Experiential Dramaturgy: Putting a Sense of "Play" into Plays

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Theatre Program
of the School of the Arts

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2022

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Introduction

For my thesis, I am creating a course on what I call "Experiential Dramaturgy." We'll get to the definition of this in a moment. First, how did this project come about? During the COVID-19 pandemic, the theater industry saw a degree of shutdown previously unprecedented in modern times. Though theater has returned, the industry is still in recovery, and the pandemic revealed deep-rooted iniquities in the industry that may or may not change over the next few years.

Meanwhile, theater-adjacent industries, such as theme parks, museums, and festivals, reopened much earlier and have not seen as much negative impact from the pandemic. These and other forms of live storytelling and performance experiences, such as tabletop role-playing games, video games, escape rooms, and other role-playing events, have proven more accessible to people during this time. This thesis, and by extension, this course, aims to provide familiarity with experiential mediums to theater students and practitioners. Though the pandemic seems to have alleviated, the theater industry still has seen effects from it that may prove long-term. Even if the industry does get back on its feet sooner rather than later, this course would still provide a greater context for aspiring dramaturgs to practice their craft. It also allows students in these aforementioned creative industries to understand how their work can apply to theater.

So what is "Experiential Dramaturgy," and how do I define it? Initially, I referred to this as "Non-Traditional Dramaturgy." I described it as interdisciplinary dramaturgy, encompassing the dramaturgy of various narrativized experiences. These include, but are not limited to, video games, tabletop games, themed attractions, escape rooms, museums, haunted houses, festivals, architecture, and role-playing events. In my own practice, I have a degree of familiarity with a few of these, but was unfamiliar with others. In my time at Columbia, I have taken courses in digital storytelling, new media art, and digital producing. Additionally, I have experience working in the video game and museum industries. I have always seen dramaturgy in these courses and fields, and this project serves as a culmination of my experiences. At the same time, I started with only a passing knowledge or familiarity with some of the areas I mentioned, so this thesis has broadened my horizons in learning about them.

Initially, the impetus for this course came from a place of frustration that I couldn't quite articulate at the time. During the pandemic, I realized that theater is one of my favorite artforms and one of my least favorite industries. Why? A number of reasons, but for the sake of this course I felt that experiential mediums were more approachable and accessible during the pandemic. I came to realize that what I wanted was an experience in which I, as an audience member, would feel integral to the process. I didn't want to go into a theater space, sit in a seat, have the lights go down, and remain still and quiet. I could just as easily do that from home. I felt like a lot of theater took the audience for granted. I wanted to experience theater that

acknowledged and respected my presence as an audience member. And for mediums like role-playing games, haunted houses, and escape rooms, these forms cannot function without an active audience. As such, I got the idea to design a course that would teach theater students about these mediums in order to facilitate more engagement with the audience through theater. As time went on, I learned to better define the area of experiential dramaturgy in speaking with others and devising this course. This thesis consists of my research but also my process. Ultimately, I came to this definition of experiential dramaturgy composed of four core tenets:

Experiential Dramaturgy

The study and practice of dramatic composition focusing on engagement with and involvement of the audience as an active assembly and the impressions left on the audience.

Immersion: The event invites audiences into a world to learn its rules and be a part of it.
Interaction: The event encourages people to engage with the environment. People may explore in various ways.
Meaning-making: Audiences take away their own lessons or narrative moments that are unique to themselves.
Connection: The event encourages people to participate socially whether through the event itself or through sharing information with each other.

Initial Outline

Starting out, here was my initial outline of the course. It has since changed significantly over time:

Course Overview: What is Dramaturgy?

For the sake of providing a reference point for non-theatrical dramaturgy, I would like to offer a potential definition of the subject. In reality, dramaturgy is somewhat all-encompassing. It can be thought of as the theory and practice of dramatic composition and the representation of the main elements of drama on the stage. Dramaturgy can refer to the research and intention that goes into a show, and the conveyance of theme, narrative, and other elements through the live performance of it.

For this course, and non-theatrical dramaturgy, students will take a look at how dramatic composition and the elements of drama appear in experiences that are not considered traditional theater. How does a given structured experience convey narrative? What feelings does it seek to evoke? Which elements of drama are present? Which are not? How does it compare or contrast with traditional theater, as well as other non-theatrical models investigated in the course? The course will seek to engage students with these questions as they look at various narrativized experiences through a dramaturgical lens.

Section One: Dramaturgy of Games

Since early civilization, human beings have played games as a way of passing time, competing, and learning more about themselves. Today, the most popular forms of games are video games, table-top games, and role-playing games. This section will look at the dramaturgical forms of each and examine how gameplay and drama intertwine. What story does a game tell? How does a game cast its players as characters? How does a game compare to live theater, and how does it differ?

The course will first look into video games, specifically those that involve some kind of narrative or theme to them. It will examine genres such as the RPG (role-playing game), the open world, and the choose-your-own-adventure. How do these genres compare and contrast? How do they position the player? Can the player affect the narrative or the world of the game? How so? Which video games feel more theatrical than others, and why? Does a game need a narrative to convey a story or can the player make their own? This subsection will look at a cross-section of player-driven games. A potential discussion topic could be how the ethics systems in open world games encourage or discourage morality in player-controlled characters and stories.

Piggybacking off of video games, the course will dive into table-top and role-playing games. It will ask similar questions about how the games cast the players. Typically, though not always, these games focus more on competition and rules. How can players affect the narrative within these frameworks? Does the theme of a game affect the players' experiences? How do rules allow for players to build their own narratives or characters? This subsection will look at various table-top games involving boards and pieces and role-playing games that involve casting players in a given scenario. A potential discussion topic could be whether the superficial aesthetics or visual designs of a board game impact how players experience the game.

This section will conclude by comparing the various types of games with each other, and examining how each does or does not include elements of drama. For the games that do, it will delve into the various ways that they incorporate these elements. It will then tie into a discussion and module around immersive and interactive theater. Could these modes of theater be considered games? Could any of the games be considered theater?

Section Two: Dramaturgy of Themed Attraction

Perhaps closest to traditional theater is the industry of themed attractions. These can include theme parks, haunted houses, and escape rooms. They often employ live performers, have some sort of narrative or theme, and rely on audiences. They differ in that participants have more of an active role in crafting their journey, and the experience centers the participants rather than the performer. This section will look at the dramaturgical constructs of audience and world-building. How do themed attractions tell stories or convey theme? How does theme differ from structured narrative? What role does the audience play in these experiences?

This section will first examine theme parks and the many ways in which they convey themes. It will examine the theme of the park itself, the onboarding narratives of rides, and the feelings that park goers are supposed to experience. How does a given theme park brand itself? How do the areas around rides cast the park goer? What is the dramatic structure of a narrative-themed ride? What does a theme park wish for attendees to feel while visiting? This subsection will look at the marketing, branding, design, and layout of popular theme parks. A potential discussion topic could be how a theme park uses specific words or protocols amongst staff to convey messages to visitors.

Moving on to a niche cousin of the theme park, the course will examine haunted houses. In this kind of themed attraction, audiences are meant to feel a certain feeling: fear. Yet there are many kinds of haunted houses. To what extent does a haunted house have a narrative? How do haunted houses create exit scenarios for people who are too scared? What are the various kinds of scares that haunted attractions offer, and how might they align with various dramatic elements? This subsection will look at various types of haunted houses and how they compare to theater and other attractions. A potential discussion topic could be what constitutes a "character" in a haunted house and how performers convey them.

Next comes another niche cousin of the theme park, the escape room. Whereas haunted houses focus on the relationship between performer and audience member, escape rooms focus more on the relationship between space and audience member. Do escape rooms convey narrative? Do participants take on the roles of characters or do they embody themselves? How does the dramatic element of spectacle play into an escape room? How does the group setting create a sense of collective storytelling? A potential discussion topic could be how designers ascribe meaning to objects in escape rooms.

This section will conclude by comparing themed attractions to live theater, as they have many structural parallels, and seeing where the differences lie.

Section Three: Dramaturgy of Space

Whenever a space gets designed, whether through architecture or urban planning, designers have to consider the user journey of the people who inhabit said space. An architect might design a building to convey a certain feeling to those who visit, and an urban planner may wish to give a city a certain reputation or personality. All kinds of spaces, ranging from rooms, to parks, to houses, to buildings of all functions, have some degree of design that goes into them. This section will look at how space conveys messages to those who visit.

I have to confess; I perhaps know the least about this form of dramaturgy. However, I do believe that architecture contains dramaturgical principles. How do different forms of architecture elicit feelings or emotions? How do the designs of spaces welcome people into them? What do the various architectural styles evoke in terms of aesthetics? A potential discussion topic may consist of how cities implement architectural decisions that accommodate or don't accommodate local homeless populations.

As of now I have this section as one unit, but it may get broken down into subsections based on different kinds of spaces. It will conclude with comparisons to the designs of theaters and sets and how they convey theatrical ideas.

Section Four: Dramaturgy of Curation and Collection

Many dramaturgs maintain play archives as part of their profession, but archives themselves can convey a theme, loose narrative, or even an idea. A collection may be defined by the works in the collection, but also the picture that the collection paints as a whole. The act of curation lets the viewer know what they should focus on and the underlying concepts at play. Commonly we see this in museums and libraries, but there are many types of collections and methods of collection that tell different stories.

As of now, this section will focus on museums, but will look into the various ways in which museums curate and collect. How can the design of an exhibit tell a story or convey an idea? What are the stories behind the procurement of given collections that museums may or may not wish to share? How does a history museum's curation differ from an art museum's? A

discussion topic could be how a museum shapes the narrative around a collection that someone obtained through colonialist, illegal, or other underhanded practices.

This section will conclude by comparing different types of museums with each other and examining how each shapes narrative in different ways. It will also discuss the narrative of the "visitor journey" on the macro level and the narratives of specific exhibits on the micro level. Other collections may come into play, such as libraries, film archives, or government records. Comparisons will be made to both archival work in dramaturgy and how anthology works create archival narratives of their own.

Section Five: Dramaturgy of Ritual

In religion, rituals are sequences of ceremonial actions performed according to tradition. However, rituals need not derive from religion, and can consist of any sequential tradition of a given community. What are the purposes of rituals? These vary greatly from ritual to ritual, but often serve to tell a story, represent a symbol, serve as a rite, or encourage the upholding of a set of values. In performing a ritual, the performance of theater is evoked, but rituals often delve into much deeper dramaturgical areas with their histories, meanings, and anthropological significance.

This section will delve into ritual, with the first section dealing with religious rituals, the most common examples of the practice. How do ritualistic performances differ from theatrical ones? Do rituals have characters? What are the different kinds of religious rituals? Which follow more traditional dramatic structures and which do not? A discussion topic may be how the Passover ritual of retelling the story of the Exodus through a shared meal differs from other forms of storytelling.

The next section will include other forms of ritual, and discuss what makes something a ritual and the dramaturgical arguments for each. Political and societal events often become rituals, but what about common activities like shaking hands? What are the differences in dramaturgical construction for each? What ideas do they convey? Do these rituals convey narrative or spectacle? How does performance factor in? A potential discussion topic could be how rituals change the narrative of historical events, such as the rituals associated with Thanksgiving that have recontextualized the historical significance of the holiday.

This section will conclude by discussing the different variations of rituals and the purposes they serve. Comparisons can be made to plays and performance art that themselves resemble, deal with, or encompass popular rituals in culture.

Section Six: Dramaturgy of Events and Festivals

Many occasions have dramaturgical importance, and while the course covers several of the important ones, it cannot be all-encompassing. One area that includes many disparate dramaturgical experiences is that of festivals and events. This can consist of everything from

music festivals and night markets to renaissance fairs and political conventions. The thesis behind this section is how a large-scale planned event uses elements of dramaturgy.

This section will look at a wide swathe of festivals and compare the dramaturgical commonalities and differences of each. How do festivals incorporate character, spectacle, and narrative? Are these created by the festival planners or the attendees? How do planners and attendees coordinate to create dramatic moments in festivals? What part does performance play in these events? What part does dramaturgical research play? A potential discussion could revolve around how a food festival might convey cultural or traditional themes through the cuisine and setting on offer.

This section will conclude with a discussion around the many types of festivals and what they all share dramaturgically. They may be compared and contrasted with one another, but is there a dramaturgical principle that binds them all? They'll be compared to theater festivals as well as the dramaturgical work that goes into audience engagement.

Conclusion

While this is a relatively brief overview of the course, it is still an early proposal. A lot of questions come up throughout, and hopefully these will get answers or better yet become more refined during the thesis process. There are a number of potential topics of "non-theatrical dramaturgy" that do not fit into the sections listed above. These include such areas as storyboarding, project management, government, bureaucracy, social media, monuments, live music, and fine dining, among others. The thesis would also devote time to researching these other experiences and looking for which ones have the most dramaturgical power and ways to potentially incorporate them into course segments. Another potential area of restructuring comes from the outline of the course. Currently, the outline here breaks down the experiences by medium, however I could also structure the segments by "type of storytelling." For example, games could go into one segment or could get split into two depending on the mode of storytelling, such as role-playing or collective storytelling. Ultimately, even the output of the thesis could change. While the goal is to ultimately create a course, the thesis also succeeds simply by gathering and synthesizing as much information on "non-theatrical dramaturgy" as possible.

Interviews

As seen through my initial proposal, when I started on this journey I didn't know about all of these experiential mediums, nor did I necessarily have my finger on the pulse on why theater could learn from them. I knew that in my own experience, I had found mediums such as video games and escape rooms to offer a high level of engagement, but I didn't know exactly how theater could borrow from them or even how this engagement was facilitated. For mediums such as tabletop role-playing games and live action role-playing games, I knew very little about the mediums themselves. As such, I sought interviews with various professionals from the fields of these mediums to learn more about how they function, what terminology they use, what resources to look into, and how the unique methodologies of these mediums could serve as lightning rods for theater. It's worth stressing that starting out, I didn't even have a lens or goal of exactly what theater could learn from these mediums, I just knew they had various pedagogies that could provide useful, but over the course of these interviews the subjects helped sculpt this into the concept and tenets of experiential dramaturgy that I landed on at the end.

Ian Klein (8/31/21)

For my first interview, dramaturgy professor and thesis advisor Christian Parker suggested I speak to Ian Klein. Ian graduated from the dramaturgy program at Columbia before working at a creative agency. He then founded his own company and has worked on escape rooms and designing immersive experiences, specifically for theme parks. He has since then gone on to create franchise guides for major motion picture franchises.

In our talk, we discussed how dramaturgy is everywhere but few people call it dramaturgy. So how do groups practice dramaturgy without knowing what it is? "It's something we do by nature. It's not just storytelling. It's more complex than that. Every moment has dramaturgical underpinnings," Ian related to me.

I found this really interesting in a few ways. First, the idea that we all practice dramaturgy could theoretically mean that anything could be included in a course about experiential dramaturgy. But for me, certain events felt more dramaturgical than others, and these were the ones I wished to focus on in the course. As such, this made me realize that I would have to begin the course with a specific definition for this area of experiential dramaturgy. Another area of note is the idea that dramaturgy is not just storytelling. I agree with that. It's a kind of narrativization but it's not always linear. The term "story-beats" comes to mind.

