objects in the production space, and connect them to the online participant. *Portal Objects* refers to the objects in the production that linked the in-show audience member to the remote participant. Portals included a typewriter, a mirror and Ouija board. The online participant was able to send

messages that would then be typed up by the typewriter, would appear on the mirror as if written by a ghost, and be spelled out on the Ouija board. *Operator* refers the controller of interactions between both participants.

The process of the experiment required a working definition of how a 'Punchdrunk/immersive experience' might be defined, described, and situated; with this definition in hand, it becomes possible to consider how it might be moved into a different format, and recreated in a virtual space. What aspects of immersive experience are required, and how might they be transferred across media, to create a Punchdrunk experience via an online computer interface for distant participants? The company disliked the limited perspective model of NTLive, in which the viewpoint of the cinema audience is decided by the camera, including cuts between performers and close-ups or whole shots of the stage. In addition, Higgin wrote that the project 'wasn't about plonking a camera on a real world participant and instructing them, drone-like, to move around the building. Instead, the challenge has been to recreate the infinite possibilities for journeys and experiences happening simultaneously across a Punchdrunk production' (the Guardian; 2012). The goal was for the online participants and the interconnected players, to have individual experiences and form their own narrative(s), as well as experiencing some moments as a pair. In this way participants in the project, whether in the show or accessing it via a computer interface, were able to decide on the direction of their gaze. The key element of a Punchdrunk immersive experience might be defined, then, as this sense of making a singular, individual journey through the world: a setup which invites a participant to make choices about their movements, and through this create individual narratives. Immersive experience is connected to narrative in the sense that an audience member is able to produce their own narrative discourse.

The atmosphere of the physical setting was also an important aspect of recreating *Sleep No More* in a virtual world. This could have been attempted by creating a highly detailed, 3D-rendered exact copy of the rooms in the real life show; instead, the online participants experiences the atmosphere and setting more impressionistically. The background was mostly black, new rooms and places were described with a few select details – a few sentences written in white across the screen, rather than large paragraphs attempting to describe it all and filling up the screen with words. Music was different for each setting; after a while playing in each space, it became possible to detect that the soundtrack was looping. The text-based-

game approach came about primarily because rendering *Sleep No More* accurately in computer graphics was economically inaccessible, but the sparser aesthetic had its advantages. A designer of the overall project, Peter Torpey, describes the role of imagery and language in the project and how its form was designed to work within the overall physical structure of the existing production:

I didn't want imagery to be an overwhelming or essential part of the online experience, focusing on the script's descriptions and the imagination of the online participant to fill in the vast extent of the story world. Borrowing the loop structure of *Sleep No More* itself, online users see no image content during the first loop, favouring a deprivation of visual sensation and the sense of darkness that is an essential part of the physical experience of *Sleep No More*. In the second loop, images appear for rooms where the participant's onsite partner has visited in either the first or second loop, as if to suggest that the online participant's character gains sensory abilities through the assistance of their onsite partner. (2012: np)

The decision to present the world of *Sleep No More* sparingly in the virtual space helped to enable immersion more than a highly detailed three dimensional render would have. Such a 'realistic' aesthetic might have accurately conveyed what the production looked like, and the experience of wandering through its spaces. But the text-based system with its occasional impressionistic images more accurately reflected the sensation of mystery and exploration that characterised immersive experience in the on-site production, and also the story that was created for the online participants of the project.

The story-logic script for the online participant was written by Elly Jessop and Jason Haas; this script was then used by the software system Cauldron to build the texts the online participant saw as they experienced in the project. Jessop comments on the relationship of the project's story and the story of *Sleep No More* itself: 'the experience for the online user seemed much more linear than a "normal" SNM experience. [...] The story they uncover is nonlinear, but the story they create is more linear' (2012: np).

Regarding the concept of linear and nonlinear narratives, it is useful to consider a model proposed by Jenkins of how gaming mechanics facilitate different sorts of narratives (again troubling the notion that narrative and ludology will always be in conflict). Jenkins notes that ‘game designers have historically been more interested in issues of level design than of plot or character motivation.’ A game’s setting or its notional character dynamics may be evocative of a narrative situation in (for example) *Monopoly* or *Super Mario*. But it is the mechanics of gameplay that is most memorable for players (2007: 56). However, he theorises that immersive gaming environments – visual worlds a player can wander around in and interact with – do facilitate ‘evoked’, ‘embedded’ and ‘emergent’ narratives to emerge through the gameplay, whether or not they were originally designed to do so. From this Jenkins suggests that game designers ought to consider themselves ‘narrative architects/texts’, who can manipulate space and gaming mechanics in order to allow for engagement with story events.

Jenkins offers a summary of how different types of storytelling might be facilitated by an immersive gaming environment:

environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in up to four different ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide staging ground on which narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives. (2007: 57)

These models are useful to consider in the context of Punchdrunk productions, which use a form of ‘environmental storytelling’. Punchdrunk productions can evoke existing texts, i.e. ‘narrative associations’ in the context of adaptation, with *Sleep No More* drawing particularly on Shakespeare and Hitchcock. They can also evoke ‘narrative associations’ in a more general storytelling context, such as, as I argued in the last chapter, opening a door functions as a narrative event in an audience member’s individual discourse. Performers enact narrative events, and the design of a space has story events embedded within its mise-en-scene and overall design. The terms might be usefully applied to considering the ways a structure of a production might provide gameplay/ludic elements and also suggest story events in

an audience member's individual discourse. Evoked or enacted narratives reveal themselves as the player crosses the space: events in the plot become events in space, which the player finds, comes across, or enacts themselves. The most useful type of narrative in the context of narrative/ludology is the embedded narrative:

an embedded narrative doesn't require a branching story structure, but rather depends on scrambling the pieces of a linear story and allowing us to reconstruct the plot through our acts of detection, speculation, exploration and decryption. (2007: 59)

This structure of narrative can imply a quest or a goal that might lend to an immersive gameplay experience.

Although the physical participant may choose to read a Punchdrunk production as a game, the online participant in the *Sleep No More* project was provided with more signifiers and tropes that explicitly suggested this form. This created the potential for a problematic relationship between gaming mechanics and the story that had been created as part of the project. The portals provided events of technical (ludic) achievement but were also intended to incorporate momentum of the online participant's narrative discourse through the project. Immersive experience for participants became less achievable when the portals were read as one thing more than another. Reading story elements or production events as part of a wider gameplay goal led to a breaking of immersion as the sense of 'failure' or 'being unsuccessful' overcame any sensation of putting a story together:

On the one hand, I think the storyline was a) really great and b) provided a hook for people on both sides of the experience to latch on to. On the other hand, I feel like people with a decent amount of game experience turned our ambiguous experience into a game in their minds and then felt poorly if/when they didn't succeed. ... In the online experience, I think perhaps being so tied to a classic gaming format may have done some damage as well. (Jason Haas)

Being too explicit about a clue iconography or a narrative deadline turns the experience into a quest. The real quest



should be connecting and sharing information with a partner.

(Peter Torpey)

Here the participants find the gaming mechanics to overpower the sense of narrative discourse, rather than finding narrative elements embedded within them or evoked by them.

Frasca (who was quoted at the beginning of this chapter arguing that there has never been a ludology/narrative debate) argues that ‘the biggest fallacy of “interactive narrative” is that it pretends to give freedom to the player while maintaining narrative coherence’ (2003: 229). He proposes that ‘traditional media’ (he cites literature and drama as examples) are fundamentally representational, rather than simulational as a game might be. This means these forms cannot truly provide ‘freedom’ for a player/reader, as the author/narrator decides in advance which events will occur. All that remains is for a reader to follow the author’s storyline. Juul also prioritises ludology over the storytelling capability of games, and suggests that games cannot be considered as a narrative form due to the relationship between storytelling, gameplay and time. Gaming happens in the present, even if the scene is nominally occurring in a moment of flashback in terms of the game’s structure and ordering of scenes; therefore gaming cannot achieve a sense of *narration* (and therefore cannot be analysed from the perspective of narratology), since it is impossible to narrate a story that has yet to reach its fulfilment:

[a] game constructs the story time as *synchronous* with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story is now. Now, not just in the sense that the viewing witnesses the events now, but in the sense that the events are happening now, and that what comes next is not yet determined.  
(2001: np)

These arguments presuppose an overly simplistic definition of the way drama and prose narratives tell stories. They assume that these forms deal with time and causality between events in a way that allows for no reader ‘freedom’. It is true that events are crafted and organised in these forms, but as I have argued, the creation of immersive experience in the moment is related to the interplay of a given event and an audience member/participant’s reading of, and reaction to, an event.

The sensation of immersive experience is always in the present – stories told about immersive experience, and memories or retellings of immersive experience evoke the present. Games do allow a player to influence outcomes, but only within the boundaries defined and maintained by the gaming mechanics. The *Sleep No More* project used this sense of the present and the incorporation of gameplay aspects to create an experience that happened in the present. The project was designed to allow participants the sensation of uncovering events in a gaming context (Portal Objects as puzzles), a story context (Portal Objects as storyworld items) and to lower the barriers to immersive experience in the sense of a fleeting, highly intense moment of engagement (interconnection and communication between the real world and the remote participant).

This use of hidden technology can be contextualised using the theory of barriers to immersion. Practical and equipment concerns are the very first barriers to immersion that need to be overcome to be immersed in any form of media. Overly cumbersome, difficult, or faulty technology would keep both real-world and online participants away from being able to play the game, never mind begin to become immersed in it. It would also affect audience members not involved in the project for the technology/game-within-game was too visible. The technology (as opposed to the physical aspects of the storyworld created by the project such as the Portal Objects or text descriptions of place) functioned as aids to the ludic gameplay and did not have any narrative importance in itself – the speakers, bone conductors etc. were intended to deliver the sensation of experiencing story events. A story was ‘hidden’ in online experience of the project, a story that was related to and grew out of the *Sleep No More* characters and setting but that didn’t require understanding of that for the story to be uncovered (for the benefit of the remote participants.) The online participant used the text interface to navigate through spaces (text-described spaces as opposed to a realistic image of 3D render) that were parallel to spaces in the McKittrick Hotel. They would occasionally be told they found an item or sensed a strange feeling of importance in the air. They would occasionally activate film footage of performance in New York. These moments when taken together aided in the gradual piecing together of the story, and the classic text-based adventure game framework, imagery and tropes suggested that solving this particular mystery was the quest or purpose of engaging in the project. The technology used in the project,

then, could be considered to be not a narrative element but a ludic one – the technology itself had little to do with the story of the project, but was the means to allow the participants of the project to access it. For this reason it was important the technology be as fault-free as possible, ultimately becoming invisible behind the effects it delivered. Textual descriptions of space helped to set the scene for the online participant; for the real-world participant, the portal connections served to enhance the ludic aspects of the game, but also served, as they were secreted within the real-world sets, to enhance the atmosphere and aesthetic of the physical show. A typewriter has much more stage presence than a laptop. The Portal Objects functioned as a means to enable the participants to connect with each other (a gameplay aspect) and to enhance the sensation of the storyworld they were both occupying (a narrative aspect). Setting and the design of spaces and mise-en-scene, referential music, and the overall atmosphere and colour palette in the Punchdrunk show operate as narrative. They create the wider storyworld, and embedded stories within them that an audience member can pick up as part of their own narrative discourse. Description in prose fiction can enable narrative immersion as it creates the sensation of a whole and internally coherent world.