For his own thesis, Ian initially wanted to do one on the dramaturgy of dark rides, but was dissuaded by Thomas Schumaker at Disney. In hindsight, he kind of wishes he had done that

project. Instead, he did a thesis on the dramaturgy of space, as in environment. "The decisions that are made in supporting narratives of space are interesting," he told me. His thesis critiques how spaces function and allow people to function in them and he feels the tension of when spaces don't support his objectives. He feels that you could extrapolate that to any scale, urban planning, for instance. This part of the conversation led me to include a section on "dramaturgy of space" in my initial proposal.

I asked him what he'd want to see in a course about "non-theatrical dramaturgy," as I was still using that term at the time. He recommended video games, dark rides, and architecture–these all made sense to me. I had thought about the first two but not architecture until the aforementioned discussion of his thesis, which made a case for how we experience certain environments and how they're meant to make us react to them.

Asked what books or resources he'd recommend I look into, he suggested this list: *Spectacle* by David Rockwell. *The Immersive Worlds Handbook* by Scott Lukas. *Architecture* by Francis Ching. *Staging Space* by Gestaltin Publishers. *Engaging Spaces* by Kossman Dejong. *Theme Park Design* by David Younger. He also said that anything about Charles Eames is good and recommended I look into the Themed Experience and Attractions Academic Society.

Char Simpson (9/9/21)

For my next interview I spoke with Char Simpson, an interactive experience designer, and professor of Digital Storytelling at Columbia.

I started by asking them what they would want included in a course about "non-theatrical dramaturgy." They said that strangely, they would actually want it to begin with a discussion about how dramaturgy is storytelling. They said that they'd want to have immersive experiences discussed, as well as collective participation storytelling, such as *Minecraft* or *Fortnite*, and also escape rooms.

This list interested me for a couple of reasons. First, I wasn't sure how I wanted, or if I wanted, to include immersive theater. But this confirmed for me that it would be a necessary framework for talking about other kinds of immersive work. Here I decided to make an early section of the course all about immersive theater and also related each subsequent section back to immersive storytelling. So already, the word "immersive" became integral to this concept of dramaturgy. The list also interested me since I had decided I would include video games, but the way Char grouped them provided a conundrum. Should I have one section about video games, or did they exist in various genres and systems that would provide a better comparison with other

media? For example, *Minecraft* could live in a section on games, or a section on collective participation storytelling like Char related.

By this point, I had created my initial proposal and outline, shared above, and I gave it to Char to analyze. I asked them about the order of the course. They said that they personally would switch the syllabus, starting with dramaturgy as storytelling and then go with events or festivals or ritual, move to curation, then themed attraction, then games, then space. I didn't quite see the natural progression of this, but it did get me to think heavily about how I would order the course. My initial order simply felt right to me, but I didn't really have any reason behind the progression.

I asked what books and resources they recommended I look into, and they suggested *Design is Storytelling, Design of Everyday Things, Pattern Thinking, Speculative Everything, Hamlet on the Holodeck,* and *Computers as Theater* by Brenda Laurel which they had some issues with but could discuss. They also recommended works by playwright Alan Ayckbourn.

They also had a lot of questions and thoughts for me to consider. They said that this area of work has similar methodologies to experience design, narratology, and ludology, and that I should be as specific as possible as to what these spaces mean to me. They said that they saw this course as "A new niche that people fit into, how Andrew sees theater and dramaturgy and why these ideas can or cannot apply to these areas. After this you can open the door to speculation about looking at experiences through a dramaturgical lens." Again, this made it clear that I needed a specific and workable definition.

They also heavily recommended that I teach the course myself, co-teach it, or even make it a workshop. They suggested I prototype it somewhere. Friends and faculty members could attend this workshop and help it grow. I could create an instructional manual for it, or put it on a personal website. This gave me the idea to hold workshops of the course, so I could test it out with classmates and make that a practical part of the thesis.

They asked me to think about how experiential design and dramaturgy coalesce–an excellent question: I wondered if experiential design should have a segment in the course or have some assigned reading for it. Char observed that these experiences are all about connection. This thought unlocked another door for my definition of experiential dramaturgy. Personally, they encouraged me to pick three topics and then move out. "You don't want to be so general that you miss things," they explained. I had to admit, I was a bit reluctant about this, so I said that I saw this course not as a deep dive but as tunneling under topics to find their theatricality. Char loved this metaphor and found it much more subtle. They observed that this course seems to deal with the dramaturgy of audience experience, which I think is accurate and another potential part of the definition. Additionally, they noted that many of these ideas rely on fear responses, such as

haunted house attractions. And lastly, they encouraged me to develop my personal pedagogy of the idea.

Claire Chapelli (9/21/21)

For my third and final initial interview to get started, I spoke with Claire Chapelli. Claire is a mutual friend of my friend Fiona, who suggested that I reach out to Claire after I posted a Tweet asking what people would want to see for a course in "non-theatrical dramaturgy." Claire is an actor who has gone on to become the producer of *Madcap Motel*, an immersive experience in California.

I sent Claire the initial proposal and course outline, and she had a few thoughts right off the bat. She said that immersive theater and immersive experience felt like the thing that held these topics together. "There's a lot of range. How do you set expectations? Something might be "immersive" to one person but not another. The immersive industry is like the Wild West," she explained. She also echoed Char's sentiment that I could even do a course on one topic. She said that the horror scene is booming and that that could either be the one topic or I could leave it out. "There's a lot there about safety concerns and consent but then the other end of stuff that's just meant to be creepy," she said. Again, I do have some reservations about having a course that is too narrow. But since two people said it, it seemed that I definitely had to make a case on what I'd focus on, and pick and choose my battles. Certain topics from my initial proposal would have to get left out or narrowed in scope.

I asked where she drew the lines of immersion. "Themed entertainment and haunted houses are immersive theater. Video games can host immersive theater. Ritual feels sort of out of place. Or like that could be its own topic," she explained. That got me thinking again about immersion. I wasn't doing a course on immersive theater, so immersion played a role in my pedagogy for this course, but it clearly wasn't the be-all and end-all.

Claire also suggested I use the term "experiential dramaturgy" instead of non-theatrical dramaturgy. This term really clicked for me, and I subsequently changed the name of the course. I asked her to elaborate on this. "The person is in the world instead of watching the world," she said. This concept made perfect sense to me.

I asked Claire about her work at *Madcap Motel* and what this even entailed. She said that they set out to combine different aspects of experiences. Initially, it was just a selfie museum, like The Color Factory and Museum of Ice Cream. It's a vintage motel with a "wormhole" that sends you into an experience. Similar to the current iteration of Meow Wolf. In this experience, performers start off by prepping the audience with the experience, and the middle part is roaming

on your own with optional roaming performers. Then at the end the performers return. She called it an immersive entertainment experience. "It's kind of a museum but there's a story," she explained. Some people want more of a theater experience and others want less, so they've hit a middle-ground that pleases people but doesn't make for a wildly successful business. There could be more of a theatrical experience, with performances in every corner, or you strip it and make it more of a museum.

I asked Claire what she would want included in this course. She said that it would be interesting to examine what themes or topics are common throughout. For example, she's noticed a lot of Shakespeare, horror, and fantasy/alternate reality/escapism. She's found that there isn't a ton of quotidian immersive stuff. She also said she'd like discussion around how people run these things, operationally. Who are the people running these things? What do the teams look like? What are the balances between making art and making things that run well and keep people safe? I'll admit, I think this last area, while a good one, may prove too unwieldy for this course, since it involves several industries. However, her first suggestion around common themes and topics is one I hadn't thought about but was right under my nose, as a lot of the subjects in this course do in fact have overlapping themes, topics, and genres.

I asked her what books or resources she recommended I research. She recommended the immersive experiences at Disney, such as the Galactic Starcruiser. She said that the site *No Proscenium* might be a good starting point. Noah Nelson, who runs it, is also on the board for LEIA, an emerging guild. She also recommended I go to buy a ticket for an immersive event and see what the rules are for taking part and how people get onboarded. What should be expected of you? What will you need to do? Also, how do performers deal with things? How do they deal with what people are expected to do? One could break these down into choose your own adventure, role-play, sandbox, etc. She recommended the book *The End of Storytelling* by Stephanie Riggs, who works in AR and VR. She also recommended a show in LA called *The Nest* about a normal person's life. There's no live performance; it's just a storage room you go into and play a tape as you go through. She also suggested I read a script for *Sleep No More* or another show with many tracks.

In regards to who else I should talk to, Claire recommended I reach out to people who work in these companies. It's a small enough industry and people are pretty generous. She suggested David Burn's Theater of the Mind, Third Rail, Secret Cinema, and Next Stage. She said that Tom Salamon is someone she could connect me with for this project. He directs immersive shows and is from a theater background. She told me to join the Everything Immersive Group on Facebook, which I did. Siobhan O'Loughlin is another solo artist she recommended.

Percy Hornak (2/4/22)

After taking a couple of months to focus on research and reading, I looked at the areas of the course that I needed to learn more about for the project. As I said, I didn't know much about tabletop games, so I decided to find out more. Fortuitously, I had a show rehearsal with Anthony Sertel Dean, who does sound design for the podcast *Dungeons + Drama Nerds*, which I had previously followed. They introduced me to the creators, who gave me a few book recommendations and offered to chat. Percy Hornak suggested the book *Queer Game Studies*, from which I read several chapters, and then we talked.

Percy told me that growing up, he was very into games and improv, loving the structures of those forms. He initially wanted to become a novelist or short story writer. In college, they thought they'd major in English but took a drama class and then went down that route from a literary perspective. Then he found out about dramaturgy which he got into next.

Asked about what he'd want in an experiential dramaturgy course, he said he'd definitely want it to engage with games, immersive theater, and participatory theater. I'd looked into the former two specifically, but while I often work in participatory theater I only had it as an extension of immersive events. They also suggested that live theater vs. digital theater could be a part of it, especially in a segment on audience experience.

Having listened to *Dungeons + Drama Nerds*, I asked him what he found theatrical about role-playing games, whether in a tabletop or video game format. He said that these games "Ask us to take on a character. To think through the perspective of someone who is not us and experience a story from that perspective. There's also an element of being a performer and audience member simultaneously."

In the podcast, I was fascinated by his use of the term "system for storytelling" and asked how he'd describe it. He talked about it in a way similar to genre, as a set of rules that tells you what's going on. Game designers use the term "systems thinking," what are the rules behind the story or creation of something? He said it's like doing a Harold in improv. These are "the shared rules through which we're all operating so everyone can think about this in a dramaturgical system-oriented way."

One issue I've come up against several times is how to organize the course, and I still don't have a clear idea yet. So I asked him how he'd manage or differentiate role-playing video games vs. tabletop games. He said that they definitely belong together and they're both theatrical. The difference being that video games are mostly solo and tabletop games are mostly collaborative.

I also asked them about genre (in the sense of popular genre) and running themes, since that came up both in Char's interview and in the podcast. They said that they found that the theater industry is afraid of genre but these interactive events are much better at depicting experiences that are not our own. I took away from this that both are forms of escapism, but one is more passive and immediate (traditional theater) and the other is more active and distancing (interactive events).

Personally, I have limited experience with tabletop role-playing games, but I have played board games with role-playing elements to them, such as *Betrayal at House on the Hill*. Is that an anomaly? Is that theatrical? "There is a large liminal area between tabletop role-playing games and board games," Percy explained. "It depends on how much you take on a character and how much you're just playing through rules." He mentioned *Alice is Missing* as an excellent example of this gray area.

For part of the course, I want to have students play a tabletop game, but I want it to be a short or easy one to make it accessible for the course. I asked if he had any good suggestions, and he recommended *The Quiet Year*, *For the Queen*, and shared an article that suggested *Honey Heist*.

I then asked him how we could bridge the gap between traditional theater and these more accessible or more popular alternatives? He suggested a few solutions, such as being more open to using the language of game design (world-building, role-playing, etc.) in making theater. Also loosening the definition of what counts as theater. And borrowing language from other disciplines that use similar principles. Likewise they said to think about plays as a system of rules, like Eleanor Fuchs might say, drawing from her "Visit to a Small Planet." This all sounded great to me, but I was especially surprised at how I never thought to use Fuchs's essay in the course, yet it's such a great piece in easily describing the kind of dramaturgy one could use to look at both plays and experiential work.

While I had already decided that the course should include episodes of the *Dungeons + Drama Nerds* podcast, and had an idea of which ones, I asked him which he thought might prove most suitable. He suggested episode 9, which focuses on playing as performance, which I had already written down. He also suggested the episodes on "spectactorship" and "narrative is the jelly" which I had not listened to yet.

As always, I asked for a few book recommendations, and he was kind enough to send me a list. This list included *Designing Virtual Worlds* by Richard Bartle, *Game Feel* by Steve Swink, *Hamlet's Hit Points* by Robin Laws, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* by Janet Murray, *A Pattern Language* by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein, and *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* by Bo Ruberg.

Kerry Concannon (2/25/22)

One day I was talking to my producer friend Leigh Honigman. My thesis came up, and I mentioned that I sought to interview people involved in immersive experiences. Leigh asked if I'd like to talk to a stage manager who worked in the field. The thought had never occurred to me, but I figured it could offer a unique perspective. And so I interviewed Kerry Concannon.

Kerry attended the University of Michigan, where she wrote a paper on *The Donkey Show* and became interested in immersive shows. After she graduated, she stage-managed opera for a bit. She had a friend that worked on *Queen of the Night* and brought Kerry on board. To her, immersive theater is "a living puzzle." She then worked on a few smaller immersive shows, such as *Seeing You* and *The Stranger* with Randy Wiener. She also worked on the carnival experience at The Museum of Sex. For her, she's primarily worked in immersive theater and immersive museum experiences, as well as dance and circus.

I asked her what she'd want to see in a course about experiential dramaturgy and she gave a unique answer: The audience. "People refer to the audience as their own character," she said. "They're a part of the puzzle. The audience becomes a big part of the productions." She said that audiences should be their own chapter in the course, which helped give me an idea of organization. She said that for performers, it takes a certain kind of performer to do immersive theater. They'd have to be emotionally vulnerable because they don't have that proscenium distancing from the audience. "They're fluid and they read people well and find that connection," she said. "And some performers aren't as comfortable with that, which is fine." In her work as a stage manager, she found the lack of backstage really interesting. For *Queen of the Night*, they had magnets they used to get props from places so that people wouldn't realize there were doors there hiding the backstage. Many of these shows have stewards, the people who block off where the audience is not supposed to go. If they have bartenders or servers, they also need some kind of prep for talking to audiences.

Since she's the first and only stage manager I'd interviewed, I asked her what else was unique about stage managing these shows. For immersive *Sweeney Todd* she had two costumes so she would blend into the production as the SM. She said that these shows have a lot more safety concerns such as protecting audience members. And a big way to make money is by having a bar which might make people more courageous. But this can also create problems with drunk people. SMs have to work with drunk, disruptive, or problematic people. They also have to perform tasks in the least noticeable way or "with a flourish" if they will be noticed. She explained that a lot of paperwork involves "if this, then this" to account for the discrepancies from night to night.

One of the unique elements about immersive theater is that it has to account for audience interactions. I asked Kerry how she stage-managed this unknown quantity. She used *Queen of the Night* as an example. For the show, the Queen would signal audience members to cast members for them to bring them into the one-on-ones with her. “Sometimes it’s the luck of the draw and sometimes it’s very curated,” she explained. “And then they would write a Q on the person’s hand to note them as having had a one-on-one. And then later when performers would examine their hands, they’d see it.” She also explained that, like *Sleep No More* and many immersive shows, it had certain chimes that would cue people without the audience realizing it.

Though a hardball question, I had to ask her about the argument that these shows were inherently pro-capitalist or neoliberal. Especially since one of the essays I read in *Immersive Theater* that argued this used *Queen of the Night* as an example, saying that the separate price points create an inherent hierarchy. Kerry explained that *Queen of the Night* uses this pricing for drinks and food to make a profit on these sometimes incredibly expensive shows. However, the interactions are totally random or based on “vibes,” as she had explained. “The show delivers a baseline where even if you don’t get any interactions it will still be great,” she explained. But she did say there is one aspect that feeds into that capitalist idea: “there are those people who want to see everything and go back 20 times which definitely has a kind of privilege.”

Having come from a lot of game research, I asked her how these experiences may resemble games, if they did. “Playing games is a big part of the process,” she immediately said. “You do get to play. Especially the secret rooms that if you find them you get to see special things. You’re immersed in a little world. It’s fun to watch adults have fun.”

This response brought me to another line of questioning. Many of these experiences in New York, such as *Queen of the Night* and *Sleep No More*, are adults-only. However, some of my research said that children have a much better time diving into play and interactive experiences than adults. So how do the performers in these shows get adults to take part? Kerry admitted that some adults are shyer than others and that generally most cast members leave these ones alone, discerning who is willing to interact by using eye contact or by touching their shoulder. However, she said that for one production, she bought nostalgic toys that adults might recognize, and performers would either hand them to audience members or play together with them, which would unlock something for these people and they would play.

We ended with Kerry recommending an immersive director with whom she could get me in touch. She said that she didn’t know if these shows had dramaturgs but knew they did a lot of research. Wrapping up, she said there’s “definitely a desire for connection and feeling close to people physically and mentally after the pandemic. And immersive gives people that.”

Nick Fortugno (2/25/22)

That same day I also spoke with Nick Fortugno, a game designer and interactive narrative designer. Broadly put, he sees his work as making art out of interactive things or making anything that creates immersive aesthetics. Nick taught the course *Digital Storytelling* and partially inspired my idea to look at interactive storytelling through a theatrical lens. I mentioned this and explained a bit about my frustrations with traditional theater and how I hoped to provide alternatives or opportunities for revitalization through this course. He immediately agreed, saying he believes that theater has a lot to offer but that the business is ludicrously broken.

We then went over my definition of experiential dramaturgy, which I had developed after my initial interviews and had shared with Percy and Kerry. Nick feels that immersion is an overused word, which I agreed with, but he said that it does fit here and that I seemed willing to acknowledge its overuse. To my surprise, he said that he felt that "immersion" is the least important aspect of my definition and thinks that "meaning-making" plays a big part, which actually was the part I added last. As such, I had felt the least confident about it. So it was good to know that it in fact fits strongly into my thesis.

He sees his work as "hybrid work on the border of immersive theater." He defined this, saying, "They're not games really, they're not theater really, they're performance art for lack of a better term." He does a lot of interactive storytelling work, from branching comics to interactive world-exploring work. He admitted he never did traditional theater and didn't know what that entails. I found this interesting, and I wondered. How much of a theater background would people want or need in this course?

Nick recommended that I assume that nobody would need "theater 101" here. I could make the base assumption that students would understand storytelling and how it relates to theater arts. And then the course changes those concepts in an experiential way throughout. "This is the dramaturgy of things that are experiential," he said. "This is a modifier." He imagined that this course would make the case that dramaturgy has a unique lens on this, using a different rhetoric because it's experiential but using a dramaturgical lens. And then it would share how people could create their own work. "There are techniques here, tropes, forms, what are the characteristics of it, how does theater give a lens to it, how is it an extension of theater and how can I take something away from that." He said he'd be surprised if there weren't discussions of Punchdrunk and VR theater and some history of theater constructs (theater in the round, etc). It could potentially look at performance art or interactive theater as well as boundaries between audience and performer. This whole description of how he imagined the course would go based on what I told him interested me, since for the most part it is exactly how I envisioned it with a few exceptions. I didn't think too explicitly about VR theater, but this was not the first time it

came up. I also didn't think much about the history of theater constructs, but I enjoy incorporating theater history and it would be interesting to give a brief overview of that.

Since Nick is a game designer by trade, I had to ask him, what kinds of games are theatrical and how so? "A lot of games are cinematic," he told me. "Not all, but they have a fixed camera. Games that are more open-ended, multiplayer, or role-playing oriented are more theatrical. Minecraft, MMOs, etc." Interestingly, Char had said something along the same lines, focusing on multiplayer games. I pressed him on less multiplayer-oriented games. He said games like *Journey,* where people connect ambiently, also count. I brought up the concept of connection through discussion of an experience's rules or lore, and he conceded that this counted. He then gave me the wonderful phrase "consistent universe" to refer to the aspect of these experiences that encourages people to discuss and compare notes with each other.

I asked him if he had any resources or groups to look into, and he suggested *Computers as Theater* as well as the group Gob Squad, which I had remembered from his class but couldn't remember the name of. He also suggested the groups All Work and No Play and Knudepunkt and their books on interactive theater and live-action role-play design, respectively. He suggested I talk to Char again, as they know a ton about haunted houses but rarely talk about them unless prompted. I had actually reached out to Char again anyways, so this was great to hear. He then suggested I speak with Samantha Gorman, who directed *The Under Presents: The Tempest*, which I had just looked into since it's a rare piece of VR theater. He also suggested Kyra Benning as someone to talk to for the thesis.

Char Simpson (3/14/22)

After getting further in my research, I wanted to talk with Char again. When we first spoke, I went over what the course would focus on and the general idea of it. Now I had an idea of what it would be like and had researched and talked about the specific facets of it, but I had perhaps the least amount of info on haunted houses. When Char and I spoke this time, we focused mainly on their experience with the horror attraction Blackout, which they said they were involved with from around 2008 to 2019. Char performed with Blackout, managed attractions, and designed rooms.

Char mentioned that Blackout had a rabid fanbase and was considered a "cult haunted house." This reputation interested me since it seemed to align with my tenets of "meaning-making" and "connection" as part of experiential dramaturgy. Sharing my definition, they agreed with it as it stood. I had heard from Nick that Blackout was a bit notorious and Char mentioned trying to keep a degree of anonymity in their work with Blackout. So instead, I asked

about how haunted houses in general fit in with the theatricality of this definition. They provided a great response around the idea of the sublime. Defined broadly, the sublime refers to a level of greatness or extremity that inspires a sense of awe. For haunted house attractions, Char said that "there's a space between true terror and then there's a moment where you are coming down from the terror, and you are giggling and laughing, and there's a release." I could see how this ties into the sublime, with a level of extremity, in this case, terror, that instills a sense of awe or an emotional release. Aristotle's concept of catharsis in theater would serve as a similar comparison.

Char elaborated on this emotional release as an immediate one, without mediation, and compared it to being on a rollercoaster. They said the "entire design of the [haunted house] production is to give you an emotional reaction. There's no fourth wall. You are actively participating in your own demise." I found this interesting in how it continues on the concept of catharsis, which Aristotle used to discuss theater involving tragedy, a kind of horror in its own right. Further scholars compared catharsis to a cleansing or purification. Without the fourth wall, that cleansing is immediate. In a haunted house, you aren't watching your fears play out, but facing them. As such, it may be worth bringing into the course texts that discuss catharsis, such as Aristotle's *Poetics* or Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

We also discussed the different types of haunted house attractions, since my research on them had proven limited. Char brought in a distinction between those where the performers can touch you and those where they can't. They suggested I bring in a range of haunted houses into the course along those lines, perhaps talking about McKamey Manor, an extreme and controversial attraction that Char suggested seeks to give people PTSD. Meanwhile, Blood Manor and Eastern State Penitentiary are ones where the performers can't touch you, desiring to scare in more traditional ways. On a side note, Char mentioned that Eastern State Penitentiary offered a night where audiences could wear a red mask allowing performers to grab them, but the performers didn't know what to do once they'd caught someone. This anecdote calls back to the discussion around the challenges of immersive theater that Kerry talked about, in getting audiences to play along in a certain way.

I asked a question that had floated around in my mind since listening to the *Dungeons and Drama Nerds* podcast, which talked about how traditional theater rarely deals with genre (of the popular or speculative fiction variety), but theater-adjacent mediums live in it freely. Namely, what is it about traditional theater that promotes naturalism and about immersive experiences that allow for more genre-oriented work? Char agreed that traditional theater has had a history of idolizing realism and naturalism, which they called "unfortunate." They provided the analogy that a couch is just a couch in traditional theater, but in nontraditional theater, that couch harbors a tentacle monster. Immediately, this made me think of nontraditional theater as being more immediate with less passivity. But Char brought in an answer I hadn't thought much about, around class and race. They said that "theater has belonged to a certain class for a very long time

and rich white people wanted to watch rich white people, whereas horror and sci-fi were seen as lower art because they gave you the opportunity to bring in important social issues through genre in a way that's entertaining." Now, I'd say that a lot of theater has brought in social issues, especially in recent years, but I do think that Char is right about the source of this. I'd posit as theater has changed over the years, it has been more willing to tackle social issues but less willing to deviate from the source of realism or naturalism as a form of compromise. In contrast, other mediums have had social messages baked into their genre aesthetics from the start, as the two often went hand in hand.

Char and I then discussed what theater students could learn from studying experiential work, especially haunted houses. Char said that as a creator of interactive work, they found it immensely helpful to have acted in interactive work. They noted that the way theater schools teach acting is great, but that anytime they see a traditionally trained actor in immersive work, they think, "I don't believe you." They disengage. Why is this? They attributed this to the need for a certain closeness to the audience so you can connect with them. On a tangent, Char elaborated that *Blackout* would actually hire innately kind people, explaining, "When something would go wrong, I'm supposed to scare you, but I'm also your guide to get you through this safely. You know you're not going to get hurt." They said that they believe so many horror movies are about haunted houses because "that's the ultimate act of betrayal." You're betrayed by a space that you're intimately attached to; likewise, a good haunted house performer will work to build that closeness. As such, performers have to put themselves into the character. Ironically, they compared this to being a "true realist actor" in that "you're playing you, but as this character," which makes it more convincing. Char said that for a recent interactive piece, they started by playing a certain kind of "new-agey" stock character, but once they shed the layers of that, it made the engagement more real. To sum up, they said that "immersive acting is breaking the fourth wall of the character so that the actor and character are fused as one."

Lastly, I couldn't resist bringing in *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, since it seemed that Allston's arguments that immersive experiences are more neoliberal than traditional ones were at odds with Char's reasoning for why immersive work celebrated popular genre. It turns out that Char read the book and found the argument perplexing as well, since they saw a lot of connections between immersive work and theater of the oppressed. They chalked this up to "propaganda" that theater is for the people, and simultaneously it costs "$300 a ticket" and promotes hierarchy in the work. What are equal rights in the arts? They suggested moving away from the idea of the auteur and hierarchical structure and towards co-authorship and collaborative work. They also recommended I read *The Art of Immersion* by Frank Rose as a book more in line with these views of immersive art.

Steve Gaynor (3/14/22)

While I'd done a good amount of research on video games, I wanted to reach out to a game designer to get their perspective on the field, especially as an interactive medium. I reached out to Fullbright, the creators of the game *Gone Home*, since it struck me that the game resembles a kind of digital cross between an immersive theater piece and an escape room. I heard back via email from Steve Gaynor, the designer of *Gone Home*, who said that sure enough, the game drew partial inspiration from immersive productions such as *Sleep No More.* And not only that, but he said that the studio's second game, *Tacoma*, drew even more inspiration from immersive theater.

I've wondered a bit about the theatricality of video games, since they're digital mediums and don't have a sense of "live performance" outside of livestreams. Nevertheless, I believe there's a theatricality of them in a structural or dramaturgical sense, so I asked if Steve felt there was a theatricality to his games. He said that personally, he thinks there definitely is, bringing in concepts around set design and staging, in thinking about lighting, the objects in a space, how the environment guides the players through the space, and how the player understands the interactive elements.

It's interesting to note that, harkening to my discussion with Char, *Gone Home* and *Tacoma* have speculative fiction genre aesthetics to them. *Tacoma* is a sci-fi game, and while *Gone Home* is not a horror game, it does have some macabre aesthetics. Also, as Char brought up, they both deal with social issues. I asked Steve about the abundance of horror and similar genre aesthetics in immersive work. He said that the accompanying senses of these, such as urgency and disquietude, "propel you through the experience." In Fullbright's games, the sense of urgency would lead players to want to discover more and uncover what was happening, while the sense of disquietude would suggest that what you do uncover might offer a thrill. He summed this up by talking about "voyeurism" and the concepts of "sanctioned voyeurism" and "unsanctioned voyeurism," and how the latter provides a "jittery sense of transgressive excitement." Interestingly, this justification for why immersive works often incorporate the speculative fiction genre comes from a different impetus than that of dealing with social issues, but nevertheless makes sense from a sociological standpoint.

Aside from the genre comparisons between interactive games and immersive theater, I was also curious about why many immersive works of various mediums, mainly those involving exploration, are set in homes or workplaces. Steve brought up *The Nest*, an immersive piece likewise blending the boundaries of immersive theater and escape room, in which participants come through the storage unit of a woman to uncover her story. As another work at this intersection, I should include it into the course. As for why these pieces often deal with lived-in spaces, Steve offered that it's the logical answer to a series of constraints. For *Gone Hom*e, he

said a family home answered the questions, "If we're making one fairly small space, and it needs to tell a story through what's left behind, what kind of place could that be?" Likewise, he said that this similarly led to setting *Tacoma* on a space station. He said that "these kinds of games are centered on intimacy," which stood out to me since many other immersive experiences also strive for a sense of intimacy, whether through offering unique audience-performer interactions or encouraging players to bond through teamwork. Perhaps intimacy should be an aesthetic that the course examines.

I was curious about other correlations between exploratory games and immersive theater. Steve mentioned that these kinds of games likely have similar onboarding processes with immersive theater as well, that you're given a general idea of what the situation is before "you're simply set loose, to apply that small bit of initial context to what you encounter." Unlike traditional theater, where the audience is a passive observer and can receive a set narrative, immersive theater often has these exploratory elements in which audiences are set loose. But then the question becomes, to what extent do you want a structured narrative or to allow people to take away their own interpretations based on exploration? Steve said that there's a balance there whether it's for games or immersive theater, but that compared to something like *Sleep No More,* Fullbright's games "have much, much more foregrounded text in them via written and spoken word." The reason for this? It allows the players to explore at their leisure but also ensures they don't miss any essential narrative beats and know where to go. He said that he'd much rather have players "come away with roughly the same raw information and disagree on their interpretation of the narrative itself, than come away with substantially different information (because important content was unintentionally missed) and have their interpretations differ because of that." While both exploratory games and theater pieces want to strike that balance, video games may have more of an onus for players to hit important narrative beats because of linearity, whereas immersive theater productions can often provide non-linear storytelling. But they both allow for a degree of "meaning-making," as people might be more guided in one than the other but still come up with unique interpretations.