Eyal Shahar was involved in designing and building the Portal Objects. Shahar's comments on the real world/online interconnected relationship of the participants hint at a further model of engagement, which involves a movement between different modes of experiencing immersive work:

In our project, we created three types of audience member – the online participant, the on-site audience member, and the audience member who was not aware of our experiment. How many types of experiences can there be? Do they have to be discrete, well-defined types, or can an audience member change, in a continuous, fluid manner, the type of experience? (2012: np.)

A 'fluid' participant might choose to connect and disconnect to other participants at different times, or begin in one mode and move to the other; such behaviour suggests a physical embodiment of 'ludo-narrativism' mode of engagement which would allow ludological and narratological aspects to facilitate immersive experience.

Jason Haas was involved in the design and development of the online experience and was involved in the project from the perspective of both the structure and organisation of the gaming mechanics and the design and arrangement of story events. He considered the Portal Objects to have a primarily ludological function: figuring out how they might be made to connect the two participants were 'puzzles that could make the people at home feel smart or efficacious while not actually being that complicated' (2012: np). These moments of explicit connection between the remote and real world participant (the former could send messages the latter would receive via the typewriter) were concerned more with ludology than narrative; they were designed to create immersive experience in the gaming mechanics by suggesting a positive correlation between challenge and skill. However, the Portal objects also functioned to facilitate narrative events. Peter Torpey comments on the role of the Grace story as a potential gap between real world and online participants:

Online participants had a role: they were Grace. The role or identity of the onsite person was unclear. It need not be more than a 'companion', but how do you create a sufficient identity for the onsite person that the online person then cares enough about them? (2012: np)

Torpey's question is a theatrical one about representation; the problem of immersive experience here is connected to narrative rather than gameplay. Empathy and the notion of character – an online participant functioning as a fictional character *within* the storyworld and story for the onsite participant to engage with as part of their own plot – imply immersion in narrative, not in ludological aspects of gameplay. The gaming mechanics facilitate this engagement but are not the main purpose of the experience.

### Concluding Discussion: games and stories – two kinds of treasure hunt

In Punchdrunk's *Masque of the Red Death*, the Gold Bug treasure hunt was incorporated into the show and allowed for different readings 'across' the space of the Battersea Arts Centre. Reading the BAC as a treasure hunt site might be considered problematically at odds with the more exploration-oriented movement of those without specific goals. Even the pace with which they moved through the space made Gold Bug chasers potentially detrimental to audience members who were not on the search, but wandering through rooms. Here the interpretive frameworks of the two pieces – immersive experience and treasure hunt – were at odds, and this was reflected in contrasting behaviour from spectators who were operating on these different interpretive frameworks. Reading this problem from a narrative/ludology perspective, the majority of experiences of *Masque of the Red Death* were narrative ones characterised by the exploratory, self-authored narrative made by a spectator's own moving through the space. Although taking them through rooms and/or story events in a nonchronological order, the experience of a Punchdrunk production can be considered a linear narrative experience from the audience members' perspective, as suggested in the previous chapter. This was occasionally in conflict with the ludology-framed challenge of playing the game of the Gold Bug, where the drive was to engage with the treasure hunt and rooms were moved through and searched for clues. The *Sleep No More* experiment aimed to reduce the possibility of audience members detracting from each other's experiences.

Having stated that Punchdrunk shows can be read as games, and that the MIT project resulted in a literal text-based computer game interface and format for its online participants, it may seem surprising that at the beginning of the MIT project, the company tried to not use a gaming perspective or computer game mechanics. The goal was to make the online experience exploratory and experiential. A potentially frustrating outcome of reading a Punchdrunk production as a game is its relationship to rules: a show that deliberately suggests there is no definite way, no correct method, to experience it, and yet does appear to 'reward' certain things or actions with hidden rooms or one-on-one experiences, might appear to be a game that does have rules that it is deliberately, perhaps unfairly, hiding them out of sight. The possibility of getting to a 'higher level' comes with the implication that it is

possible to fail to do this; winners imply losers. The relationship between gaming and narrative in how a Punchdrunk production might be experienced is articulated by Barrett and Doyle in an interview about *The Drowned Man*:

‘We’ve tried to invest in this idea from gaming that the further you unpeel the layers, the more secrets you’ll discover,’ she [Doyle] adds. ‘The show goes vertically down as well as horizontally,’ says Barrett. ‘You can follow the story of our Woyzeck and it will be a great night out or you can go vertically down, lift away the topsoil and get to the other, hidden narrative underneath.’ (2013, np.)

In this description of *The Drowned Man*, gaming is shown to influence how the show was put together and how audience members might experience it. A potentially problematic aspect of the non-linear structure of Punchdrunk’s larger productions is that it is impossible to see everything. Here it is suggested that there are different paths through *The Drowned Man*, literally of course in terms of which parts of the production to look at but also metaphorically, and in terms of how far ‘vertically down’ the route an audience member is able and/or willing to go. Coding these different layers of the production as narratives makes the relationship between ludology and narrativism a useful context to consider how immersive experience might be functioning in a Punchdrunk space. Not being able to see everything becomes an integral part of choosing to experience the show from a ludological perspective, as opposed to a problem that might arise if attempting to form a coherent narrative discourse that captures all of the production’s wider story and storyworld. Paratelic gaming is *meaningful play*, play for its own sake. Punchdrunk’s shows can be read for their use of gaming mechanics without necessarily evoking competitive notions of right or wrong, win or lose. Assumptions of specific goals within a production will influence an audience member’s experience: whether the goal is to find all the scenes, follow a specific character, wander, or something in the middle, the experience will be(come) immersive if the show rewards the chosen means of engagement.

The disorientating effect of Punchdrunk productions in both content (scenes out of order, mystifying one-on-ones) and form (darkness, maze-like spaces, getting lost) might mean it is difficult to remember, in retrospect, what moments came before or after other moments (with the exception, perhaps, of finale scenes). An audience member's movements, when considered as a linear journey with its own events and structure, are formed in the meeting place between decisions of what door to go through, and Punchdrunk's own choreography, direction and layout. The way these events are remembered might be one in which the whole experience merges together into a single three-hour long 'block' of immersive experience, with particular high points of specific scenes or high points of 'peak' experience or immersive activity. This is a similar way in which immersion in gaming is frequently defined: as being immersed in the activity of play for a long time with a few intense, climactic moments of peak experience. The state of mind in gamers who have been intensely immersed in play for a long period of time might be one that cannot, in retrospect, describe every event in the order they happened. The relationship between gaming and memory is suggested by Ryan:

For a game to inspire *specific* retellings, to be *narratively designed*, it must involve actions whose purpose is not just winning or losing, but fulfilling a concrete goal. [...]The greater our urge to tell stories about games, the stronger the suggestion that we *experienced the game narratively*. (2006: 284; original emphasis)

Punchdrunk productions create an urge to tell stories: sometimes more about the audience member's individual experience (the crafting of their own narrative score, their enjoyment or frustration with the mechanics and logistics) than an objective description of the storyworld or story Punchdrunk created. Immersive experience happens in the meeting place between the perspective of the individual and the sense of a larger production, and a longer narrative of Punchdrunk as a company. Considering an immersive production like *Sleep No More* (or, as in the next chapter, *The Drowned Man*) as a system that invites 'ludo-narrativism' allows a more nuanced perspective than considering the two perspectives to be a binary. Ludological elements can be read as purely that, such as Haams' reading of the purpose of Portal Objects. A problem arises, that raises a barrier to immersive

experience, if ludology and narrative appear to be at odds: if the sensation of following a specific quest is contradicted by the show's own invitation to wander.

A ludo-narrativist approach to immersive theatre allows for gaming mechanics and story elements to be considered separately but not to be taken as mutually exclusive. The question of what an audience member is being immersed *in* becomes a means to craft and structure immersive experience. Gordon's discussion of audience behaviour in the context of gaming mechanics in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* makes an interesting connection to the kind of game *Sleep No More* resembles, and the notion of linking two participants (the real-world and the long-distance):

the classic adventure/quest games that are the closest model for Punchdrunk's immersive environments are typically *not* played as networked multiple player games. The behavior of other players in these frameworks is distracting and incongruous (unlike in first person shoot 'em ups) precisely because, unless the game is simulating a search-and-ransack, the behavior of players (trying every door and drawer) clearly denies immersion. Modeled on this type of game, Punchdrunk's website reinforces an immersion in task, rather than environment. (Gordon, 2012n: np.)

Gordon correctly identifies that the mechanics of play in the physical *Sleep No More* environment and the virtual game world created as part of the MIT project are suggestive of two different types of games, each with different gaming mechanics and the potential to immerse in different ways. 'Trying every door and drawer' would be precisely what creates (or at least, facilitates) immersion in a first-person exploratory adventure/quest game, which is what the physical structure of the production resembles. In connected play, the behaviour of other 'players' (audience members) becomes the site for potential barriers to immersion. A final comment about the *Sleep No More* project by Brian Mayton, an engineer involved in the technology design and operation, suggests the importance of individual experience as to whether events are read from the perspective of gaming mechanics or as invitations to engage in a storyworld:



It was a lot of fun to watch when a successful portal interaction happened. [...] I think it's definitely a success that the majority of the participants reported that they felt like they were getting a special experience, that things were happening *just for them* (2012, np: original emphasis).

This comment implies that, whether it is narratology or ludology that engages an audience member in the original play, the illusion of individuality (for both players) and the sensation of presence in a space (for the long-distance player) are even more important aspects of what is deemed a 'successful' immersive experience. Connection between 'players' becomes a site for immersive experience, as opposed to the solitary journeys implied by the production's physical environment.

Coda: 'Level design is more like theatre design than anything'

We're experimenting with technology, with wearables, with how you can almost make a theatre *playable*... (Barrett, 2014: talk at 'Experience Economy' Remix Summit)

This chapter focused on Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* MIT project – an explicit site of interplay between immersive theatre and computer game forms – to consider the relationship between immersion, gameplay and story. The project is one event in a history of overlap between theatre and game for the company. Earlier productions, particularly *The Masque of the Red Death*, contained gaming aspects (the incorporated *Gold-Bug* treasure hunt), its exploratory/sandbox design and audience invitation reminiscent of adventure/quest games in itself. This chapter has offered a theoretical framework for thinking about the relationship between the immersive potential of both theatre and games. The overlap between the two forms has been commented on (Dickinson 2011; McMullan 2014), and a recent interview with a game designer shows influence going both ways. Gaynor wrote *Gone Home*, a game 'directly influenced by *Sleep No More*':

Just as in a Punchdrunk production, players in *Gone Home* are let loose in a beautifully-realised world - in this case, a suburban family home in the mid-1990s - and tasked with discovering its stories and secrets for themselves. And, just as

in a Punchdrunk production, players are unable to influence the story, but are instead given a great deal of freedom over how they choose to unearth it. "Level design is more like theatre design than anything," notes Steve Gaynor. "Because when you're designing a space to be playable, you have to design it in the same way that someone designs a stage, where there could be someone on the balcony, there could be someone up front on the left, or on the right. Especially something like [The Drowned Man]. I mean, this entire experience is level design. Lighting directs you to stuff that's important, there are main thoroughfares, etc. This is a videogame level, period." (Jakob-Hoff, 2014: np)

Punchdrunk's plans for future exploration also suggest that the trajectory of enquiry raised by this chapter might continue:

Barrett and his team are currently looking closely at how they can exploit more explicit game mechanics in future productions. Earlier shows like *The Masque of the Red Death* and *Sleep No More* experimented with puzzle solving and treasure hunts, but Barrett feels these game-like elements disturbed the balance of the show too much. 'I think we've learned that one discipline has to be your lead - so with *The Drowned Man*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, it's theatre. We started putting game mechanics into it, putting a square peg into a round hole, and it didn't quite fit. So I think if we were to do a project using game mechanics now, it would be a game primarily.

'Now we're aware of games, and the similarities, and the similar aspirations, we've literally started to break down game mechanics and just take them out.' He is interested in how casual games like *Clash of Clans* or *Candy Crush Saga* balance accessibility with a 'level of difficulty that stays just attainable. How do you do that theatrically? [...] What I'm fascinated by is: what happens when you level up? What happens when you know that you can only access this room

and this one-on-one when you're a level five player?' (Barrett in Jakob-Hoff 2014: np)

The theoretical concepts discussed in this chapter might enable such explorations into the relationship between gaming mechanics and immersive experience in performance that are hinted at here. The aspects of gaming raised by Barrett, 'levelling up' and gradually increasing levels of difficulty, are concepts that potentially facilitate immersion or create barriers to it. They are evocative of the psychological state of mental immersion or 'flow', partly defined by experiencing a positive correlation between a player's sense of challenge and the sense that they have the skills required to match it. These aspects are the domain of ludology and might, as Gordon suggests, deny immersion to other 'players', who, for whatever reason, are not level five. The relationship between ludic and narrative elements, as theorised in this chapter, is not one of straightforward opposition (as is also hinted at above). The approaches to structure and forms of gaming present in *The Masque of the Red Death*, *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man* overlapped with theatrical elements, and the results could be interpreted as being out of balance, creating barriers to immersive experience (to draw on Gordon's theorisation, one player's immersion in *task* becomes detrimental to another spectator's immersion in *environment*). This chapter suggests that ludology and narrative are not always mutually exclusive. As overlapping or interplaying approaches, a ludo-narrativist approach to immersive theatre provides a theoretical framework for considering how future productions might be crafted to contain gaming elements and/or narrative elements, without throwing the two out of balance.

Chapter 7: environment and immersion: 'steer your own course'

Punchdrunk's Barrett admits that he's not a fan of the term 'immersive theatre'. 'We would never use it ourselves, although I'm delighted if our audiences are totally immersed,' he says. 'We used to call it "site sympathetic" – because it's all about the building.' (Masters 2013: np)

I urge each of you to steer your own course. Tonight, your bearing shapes your fate. (*The Drowned Man* voiceover)

This chapter examines the relationship between immersive experience and environment. It is focused on immersion in a physical space: the site of performance and the environment created by Punchdrunk within and on that site. I define the production space as the environment in which narrative events are enacted, and where interactivity takes place; and this relationship between performer, spectator and space is one of the ways a production might be considered 'immersive' – everything happens in a confined, finite site with clear boundaries. The chapter is interested in immersion in the site/building/space of a Punchdrunk show – both the found setting (the original building) and designed set (the atmosphere, design, mise-en-scene etc., created and installed by the company.) This chapter is therefore interested with what immersion means in a physical, spatial sense: while acknowledging that environment and narrative are connected (see Horton 2003 on geography and/as narrative power), this chapter defines immersive experience as the product of site. The chapter begins by discussing concepts from cognitive studies and neurobiology that could be applied to immersion in a multisensory environment. I then consider theoretical frameworks from the field of performance studies, in particular site-specific performance and environmental theatre, which the main body of this chapter draws on. I consider the relationship between environment and immersive experience in relation to two Punchdrunk case studies: *The Borough* (Aldeburgh, 2013) and *The Drowned Man* (31 London Street/Temple Studios, 2013-4). Both shows negotiate a complex relationship between the original site of performance and the fictional 'world' created by Punchdrunk within and/or on this site, and between the spectator and the performance space.

### Immersion and environment in cognitive studies and neurobiology

The notion of a clear Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind has been discredited (Varela et al 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Turner and Fauconnier 2003), and McConachie explicitly applies this to the field of theatre and performance: 'The mind is embodied.' (2013: 1) The way we perceive, think and act in the world is connected to the way our bodies evolved as part of the earth. Cognitive studies has been applied to theatre and performance (McConachie and Hart 2010; McConachie 2008 and 2013; Blair 2008; Cook 2010; Lutterbie 2011), and immersive experience can be considered at the level of brain activity and its effects on the body. Environment in the context of this field can be defined as the stimulus to which the body reacts.

Cognitive enquiry is particularly attractive as a field through which to consider more ephemeral aspects of theatregoing, since they can be attributed to equally ephemeral but very real brain activity that can be recorded and tracked: immersive experience when defined as a cognitive/psychological phenomenon (high engagement, emotional investment, rapt attention), sensory stimulation, emotion, empathy, or make-believe. The idea of 'make-believe' is connected to the notion of conceptual blending, a theory concerned with the way in which an audience member is able to hold multiple truths or images in her mind. Conceptual blending and make-believe can also be applied to audiences: 'Spectators also engage in conceptual integration' (McConachie 2013: 23), blending the actor's performance with their own concepts. These concepts might include the actor, the space, or (as in Carlson 2003) memories of earlier theatrical experiences. Conceptual blending can be used to suggest how immersion in the experience of performance might manifest, and seems to provide a cognitive explanation for Rebellato's discussion of how we are able to conceive an actor and a character at the same time (2009). Rebellato does not use cognitive studies directly but considers the problem of blending and believing in theatre, suggesting that theatrical representation ultimately functions as metaphor. An audience member can hold two (or more) concepts in mind, and blend them, because in the moment one concept 'is' the other. One acts (literally) as a metaphor for the other. This chapter does not draw on cognitive studies directly as it can lead to an essentialist discussion of whether or not something is immersive; but notions of blending and make-believe are useful in the context of the relationship between a 'real' and 'fictional' environment, and how those fictional environments are created.

An outline of recent cognitive approaches to multisensory stimulus clarifies my approach further.

Di Benedetto (2010) considers the role of the senses in contemporary theatre from a primarily cognitive/neurobiological approach. Welton (2012) uses a phenomenological perspective to consider feelings and emotion in theatre, particularly connected to sensory stimulus such as being in the dark. Di Benedetto uses a multidisciplinary approach to the theatrical event, drawing on cognitive science, neurology and phenomenology to consider how theatre stimulates the senses. He considers visual perception, olfaction and aural stimulation (noise, vibrations, etc.) and physical touch. The provocation of the senses in theatre is considered at a cellular level: empathy, for example, can be illustrated at the level of the brain by the fact that seeing two performers slap each other on stage will make the same mirror neurons associated with that action fire in a spectator's brain (76). The concept of mirror neurons can be used as a means to discuss the sensation of being highly immersed in a performance, or in a theatrical environment. Immersive experience in Punchdrunk productions could certainly be considered from the perspective of appeals to multiple senses in the created environment: light/darkness and olfactory stimulation as well as the physical structure of their spaces and detail of mise en scene create an overwhelmingly 'total' effect that seems designed to allow for immersive experience at a cognitive level. Indeed, the stimulation of multiple senses in response to a surrounding environment could be considered a defining aspect of immersive theatre: McKinney and Butterworth (2009) note that many reviews of *The Masque of the Red Death* mention multiple scenic details, describing as they review. This multi-sensory aspect could be considered from a neurobiological or cognitive perspective: it would be possible to track the individual brain activity when someone is afraid or excited, or when smelling roses or embalming fluid, and a positive consequence of this approach would be the levels of (physical, atomically precise) detail that could be reached. Punchdrunk productions might be considered using the field of cognition as Cook (2010) does, opening up new areas for analysis and conclusions about experience to be made at the level of the brain. A phenomenological approach to darkness and quietness could also be applied to immersion in the work of Punchdrunk.

A cognitive or neurobiological approach to considering immersion and environment has some problematic consequences. The primary risk is one of reductionism. The political and social consequences of any theatregoing experience become inconsequential as response becomes instinctive flashes of our animal brains that would be near-identical from person to person. Cognitive studies and neurobiology allow for unprecedented levels of inquiry and scientific detail. However, the technological advances that have given us cognitive studies and neurobiological approaches to theatre and performance are limited in terms of how they might explain certain aspects of theatregoing, particularly political and social ones. Studies of performance that draw on cognitive science do not imply that cognition is the only approach to adopt; Cook (2010) states early on that cognitive science does not separate body from mind (3-4) and draws on cultural contexts in her analysis. Sensual perception is an important aspect of theatre, particularly the work of Punchdrunk which attempt to stimulate the senses and feelings of its audience members to create intense engagement. But adopting the approach risks a reductive description of the process of theatre, implying theatre makers create work with the audience member's brain cells in mind. For example, Di Benedetto considers 'the ways in which theatre practitioners have manipulated physiological traits to keep us stimulated and interested in what is happening on stage' (2010: xi). Drawing on cognitive studies or neurobiology to analyse the effects of performance risks making reductive conclusions; a performance is deemed immersive due to the way it affects the brain. Suggesting theatrical effects are achieved because the work affects specific cells or instincts or muscles or parts of the brain is technically accurate, but is ultimately a flawed model for considering the experience of individuals, and one that does not allow for theatrical experience as cultural construct. This chapter is particularly interested in the constructed environment Punchdrunk creates, and the interplay between this environment and the real-world site in/on which Punchdrunk's world was created. While remaining aware of the potential for examining immersive experience in response to sensory stimulation, this chapter adopts a theoretical framework drawn from theatre and performance studies, and in particular site-specificity, in order to explore the relationship between immersion and environment.

### Immersion and environment in theatre and performance studies

The concept of memory provides a bridge between neuroscience and performance studies. Carlson (2003) considers the importance of memory on performance reception. A spectator's memories – of earlier performances, productions, individual performers – affect how a performance is received. These memories 'ghost' the current performance being experienced and influence a spectator's response. Site-specific work deliberately incorporates the resonances of the pre-existing performance site:

In [site-specific] productions, already written texts are placed in locations outside conventional theatres that are expected to provide appropriate ghostings in the minds of the audience, or, in more extreme cases, new works are created that are directly inspired by the extratheatrical associations of these locations. (2003: 134)

Responses that evoke memories of previous experiences can occur in any performance space: as Carlson comments, 'how important for us, and yet how underrated, are the ghosts of our previous theatregoing. ... any theatrical production weaves a ghostly tapestry for its audience' (164-5). But site-specific or site-sympathetic theatre 'all about the building' is particularly interesting to consider in this framework. The concept of the *ghost* begins to take on multiple meanings: in Carlson's model memories are ghosts which haunt a current production; in the field of site-specific theatre the production itself is the 'ghost' that haunts the 'host' of the performance site (see discussion of Pearson 2010, below). The word *ghosts* takes on a further meaning in the context of Punchdrunk, who have described the mask as a device that allows the audience to 'become ghosts walking through the building' (Barrett in Sooke 2007), and this sensation of not-quite-belonging to the environment continues themes of transgression and exploration that Punchdrunk have characterised as being part of the excitement of immersive experience. This chapter draws on the site-specific model of host and ghost when using the term, but the concept of memory influencing spectatorship becomes interesting to consider in the context of multiple visits to either the same Punchdrunk show, or to multiple Punchdrunk shows across their years of making work. Perspectives on site-specific



theatre and environmental theatre provide the theoretical frameworks and research questions that are applied to the case studies.

The relationship between environment and spectator can be a site for ethical enquiry. The consequences of ambulatory or otherwise active audiences are considered by Zaiontz, who notes that audience members within site-specific performance events 'often serve as the equivalent of an "animate" *mise en scene*' (2012: 167). The spectators bring a spatial dimension to the theatrical environment and function as co-creators or facilitators of the work as well as being spectators. Zaiontz suggests such encounters build a sense of role or responsibility within the production and can lead to an environment in which 'strangers produce binding ethical relationships with each other' (167). Considering subjectivity in so-called intimate theatre practice, Iball also brings up the possibility of considering the politics of individuals and relationships, noting that 'there is evidence of UK-based practitioners using site-specific strategies for an ethical imagining of audience participation' (2012: 201). The effects of considering audience members as individuals has an effect on the sensation of an audience as a whole group, especially if the structure of the show enables spectators to be aware of each other.