In my definition of experiential dramaturgy involving "connection," I wondered about the extent to which video games encourage people to participate socially. *Immersive Theatre: Engaging the Audience* brought in the unique idea that even immersive experiences like *Sleep No More*, in which you can't interact with fellow participants, allow for connection through post-show social gatherings in which audience members share info and tips. Initially, according to an interview with Alexis Soloski, Punchdrunk frowned upon these debriefs as spoiling the show, until the company realized that this was the audience's way of gamifying the show. I found the use of that word interesting because it implied that there was something inherently social about gaming. When I asked about whether designers consider opportunities for external discourse, Steve mentioned that the extent developers think about what players might discuss varies. However, he said that some developers do consider these decisions around "secret"

content. He brought up the new game *Elden Ring* and "the loads of obscure information in a From Software game that basically require players to collaborate and communicate." He said that for him and his team, they're more excited to see players dissect the meaning of the narrative but do include some hidden bits of information. This delineation made sense to me, since not every immersive theater piece includes opportunities for sharing secrets. And having audience members discuss narrative also constitutes a kind of intersocial connection. On a side note, I was excited that Steve brought up *Elden Ring*, since I had already decided to include the chapter of *Queer Game Studies* discussing the exploratory elements of From Software games and the meaning that players can derive from them.

Lastly, I asked what Steve would like to see immersive theater borrow from games. He admitted that he actually thinks they've already borrowed a lot, citing the work of Punchdrunk in particular. He brought up an interesting perspective, that he found the lack of dialogue in an immersive work like *Sleep No More* to go along with the "most 'game-like' aspect of Punchdrunk's work, which was the experience being fully 'player-directed.' Now, games do often have dialogue between characters; however, I understood what he meant. In games, dialogue doesn't remove player autonomy, but in traditional theater it does. Without dialogue, an immersive production allows audience members to interact in other ways. Steve compared having dialogue in immersive productions to "feeling 'locked into a cutscene" and that not having to worry about listening to conversations allows for exploration in an "unfettered way." This comparison made sense to me, and also made me think about the improvisational affordances of mediums such as tabletop games that allow players to interact organically with dialogue. Perhaps similar affordances could influence more immersive theater productions as well?

Mikhail Mansion (3/15/22)

I wanted to look more into the experiential dramaturgy of interactive or immersive museums. I was curious about them since they typically don't involve performers, so they're not theatrical in a live performance sense, but they do include visitors telling stories through exploration, similar to digital games. I spoke with Mikhail Mansion, the co-founder of Fairgrounds St. Pete, a new immersive museum that opened in Florida.

I find it interesting how people come to immersive works from different paths, and Mikhail's was different from the theater or theater-adjacent backgrounds of others. His approach started out much more engineering-focused. He worked on engineering for the air force, which he didn't love, but he had always been creative and played in bands throughout school. This pastime got him interested in the technology behind music, and he switched from hardware to software. This shift led him to a practice around interactive media. He attended grad school at

RISD and did exhibition design, sculpture, and installation work. He worked at the Tellart Design Agency, which began to focus more on interaction design. Mikhail then did consulting work and created an installation for Meow Wolf. Eventually, he was approached about doing immersive work in St. Pete, which led to the creation of Fairgrounds, which had a production phase during the pandemic and opened to the public in September of 2021.

I asked him my standard question of what he would want a course about experiential dramaturgy to include. I was especially interested in asking Mikhail since he came from a different background than most people and, in fact, had a unique set of answers. He said he'd want it to bring in the design process, from the discovery phase to the concept phase to the design phase and then into production, where you can achieve the design intent. Initially, when planning this course, I didn't think much about the actual practice of designing experiential work. Still, I believe it is, in fact, integral and relevant, especially in how much it mirrors dramaturgical pre-production work but with aspects that theater artists could learn from in the order and system of it.

Mikhail also brought in a few terms and concepts that he would want the course to include, some of which I hadn't heard of formally but made sense in context. First, he brought up architectural awareness, "how stories change in scale and space" and "change the way you move through the space." Then interaction design, such as how audiences are "interacting with objects that have a role in storytelling." This concept goes hand in hand with my tenet of interaction in experiential dramaturgy, but I liked that he brought in an example familiar to interactive museums and also found in other immersive works. He then brought in two terms I hadn't heard of, "environmental wayfinding," which is "how you direct people through space," and "narrative drivers," which set up frameworks in nontraditional storytelling to serve as the "driver of decision" in "what makes sense in that world-building scenario."

I had a question that was unique to what I knew about Fairgrounds as an immersive museum: how do immersive museums have narratives? Mikhail answered with another great term I hadn't heard of, what he called "game layers." He defined this by talking about how at Fairgrounds, they "cast a wide net to try to get narratives to everyone," from people coming from more interactive backgrounds like escape room and theater fans to people from more passive backgrounds like visual art aficionados. Some parts of the museum are more passive, and some are more interactive, with the most interactive sections referred to as "quests." Mikhail likened these to escape rooms but said he has issues with the term because it "conjures pressure." I asked him about the term "immersive" since it's often overused. He said that Fairgrounds will use it in marketing if it's helpful, but if the word confuses people, they won't, and they'll primarily use it "to describe an all-encompassing world." Since the word frequently gets thrown around, I appreciated Mikhail's definition of how Fairgrounds applies the term.

Similar to Mikhail's concept of game layers, when I asked him how theatrical Fairgrounds is, he said it's "theatrical by degrees," citing parallels in its creation between the museum and immersive theater. He did mention that they don't have actors at Fairgrounds, and while they do have "guides," these guides are not diegetically part of the world of Fairgrounds.

In our closing discussion of what else to look into, Mikhail brought up the parallels to game design and game theory. As I touched on a little before, I'm interested in the similarities of various design practices with theater, and game design is no exception. But he gave a justification that I hadn't considered, that game designers have "done so much work solving problems in virtual worlds that we're now dealing with [in real spaces]." This reasoning is a sound justification for studying game design as a maker of immersive work, since games have created immersive spaces for far longer than immersive theatermakers have, for example. Lastly, Mikhail recommended I check out a few artists making immersive installations, including Teamlab, Superblue, Artechouse, Moment Factory, and those who bring installations to Burning Man.

Monte Monteleagre (3/21/22)

Playwright Greg Nanni told me about Monte Monteleagre, another playwright he met who also designs tabletop games. I figured I had to talk with them since they'd know about both the tabletop and theater aspects of this course and be able to compare the two. Monte first got into tabletop games in elementary school, playing paired-down versions of games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. He then got into theater in high school and started designing their own games in college.

I always like to ask what people would want in a course about experiential dramaturgy, as the answers vary between the specific and general and the concrete and the abstract. For Monte, they offered "the idea of play, and how theater relates to play," elaborating that in their experience, "tabletop role-playing games and theater scripts are both machines to create stories." They described both as "structures for a concept of play" that "change from performance to performance." This response is one of the more abstract answers, but it makes sense. Many of these mediums aren't stories themselves, but rather systems for storytelling like Percy said before.

Are tabletop games theatrical? How so? "You are essentially telling a story to yourselves," Monte answered. "So it's as theatrical as the players want it to be in their play through." They admitted that it also depends on the game itself to a degree, and that some systems "want to be theatrical." There isn't much theatricality or performance for some games,

such as the war games that inspired modern tabletop games, but they said that games have tended more towards the performative in recent years. This trend might have something to do with the rise of podcasts in which actors play a tabletop game and play up the theatrical aspects, and Monte said that these tend to be the most theatrical sessions since they operate as a kind of radio drama.

This thought led me to ask about something that came up during the play sessions I hosted. I mentioned that none of the participants had any issues with improvising dialogue, even those who admitted they would never agree to perform improv if asked. Why were they comfortable with improvisation in a tabletop setting, then? Monte gave a couple of reasons, citing the lack of audience in a traditional sense and the privacy that affords, as well as the system of stakes that allows people to embody a character for whom those stakes are a reality.

During the tabletop sessions, I talked with the participants about the mechanics of these games that they'd seen in shows or could imagine being in a show. Since Monte has experience in creating both plays and tabletop games, I brought this discussion up. They told me about how in college, they created an improv show using the game *Fiasco* as a framework. Though I've never played the game, I'm familiar with it and had considered ordering it for a session. Since the game is about generating Coen-brothers-esque scenarios, I imagine those became the inspiration for scenes that were then performed by the improvisers. They also said that many role-play mechanics come to the forefront in immersive theater, which greatly validates this thesis and its goal.

Monte also mentioned that one could use tabletop mechanics not just in a play itself, but in creating or rehearsing one. They cited a play festival in which they used rolled dice to determine randomized tone words that would provide a basis for each play. They also said they try to use safety tools from role-playing games in theatrical settings. Monte felt that "traditional theater spaces don't seem actively concerned with consent," and this would be a way to rectify that, but also said they're seeing the increase in intimacy coordinators as helping with that as well. For reference, tabletop games occasionally use "x cards," "lines," and "veils" in determining what the participants of a game are comfortable with before they dive into a session. Monte defines x cards and lines as "things [players] don't want in play" and veils as content that players are fine with having but "don't want to go into depth on" while playing. Since I believe that ethics and accessibility are important aspects to discuss, especially when it comes to immersive theater, these practices from another discipline prove relevant to that concept.

Something that Nick has talked about, and that came up in the tabletop game sessions, is whether tabletop game stories are interesting when retold. Monte had a great term for these narratives which explained their benefits and limits, calling them "pseudo-diegetic narratives." You have the narrative of the characters and that of the players, and it's hard to relate this to other

people who weren't there because they were not in that pseudo-diegetic space. Monte gave the example of making out-of-character jokes while one is in character, and explained that "when you try to translate that to someone else you lose the gray space, and the gray space is what made it happen, so it falls flat." That makes sense to me, and it seems like a play that wanted to borrow from tabletop games could in fact succeed as long as it maintains that pseudo-diegetic space, such as Monte's improv show incorporating a game of *Fiasco*. If you played the game at home, say, and recorded the script, it wouldn't be interesting. But if you played the game and improvised in real-time, you would maintain that gray area that the piece would require.

For my own edification perhaps, I asked if it's more important in running a tabletop game to complete the game or let people wander. "Rule number one is be safe, and rule number two is have fun," Monte answered at first. "If all [the players] want to do is futz around in a tavern, let them futz around in a tavern. If they want to get to the dungeon, make sure they can get there." My takeaway from this is that it's important to manage and gauge expectations. Monte didn't say which was better or which one they personally preferred, but that it will differ from session to session. I'm noticing a running theme here, that tabletop games as a medium value player input more so than other mediums since they can get crafted in real-time. Most theater doesn't work this way, but perhaps there's potential to create a show that incorporates audience or performer desire as an experiment. Monte said that establishing expectations is the key purpose of a "session 0," a game session before the actual game in which the players discuss what they want or from the experience.

I asked why role-playing games lean on genre (speculative fiction) more than traditional theater, a question I like to ask folks from various non-traditional backgrounds because they each seem to have this in common but different answers for why it occurs. Coming from a theater and tabletop background, Monte posited that "most popular theater pieces have one set narrative they're trying to tell, whereas games have more mechanics and lean more on tone and genre that leave the narrative up to the players." That makes sense to me, especially for tabletop games. A play may prioritize narrative, but a tabletop game can't since it's written as the game unfolds, so instead, a game would build a foundation on something that likely wouldn't change, such as tone or genre.

And then lastly, I asked what Monte recommended I look into, and he had a lot of recommendations. For games, he suggested *Fiasco,* especially the second edition for its ease of play, *Mork Borg*, a Swedish game that he described as "highly theatrical," *Arcana* and *Grin,* short horror role-playing games, as well as *Street Magic*, *Monster of the Week,* and *Apocalypse World*. I explained that I didn't think I'd have time to play that many games in the course, but Monte said that a lot of these are known as "one-shots," role-playing games that are light on rules and often consist of just one page. They recommended I check out *The Ultimate Micro RPG Book,* edited by James Dematto, and his podcast, *One Shot,* in which he plays many of

these short games. It might not be a bad idea to have an assignment that gives out a whole list of one shots and allows students to pick the ones they're interested in or play a few to compare and contrast them. When I said, "What about theory?" Monte suggested that the best way to learn about games is to read their rules, including the game master sections that most people don't read. But they did also say there's a new tabletop game magazine called *Knock* that might have more theory to it. Monte also said that have a friend named Lea who works in immersive and might be worth talking to, and asked if I was looking into Live-Action RolePlaying (or LARPing), something that I had actually considered for the course and was on the fence about previously.

Kevin Hourigan (3/22/22)

Kerry recommended I interview Kevin Hourigan, an immersive director who worked with her on *Queen of the Night*. I still needed to interview someone who specifically directed immersive work, so I got in touch. Kevin started as a performer at Gallow Green, the restaurant attached to *Sleep No More*. However, he didn't consider himself part of the immersive community until he got pulled into *Queen of the Night*. Since then, he's directed and worked on a few projects, and while he wouldn't necessarily call them immersive due to the word's overuse, he has tried to pull in some of the practices of immersive work in staging more traditional pieces.

That immediately piqued my interest, since one of the purposes of this course is to bring in experiential practices from various mediums that theater students can use in their own pedagogy. I asked about the techniques Kevin has brought into more traditional work, and he said that it mostly pertains to visuals and set design. But for a production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he had the minor role of the flower seller interact directly with the audience. The show has various ambient textual moments onstage, and Kevin said that he attempted to work these into audience interactions where possible.

But what makes for successful audience interaction? Kevin said that it's a fine line, and that fiction doesn't hold up well, so if the audience detects something off, the whole attempt will fall apart. He illustrated where this line lies, explaining, "If you ask too much [of audience members], they start to panic. If you ask to partner [up], they want to do a good job." Similarly, the amount of interactions needs to strike a balance, and he said that having too many or too few will make the show fall apart. But not every audience member wants the same level of interaction, and when I brought this up Kevin said that these shows try to provide an experience that has something for everyone. As such, some of these shows try to prescreen audience members in certain ways to determine how much engagement they want from the experience. This practice reminds me of what Monte said about having a "Session 0" before starting a

tabletop game. Likewise, Kevin said that he has begun bringing in intimacy coordinators for shows where audience members may get physically touched to gauge the appropriate level for that type of interaction.

In talking to Nick, he had said that from an experience design background, the most crucial interaction in a piece is the first one, since it sets expectations for those that follow. I asked Kevin what he thought about this as a director of immersive theater, and he made the case that it's not so formulaic since interactive theater is about gaining trust. To him, you have to build trust through interactions in the work over time, but he said that the benefit of this is that "if the first impression doesn't go right [the artists] can still build that trust." I appreciate these two different points of view, and to me, it makes sense that somebody from a game design background would have one that's more precise and testable, while somebody from a theater background would have a view that's more about relationship and feeling.