Pearson (2010) draws on examples from work and issues invitations for further practice, rather than proposing a definition of site-specific performance. An 'immersive' model is a suggested means for the reader to imagine themselves into a site. The relationship between performance and environment can be considered in reference to a defined geographical area, approaching the work 'horizontally across the terrain and simultaneously vertically through time: performance becomes a topographic phenomenon of both natural history and local history' (2006: 3). Drawing on methodologies and metaphors of archaeology and geology (excursions; strata), and social sciences, Pearson considers 'performance and landscape, biography and locality, memory and place' (2006: 3). The concepts of memory, history and ghosts provide suggest ways a spectator or audience member might become immersed in an environment. This thesis theorises immersive experience as a specific, time-bound (temporary) state, and also as a non-binary state that can be experienced at varying levels of intensity. Memory, history and ghosts contribute to this model of immersive experience as a series of graded states as they complicate the idea that a spectator might be completely 'lost' in a created theatrical world. Instead of

completely forgetting about ‘the real world’, memories of previous performances or an awareness of the history of the performance space contribute to an experience of immersion. They throw the temporary nature of the created environment into further relief.

The theorisation of the host and the ghost is very useful for considering the role of environment in immersive experience. Pearson credits McLucas of Brith Gof as first theorising the host and the ghost in the early 1990s:

[McLucas began to] characterize site-specific performance as the coexistence and overlay of two basic sets of architectures: those of the extant building or what he called the *host*, that which is *at site* – and those of the constructed scenography and performance, or the *ghost*, that which is temporarily brought *to site*. (Pearson 2012: 70)

Other metaphors of making in site-specific work are bricolage (Pearson 2010: 119) and palimpsest (Turner, 2004: 373; Kaye, 2000: 11), and as Kaye notes, ‘site-specific art frequently works to *trouble* the oppositions between the site and the work’ (2000: 11). The theorisation of the host and ghost provides a useful framework for considering the ways Punchdrunk use existing buildings and spaces to create their production environments. The case studies in this chapter consider the relationship between what is already *at site* and what Punchdrunk brings *to site* in order to enable immersive experience. *Environment* can refer to both the original host and the Punchdrunk ghost, and this chapter suggests that it is the interplay between an awareness of the pre-existing first site and consciousness of Punchdrunk’s creation of the other site that contributes to theatrical immersion.

As mentioned above, Pearson resists providing a rigid definition of site-specific work. Hodge (in Wilkie 2002: 150) offers a continuum of site-specific performance ‘types’: at one extreme is performance *in a theatre building*; then *outside theatre* (i.e. outdoor Shakespeare); *site-sympathetic* work is an ‘existing performance text physicalized in a selected site’; *site-generic* work is ‘performance generated for a series of like sites’ (i.e. car parks, swimming pools); at the other end of the scale is *site-specific* work, which is ‘performance specifically generated from/for one selected site.’ The continuum lists common features, methods or techniques which may occur in site-specific work in order to reveal ‘layers of the site’,

including: historical documentation; found text, objects, actions, sounds; personal association; and site morphology, physical and vocal explorations of site.

Drawing on these models it is possible to conclude that Punchdrunk shows are not site-specific, and furthermore that the work of Punchdrunk tends to resist readings from the perspectives of local history or individual memory. Hunter provides a useful perspective on the importance of influence and affect in the creation of site-specific dance performance, based on a model of a reciprocal relationship between choreographer/dancer, the space of performance, and a spectator watching: 'interaction between site, performance and observer results in the creation of a new "space", the conceptual space of performance, which exists only temporarily, yet brings a new dimension to the architectural location' (2009: 413). Site-specific dance takes influence from its location, and also has the potential to influence how that location is perceived. Hunter's definition of site-specificity emphasises the importance of the original environment: in site-specific theatre,

There is a specific interdependence between the site and the performance. Move the performance from the location and its significance will be either lost completely or weakened dramatically. (Hunter 2009: 399)

Barrett has commented on both the temptations and the possible difficulties of moving *The Drowned Man* to a new host location:

'I'd love to do Drowned Man again in a different building,' Barrett says. 'It would evolve hugely due to the findings we've made this iteration. [...] But I don't think it would be possible for us to replicate a show somewhere else. In fact, it's not. Physically, there's always going to be different buildings, different flows, different tempos, different atmosphere.' (In Jakob-Hoff 2014: np)

The possibility that an immersive theatre production could theoretically be moved raises further questions about the appropriateness of the site-specific or sympathetic designation. *The Borough* couldn't move without considerable changes to the performance text, and certain resonances of the setting would be lost, as is built into and requires the landscape of Aldeburgh. *The Drowned Man* is dependent on its host building for its physical layout and structure, but the world created is self-

sufficient and could, theoretically, be moved without significant changes to the content: the spaces that were inspired by the original building could be recreated in another. As Hunter suggests, ‘works [that move, even between unconventional performance spaces] cannot be deemed “site-specific” in the true sense of the word as the essence of the work remains constant from location to location’ (Hunter 2009: 408). My discussion of the case studies in this chapter remains aware of this tension between original site and created environment. A question addressed in this chapter is whether it is purely in the created world that a spectator becomes immersed, or whether it is the interplay between the sensation of the original host environment and the theatrical ghost that creates immersive experience.

Schechner’s ‘Six Axioms for Environmental Theater’ (1967; revised 1987) are particularly relevant to a discussion of the relationship between immersive experience and the space of performance. The axioms emphasise a reciprocal relationship between the space and the gaze of a spectator:

1. The theatrical event is a set of related transactions;
2. All the space is used for the performance;
3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in ‘found space’;
4. Focus is flexible and variable;
5. All production elements speak their own language;
6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no verbal text at all.

(1973; 1994: ix-li)

For Schechner, a relationship between, and dialogue across, the space, performers and audience are central to the creation of the performance itself. Interactions between audience members, and between audience members and performers, are part of the energy of the performance. Unplanned moments of conflict or tension in the space also contribute to energy and atmosphere as much as rehearsed events. Environment, performance, and audience behaviour are allowed, or even invited, to inform and affect each other. Harding and Rosenthal (2011) suggest ‘the highly controversial and now legendary production of *Dionysus in 69*’ could be considered ‘the quintessential environmental theatre piece’ which ‘exploded the boundaries between performers and spectators.’ (5) Bottoms criticises Schechner’s distrust of

mainstream/legitimate theatre, suggesting that such formulations result in problematic binaries between 'drama' and 'performance'; he also notes that the quintessential environmental theatre piece *Dionysus in 69* was branded, packaged and sold to a similar extent as any other successful piece of mainstream theatre (in Harding and Rosenthal 2011: 23-38).

Considering immersion and environment from a performance studies perspective raises questions of freedom(s) and agency: troubling the boundaries between performer and spectator raises questions concerning the creation of performance; the manipulation of an audience's and performers' movement in the space; the role of structure, design and direction; but also on a more personal level of individual wellbeing. A social assumption of space in Environmental Theatre is that it is fundamentally more democratic for its audience. There are no 'best' seats with an officially sanctioned better view, a system in opposition to theatre's long history of segregated seating. Instead the audience can control its own view, directing its own gaze and how (multi- or local-focus – the fourth axiom) it looks. This assertion might not sit easily with the possibilities of discomfort or manipulation suggested by moments of tension in performance. It is possible for theatre of this type to have a segregated pricing system as *Dionysus in 69* did originally (Bottoms 2011: 30), or to fall victim to audience behaviours that affect the experience of others, resulting in a 'better' view for some than others. Clapp's review of *The Drowned Man* proposed that, since Punchdrunk's earlier shows, their audience has changed more than their work, and the behaviour of people who knew how they wanted to go about experiencing the show could easily be distinguished from 'newcomers' (2013: np). This affected the experience of *The Drowned Man* as much as the scenographic elements of the show itself: behaviours within an apparently democratic performance space might begin to recreate oppressive or problematic behaviours that draw on knowledge from outside the performance space.

The ideology implicit in the performance studies approach to environmental theatre by Schechner is concerned with the agency of individual spectators and performers. A wider approach to environmental theatre allows for social and cultural contexts of a theatrical event to be considered. Aronson suggests the defining trait of environmental theatre is 'any form of theatre in which a spectator cannot apprehend the total performance space within the normal frontal lines of vision' and suggests

that '[a]udience incorporation may be achieved in several ways and in varying degrees' (2012). Environmental theatre forefronts the relationship between actors, audiences, and the space of performance: a general truism of environmental theatre is that the audience and the performers occupy the same space: there is no 'make-believe' that the performers are elsewhere. Environmental theatre works to diminish the literal distance between audience and performers; the question therefore becomes one of whether a fictional distance is maintained. The anonymous masked audience members of Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* are in many ways distant from the performers they are close to and distant from the environment they temporarily inhabit: the rules of the mask (no touching, no talking) and the performance style of the performers (ignoring the audience members except during one-on-one scenes) emphasise this distance within physical proximity.

Aronson traces environmental theatre's lineage back to 'processional and church-based productions of medieval theatre in Europe, as well as many forms of traditional Asian theatre and various folk performances', and notes that the use of the environment in productions might be created by the manipulation of atmosphere only, or involve a more drastic (re)structuring or organisation of the space. In this way, pageants, processions and parades can also be considered environmental theatre. A spectator cannot take the entire event in at once, and the route through the city is part of the event and therefore the background/setting of the event takes on theatrical significance of its own. Wiles proposes that the political implications of civic processional events are connected to the shape of the route through the environment: 'The spatial order is an order of power. A linear movement through the streets defines the shape and order of the town and of its processing inhabitants' (2003: 21). A sense of immersion in these contexts begins to blend with ideas of inclusion, belonging to a particular group or community, or the idea of patriotism. These can all be exclusive or troublesome if celebrated in a manner oppressive to groups that are deemed 'other'. If environmental theatre has in its lineage this kind of civic or political event, the purpose of audience inclusion into the work takes on extra resonance. Promenade and environmental theatre takes place on a smaller scale than civic processions, but the political implications of a single defined route or strictly demarcated performance space suggest, rather than the freedom of audience members invited to wander, the power of the makers to demarcate the space. Work

that seeks to remove any sense of distance between spectators and performers, and the idea of an active relationship between the original space of performance and what is brought to it, are given a greater social weight, and a role of responsibility for performance makers.

Also interesting for the implications of immersion and environment is environmental theatre's relationship with illusion and fiction. As already mentioned, the audience's incorporation into the production is a central aspect of the form in whatever way this incorporation manifests, either being merely allowed to wander or given greater freedom for interaction or co-creation. Although occasionally environmental theatre is used to achieve levels of greater levels of naturalism, Aronson notes that 'More often artists have used environmental staging as a *means of thwarting conventional illusion*, as in various productions of Meyerhold, Barba, Mnouchkine, the Bread and Puppet Theatre' (my emphasis). Thwarting conventional illusion is almost directly contradictory to the idea of immersive experience as Punchdrunk defines it. Their work seeks to create a world at such a level of detail (called 'cinematic' on Punchdrunk's website and in other company profiles; the implications of evoking the language of film are discussed further later) an audience member is encouraged to lose themselves in its exploration.