I asked Kevin what he'd want from a course about experiential dramaturgy. He prefaced his answer by saying, "As an immersive director, it's about crafting the one-on-one direct engagements. I'm looking for containers that can hold that tightrope act that I was talking about earlier. What I've become most interested in is when the scene becomes a kind of mirror where audiences can do a bit of self-reflection even if they don't realize it." As an example, he brought in the Barnum Effect, which I had never heard of before. Essentially, the Barnum Effect is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when somebody gives a generic description that could apply to anyone, but a person takes it to apply to them specifically and uniquely. If a ringleader said to a crowd, "someone here likes to eat pizza," several audience members could assume that they were the one being talked to, even though it's a general fact that many people enjoy pizza. Kevin suggested, "Find exercises and create scenes that incorporate elements of that strategy." I could incorporate assignments allowing students to test these immersive practices around the performer and audience to give them practical experience in designing for immersive work. I had yet to think as much about the practical assignments of the course, since I've mostly read books that I figured I could work in, but this sounds like a great opportunity for students to test the theory they'd learn from those resources.

In talking about the potential of digital work and how that differs from experiential theater, Kevin mentioned that he read an Artform article about Virtual Reality works that touted the form as "an instant empathy machine." However, he said that the interesting thing about the piece is that the author argued that "VR is not actually empathy; it's narcissism." When I pressed a little on the key difference between the two mediums that caused this distinction, Kevin said that "theater offers empathy from a distance, but VR is just manufacturing." The key word here is "distance," and he explained that when we empathize with people, we don't imagine ourselves as other people literally but try to relate to them from our point of view.

I was also curious about Kevin's take on the argument that immersive theater is inherently neoliberal, and to my initial surprise he said that he actually agreed with that take. However, he provided a useful and succinct dichotomy for outlining this argument, saying, "Immersive theater is dividing the audience in the individualistic myth of the neoliberal whereas traditional theater has the collective." From that perspective I could see it, as immersive theater does focus on the journey of the individual while in traditional theater, "the audience" sits together as one unit. But while I could see how one could place the paradigm of neoliberalism on top of immersive theater, at the end of the day, this doesn't explain whether they have the same ethical ramifications. Kevin summed up the comparison in another way, saying, "There's a lot of neoliberalism in the concept of being able to walk into a room and touch anything because you paid for it." What I like about this quote is that it's concise, easy to grasp, and illustrates how immersive theater often dovetails with the experience economy. In fact, it more or less sums up the experience economy in one sentence. I still wouldn't say that neoliberalism is ingrained in every piece of immersive theater, but for those that are more commercial these concepts sum up the relationship well. Either way, I want to put forth both arguments to students of the course, and this point of view makes the immersive-as-neoliberal argument easy to impart.

Kevin brought up an episode of Ezra Klein's podcast about games, and said that it mentions how games "modulate your levels of agency." I'll have to check out this episode, but it led me to ask how immersive works resemble games, or if Kevin thought they do at all. Kevin said that it depends on the given work and that they may resemble games greatly or hardly at all. For example, some immersive shows model escape rooms or scavenger hunts. He said he often thinks about incentivizing the audience, but this can come in various ways. How can you "gamify" the experience? And when it's not a game, what does it mean to use a game framework? He said that this could even mean setting up a framework for audiences to achieve an emotional experience, as opposed to collecting as many interactions as possible or experiencing the rarest ones.

So I asked Kevin, how do you get people to participate in these immersive experiences? Similar to his idea of having to provide an incentive for the audience, he said that you first have to know the world of the show and the goal of the show. From there, you create interactions that model the ethos you want the audience to take on, "To help them feel both seen and that we're not invading too much of their space." He said that productions can accomplish this through what he referred to as "an opening gambit," an interaction that "playfully get [the audience] their consent and gets them onboard and makes an offer." And how can you be creative with your interaction? He said that the structure or outline comes from good communication, and then you can use the art of a piece to find how that communication unfolds. This reasoning makes sense to me, and to take it a step further, I'd say that it sounds like the art and world-building of an immersive piece could both entertain audience members and mask the strings that are pulled to get them onboard with the rules of the piece.

Josh Randall (3/22/22)

After talking with Kevin, I spoke with another immersive director, but this time one with a background in haunted houses. Josh Randall co-created *Blackout*, a kind of haunted house experience that deviated from many haunted houses at the time. Before our chat, Josh suggested that I check out the 2016 documentary *The Blackout Experiments*. I have to admit, I don't think the documentary would be helpful for the course itself, since the film mostly deals with the perspective of the people who became fans of *Blackout*. However, it did provide me with a sense of what that experience was, which gave me more questions to ask Josh about his role in designing it. But first, a bit of his background. To my surprise and joy, he actually came from a traditional theater background, as growing up he was in awe of shows like *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserable* and especially the breathtaking aspects of them like the crashing chandelier in the former and the barricade building up in the latter. He became an actor, went to NYU, and quickly transitioned to producing and arts administration. A lot of the work he produced was what he referred to as "immersive without immersive being a thing" at the time. For example, he created a show called *The Frying Pan* that he and a friend staged in the bottom of a boat. In 2009 Josh and his friend created *Blackout*, which became decently successful within the haunted house community and shifted the industry to an extent. He then did a lot more work in experiential branding, creating, and producing, before *Blackout* closed in 2019. Now, he works with Two Bit Circus, trying to bring these immersive experiences to the family fun industry.

I shared with him my work-in-progress definition of experiential dramaturgy, as I've done for everyone since coming up with it, but for the first time in a while I got some feedback on how to tweak it. Josh said that on the surface, he doesn't disagree with the definition but does feel that immersion and interactivity have taken a turn over the last couple of years. For him, immersion is "about creating a world and letting people into a world," and he said that does come down to semantics. However, he did say that my definition implied that interaction always occurs between people, and he disagreed with that. I explained that, in fact, I didn't feel that was the case and that I thought a lot of experiential interaction involves the environment, so he suggested that I change the definition of interaction to say "...to engage within the environment." That helped specify the kind of interaction that I envisioned, so I made that change so people would know that interaction could be with performers or with objects in an immersive environment. Josh also pushed back against the phrase "in their own ways" when referring to audience interaction. After all, a show invites audiences to interact but sets the rules for what these interactions will become. In writing it, I wanted to show how audience members can perform various interactions, so I asked if replacing that phrase with "in various ways" would satisfy this and he agreed that it would. These were easy updates to the definition, and it was helpful to know that while Josh and I essentially agreed on the definition, the phrases I used led him down a different line of thinking than I intended, so this update allowed for a course correction.

As with everyone, I asked Josh what he'd want a course on experiential dramaturgy to include. He had a few suggestions that were highly relevant and some that were interesting but less relevant to the scope of this course. He also had a few opinions that I largely agreed with, but found more useful as perspectives to bring into the course and less as directives for how the course should run. He elaborated on how immersive theater has changed in terms of agency, saying that he believes the industry has gone in a big circle and essentially is back to LARPing, "with all these theater people doing all these innovations and just bringing [the productions] back to LARPing." He said that in 2022 "immersive" seems to mean offering a role for audiences in "who can you be" and that was never relevant for him. He doesn't believe in audience agency because that's not the way theater goes, and finds a big difference between LARPing and experiential work. This is a helpful viewpoint to include in the course, but ironically it suggests to me that LARPing should be a part of the course, something I've debated. The purpose of this course isn't to advance an aesthetic, but to provide students with the various tools that they could use in crafting experiences. One student may have little interest in audience agency, but another student might find the concept of audience agency relevant to the work they wish to create.

Josh also said that he tends to be an outlier in disagreeing with the concept of "story first" that many designers lead with in their work. "I don't believe story is the most important thing," he explained. "Worry about mood and atmosphere above story. If you can do that, the story will come like that. [The audience] will always get the story. Make them feel something first." Personally I agree with this regarding immersive theater, but since this course includes several experiential industries, I want to bring this view into the course as a point of debate, not as a point of direction. On a side note, I really liked the three questions he asks when audience members leave his work. Josh asks, "What's something that sticks with you? What will you walk away with or think of when you think of this show? And anything that surprised you, any moments that put you in awe?"

One point that I found interesting, but I don't know how relevant to the course it would be, is that "immersive is experiential and that can be anywhere." For Josh, the most immersive experiences are rock concerts, which he referred to as "the Roman chariot races of our time," and he cited those of Madonna and Peter Gabriel as especially experiential. The reason I hesitate to bring in rock concerts is because they're not consistently experiential from a dramaturgical perspective. If I listen to somebody playing "Wonderwall" at a bar, I certainly have an experience, but I wouldn't say I'm immersed in an interactive environment that provides connection and meaning-making. However, I do think there needs to be a section on events that can have dramaturgically experiential elements to them. This unit can cite how Robert Le Page brings those elements to Peter Gabriel's concerts, for example. Josh also mentioned that museums and aquariums "create these worlds, these vibes, these atmospheres that you're invited into." It's a good point, and while the section on experiential spaces will primarily deal with

immersive and experiential museums, I agree that traditional museums and aquariums do borrow from these practices as well and can come up towards the end of the course. In short, I'd say works that aim for the experiential have a bit more significance to them in terms of influence and inspiration, but those that turn out to become experiential as well still have relevance to a lesser extent as aspects of them can prove useful. After all, a course isn't meant to include every occurrence of a phenomenon, but rather the instances that prove most influential to the subject at hand.

In the documentary, a couple of people mentioned that they perceived a "story" to their *Blackout* experience, or that they interpreted the experience to relate to their lives. I asked Josh about this, and he said, "We never intended for story." He said that the team put "zero thought" into the story of the experience until people started taking part. He still didn't create a story, but aligning with my tenet of meaning-making, Josh said that people projected their own stories on the experience and the artists accepted that. For example, in one scene a performer would pinch the audience member's arm, and one person who experienced that wrote about it as "the scene with the nurse," likening the pinch to getting a shot, and the team accepted that for the rest of the run. Josh and his team don't write any kind of narrative, but nonetheless one can arise if the audience projects a story onto the event.

I asked what brings returning attendees back to *Blackout* and if Josh thought there was a sense of people wanting to "gamify" the experience. He said that for *Sleep No More*, there's "absolutely a sense of gamifying it," but for Josh's fiancé, "It's not a game, it's a world, it's a mood." For Blackout, Josh chalks the repeat attendees up to people who had really intense emotional reactions and want that again, or couldn't get past a certain part in the experience and want to try again. It's interesting, because I would argue that both of these motivations, especially the latter one, is a form of "gamifying" an experience, but it all comes down to whether one thinks of the term "gamifying" as turning something into a game that one can win, or as turning an event into a structured form of play in which people can have a goal or a challenge to surmount, regardless of whether they "win." I brought in the four attributes of gaming mentioned in the essay "Game/Play: The Five Conceptual Planes of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* from *Immersive Theatre: Engaging the Audience,* and Josh mentioned a similar form of themed entertainment categorization for audiences as the "the divers who jump right in, the swimmers who do most of it, the waders who do a little, and the toe dippers maybe who do a tiny bit." He also mentioned another term as "the triangle," a pyramid with various layers based on engagement in which all audiences should get the smallest top portion but the experience should offer deeper layers. For him, he doesn't consider these but "thinks about building an experience as an experience." Again, I understand where he's coming from, but I'm glad he brought these terms into the conversation as they could prove useful for students who have never created experiential work and may want frameworks that can provide jumping-off points. As an analogy,

playwrights may or may use writing prompts, but having access to them can prove helpful for those who get stuck.

Since we had chatted about immersion, interaction, and meaning-making, I wanted to bring the concept of connection into the conversation. I asked Josh about how much the makers of *Blackout* wanted audience members to connect post-show. It turns out, quite a bit, actually. Josh explained that Blackout is “an experience built on secrecy” but that, similar to Punchdrunk with *Sleep No More,* the team realized that actually, “Oh, it’s about community, to compare and contrast and be a part of this club.” The creators seized on this opportunity, inviting attendees at one show to a secret “final meeting” which was just the audience getting together at a bar, and “it kicked off this community.” There’s an interesting trend here of artists planning an event to have secrecy around it, perhaps to build a shroud of mystery, but then realizing that this actually lends itself to a community. I wonder if a form of reverse psychology comes into play, where telling audience members to keep secrets actually gets them to form communities to share said secrets?

I asked Josh my final round of questions about what I should look into, who I should talk to, and if he had any final thoughts. He recommended I check out the work of Elan Lee, who works across video games, augmented reality games, and tabletop games. He also recommended I look into the show *So Long Ago I Can’t Remember*, created by Michael Counts, which Josh described as a version of *Dante’s Inferno* that to him, “Was the first *Sleep No More*.” In terms of people I should talk to, he asked if I knew of *The Nest*, and he wasn’t the first to bring up this show. The difference, however, is that Josh is friends with Jeff and Jarrett, the creators, so hopefully he can get me in contact with them. In terms of other works that came to mind, he brought up a show playing in LA called *Cages* which bills itself as a hybrid theater-concert, but Josh found more of a concert. He also mentioned thinking about *Someone Else’s House* by Jared Mezzochi, a digital-theater hybrid that aired during the pandemic. Lastly, he recommended I read *The House of Leaves*, which isn’t about immersive work, but Josh has found that many people working in the immersive industry have read it due to the unique way it engages readers.

Aaron Suduiko (3/24/22)

Looking into panels for the PAX East gaming convention next month, I stumbled upon one hosted by the members of *With a Terrible Fate*, a game analysis site. Looking into their work, I found that the academic rigor with which it analyzes video games lends itself to this thesis in a few of their articles. I reached out and got an immediate response from founder Aaron Suduiko. It turns out, and perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised at this point, that he was a self-professed “classic theater kid growing up.” He did a lot of acting and directing in high school and then started to think about the literary quality of gaming and the extent to which

games are and aren't analogous to theater. He specifically researched role-playing in plays, games, and other works. He majored in philosophy, studied the narratology of games, and talked with his friend Dan about the game *Majora's Mask* and how it tells stories in ways other media can't. They started a blog about the game, which became *With a Terrible Fate* as others took an interest, and it grew from a blog into an academic site. Aaron considers the site a blend between video game journalism and the analysis of academia.

I asked him what he'd want a course about experiential dramaturgy to include, and he shared a book and an idea–both interesting. The book is *Mimesis as Make-Believe* by Kendall Walton. The book presents a theory around representational art that draws analogies to concepts around "play" and "make-believe." Since Monte mentioned wanting the course to cover a sense of "play," this might be a great book to look into for that aspect. Aaron also said that he thinks about storytelling in two ways, "having a story told to you" and "telling a story." He provided the distinction that one involves somebody telling a story, and the other involves somebody taking their experiences and narrativizing it, which dovetails nicely with my concept of meaning-making. Aaron suggested that Walton's book also covers this ground, which is another reason I should look into it. On a side note, he said that he finds the word "immersive" over-used, which I agree with, but that's helpful to know since I can bring that up in the course.

I asked him if he finds a "theatricality" to games, as a person who knows both theater and games, and he said "100%." But he quantified this in a unique way, saying that, "It's misleading to take on the idea that you are playing a role in a game, such as playing 'the role' of Link in the *Legend of Zelda*." I hadn't thought of this explicitly, but it makes sense. A player is not asked to read scripted lines as an avatar and can make their own choices within the rules of a game. Aaron built on this by comparing playing a game to having a script and being the director. He cited this relationship as akin to the concept in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a play I'm aware of but may have to read.

As I said, the articles found on *With a Terrible Fate* struck me with their level of analytical rigor. They discuss several relevant concepts such as "capacity," the affordances of a game, "environmental storytelling," the arrangement of objects in a game that suggest a story, "narrative teleology," building a story towards a specific end, and "ludology vs. narratology," the debate of games expressing rules and mechanics vs. games expressing narrative structures. I asked if Aaron had any other terminology that I should bring into the course, and he said he often thinks about "flat and full analysis," the difference between looking at the level of plot that is scripted and the level that brings in the fact that a player is interacting. He gave an example drawing from *Final Fantasy VII*, in that a flat description of the death of Aerith is that she's killed by Sephiroth, but a full analysis would include a player's loss of agency when that occurs. In other words, this distinguishes between what happens regardless of player interaction and what happens with player interaction.

Aaron also brought in the term "possibility structure" as one used to talk about the manifold of potential plots that can unfold by the creator who created the possibility structure. This term does not include interpretation but rather the various routes within a game that a player can choose. Along with this, Aaron mentioned "macroscopic" and "microscopic" decisions. He said that, for example, macroscopic is which ending you choose in *Bloodborne*, and microscopic is which weapon you have or if you walk three feet or six feet to the right on the path toward that ending. I can see how several mediums, including immersive or interactive theater productions, do or can incorporate these concepts in their creation and the experience of attending them.

As I've asked several people, I asked Aaron why traditional theater tends toward realism, and games and experimental works tend towards popular genre? At first, I realized that we didn't quite have the same definition of realism, and I gave a few examples of realism and naturalism in theater. Aaron then had an intriguing answer, finding that there's an interactive distance in games that makes them interesting and "creates a special relationship between the player and the world, which genre helps facilitate." I had to ask a couple of follow up questions to understand the nature of this special relationship. Ultimately, I came to grasp it as stemming from the interactive distance, which allows players to be more taken in by a world that is unlike their own, and in turn genre, whether that's sci-fi or fantasy or horror, makes that world more intriguing for players to engage with in building that relationship.

I asked Aaron what he'd like to see immersive theater borrow from games. He brought back the concept of the "special relationship between audience member and story," which he found as what really mattered in analyzing games. He said that he actually compares this to a theater piece that would consist of a bunch of actors in an enclosed space with a very elaborate script, and an earpiece in an actor's ear that feeds directions from an audience member viewing the space from an overhead platform. As such, he asked if there are ways in which a theater piece can make audience members feel like a director or other positions in theater? There's an interesting concept here, that immersive work can change the nature of what it means to be an audience member and liken that experience to another aspect of theatermaking, something that traditional theater can't do.

I asked him if he recommended any other resources to look into, particularly any games that the course should definitely include or any articles from *With a Terrible Fate* that he felt spoke to the course the most. He suggested I include the game *The Stanley Parable*, which I already have, and a game by the same designer, *The Beginner's Guide*, which I didn't know about. He also suggested the game *Dishonored*, which I've played but hadn't thought to include in the assignment relating to games. I didn't specifically disclude it, I just hadn't thought of it, and I can see why it's relevant. In terms of articles, he said that generally speaking there are a few published articles that compare games and theater, some of which I've likely already

researched. As for *With a Terrible Fate* articles, he said that there's one about how the remake of *Final Fantasy VII* is "completely incomplete." He admitted that it might be too "in the weeds," which I had to agree with as I love the game and read the article but it requires too much context. He also suggested another about the theatricality of *Final Fantasy IX* that might be potentially relevant and another that's a response to an argument that video games are better without stories. In going through the site myself, I came upon a few interesting articles, and mentioned the one about the death of Aerith as it talks about capacity in a way that, to me, seemed to deal with both interactivity and meaning-making. He agreed and said that it might also be worth reaching out to the person who wrote that article and Dan Hughes who's the person who founded the site with him.

In wrapping up our conversation, Aaron mentioned doing a previous talk for PAX Online about the social aspects of games that he suggested I look up. I had brought up the concept of "external discourse," the secrets and tips that gamers and participants of other mediums share that become practically a part of the given experience. For games, Aaron likened this to "meta-gaming," a term he admitted was nebulous but could facilitate a discussion around this phenomenon. In a general sense, meta-gaming is "the game that we decide to play with it that might be different from what the developers envisioned." In this case it could become the "meta-game of excavating a world and all its secrets."

Alexis Soloski (3/30/22)

Thinking about people I still hadn't talked to, I wanted to get the perspective of a theater critic, and Alexis Soloski came to mind. I may have a bias since I interned for her, but I also know she has a particular interest in immersive works. Alexis is a theater critic and features writer who has held an interest in immersive theater for around two decades. She wasn't aware of it in college, gravitating more towards site-specific theater at the time, and didn't get into immersive theater until her professional life. She found that New York in the early 2000s was a bit shabbier at the time, which opened up more spaces for artists to utilize around the city. For example, Alexis saw a site-specific production of *Twelve Ophelias* by Caridad Svich by Woodshed Collective at an abandoned pool, no longer abandoned today. In terms of immersive work, she saw *The Angel Project* on Roosevelt Island, which felt incredibly powerful post 9/11, and *The Mask of the Red Death* in 2007, her first Punchdrunk show, and she had never seen anything like that. Alexis had seen promenade theater but never something where she could walk wherever she wanted. Going through a fireplace and into another room felt like "walking through her own dream," an interactive adventure that included her. Since then, she has chased immersive theater, and during the pandemic, she started chasing it through VR and digital escape rooms and tabletop games. Counting college, she's been a critic for 30 years. She loves theater,

sees a lot of it, and gets bored easily. As such, she enjoys immersive and interactive work when it's good and she feels accountable. She says, "In live theater, you're always accountable. If you're laughing and clapping, you're always accountable, but when you're watching immersive [theater] that ratchets up. Immersive is an embodied experience. It forces you into a kind of presentness whereas, in traditional theater, it's easier to zone out."

I asked her what she'd want from a course about experiential dramaturgy, and I love asking this question because everyone answers uniquely but in a way that complements other answers. Alexis said that she always believes in a historical perspective. And since she knows immersive theater, she gave a few examples of where this perspective could lie for the course. She said that some people think of the Greek dramas as a participatory event, and admitted that it's not a throughline that she traces but that it might be worth considering. Since the beginning of this thesis I've toyed with including *Poetics*. So perhaps that sentiment tips the scales in favor of bringing Aristotle's work into the course. Alexis said that she does think about medieval cycle plays and pageant plays. She thought it might be fruitful to consider amateur vs. professional work as well. But she definitely thinks about the Happenings of the 60s that went along with art and music. This suggestion made me smile since I've done a lot of work in Fluxus, arguably the cousin of the Happenings. Going on to the 70s, Alexis cited experimental work involving the audience, such as pieces by The Living Theater, The Performance Group, and The Wooster Group. I'm aware of these groups to an extent, and I could imagine a correlation, but I'd have to look into specific works more closely. They're worth mentioning. Alexis said that she doesn't trace the 80s and 90s so much, but that makes me wonder about the Theater of the Ridiculous groups that incorporate interactive elements into their shows. Lastly, she found an explosion of participatory work in the early 2000s with the "catalyzing phenomenon" of Punchdrunk and their works. Bringing in a historical record occurred to me, but I have to admit that I hadn't thought too much about it prior, so this legwork proved invaluable.

Another question that I've enjoyed asking lately, since it brings in so many unique answers, is why traditional theater tends toward realism and more experimental works tend toward genre pieces (speculative fiction). Alexis said that she wrote an article a few years ago on audio drama, and she asked why so many audio dramas were genre pieces because "it was almost impossible to find anything else." The answer she found is that this is part of an emergent artform, in that "you use genre to grab ears and then move on." This is true, certainly for the relatively new medium of podcasts. But tabletop role-playing games have always tended towards genre and have been around for a while. This answer applies to some industries but not all.

Thinking about recent journalistic discourse around open-world video games, which keep getting bigger and bigger, I asked Alexis to what extent she feels one has to experience an immersive theater piece to review it or get a sense of it? She said, "As a critic, you are an active and informed audience member. You are having a conversation with the work of art but also the

prospective participant." She elaborated that the first time she went to *Sleep No More,* she saw almost nothing but became so absorbed by the lights and the sounds and what she might find if she opened a drawer that it didn't matter if she missed the big scenes. This experience still gave her much to write about and some of that writing acknowledged, "Hey, there's a lot I didn't see." She said that she imagines that in a game, you might want to move through the direct route, or you might look for everything you can find. She doesn't think one way is more valid than another. And then she said that she feels like this is true even more so in traditional theater, in that "A responsible critic values the variety of responses," but makes a case for their point of view. This perspective reminded me of the theories Josh touched on around the swimming and pyramid analogies for immersive theater, so I brought those into the conversation. Even though Josh doesn't design with those in mind, it seems like the resulting audience responses should validate both the point of view of "the toe dipper" and "the swimmer," for example, which Alexis seemed to agree with in her response.

I asked about seeing marketing that touted the polar opposites of interactivity, that a show would either hardly interact at all or would offer the most interaction an audience could desire. Alexis said that she didn't really see much of that, which was helpful to know since this could likely be an outlier of my time in Chicago and may not have relevance to this course.

I asked about how external discourse factors into immersive shows as communal engagement, and brought in the essay "Game/Play: The Five Conceptual Planes of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More,*" refuting critic Michael Billington's stance that *Sleep No More* did not offer any kind of social connection. As a fellow critic, Alexis shares Michael Billington's point of view. She said that a small amount of people go on social media to discuss the secrets and tips of a show like *Sleep No More*. I pushed a bit on this by bringing in the concept of sharing just among friends at a bar, but Alexis said that was analogous to discussing any show, even traditional theater. I pushed a little bit more and brought up the difference between sharing opinions on a show and sharing tricks and tips, but Alexis found this to exist on a continuum. Overall, I agree that this external discourse is not always present in an audience experience. This justification may be a cop-out, but I think that the connection of external discourse still holds true to my definition of experiential dramaturgy as it's an element that shows should encourage. I don't quite agree that opinions and tips exist on a continuum, or if they do, I think there's enough of a perceptive difference. I can say to someone, "I enjoyed my trip to Paris and saw the Mona Lisa at the Louvre," or instead say, "If you go to the Louvre, make sure to go on Friday night when most tourists don't know the museum is open so that you can go right up to the Mona Lisa." One of these comments will provide somebody with a much larger chance of seeing the famous painting than the other. I also wonder if an appreciable distinction between the two spectrums of the said continuum is generational. Gen-Z (of which I am not a part of, I should note) coined the phrase "spill the tea," referring to the sharing of secrets or gossip. Thoughts and ideas do not constitute "tea," but hidden information that proves useful does. Providing an opinion versus a critical

piece of information facilitates different experiences. But at the same time, I also wonder if Alexis is entirely right about *Sleep No More*. It's not that the connection isn't important, but perhaps *Sleep No More* just doesn't do a good job of enabling audience connection. That may explain why I've shied away from the megalithic show and gravitated towards other productions that have fostered a higher sense of community among audience members. *Sleep No More* may have that sense, but other shows may do a better job.

Alexis brought up a justification that spoke to a different area of interest, namely that of safety and intimacy. She finds that in *Sleep No More*, once you're anonymized with a mask, you can't have a sense of solidarity, making the experience less communal than traditional theater. Personally, I still think that *Sleep No More* offers a sense of community, just not in that way, but this brings up a great point of how shows foster a sense of security or not, and reminds me of what Char said about Haunted House artists needing to scare people but also guide and protect them. Alexis said that as a woman, walking around a dark space can be terrifying and that "If one or two people in scary bird masks come, that's not necessarily welcoming." *Sleep No More* actively discourages audience members from engaging during a show, both through encouraging silence and through creepy masks that only the audience members wear–which denote people as audience members, provides them with anonymity, but also makes them frightening to fellow audience members.

I asked about any plays that Alexis feels incorporate mechanics or aspects of games, and she said that personally, she hasn't seen much in theater but thinks more about escape rooms. She has seen this a bit in murder mystery shows, where audience members have to figure out the crime and who committed it, but not much otherwise. She also explained that even *Sleep No More* wasn't designed to have game mechanics but Felix Barrett eventually worked in those inspirations after people approached it that way. Though seemingly not what I hoped to hear, this answer solidified my belief that theater has much to learn from alternative interactive mediums.

In terms of why immersive theater also attracts non-theater people, Alexis ascribed this to marketing. She said that for *Sleep No More*, "It's billed as an experience more so than a play." On some level, it boils down to going to a bar or a club and then walking around a warehouse. "It's experiential haptically in an embodied way that traditional theater is not," she delineated. She also brought in a term I had never heard of, that of "XR" which I realize is something that I have experienced. Alexis defined it as more experience oriented than VR (Virtual Reality) or AR (Augmented Reality), but online definitions say that it actually encapsulates these two. Regardless, it's worth looking into as I wasn't aware of the term before.

Alexis plays a moderate amount of board games but doesn't really play tabletop role-playing games. Nevertheless, I asked if she found anything theatrical about playing board games. She answered, "Not really, you get very invested, and you're buying into the narrative of

the game." She explained that players mostly know they're playing the game, and they're not actually taking on the role of the character they're playing as. Aaron said the same thing about video games; however, it seems like in board games that's the only touchpoint for any kind of theatricality whereas in video games the connection with the avatar is one of many. Alexis differentiated that for board games, "It's a limited buy-in, the theatricality is limited. But for people who do role-playing games, that may be different. There's a big theatrical element to role-playing games." Again, this works great for my thesis, since I'm looking into tabletop role-playing games but not board games. Alexis did catch me slipping, as I referred to TTRPGs as "tabletop games," something I've been doing for brevity. She reminded me that board games are tabletop games, just not tabletop role-playing games. It's useful to use the full title for something specific in order to differentiate it from other mediums.

I asked if she had any relevant books or articles, and she said that she contributed to a Routledge book a few years ago entitled, *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance*. I also mentioned her recent New York Times article about immersive theater, which did a great job introducing readers to *Sleep No More*, a work that I have to touch on but don't want to become the be-all-end-all for this course. I had also brought up the concept of audience members "gamifying" the show in ways other than trying to win it, but I don't think I did a good job explaining this, so that's something to work on for the future. Eventually I got there, and Alexis said that while it might well be the case, I would have to conduct a post-show survey to determine the different goals audience members had going into the show. She suggested that I could contact Punchdrunk to see if I could do a post-show survey of what people aim to get out of it, or just stand outside and interview people. I could do this, but I sense a degree of difficulty in arranging this. However, it occurs to me that I can facilitate this entire experience myself by having my classmates (shout out to them for being so game to take part) experience some kind of immersive event, such as a video game, and ask what goals they tried to achieve.

In talking about seeing audience members attending *Sleep No More* and who they were, Alexis mentioned that she's seen a decent amount of international crowds who might not speak English, which made her think about how much they were able to get from the performance. This observation is fascinating because it speaks to concepts of "affordances" and "capacity" that prior interviewees have mentioned. If you don't speak a language or have a certain barrier to entry, to what extent do you have the capacity to experience the affordances of an immersive event?