The implications for immersion and environment become interesting when considering environmental theatre in the context of audience awareness, and the idea of illusion and fiction in Punchdrunk. Environmental work is deliberately crafted and directed in order to call attention to the environment in which the performance takes place, or to commence or continue a negotiation with that space. In the 'Axioms for Environmental Theater', Schechner argues that 'Every space has its own given character. [...] An environmental theatre design should not be blindly imposed on a site' (xxxvi). In Punchdrunk's larger shows, the building itself, the set and props design, lighting design, actor- and audience-direction and musical score could be described as the means to an immersive end. The environment calls attention to itself in this context, which could be argued is its main, if not sole, purpose. Moments where these things seem not to be in sync adversely affect immersive experience. Punchdrunk's environments are designed both to create an immersive 'dreamworld' *and* the (structural, logistical) means for an audience member to experience that world. The relationship between environment and immersion in this context provides

an interesting opportunity for analysis; drawing on this strand of environmental theatre's history to analyse Punchdrunk's work helps to trouble the assertion that the creation of immersive dreamworlds is not only an aesthetic decision, but a decision with social and political consequences.

A scenographic perspective allows for a discussion of the creation/manipulation of the theatrical environment. For a discussion of immersion, participation and exchange in the work of Punchdrunk from the perspective of scenography see McKinney and Butterworth (2009, pp 192-5) who note that 'scenography effectively provides the dramaturgical through-line' of some contemporary theatre practice situated outside traditional theatre spaces. Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-8) reviews responded to a range of scenographic elements as well as performances, including sights and smells and stage/space pictures: 'Ultimately, the quality of participation in the Punchdrunk production was determined by individual audience members who made choices about the way they viewed the performance' (194). The presence of multi-sensory stimuli might seem to be more pronounced work where an emphasis is placed on design aspects; if there is no performer present, the space is composed entirely of such elements.

Having discussed immersion in the context of environmental theatre, as with site-specific performance, it becomes necessary to question whether Punchdrunk's work belongs to the category 'in the true sense of the word' (Hunter 2009). Aaronson suggests environmental theatre finds its modern-day equivalent in site-specific work: 'in site-specific work, as in much environmental theatre, the environment itself often becomes the central aspect of the performance and incorporates performer and spectator equally' (2012: np.) Twentieth century Happenings' 'structure and content are a logical extension of [their] environments' (Kaprow in Henri 1974). Happenings took place in an intersection of performance, fine art and progressive political ends; Henri notes the potential danger of mass political spectacles which Happenings often attempted to interrupt (174-50). In the historical trajectory of the 'revered gaze' in large other-worldly spaces, immersive experience is more suggestive of a highly *unequal* relationship between performer and spectator, and between environment and spectator. Rather than deliberately designed all-encompassing multi-sensory atmospheric environments, site-specificity returns to the anti-immersive idea of



*thwarting illusion*, instead presenting for consideration the world we actually live in and drawing on real-world environments as the stimulus. It is important to remain aware of the tension between illusion and fiction, the created world and the site already present, in considering immersive experience in fictional environments.

As a means of outlining the scope of this chapter it is worth differentiating between environment in the context of performance and of cultural geography and ecocriticism. There are further social and political qualities and consequences of immersion in performance that could be considered in the context of these fields. Kershaw (2007) considers the challenges to, and the role of, theatre and performance in the context of a changing ecological situation; of particular relevance is his description of ‘the late-twentieth-century paradigm shift towards performance that confirmed the spectacular as an especially potent phenomenon in the realms of excessive power’ (2007: 206). The immersive environments of Punchdrunk’s larger scale shows could certainly be considered as part of the trajectory of spectacle/power that Kershaw identifies. Cultural geography and ecocritical perspectives are potentially fruitful areas of enquiry to apply to the case studies to consider wider social and political consequences of creating immersive spaces in/on original sites. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the relationship between immersive experience and the environment created by Punchdrunk, and the interplay between this environment and the original site. An approach drawing on the perspectives of cultural geography would require too large a geographical and critical scope for this chapter.

As a final theoretical concept concerning space and spectator, Giannachi proposes a distinction between environment and ecology:

an environmental interpretation of presence foregrounds the set of circumstances that surround the occurrence of presence, while an ecological reading of presence foregrounds how presence may operate as a relational tool between organisms. (2012: 50)

The reciprocal relationship described by McAuley of ‘energy exchange’ in performance is suggestive of a kind of ecology: ‘In the theatre, due to the live presence of both spectators and performers, the energy circulates from performer to

spectator and back again, from spectator to performer and back again (2003: 246). Kaye suggests that work containing architectural and sculptural elements might contain 'bodily confrontations with materials or an acting out of place and space, a "performed ecology" of the subject' (in Giannachi and Stewart, 2006: 269). This metaphor of ecology emphasises the interconnectedness of spectator, performer and space: 'performance becomes the means by which the individual's relationship with the built and found material environment is understood, realised and reproduced' (282). An immersive environment lends itself to being considered as an ecology rather than an environment and it is interesting to posit the audience member as one element of a wider ecology of immersive experience, part of an energy exchange between themselves and the performer in the environment created by Punchdrunk. However, this approach limits how much the constructed environment can be considered to be part of immersive experience. This chapter does not draw on the perspective of ecology from the field of ecocriticism, but remains aware of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between space, performer and spectator. I have already argued that interactivity in Punchdrunk productions occurs at a level of imaginative engagement rather than as a series of embodied actions with outcomes; the productions are not interactive in an explicit sense, and this may not affect immersion unless an audience member has expectations to the contrary.

The case studies for this chapter have the relationship between audience member and environment built into their form. *The Borough* was a soundwalk through Aldeburgh for a single participant at a time, the narrator inviting the participant to follow a prescribed path through the village. *The Drowned Man* completes the trajectory of work that began with *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death*, large-scale productions containing looping action in buildings through which audience members wander. The main research questions the case studies are concerned with are: what is the relationship between the original site and the theatrical environment in these productions? What is the relationship between these environments – the original host and Punchdrunk's created ghost – and the sensation of immersive experience for a spectator?

Immersion and environment in *The Borough*

Punchdrunk's gift has always been the ability to make it feel as if you've been plunged into a parallel universe. The spooky beauty of this latest work is that they achieve it, not within an enclosed space, but on the streets of Aldeburgh in broad daylight. [...] The show disrupts the everyday and yet is also woven into the fabric of daily life, and it exists simultaneously in the mind and out on the streets. You walk among the living, but when you catch a glimpse of your own face, reflected in a window, it looks oddly spectral. (Gardner 2013: np)

Gardner's review taps into a key way *The Borough* can be considered an atypical Punchdrunk show. The immersive experience was not contained within the physical boundaries of a building. *The Borough* was produced in June 2013 as part of the Benjamin Britten festival in Aldeburgh, Norfolk, and its story was inspired by George Crabbe's poem which influenced Britten's *Peter Grimes*. The narrator guided participants through the village on a predetermined route, providing a rhythm for their footsteps, and moving them through scenes in hidden spaces (a bedroom, a fishing hut) and at other times the village streets. The sounds were of the rhythm of footsteps (a practical means of keeping to time), natural sounds of sea waves, and music from Britten's opera. Actors matched the footsteps in the earphones, like a dance. Although the show did not have physical walls as indoor immersive performance does, Aldeburgh itself functioned as a site with physical boundaries, especially given a theme running through the story of paranoia in a small village. The show played with themes of scrutiny, watching and rumours and some indoor scenes (in fishing huts and a bedroom) were evocative of the designed environments of Punchdrunk's other shows. However, in general the physical setup of the show places *The Borough* closer to the field of site-specific work, pervasive performance and audio walks, rather than 'immersive' performance. The show also created a tension between the participants experiencing the show and people who were not: *The Borough's* participants shared the streets with non-participants, and at times the show played with this ambiguity.

*The Borough* might also be considered atypical in its treatment of story, chronology and narrative. *The Borough* was a very linear experience in a literal

sense. The earphones played a single hour-long mp3 soundtrack which could not be paused or rewind. This took the participant from the beginning of the show to the end, without the appearance of choices regarding when and where to walk. (These choices could be made in *The Borough*, but would manifest as mistakes or refusals that stop the show.) *The Borough* became less linear and more impressionistic in the way chronology is recounted during the course of the soundtrack, allowing for a gradual accumulation of details ('there was another boy') leading up to a final climactic reveals in the second fishing hut. The linearity of *The Borough's* score emphasised the gradual reveals were the choice of the structure of the narrative, rather than occurring as a result of an audience member's own exploration.

Some structural aspects of *The Borough* demonstrate its immersive qualities, even as the show was not 'typically' immersive in the sense of occurring entirely in a dark, indoor space. The second fishing hut, where the finale of the show took place, was constructed in an isolated-seeming field rather than on the shoreline, but was otherwise identical to one that the audience member enters and explores early in the show. As I argued in reference to *It Felt Like A Kiss*, returning to a same-but-different space suggests progress has been made and that the stakes are higher, as the spectator literally sees the space differently having been influenced by the events that have occurred since the previous visit. There is a boy performer in the second fishing hut, making the act of watching a very different physical experience to exploring an empty space: the presence of performer-spectator is central to the climactic scene. Changes in the sound quality also emphasised the culmination of the narrative. Not intended to be explicitly recognised, at the end of the show speakers played the music as well as the earphones: the sound quality literally gave resonance to the story's final events.

The structure and form of *The Borough* allows for interesting discussion of immersion and environment. The show's potential to lower barriers to immersive experience were provided by the interplay between the real environment of the village and Punchdrunk's created scenes and story.

The participants' route was controlled in terms of the direction walked and the pace they were invited to adopt, and the narrator draw attention to certain landmarks. The route and the viewpoint were carefully controlled and mediated, and

the audience members are never actually alone. They are always in the sight of either a performer playing a character or a not-in-character steward. Characters are not seen at length but only glimpsed in the street, creating the illusion of a larger world and further blending the 'real life' of the village and the story of *The Borough*. In contrast the stewards intend never to be seen as their function is more pragmatic, and noticing this aspect of the structural framework would break the illusion of the world of the show. The tension between the structural logistics of the show and the fictional environment were present throughout *The Borough*. In its form, the piece was a deliberately isolating experience as it is experienced individually: Lyn Gardner commented that by the end of the piece 'I began to feel as if even the seagulls had a grudge against me' (2013: np). The show also enabled a sensation of (a more positive, inclusive) community and measures of care and safety in terms of how the route and the pace are mediated. Sensations of long-held grudges and the accusing stares of performers are part of the fictional world, while in real life each participant is well looked after, and the child performers are also constantly chaperoned by hidden ushers. Environmental theatre has interesting implications for the relationship between illusion and fiction in immersive experience. The show used the village as both a real and fictional space. The immersive environment in this context becomes one created between the participant, the village of Aldeburgh, the Punchdrunk-created fictional spaces (such as the fishing hut) and the fictional story of *The Borough*, which itself draws on other existing texts.

*The Borough* was produced as part of Aldeburgh's Benjamin Britten festival, making explicit the production's link to a historical and cultural heritage. As *The Borough* could be perceived to be an atypical Punchdrunk show in terms of its pervasive shape and outdoor location, the show also drew on Punchdrunk's own heritage in terms of the history of the company. The show demonstrates that immersive experience can be created and maintained in settings outside of a site with physical boundaries. The interplay of history and the present was mirrored in the interplay between the real site and the environments placed within that site. The participant of *The Borough* was immersed in terms of the technological and physical setup – surrounded by sound effects, the centrality of the production to their journey through the village. However, they are also immersed in a fictional sense, given a character at the centre of the story's fictional village community. The story slowly

reveals this and its ending, though open to interpretations, does make explicit the themes of blame and accusation. The fictional society of *The Borough*, and the audience member's place within it, is linked to the landscape which it inhabits. The story of *The Borough* belongs to Aldeburgh, not just because of the local cultural heritage it draws on, but in terms of the importance of the geography of the village to the story, and the audience member's experience of that story.