We also briefly discussed neoliberalism and how it can apply as a critique of immersive works. Alexis said that she gets how it can apply but also thinks immersive shows often provide equally valid ways of experiencing them. Here I think Alexis and I were on the same page, as she called it "A limiting critique." I like this term, as I agree with part of the critique but do think it's both limited and limiting in being useful to an extent and only an extent, and then also boiling

down immersive works into one lens of viewing them through. But as I said, I want to present various viewpoints in the course, including ones I don't necessarily agree with, for debate and discussion.

I asked if she knew anyone else I should reach out to about this thesis, and she recommended two people. The first is Mike Sell, a professor who covers dramaturgy and games and has a blog called *This Professor Plays*. She said I should definitely reach out since he has a background in theater and gaming. She also recommended I talk with another professor, Sophie Nield, who she gleefully said "hates participating" and wrote an essay entitled "Leave Me Alone I Like it Here in the Dark." Initially, I thought this might be the last person I should speak with, but then I wondered if it might help to get this different perspective. Alexis elaborated that yes, she's self-aware about her perspective; she's just a shy person. That made me think that actually she might be great to speak with, since as I said, I want different perspectives in the course as long as they don't shut down the dialogue facilitated by the course itself.

On our last thoughts and responses, Alexis left me with a closing thought that I hadn't prompted but proved appreciably helpful. She said she hoped the course would have a proposal or a design element, "an experiential thing that [students] can design." This potential assignment had occurred as a possibility in speaking with Mikhail, but the unprompted suggestion of it validated its importance. Lastly, Alexis said that she tends "to be a big tent person in terms of what is theatrical" and that she enjoys bringing other works into the conversation.

Alex Roberts (4/4/22)

For this thesis, I wanted to ideally interview a role-playing game designer whose game I could also play as part of the thesis. After playing *For the Queen,* interviewed the game's creator, Alex Roberts. The interview provided the perfect opportunity to use the post-game debrief to inform the questions I would ask. Alex is a game designer by trade and also finished up a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology. They find role-playing games as a way to connect people and help them find what is meaningful to themselves, a practice that also comes up in their counseling work. She has made role-playing games for around five years. Pre-pandemic, she also focused on Live Action Role-Playing, finding the two practices have a lot of similarities and are only separate because they come from different design practices.

First, I shared my most current definition of experiential dramaturgy with them. Alex found the meaning-making and connection aspects especially relevant, because she believes that tabletop role-playing games have done well in large part because of connection. They find that role-playing games promise interaction in a way that few mediums do, with a degree of interaction afforded yet limited by a barrier.

I asked Alex what she would want in a course about experiential dramaturgy and what I should do with the students. She responded succinctly and to the point, saying, "Play games. Make them play games, read games, and debrief. You need to have that experiential component." This response reinforced what Monte said, that the best way to have people learn about role-playing games would be to have them play them or read the rules of them. I had previously pushed for more theory, but now I'm leaning more into the camp of learning by doing. Alex also said it would be okay just to have one class on LARP, after I mentioned wanting to include it but not getting into too much of it in my research.

I asked what is theatrical about role-playing, and Alex said that they find LARP to be a bit more theatrical than tabletop role-playing games, but both have a theatricality to them. "The experience of tabletop role-playing games feels more like a board game. The drama happens in your mind. We use words to describe imagery or figures, but it's all theater of the mind. We're all telling a story, and words are really important," they explained. "But in LARP, it's about movement and space. You can feel like you're putting on a performance." Alex compared LARP to dancing with friends in that "it's not about making something that's impressive." In LARP and tabletop role-playing, players get to feel what it's like to play a character without having to be a professional actor.

I then asked the question that came up in the tabletop sessions, what makes people comfortable with improv in tabletop role-playing games? Alex said that they actually found the answer to this in a course on group therapy. Early on, the professor said, "When a new group of people is together, anxiety is really high, so you have to produce a rigid structure." Alex then paraphrased that this structure may not allow for much potential at first, but the rigidity can get reduced over time. Comparing this to games, Alex said, "People need to know exactly what is expected of them." They explained that certain factors increase the need for one to outline these expectations, like if the players don't know each other, aren't familiar with the game, or have never done anything like role-playing before. This ties in with some of the responses I received from classmates who participated in my game nights. They felt comfortable participating because they either knew each other or came from a theater background, even if they had never played the games or any tabletop role-playing game before.

Likewise, as discussed in some of these sessions and as Nick brought up, I asked whether Alex found tabletop game stories interesting when retold. Alex has found that the concept that tabletop games aren't inherently interesting is "mostly almost entirely true." She said the stories are a bit like inside jokes in that you need context. She provided a great analogy, saying, "Gossip about people you don't know has to be really really interesting, but if it's someone you know, it doesn't [have to be interesting]. You had to be there. If you don't have the context, why would you care?" She also brought in a concept that illustrates a potential reason for this, saying, "The

game doesn't make the story; the players make the story." It may feel like the story is unfolding from the game, but it's actually coming from the players. Alex feels that TTRPG stories aren't usually interesting from beginning to end, but people will have anecdotes that can be interesting. She explained, "It's fun to tell a story. The fun of doing it is disproportionate to how good the story may be." She believes that the fun in tabletop role-playing games doesn't come from the storytelling itself but from the experience of collaboration. I find this interesting, as there's something to be said about how this applies to theater. To use a film example, a bad horror movie might be good in theaters not because of the movie itself but because of the shared experience of sitting through the frights with other people. One could apply this phenomenon more broadly to any audience experience and the ensemble experience of putting on a show together. But for these mediums that incorporate "spectatorship," in which performer and audience are one, these two communal experiences bring out an even higher level of collaboration.

Since I enjoy the variety of answers, I asked Alex why she thought role-playing tends more towards genre (speculative fiction) than theater, even though she doesn't have a theater background. And I'm glad I asked because she gave not one, not two, but three reasons. The first, as she put it simply, is "because [role-playing] is theater of the mind, there's no reason not to." This answer may not explain its motivation, but it certainly accounts for its allowances. The second reason proved more explanatory, as she said that "Role-playing from the start appealed to people who had trouble connecting with others, and sci-fi and fantasy is escapist." She found that role-playing games foster a positive form of escapism that these genres often align with in play. The third reason she gave was perhaps the most compelling for not just why games would allow for genre or dovetail with it but for why they would encourage it as practical."Genre is important because you need to share storytelling tropes with people," Alex explained, giving the example of using a standoff in a Western-themed game. The genre tropes prove helpful and make a game easy for people to play if they have a shared knowledge of the genre at hand. Alex admitted that this can prove formulaic and predictable but argued that sometimes you need those aspects to easily get people on the same page with the game they're playing. They explained that, ironically, genre tropes and archetypes are easier to incorporate into role-playing games for that reason, unlike kitchen sink naturalism which can become difficult for various players to find commonalities for during play. Still, there are role-playing games about everyday life, but Alex said these did receive pushback. She gave the example of Emily Care Boss' *Breaking the Ice*, about people going on dates, and that there was a lot of pushback at first as players were confused by it.

Since Alex recommended students play different role-playing games and discuss them, I asked if she had any she recommended, curious to see if they overlapped with any that I had in mind. But first, I asked if I could have at least one book of theory, so Alex brought up a textbook called *RPGs: Transmedia Foundations* by Jose Zagal and Evan Torner. She emphasized playing and reading games because one learns design from them, giving the example of *Monsterhearts 2*,

a game that weaves its design principles into the game itself. As for TTRPGs, Alex first mentioned *Fiasco* by Jason Morningstar, and explained that the creator comes from an improv background and worked improv concepts into the game. I had been considering that one, but Alex sold me on it, as she said there's also a *Fiasco* companion book that tells people how to play it or use it as an improvisation exercise. Alex also recommended *Dread* by Epidiah Ravachol, which she said requires a GM but is pretty simple. Next she brought up *Fall of Magic* by Ross Cowman and described it as very open-ended, so potentially interesting to see what people do with it. Then she mentioned *The Quiet Year* by Avery Alder, which she described as super accessible and collaborative. For more games to test out with my classmates, I had looked into *Fiasco* and *The Quiet Year*, as previous interviewees had brought them up. I was also looking into *Alice is Missing* which Alex said she hadn't played but had talked to some people who loved it and others who didn't.

She also asked if she could suggest LARPs for the class to play, and I hadn't realized that one could easily bring LARPs into a classroom setting. Alex explained that there are different kinds of LARPs, and people often think about the "in the woods kind," but that there are those that one can easily bring into other spaces. Alex recommended one called *Welcome Guests* by Jason Morningstar, about a family of cannibals. She said it's both good and easy to get into when playing. She also recommended *SIGN: A Game About Being Understood* by Kathryn Hymes and Hakan Seyalioglu and another by Jason Morningstar entitled *Ghost Court*. Alex also said I could look into the previous winners of the Golden Cobra Challenge, a LARP-making competition.

Alex also said it could be worth looking into live-action online games, such as *This Discord Has Ghosts in It* by Adam Vass and Will Jobst and *Makeup Moments* by Gerrit Reininghaus. Since many artists switched to making digital theater during the pandemic, it could be worthwhile for the course to bring in digital live-action games. A few people I spoke to professed interest in looking at digital works, so if those fit the parameters for the course, I could include them.

I couldn't resist mentioning how Jorge thought that *For the Queen* was made with theater people in mind, since Alex is not a theater person. She found that interesting and said that the principle behind making *For the Queen* was, "I want to be able to play this with anyone." She had created a game beforehand that they realized couldn't be played with just anyone. As such, for this game she ran *For the Queen* with people who had played games before and those who had not. She found that the people who hadn't played games before surprisingly connected with the open-ended storytelling of the title.

Wrapping up, Alex told me that it might be worth reaching out to Gerrit Reininghaus, who works on live-action role-playing gaming and designing online games for Zoom, as well as Jason Morningstar, who does both LARP and TTRPGs. In terms of scholarship, she

recommended Evan Torner and Sarah Lynne Bowman who she described as “THE scholars of LARP,” Jonaya Kemper, who is connected to academia and has done more of the “in the woods” kind of LARP, as well as Aaron Trammel, a game studies person who just ran a TTRPG design course. She ended by saying that she finds it fascinating that people decide what *For the Queen* “is for” or “is about” and that none of these lenses are intentional. Likewise, I found this fascinating, as it conveys how meaning-making applies to these types of games.

Leah Cardenas (4/7/22)

Next, I spoke with Leah Cardenas, an immersive theater director who Monte put me in touch with for the project. I was glad to hear that Leah also has a background in traditional theater and then gravitated toward experiential work. She loves theater and grew up in Denver acting and wanting to perform on Broadway. She went to college for theater and then realized, “Wait, I’m not getting cast in things.” As such, she switched to directing so she could make the theater she wanted to make. She saw *Sleep No More* in New York, which inspired her to create an immersive production of *Macbeth* at college. As she put it, she loves theater but really loves crafting experiences and making people feel unique and feel seen. She worked with an immersive company in Omaha called *Walk the Night* and then moved back to Denver to direct immersive work. She attended the Immersive Design Summit in San Francisco in 2019 and got a fellowship with Odyssey Works, a company that creates immersive experiences for an audience of one. Now she’s gearing up to direct an immersive piece by Monte in Denver.

After getting her background, I shared my working definition of Experience Dramaturgy with Leah. She said that she does find “immersive” to be a buzzword and has seen site-specific work use it, which she finds not always quite accurate. She finds the definition of “immersive” to mean “giving the audience a role and having [the audience] make choices.” She said that this includes a sense of agency of being in control even if the audience actually isn’t. She also said that people in these kinds of productions may not interact to the same degree but that “allowing for that connection to be possible is definitely what makes it immersive.” I find the ideas of possibilities and illusions of possibilities relevant to this course. Ultimately, the success of immersive work isn’t actually in creating a system for the audience to take part in, but rather a feeling for the audience to take away.

I asked her what she’d want in a course about experiential dramaturgy, and Leah brought up the workshop she took with immersive company Third Rail. She said that they played improv-style games, for example, saying to the participants, “Here’s a poem, break into small groups and each team create an experience based on this poem.” Then they’d take the experience and think of various ways for the audience to participate. Leah found the practical application to be really cool in creating opportunities for experiences and atmosphere building. As such, she

would want a course to allow students to "create something for each other and [experience it] as an audience and as a creator." At first, I gravitated towards the theoretical in thinking about the syllabus. But the more people I speak with, the more I hear the desire for practical applications, so that will absolutely be a part of the course.

I then asked Leah, what's unique about directing immersive theater? She said that it's all about connecting the pieces of the show, and one needs a good stage manager, "Especially if you have multiple characters with multiple offshoots, there's so much more to know and to craft and to think about." I'm glad I spoke with Kerry about this, as she gave me a lot of great info about all the elements that stage managers have to keep in mind.

Since taking care of the audience is a big part of the reason behind this thesis, I asked Leah how she onboards people or facilitates interaction in her work. "It depends on the show, but setting audience expectations is huge," she told me. She said that even if one wants to make a show mysterious or vague, one can still do that by sending emails that create the vibe and energy of the show. The show she's working on right now aims to make the audience feel alienated, but also intrigued, so she wants to be sly about how the artists do things, as they can't have too many audience members. So they set the show up to be something mysterious and weird and then have a description on the website of it being immersive and interactive. She said that this show doesn't need too much onboarding since it's fairly short. But another show she worked on was held in a former slaughterhouse, so the guide gave the rules upfront, and then the music began, which started the actual show.

Since theater doesn't usually have people prototype the work–unless previews count–I asked Leah how she utilizes test audiences. She said that it's valuable to learn from the audience, and that in her shows there are definitely moments where she'll see an audience reaction and think, "Wow, we didn't expect audiences to do that! And now we're prepared for it." She finds that when the audience can wander around or interact with objects, it's especially imperative to test those moments out. Another call for testing is when actors don't have experiences with immersive work, even if they have done some improv, because it's different having an audience member in your face who could say or do anything. And testing this kind of moment lets her think about whether a stage manager needs to be present for a scene that could be intimate, like a one-on-one. I'm glad she gave this example, because it illustrates both the need for and benefit of prototyping. A show that doesn't test out its beats could potentially become unsafe for the performer, audience member, or even both, but a show that does prototype can have safety and an extra layer of polish.

I asked a question that I may need to rephrase, which is whether Leah thought the first interaction in an immersive work is the most important or whether every interaction is equally important. Nevertheless, she understood what I meant and gave an answer that accounted for

ambiguity. She said that she believes every interaction is important; however, it's crucial to teach audiences "the game" of the show early on. This gambit can show the audience, "Hey, you can play with us; that's fine," and should also answer, "But to what extent?" Rather than asking about the importance of the interactions–since she's right, they're all important–I should have asked whether the interactions throughout a show serve different purposes. But she understood what I inquired after. And I like how she mentioned "the game" of the show, which is both a term from improv theater but also ties into the concept of playing a game, a big part of this thesis.