The immersive experience in *The Borough* occurs on the boundary between the real world and the fictional world. *The Borough* consisted of created, performed and performative elements mixed with the everyday layout and life of the village. If the gaps between these worlds is less noticeable – so that even seagulls seem sinister by the end of the show, and one is left on the lookout for accusatory stares all the way home – the conclusion might be drawn that the whole world, for a while, seems to carry with it the flavour of the production. Pervasive gaming does not have rigorous geographical boundaries in the way traditional immersive environments do: the show bleeds, spatially or temporally, or in any case is perceived to. In *The Borough*, the gap between the experience of the fictional environment and the real one – the one without headphones – may lead to paranoid conclusions about society and surveillance, or a feeling of relief that society is not like that after all.

The theorisation of the host and the ghost in theatre studies argues that site-specific performance is characterised by two co-existing architectures – the *host* of the original site; the *ghost* which is temporarily brought to site (Pearson 2012: 70). *The Borough's* host site of Aldeburgh had its own ghosts before *The Borough* arrived, in terms of its musical heritage and nautical history. The story of *The Borough* – the show's content – weaved in and out of this already multi-layered host. The narrator pointed out landmarks as part of his story and as they evoked memories, as well as to aid navigation. As well as blurring the show's content in this way, the host and ghost were also played with in terms of the show's form, which took its participant past real village buildings and in and out of purpose-built fictional spaces like the fishing huts.

The show was relatively low-tech for a Punchdrunk production. Following on from the *Sleep No More* project with MIT Media Lab, with its multiple technological experiments and considerations, *The Borough* was designed to be a simple

experience with a straightforward operating system. These decisions were designed to lower initial barriers to immersion by making the interface as easy to access and operate as possible: a single hour-long mp3 file played in earphones with no need to pause, stop or rewind; the route and walking pace was mediated by the show's narrator; ushers were present throughout the performance to correct and mistakes or deal with any discomforts or disorientation. The production's environment of props, buildings, costumes and landmarks blended in to the surrounding landscape. Some sites were made into fictional spaces with an attention to detail that might be expected in other Punchdrunk environments – the fishing hut(s), for example, were full of props and details. At other times the world was created by the audio score alone, the landscape of Aldeburgh, and the participant's own imaginative input. These scenes/instances of detail and darkness occurred relatively rarely in the show, and presented a contrasting atmosphere to the experience of moving through an outdoor site. Immersed in the story and the narrative/musical score of the show, *The Borough* also used environmental immersion within the wider physical landscape of Aldeburgh to create immersive experience in small, dark spaces. The climax of the show made this relationship between environment and immersion explicit, as the audience member was pushed out of the final encounter in the dark, loud fishing hut into wide space and accusatory silence.

The experience of immersion in *The Borough's* various fictional/real environments requires mediation and control. It would be a technical or organisational failure that would cause an audience member to walk into a room just as the action has ended. The phrase 'the role of the audience' has a double meaning in *The Borough*, since as well as placing them centre in terms of logistics, its fictional narrative slowly reveals they have a place within the society described in the story. The role of the audience member begins as a stranger having a tour of the village, but eventually moves beyond this. *The Borough* slowly turns its audience members into maligned outsiders who other villagers know and glare at. The way in which the centrality of the audience member's fictional role is gradually revealed corresponds to the gradual building up of immersion. The immersive experience technically begins as soon as the headphones are turned on to play the opening sound effect of ocean waves. But it is through a slow build-up of both fictional story elements and literal aspects such as the set, number of actors, and a change in sound quality by

the climax, that *The Borough* was able to manipulate levels of immersion as it guided its audience through Aldeburgh.

### Immersion and environment in *The Drowned Man*

As with all Punchdrunk work, in whatever we do, the space always comes first. And actually the first time I walked around this building, about right where we are now [Studio 3], it was completely open-planned. A huge void, an empty open wasteland. And it had very few architectural details of note. The source and the show always comes from the space, and because it was so barren, it sort of screamed out 'film studio'. (Barrett 2013, *The Drowned Man* pre-show talk)

The making of *The Drowned Man* (2013) saw the open-plan site become a series of constructed spaces: 31 London Street become Temple Studios. This renaming is a symbol of an attitude towards site as well as a description of the changing of site. It is the suggestion of this chapter that immersive experience in *The Borough* came about because of the interplay between the real and the constructed. According to the continuum in Wilkie (2003), site-specificity occurs when performance is 'specifically generated from/for one selected site' (150). In the quotation above, *The Drowned Man* fits this definition of site-specific in the sense of being informed by its environment; the show was literally built for the building, its layouts unavoidably informed by the original architecture of the site. However, immersive experience in this show relies on the creation of a totally self-contained world. The mise en scene of the production is more prominent than the original site: 31 London Street was neutralised and the new design built inside. (The same happened in New York, where *Sleep No More* saw West 27th Street become The McKittrick Hotel.) *The Drowned Man* is more representative of *site-generic* work than *site-specific*; it could be recreated/rebuilt in another large building. This section of the chapter is interested in the relationship between environment and immersive experience in a show that is less 'sympathetic' to its host site than *The Borough*. As argued in relation to *The Borough*, immersive experience can occur in the interplay between the real and the fictional – this is where barriers to immersive experience might be lowered and a sensation of transgression becomes key to the structure of the show. Immersive



experience is defined by a paradoxical awareness of the boundaries of the sensation: being aware of boundaries leading to the pleasure of their being broken or transgressed. A relationship between the 'real' and the 'fake' is a theme of *The Drowned Man*, in its Hollywood setting. The production is 'immersive' in its shape, and due to its having finite boundaries of the walls of the building. It is my argument that merely being inside an immersive-shaped production does not in itself guarantee immersive experience. The atmospheric and design elements attempt to create a world wholly self-contained, but it is an awareness of the created, temporary nature of the production that leads to immersive experience in the created environment. The show begins with an invitation for the audience to 'steer your own course' through an internally coherent world. *The Drowned Man* is not site-specific due to its neutralisation of the original space, however, a key aspect of immersive experience in the production is a sense of interplay between the 'real' sensation of exploring a theatrical production, and the verisimilitude of the fictional environment.

Punchdrunk's larger-scale shows play with the line between modification and neutralisation of their original spaces. *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-8) spread through the Battersea Arts Centre into spaces not traditionally designated for performance, such as the foyer staircase. *The Duchess of Malfi* (2010) drew on the venue's earlier purpose as an office block, using computer wires as part of the new fantasy landscape inhabited by the characters. For *The Drowned Man*, as stated above, the building's architecture influenced the design of the show, and this is true in a literal sense, but the overall effect was of neutralising the original atmosphere and dynamics of the space. The performances of the actors and dancers in response to the created environments could also be considered site-specific. Scenes are devised alongside the physical layout of the show and move across its rooms and corridors, and in rehearsal performers adapt their movement in response to the set. Performances are created in response to the specific fictional world created by the designers. Finally this transgression between boundaries is also mirrored in the content of the production itself. The relationship between 'host' building and the Punchdrunk 'ghost' brought to the site is mirrored in the interplay within the fictional environment – and the story enacted upon and embedded within the fictional environment – between the 'real' and the 'fake', the 'real-life' and the 'acting/pretending'. Although the relationship between the original site and the 'ghost'

is less of an equal exchange and mutual influence (as in *The Borough*) and more of an overlaying, the interplay between the created environment and the host site is a key component of the potential for immersive experience. It is not the parallel universe in itself that allows for immersive experience, but the relationship between the parallel universe and the sense of the 'real world'.

*The Borough's* fictional story intermingled with the real geography and landmarks of Aldeburgh. *The Drowned Man* announces the creation of a whole fictional world as distinct in the (re) naming of the site of production. The environment in *The Drowned Man* is designed to create a feeling of wholeness and allow for a sense of getting lost in the fiction/setting; immersive experience can be facilitated by the environment itself. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, a defining preoccupation of environmental theatre is the attempt to deliberately thwart illusion: a preoccupation in opposition to the notion of immersive experience as Punchdrunk defines it, to lose oneself in a highly detailed environment. Immersive experience is deemed to come from the very detailed, atmospheric, and strategically structured internal space. The interplay between tiny winding corridors and secret passages, opening out into much larger spaces, and sudden shifts between very different spaces (light/dark, cosy/sinister, naturalistic/abstract) contribute to the creation of the fictional environment, designed and created inside the host building. The environment exists in order to create immersive experience – a sense of being lost, disorientated, free to wander – and to commence a negotiation with the environment – active exploration, following characters. If the immersive environment is a dreamworld its means of navigation makes it a lucid dream. The purpose of illusion and fiction in this context is that the audience members are encouraged to get lost (literally) in the very 'real' (highly detailed, etc.) world that is created inside 31 London Street. The characters who occupy this world are also part of the environment, and their stories and journeys can be explored as much as the space itself can. Repeat viewings of *The Drowned Man* increases the detail of fans' close reading of the show, and attempts to map it or plan a strategy for the next visit.

The relationship between immersive experience and the physical environment of *The Drowned Man* can be considered in two categories: a scenographic, design perspective; and a more structural, logistical perspective. Using a scenographic perspective allows all design elements to be considered. As

well as sight, the senses of smell and touch played a major part in creating environments in *The Drowned Man*. The church of the Dust Witch smelled very strongly of herbs and smoke, for example, and the sand on this highest level of the building gave walking through the space its own distinct feeling. Discussing the use of darkness in Shunt's *Money* (2009), Welton suggests that when 'actors and audiences [are] forced to feel their way through darkened places both real and imagined, these explorations of theatrical darkness blur physical and fictional domains' (2012: 14). The creation/manipulation of the environment has the potential to lower barriers to immersion by dealing with scenographic elements. In the narrative section of this thesis, the action of opening a door was cited as an example of how engaging with environment functions, in an immersive space, as a narrative event. Opening a door can also be seen as a major event in the exploration of environment, and in the facilitation of immersive experience in that environment. Opening a door, pushing aside a curtain or otherwise crossing a threshold into a new and previously unexplored space is a site where barriers to immersion might be experienced. Entering a new space provides a new set of scenographic stimuli, and adds information to a gradual idea of the show's physical layout. It is an act of further exploration and of further disorientation.

Barriers to immersion on the level of environment are structural and logistical. The design of *The Drowned Man* lowered these barriers by manipulating the layout of the rooms and floors of 31 London Street, and in its arrangement of architectural features and organisation and design of the space: a total environment was created from a literal perspective as well as from a scenographic one. The logistical organisation of *The Drowned Man* was similar to previous Punchdrunk shows in certain aspects but physically larger. The building was the biggest single space the company had yet used, had the longest run, and space for the greatest number of audience members at one time. The possibilities for immersive experience were great, but the potential barriers to immersion were made more numerous and difficult to lower too. The number of people moving in the space increased the challenge of making the atmosphere one of tension, interest and excitement, not a feeling of being in a crowd; and the challenge was also to make sure the experience of moving about the show could still be one of secrecy, exploration, intensity, individual viewpoints, one-on-one interactions and solo

moments that characterise the experience of previous shows. The physical environments of *The Drowned Man* included larger spaces with visual spectacle and smaller rooms with detailed settings and an atmosphere of intensity. The large site of *The Drowned Man* was designed to suggest size but also maintain the potential for individual interactions; an important part of the show was that immersive experience could still be achieved although its audience was larger than any for previous Punchdrunk shows.

The mise-en-scene and design of Punchdrunk's created environments is described by the company as employing a 'cinematic' level of detail 'to immerse the audience in the world of the show' (punchdrunk.com). Bartley describes the importance of environment in *Sleep No More*: 'Though Barrett and Doyle frame their work with rhetoric of interpersonal exchange, *Sleep No More* is fundamentally object-based and space-based rather than performer-based' (2013: np). *The Drowned Man* has a similar emphasis on spatial and environmental elements, within which the company's dancers and actors rehearse and perform. The invitation to explore the detailed sets and settings remains a central part of *The Drowned Man*'s facilitation of immersive experience. The language of cinema has also been used in relation to how an audience member might navigate this environment. Both quotations below refer to *The Drowned Man*:

'The audience is the camera floating around this dream,' says Barrett. 'All we are doing is presenting loads of content like the unedited rushes for them to cut together.' [...] The mask, he adds, is the 'fourth wall' that enables the audience to become anonymous and get closer to the action. 'They can almost feel the breath of the performers on them. The mask enables them to become the camera.' (Masters 2013: np)

'For audiences, it's like directing your own film,' explains Punchdrunk founder and artistic director Felix Barrett [...] 'They become a living Steadicam and they're shooting their own director's cut of the show. They float down corridors and choose which characters they want to have close-ups with, where they want spectacle. They are in charge.' (Lukowski 2013: np)

The language of film is invoked regarding both the show's environment and the means to engage with that environment: the creation of a fictional environment with 'a cinematic level of detail' and the invitation to navigate with 'director's cut' approach.

The relationship between 'real' and 'fake' becomes more interesting when considering the world of the production is based around a film company; this also represents a physical embodiment of the themes of film running through the show in both content and form. The audience members are invited to wander through Temple Studios while they finish shooting some of the final scenes for their latest picture. Some of the spaces with *The Drowned Man* are film sets deliberately designed to look fake; some spaces are more of a grimy, crumbling, gothic aesthetic that we could say looks more 'realistic' and 'real world' in comparison to the film sets. In *The Drowned Man*, one room contains large sloping piles of fake snow: deliberately fake snow, film-set looking snow, with glitter among the white and a solid surface to run about and dance on. The room next door to this space is a decadent dressing room, and in one corner is a smaller fake snow-hill that appears to be coming through the wall. This detail might be a means of linking together two parts of the site, as another puzzle of the production with various possible interpretations. It may suggest the artificiality of the film-making world is encroaching on the real world of the studio's actors, with consequences for the relationship between fiction and reality for these characters, or the mental health or wellbeing of these characters – or it may, as I heard one audience member wonder out loud through their mask, be 'all about cocaine'. Depending on which room is experienced first, it may become a navigational clue: providing a hint at what is to come or a reminder of what is next door. Referring to film from a geographical perspective, Horton (2003) suggests landscapes can clue an audience in to the type or genre of story they are watching, or even become a character in its own right (77-81). The relationship between the snow-scape and the dressing room in *The Drowned Man* allows various interpretations of the fictional world, and the rules (or lack thereof) of that world. This interruption across the two spaces – a place where the real and the fake, the (relatively) realistic dressing-room and the explicitly theatrical snow – is a site of the possible breaking of immersion in the environment as it makes obvious the boundary between these two spaces and these two aesthetic states. Becoming aware of this boundary allows for further immersion as the limits of the experience are felt. RWD

allows for the interruption between two spaces to become a site for immersive experience, made more intense by the awareness of an interruption followed by a decision to dismiss the interruption.

Immersive experience is defined by its limits: the experience is potentially so intense and overwhelming because it is temporary. *The Drowned Man* and other Punchdrunk productions of its shape are strongly bordered and with definite boundaries of both time – three hours, tonight – and space – this building, this room. There is a considerable, noticeable gap between the world outside the building and what is experienced inside. This method contrasts with *The Borough*, which used immersive experience to blend the real and the fictional to the point where it became possible to respond to elements of the real world environment within the tone of the fictional narrative. The gap between these worlds in *The Drowned Man* could be seen as one that allows for little more than escapism: providing a puzzling dream world, temporarily gone into, explored and left behind. Themes and characters in the show might provide ways of thinking about corruption and poverty, dreams and exploitation that still has a contemporary relevance. Individual rooms, scenes, encounters and props could spark many interpretations about the world of *The Drowned Man* itself, as suggested above in terms of the snow-scape and the dressing-room – but they might also be used as a catalyst for considering the production itself, the amount of artistic imagination and physical labour that went into the creation of the environment.

#### Conclusion: immersion and environment

The whole thing with Punchdrunk is it's always for the individual. So even if it was a larger scale show, an audience of two thousand people, it's still about each one as an individual, and we'd still want to make sure every single one of them had their own experience they had ownership of, and there were enough beats of intimacy and that panic-inducing alone time. Because without that, we might as well just do it in a theatre. (Barrett 2013, *The Drowned Man* pre-show talk)

This quote demonstrates the centrality of environment to Punchdrunk's conception of immersive experience. Emotion and sensation, panic and intimacy, alone time and exploration, are all explicitly connected to, and derived from, the fact that productions take place in non-theatre spaces, and with an invitation to the audience to 'steer your own [individual] course' (from *The Drowned Man* introductory voiceover). This chapter suggests that interplay between the sensation of experiencing a created theatrical world and an awareness of the real world outside are connected to immersive experience in the environment. An awareness of the temporary nature of the experience is required to truly allow the sensation of feeling lost. An awareness of the detailed design and painstaking construction of the settings and mise-en-scene lower the barriers to psychological immersion in the atmosphere and settings.

Immersive experience exists as a series of graded states. This is made physically manifest in the existence of a fictional world created across different floors of a building and/or different parts of a village. The varying between larger spectacles and smaller, detailed settings also lowers barriers to immersion in environment within the space. An awareness of the boundaries (spatial and temporal) of the production might initially seem to raise barriers to immersion. An awareness of the constructed environment might manifest as experiencing an interruption or a 'real world' factor such as an usher or a fellow audience member. At a high level of psychological immersion, such awareness might evoke a sensation similar to that experienced at a state of high immersion in computer games: a paradoxical awareness of the constructed nature of the experience goes towards lowering the barriers to immersion, allowing an audience member to explore the space further. The concept of Real World Disassociation (RWD) can be used here to theorise how a moment of awareness of the constructed nature of the theatrical environment goes towards lowering barriers to immersion: choosing to ignore interruptions presupposes an awareness of these interruptions and a grading of certain interruptions as more or less relevant, and facilitates the potential intensity of the immersive experience.

This chapter has also considered the relationship between immersive experience and site-specificity. While relying on the architecture and layout of the original building at 31 London Street for its structure, *The Drowned Man* ultimately

neutralises its site to install its own world on top of it, rather than allowing for 'articulate exchanges between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined' (Kaye 2000: 1); the original spaces are overlaid by the technologies and design elements of the production. The relationship between the host and the ghost was more porous in *The Borough*, as the landscape and history of the village was incorporated into the fictional narrative of the soundwalk, and performers and constructed spaces were hidden within the real world locations. In both cases, though, the relationship between the original host and the created ghost allows for an interplay that facilitates immersive experience in environment, either in the detail of the created environment itself or in the ways Punchdrunk has acted on the original building. This sensation of immersion becomes what Griffiths calls 'a "revered gaze", a response marked as much by recognition of the labor and effort involved in creating the spectacle as in the spectacle itself' (2008: 286). The construction and craft involved in creating both *The Borough* and *The Drowned Man* acted to make the construction invisible, the technology as unobtrusive as possible and the gradual layering of a fictional world and story (or collection of stories) was designed in order to lower the barriers to immersive experience. However, moments of awareness of this construction may interrupt immersion in the story or an individual performance, but may facilitate the creation of a 'revered gaze' that is not necessarily contradictory to immersive experience.



### Conclusion: audience immersion in the work of Punchdrunk

This thesis has demonstrated an awareness of existing scholarship on immersion and immersive experience in theatre and performance studies, and also an awareness of research into immersion in other fields; it outlines a cognitive approach to and psychological concepts of immersion, and has drawn on concepts from the fields of computer games and philosophical aesthetics. It has drawn on performance theory in order to consider current understandings of immersive theatre and proposed a series of theoretical frameworks for considering immersive experience. The thesis has applied its definition of immersive experience to various aspects of contemporary performance often called 'immersive', in order to investigate how immersive experience might be constituted, situated and created for by makers and received by audience members. It places Punchdrunk's immersive experience in the context of a longer human urge to investigate and experience bodily immersion, drawing on studies that propose a 'long' history of immersion. A shorter history of immersion in the context of performance studies has been proposed by other studies (such as Machon 2013), finding a lineage for the form in early twentieth century avant-garde performance. The contribution of this thesis is to propose a different trajectory of enquiry that might intersect with immersive experience in performance. The definition of immersive experience used in this thesis has been drawn from cognitive psychology, philosophical aesthetics, and studies of gaming and computer games. While neuroscience and cognitive science can provide some context for considering immersion, this thesis concentrates on cultural constructs of immersive experience.

The thesis provides new content in terms of primary research; chapters conduct analysis drawing interviews and investigations of feedback provided by audience members, long-term fans of Punchdrunk, and interviews with members of the company. The thesis builds an original working definition of immersive experience and applies this definition to aspects of immersive theatre, using Punchdrunk productions as case studies. The chapters consider the relationship between immersive experience and immersive theatre, and question what might be meant by 'immersion' across different contexts. The thesis proposes that interactive

elements and innovative approaches to narrative and environment have a complex relationship to immersion. The thesis contributes to existing scholarship on immersive theatre and performance by proposing a series of theoretical frameworks for considering immersive experience, drawn from a variety of fields, applying these to original analysis of Punchdrunk productions, and conducting original discussions of the relationship between immersive experience and interactivity, narrative and environment.

Punchdrunk's work – especially their larger-scale shows – are physically immersive in shape, and contain an implicit, or (with the increasing reputation and status of the company) explicit promise of being highly immersive in terms of the visceral or spectacle-related phenomenon. 'Immersive theatre', in being so called, promises a highly effective visceral response in its spectators. Use of the term is connected to shape and layout and audience logistics, as well as a promise of some interactive (or interactive appearing) elements, certain aesthetic and atmospheric trademarks (scenographic, sensory and environmental innovations), and un-chronological or fractured narratives. This thesis considers individual Punchdrunk productions as case studies in reference to each of the three main areas or interactivity, narrative, and environment. In doing so, the thesis considers how immersive experience might be constituted, created, facilitated or blocked by certain spatial or logistical signifiers; unwritten rules or conventions of play; and the wider social contexts of a Punchdrunk production as related to the concept of the theatrical event, as exhibited particularly in fan or long-term audience behaviours. The relationship between a production, the company, and Punchdrunk's audience(s) – and how each might relate to immersive experience – is another thread of enquiry that runs throughout this project.

This thesis is particularly interested in a close analysis of immersive experience as a concept, and how it might relate to immersive theatre: this thesis asserts that the two might be considered separately. In doing so, it opens up a wider area for potential research. The thesis begins to consider immersive performance within a wider cultural context by drawing on longer histories of immersive experience including fine art and historically immersive spaces such as panoramic paintings and planetariums (cf. Griffiths 2008) or cinema spaces or digital media (cf. Griffiths; Dixon 2007). It also suggests areas of studying the further political

implications of the concepts and the discussion raised throughout the chapters. A point of departure from this thesis for other researchers, therefore, might be to consider the role of immersion in the experience economy, and the relationship between immersive theatre companies, immersive experience, and the wider context of global capitalism. Punchdrunk are, as a highly visible and mainstream company making work in the field of immersive experience, a company that have experienced considerable criticism in the context of corporate training and brand sponsorship. The financial and ethical responsibilities of immersive experience, and the responsibility of makers of immersive theatre, is something that can be considered further from the starting point of the theoretical analysis this thesis provides. There is a growing interest in considering immersive performance in political and theoretical contexts. This thesis aims to contribute to the field by providing both wider theoretical concepts and close analysis that can further facilitate this.

A shorter history of immersive theatre, in the context of late twentieth century performance studies, is a common context for many current studies of immersive theatre (Nield 2008; Machon 2013; White 2013). This thesis proposes a definition and series of frameworks to consider immersive performance in the context of a longer history of immersion in art (such as Wilson Smith 2009; Wolf 2013) and in the context of contemporary investigation into immersive experience in fields other than performance studies (Csikszentmihalyi 1990 and 1996; Cairns et al 2004). This thesis proposes a definition of immersive experience drawn from philosophical aesthetics and art history, as well as more contemporary findings and theoretical concepts from the fields of gaming and cognitive psychology. Computer gaming and cognitive psychology are relatively recent fields of study, but their trajectories of enquiry have lineages that go back to earlier studies that consider the experience of being immersed in a work of art or an activity. Historical studies of immersion generally focus on immersion in art other than theatre or performance; they therefore provide a wider context for thinking about immersion, which can then be applied to performance. It is also an important historical point that social anxieties about being too immersed in a work of art can be traced back to the beginning of art itself; this thesis is aware of this longer lineage as well as the contemporary anxieties around the form and potential frustrations or problematic aspects of immersive theatre. The

definition of immersive experience that is used in this thesis is therefore one that allows for this awareness.

This thesis proposes an original definition of immersive experience by considering the etymology of the term and its roots in describing a physical and symbolically profound experience. Immersive experience exists as a series of graded states and at its highest is an intense, necessarily temporary state defined by an awareness of its boundaries. Immersive experience may often contain a seemingly-paradoxical blend of being both aware *and* unaware of the temporary quality of the experience. The boundaries to immersive experience are strict: spatially, temporally, atmospherically. They create contrast between the 'in' state and the world of (being) 'outside'. Barriers to immersion, that can be lowered by makers but not forced over, are also a key element in how this thesis theorises immersive experience.

An intense, emotional, highly visceral experience is implicitly promised in performance that calls itself 'immersive', and this type of performance is becoming increasingly common. The contribution of this thesis to the field is to suggest that, by considering immersive experience as a separate concept to immersive theatre, it becomes easier to consider how the relationship between spectator, performance, performer, story, space and site is constructed and maintained; and what the relationship is between immersive experience and each of these aspects – how each aspect might contribute to the aforementioned highly visceral experience. Each of these elements – interactivity, narrative, and environment – has the potential to create, influence and intensify immersive experience. Alternatively, they have the potential to become barriers to immersion if they are not properly understood. Punchdrunk's productions conflate these aspects together: they (generally) take place within an immersive shape and contain interactive-seeming elements and innovative approaches to atmosphere and narrative. A trait of immersive experience is that separate elements come together to become more than the sum of their parts; and therefore it becomes difficult to consider precisely what is going on when an audience member is 'immersed', by the very nature of the experience. This thesis aims to provide a series of theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts that aid a better understanding of the question of theatrical immersion.

The concept of barriers to immersion and the theorisation of immersive experience as a series of graded states are key propositions this thesis makes for considering why a production or an experience may *not* feel immersive. This thesis does not imply a value judgement of immersive experience – that it is better to achieve it than to miss out. Instead, this thesis proposes a series of theoretical frameworks and concepts that might aid a discussion of why something was or was not felt to be immersive. It unpicks the ‘it’ that may be achieved or missed. The frameworks can then be used to further investigate such implicit value judgements – for example, what is going on in questions like ‘what did you think, did you get the story?’ (asked of me moments after the finale of *The Drowned Man* by a member of Punchdrunk). The concept of Real World Disassociation (RWD) is also proposed in this project as a means of thinking about the relationship between immersive experience, an immersive world or atmosphere, and the audience’s awareness of the ‘real world’ beyond the immersive world.

This thesis makes an original contribution by providing a series of alternative theoretical frameworks for thinking about immersive experience, and applying these to productions by Punchdrunk in the context of thematic topics that run through the chapters. I consider how immersive experience might be discussed in each context and draws conclusions about how immersive experience is constituted in regards to each topic. Interactivity, narrative and environment are all fruitful areas of research in themselves, and this thesis proposes that they have complex relationships with immersive experience and are each capable of facilitating or providing difficulties in getting, and staying, immersed. By theorising immersive experience as a temporary state, researchers can further explore the creation of immersive experience and the maintenance or the curation of immersive experience by theatre-makers, and how immersive experience might be provided for or facilitated in the creation, direction and/or design of a new piece of immersive performance.

The focus of this project has been on the work of Punchdrunk specifically, and the modes of enquiry allow for further research on other companies and productions that might also be defined as immersive, or contain elements of immersive experience. The theoretical concept of immersive experience that is proposed by this thesis can be applied to the work of other companies, other productions, and other ‘shapes’ or ‘genres’ of performance that might not immediately contain typical

'immersive' signifiers. Masked audience members, a freedom to roam, interactive or interactive-seeming elements, and certain environmental or aesthetic trademarks, can be considered not as defining elements of immersive theatre – this thesis might therefore open up a range of possibilities for theatre makers or performers. Immersive experience, when considered as a theoretical concept existing in relationship to, but ultimately separately to and not entirely dependent on, certain structural or atmospheric conventions, can therefore be theorised in the context of other, as yet less explored ground, by both Punchdrunk and other immersive companies. For example, experiments in terms of content – an otherwise 'conventional' immersive production that, unconventionally, contains a story or tone of comedy – and experiments with form: making immersive experience occur outside, or take place over a wide area or a long period of time (begun to be explored in Punchdrunk's *The Borough*; theorised to continue in Punchdrunk Travel):

What we're doing now is we're trying to [ask] how can we shift that heightened state and that theatricalised experience, how can we take it outside of the confines of a building, and how can you extend the evening of theatre over a number of days, weeks, months... (Barrett, 2014: talk at 'Experience Economy' Remix Summit)

The work that I'm really excited about, the future for us as a company, is the use of the real world as set and creating the same sort of immersive responses, sensibilities and reactions that we can in a completely controlled, designed space. (Barrett in Machon 2013: 163)

Other companies than Punchdrunk might benefit from the research in this thesis, as it proposes an unplaiting of immersion in space, site, story and performer-audience relationship in its definition of immersive experience. Therefore, the theoretical framework(s) proposed by this thesis might be applied to companies and performances that might not necessarily be considered under the genre of 'immersive.' Proscenium arch, promenade (indoor or outdoor) productions, or theatre-in-the-round performances might all involve or entail immersive experience; virtual reality, pervasive gaming and interactive performance might also be considered using the theoretical frameworks suggested in this thesis.

The thesis proposes a definition of interactivity drawn from computer games, performance studies and the wider cultural context of the theatrical event in order to argue that interactivity and immersive experience have a complicated relationship. The two concepts are not entirely mutually exclusive, but interactivity does not guarantee immersive experience. The thesis also proposes a 'wider' definition of considering interactivity that begins to take analysis outside the building in which an immersive production takes place. Its analysis of fan mail and audience communities provides a way to consider the way immersive experience might be claimed or considered by audience members. Punchdrunk are a particularly useful company to provide the means for this analysis as their ten-plus years of making work has enabled a long-term loyal fan base to be developed. Concepts of what 'immersive theatre' is have been able to become established in this time, as have concepts of what 'a Punchdrunk show' is. This thesis therefore considers these concepts in order to propose that we do not take them for granted, nor should it be assumed that logistical or spatial innovations in interactivity, narrative or environmental factors guarantee immersive experience.

The thesis proposes a definition of narrative drawn from contemporary narratology in order to consider what is meant by being 'immersed' in a narrative. Having considered contemporary definitions and tensions, the thesis considers how 'immersive theatre' and Punchdrunk in particular set their audiences alongside stories. The thesis is particularly interested in the concept of time, structure and chronology; it considers how other scholars have theorised the relationship between time, narrative and immersive experience, particularly in the context of prose fiction as this is where many important studies have taken place. Punchdrunk traditionally set their audiences at ninety degrees to the actual narrative of the characters in the performance's original 'story'. This thesis examines this convention of immersive theatre, drawing on analysis of the company's more spatially linear productions as well as the more 'traditional' non-chronological ones, in order to consider how immersive experience might manifest or be claimed to manifest (or claimed to not manifest) in certain relationships between spectator, production, story, and performer/character. Scholars in the discipline of film studies have also conducted considerable study of narrative and discourse, and how stories are created and constituted and framed by the audience; Punchdrunk have used the metaphor of a

'director's cut' (Barrett in Lukowcki 2013) to define how their audiences might engage with their productions, and the implications of this could be an area of further analysis. The relationship between story and immersion in art has a long history of study to which this thesis contributes by considering what theoretical concepts of narratology might be useful or relevant for in the context of immersive theatre.

The thesis proposes a definition of environment drawn from site-specific art and scenography to consider the relationship between immersive experience and the typical aesthetic and atmospheric trademarks of a Punchdrunk production. Just as interactivity and narrative innovations do not automatically constitute immersive experience, neither does merely being 'immersed' in a spatially innovative landscape. The definition of immersive experience that was proposed at the beginning of the thesis is applied to two Punchdrunk productions in order to consider how immersive experience might be made manifest or allowed for in the context of a physically immersive world. The last section of the thesis is particularly interested in site-specificity and the host/ghost relationship proposed by other performance studies scholars in order to suggest that immersive performance might build on or *over* an existing environment in order to create its immersive world. The notion that immersive performance is site-specific is contested in this thesis – some immersive performance is not site-specific. The relationship between site, space and immersive experience is one of particular tension; the final chapter of this thesis is interested in how Punchdrunk create 'other worlds' for an audience member to get lost in, and this might fit into the wider context of a series of increasingly urgent questions about the relationship between performance and environment.

The further dissemination of this research will aid its contribution to the field. Conclusions and findings from this project can be disseminated through traditional academic pathways such as through written articles and the presentation of conference papers. The definition of immersive experience central to this thesis and its theoretical frameworks for considering audience experience might also be of interest to theatre-makers and other companies producing – or that aim to produce – immersive work. Further dissemination through alternative pathways to traditional academic routes might also be considered. As part of the Collaborative Doctoral Award some of my research findings have been disseminated to Punchdrunk; presentations have been particularly focused on theoretical concepts and various



definitions of immersion (computer gaming, virtual reality, philosophical aesthetics and narrative theory). These concepts and wider contexts might be of particular interest to other makers, writers and theatre companies. Further research in a more practical collaborative mode might aid the dissemination of concepts discussed in this thesis; practical workshops or performative experiments, with Punchdrunk or other companies or artists, might develop a further understanding of how immersive experience might be created and made manifest in performance. It might be particularly fruitful to conduct more practical research projects within immersive- or interactive- identifying work or companies, or artists interested in pervasive gaming or telling stories via 'unnatural' narratives (cf. Alber et al 2013) and/or digital storytelling. Applying the findings and conclusions of this thesis to a series of practical or exploratory projects is a potentially fruitful area of exploration for makers and researchers who wish to create or critically examine immersive experience.

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