Since it's a hot-button question, I had to ask Leah whether she thought immersive shows are inherently pro-capitalist. This time, I broke it down into the concept of a show being a part of the experience economy versus a show being inherently neoliberal due to the nature of participation. Speaking towards the first point, she said that one of the main reasons people are interested in experiences and immersive work is that, "Secretly we all want to feel special and like things are just for us, so that can definitely play into marketing and commercialism." Leah finds that brands have used this desire to create immersive experiences that play into capitalism. That said, she doesn't know if that's necessarily a bad thing since artists receive payment for their work, and "brands are going to do what brands do" regardless. Speaking on the second concept behind this question, she said that she isn't sure about the idea of participation being inherently neoliberal, as audiences are allowed to participate or not according to their comfort level. Ultimately, she said that at the end of the day, "I just want to make people feel certain ways if I can." The more I discuss it, the more I'd say I agree with the first concept and disagree with the second. But as I said, I want to bring different perspectives into the course. Leah makes a great point that shows can, or perhaps should, allow audiences to participate or not according to their comfort level, and I think that's an important distinction.

I decided to ask a new question about if Leah ever draws from other mediums or practices for her immersive work. This line of inquiry came to me since Monte draws from tabletop role-playing games, and I didn't know if Leah had another area of expertise. But she does. "For me, it's film," Leah related, "because film acting and immersive acting are very similar. It's not like traditional theater acting where you're emoting loud and proud. It has to be subtle and nuanced like film." Similarly, she also thinks about the perspective you give the audience. When she saw *Then She Fell*, the cast seated her in a chair, but she turned to the side to see what was occurring to the side of her, a perspective she would not have seen if she had looked straight ahead. She described staging immersive works as having "almost a cinematography to it," as one has to think about the angles from which audiences will view a scene. While I don't plan on bringing film into this course, I do imagine it could welcome film students, and this perspective may serve as an entryway for them to relate their work to that of theater.

As always, I asked what books or resources I should look into for the course. Leah mentioned the Odyssey Works book, which discusses how the group makes theater for one person. She justified focusing on this one group, saying one can utilize many of their practices for creating moments of surprise or delight in immersive shows. Leah also said the book has exercises within it that people can use to create immersive work. She also recommended *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker, which isn't about immersive theater but can still prove applicable. Looking into the books, it seems that both of these could speak to connection, and the first could also speak towards meaning-making.

I asked her who else I should talk to, and Leah recommended Christine Woods, who runs *Immersive Denver*, a publication about immersive work in Denver. I expressed surprise that Denver seems to be a more extensive hub for immersive work than I would've expected, and Leah explained that immersive work became prominent in the city around 2016 as Third Rail came and did a show that became very popular there. At least as far as she knows, Leah finds that that kicked off immersive work in the city. I'm hesitant to reach out to the bigger immersive shows since I don't want to just focus on them and some may be too commercial, but I should definitely reach out to Third Rail, especially since now I know they do workshops that teach people how to make immersive work.

I asked Leah if she had any final responses, and she said that the last thing she wanted to share is that she believes this kind of work to be the future of theater, that the immersive aspect is growing. I'm sure many would agree with her, and others would disagree, but I'm glad she mentioned this. It's a good note to end on since it asserts, at least in my view, that this kind of course is one that theater students could seek to learn from in developing what could become the future of theater.

Jason Morningstar (4/14/22)

Returning to the tabletop folks, I spoke with Jason Morningstar. Alex Roberts mentioned him as a person who works in both tabletop gaming and LARP. The more I think about it, the more I believe LARP has to be a part of the course. I also reached out because a few people mentioned his game *Fiasco* as a tabletop game that felt theatrical, and I got my hands on a copy of the second edition myself. Jason is a game designer by trade and has particular interests in analog, tabletop, and live-action games. He creates these for a living but also for fun and educational purposes. He created Bully Pulpit Games, a small company of just two people. He has an undergraduate degree in theater and a master's degree in education science.

I shared my working definition of experiential dramaturgy with Jason, and he had an observation that nobody else had, which is whether I thought about ordering the list or not. I

don't think I thought about it consciously, but I suppose I put it in an order that made sense, especially since I'm pretty sure I came up with "meaning-making" last, but put it before "connection." Jason said that for his work, he'd put "connection" first because the other aspects don't work as well if you don't have that first element. He also said that when you play a game, you're connecting with the other players, but you're in connection with the designer as well. This concept fascinates me since it makes me wonder if it's unique to game design or also applies to theater. I think back to what Percy said in that games create "systems for storytelling," so it makes sense that the players connect with the system and then fill it with their own story as active participants. Theater doesn't quite have that analog, but perhaps certain theatrical forms could, or a show could be made in which one is in conversation with a form created by a theatermaker. Bringing this back to the order of the definition, I think my order makes the most sense for theater. The first thing a show should do is bring the audience into the world of the play, or immerse them, followed by the live interaction between performer and audience, the meanings the audience derives from that, and then the connection which happens passively during a show, typically, and actively after a show ends.

I asked Jason what he'd want a course about experiential dramaturgy to include, and he had a great answer since he directly framed it as what theater could learn from role-playing. He said that theater could learn from LARP especially regarding issues around "agency, consent, and safety." He noted that immersive theater productions in particular often lack an offramp or a debrief and that while these aspects are hard and awkward to carry out, they're really important. On another note, he also echoed the sentiment that the course should be structured around "play," saying that he learns the most through experience and, "You can show [the students] by doing. Get them playing and then making games that are either commenting on or questioning or supporting those points in ways that are meaningful to them." A few people, mainly from gaming backgrounds, have mentioned having a sense of play in the course. As such, I wonder if this has to permeate the whole course, but for the sections on gaming it absolutely will apply.

I asked Jason what he found theatrical about role-playing games, whether tabletop or live-action. First, he said that he views tabletop role-playing games and LARP as a continuum, elaborating that, "It's a performative medium; you are your own audience. It's pure performance, mediated by various guardrails, and those are procedural in the case of games." He said that they can provide players with agency but that it's a dial, and some games don't offer much agency and some offer complete freeform play. With this preface, he said that these games have a strong crossover with improvisation since there's a lot of agreement and status control involved. Jason said that this was especially true of *Fiasco* as he made it while he was performing on an improv house team, and as Monte said, now improv teams will look to the game as a means of structuring shows. First, I enjoy the circle of inspiration that can occur between games and theater, similar to how Steve created a game inspired by immersive theater, which in turn seems to have inspired immersive theater, based on my judgments. But in this case, it's quite easy to see how one could replicate this kind of exercise in structuring improvisational theater based on a

game, and this course could potentially incorporate that as an assignment. Jason also likens role-playing to being in a band, as occasionally one person plays a solo and then goes back to creating harmony. Jason wasn't the first person to make this comparison, and he said that a theorist named Ron Edwards was the first person he heard of to mention that comparison.

Jason had said that he views tabletop role-playing and live-action role-playing as existing on a continuum. However, I was still curious about the dichotomy between them so I asked what distinguishes something like *Fiasco* from something like his live-action role-playing game *Welcome Guests*. He said that while he doesn't worry too much about categorizing these games, Northern Europe has more terminology, such as the "scenario tradition" that originated in Denmark. But he said that motion tends to play a big part in differentiation, for example, "In *Welcome Guests,* it's important that you embody characters and move around. If you're not doing that it's not going to land the same way." He explained that the kinesthetic quality of the game makes it meaningful. But there's another game of his called *Winterhorn* that's a committee LARP, a role-playing game where you have to make a decision, so he said that's kind of in the middle. You can play the game sitting around, since you're a bunch of government agents. If I had to give a quick definition of LARP to the class, Jason said that "LARP is tabletop where you get to stand up and wave your arms around." It's about embodying a character. But Jason stressed that the difference is very gray, and even that definition isn't entirely accurate. This context makes sense to me, and I understand why Jason wouldn't want to categorize these games too meticulously. But I do think it can be helpful to both give a quick definition for students who need one and then explain the nuances and gray areas after they grasp the basic concepts.

I then asked a leading question that I was not quite correct about, but I'm glad I asked it. I said that to me, it seems like the role-playing community is less commercially minded than traditional theater, and I asked if this was true. Jason said he wouldn't agree, explaining that if you're a large company like Wizards of the Coast or Hasbro, you're having a moment right now, and "it's bonkers in terms of engagement." In a business sense, this is talking about *Dungeons & Dragons* and the like. What Jason does is considered interesting and different, and people on the margins may influence the juggernauts, but it's a different beast. I brought up how regional theaters, which ostensibly exist to serve their communities, often look towards New York and what's marketable. Jason said that even in the role-playing community, there's a term known as the "fantasy heartbreaker," used to describe a person who wants to "fix" *Dungeons & Dragons,* and it doesn't work because nobody wants that. He said that even in the tabletop role-playing game industry, smaller companies will do things reflective of more prominent companies. While perhaps disheartening to hear, I'm glad I asked, as that's an aspect of theater that bugs me, but apparently role-playing games have the same issue.

Still, I feel that the theater industry has much to learn from the role-playing community, so I asked a different question that spoke to the same impulse: When and how did the

conversation around consent and safety arise? Jason explained that this originated in LARP. The designers will onboard you, give you expectations around safety, and there will be some kind of formal or informal debrief. He said that tabletop games then took a cue from this, and within the last decade, the “X Card" arose in the community, and tools arose to take care of people and foster a place of care and support. Jason stressed that even just setting the expectation of that environment will do a lot of work, and then the tools like the x card are there if you need them. I had heard of the X Card from Monte, as well as the tools of “lines and veils.” Jason said that he has mixed feelings about lines and veils, which predated the x card, since they only occur before a game starts, so they don't have allowances for “in-the-moment play.” He summed this issue up, saying, “You won’t know what bothers you.” I asked whether “in-the-moment” equivalents to lines and veils exist, and he said they may, but if they do, they’re not widely used. My takeaway from this subject of discussion is that the role-playing community is still developing its safety tools, but that it's still way ahead of the conversation that the theater industry is having, which still can’t decide how to implement content warnings or in some cases, even whether to have them. Regardless of the potential for better tools, the theater industry could still learn a lot from these safety tools. For example, content warnings could be available as an announcement, which many are, or for people worried about spoilers, they could come as a program insert or be available from the front-of-house staff upon request. I mentioned this to Jason, and being a game designer, he said, “that’s agency,” since you don’t want to traumatize someone, and you want them to have the agency to know what they’ll encounter. It’s a principle from game design, but he applied it right to theater.

While I’ve asked about the comfortability with improvisation in tabletop role-playing games before, I wanted to ask Jason since he also has a background in LARP. So what makes people comfortable with improv across various forms of role-playing compared to the theatrical form? “There’s a different framework; the procedural nature of play is comfortable,” Jason answered. He elaborated that this provides ways of dealing with conflict and uncertainty that can be comforting and reassuring. Everyone agrees to the procedure, so Jason gave the example that if someone plays a “space princess,” everyone will accept that and know what that means thanks to the framework of the role-play. I had mentioned wanting to incorporate a simple LARP into the course and had heard about his LARPs *Ghost Court* and *Welcome Guests*. He highly recommended the former as a “gateway LARP” since it has players improvising in a joyful setting for a short amount of time.

Similarly, he said that he designed the second edition of *Fiasco* to be a bit more welcoming to newcomers. In the rules of the games, I noticed that he encouraged players to act as a character instead of saying what the character would do in the third-person. This topic of discussion had come up during the game sessions with other role-playing games, so I asked Jason why he recommended the first-person play style, and he had an insightful answer. “In inhabiting a character, you start to know what they’re going to do,” he explained, backing this up

with the theory of apophenia, matching patterns to where they don't exist. Using *Fiasco* as an example, he explained how players set up a situation and make choices and as they build things out they tell a story. They suggest an ongoing situation. Jason likened this to the same kind of prompts one sees in improv and how our brains will match those prompts in responding.

As I've asked other people in various other mediums, I asked Jason why role-playing also tends toward genre (speculative fiction). Of course, I expected I'd get a different answer, as I always do. He said that a lot of it comes down to "reflexive reactionary power fantasy," that players want to be powerful, capable, and important and genre is the best way to facilitate that. It can be subverted and can be positive or negative. D&D is all about that power fantasy. It also provides an environment for trying on new identities in a pretty safe, grounded environment. He has a game called Night Witches in which you play as women, and you have to, and it's a game about sexism and Jason sees it as promoting empathy.

I asked him if he had any resources he recommended I look into, and he suggested the games *Group Date* and *Sign*. He also recommended that I look into the games from the Golden Cobra Awards, and he said that many of them are simple for players to pick up and play. I asked him who else I should speak with, and he suggested Evan Torner, an editor of *Analog Game Studies* who knows a lot about LARP. Jason also mentioned Sarah Bowman, whom Alex Roberts recommended I speak with as well.

Mike Sell (4/19/22)

Next, I spoke with Dr. Mike Sell, who Alexis had recommended as a scholar of dramaturgy and gaming. That sounded like a perfect person to reach out to, so I did, and we spoke. Mike wrote his dissertation on avant-garde theater of the 1960s and was particularly interested in political theater and performance art. From there, he focused on concepts of the avant-garde that extended beyond theater and then took a turn towards what he calls playful literature, textural forms that invite playful activity and literary representations of play. Mike has focused on Systemic Dramaturgy for understanding the dramaturgy of technology in a way that divorces it from a digital framework. Recently he began to write about the dramaturgy of immersive work, role-playing games, and video games. In extending dramaturgical practice to these forms of media, he often asks the question, "How can we build this world and tell this story together in a fun and interesting and engaging way?"

I shared my working definition of experiential dramaturgy with him, and he had a few thoughts. He immediately recommended a few texts, which was great since I usually ask that question myself toward the end of these interviews. First, he suggested Josephine Machon's book *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. I had been aware

of this resource but hadn't read it for the thesis because I worried it would be a bit too niche in its perspective on immersive work, much like *Beyond Immersive Theatre*. But the more I hear about it, the more it sounds like a work worth bringing into the course. Mike also brought up a book by Jesper Juul about games studies and how it talks about registers of interactivity, such as the tension between story and rules, the engagement with the game system, and engagement with the machine. Next, he mentioned the book *Playing with Feelings* by Aubrey Anable. I'm surprised I hadn't heard about this book which discusses how games affect emotions. Lastly, he recommended *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, which has a lot of info that doesn't relate but does have a chapter on how game avatars promote empathy which Mike said to look to in particular.

I asked Mike what he would want in a course about experiential dramaturgy, and he immediately made a case for bringing in tabletop role-playing games. I had planned to do this by this point, but I liked his justification. He described them as "low-cost, high-intensity experiences" that provide "a lot to learn about in the different modes of experience." He mentioned the unique experience of being a participant but also a spectator, but brought in a thought I hadn't considered, which is that sometimes you're more one than the other. He said players might also have to take notes, as they're constantly watching and keeping track of the game. Giving an example, he said that as a GM he takes notes of "stains," if a mess gets made or something goes wrong, he can "make a callback to that" to help maintain the world. He also said that TTRPGs offer the experience of having to think about world-building and the mythos of worlds. There are opportunities for bringing props like food and drink to the table while playing, but you can also cosplay or bring objects in. Another layer he mentioned is the dramaturgical work of the GM, who plans the game out for the players ahead of time. I wondered, how does he frame these different levels of experiences with role-playing games? Mike said that he considers these "different domains or registers" that are "multiple ways of doing this [in experiencing the game]" and in "producing meaning or enacting meaning." Tying this directly to theater, he outlined how a person may be emotionally engaged in a show, be more critical and think about choices made, or think about the people around them. There may also be "creative engagement outside of the moments of play," such as looking at lore books or props in addition to those inside of play. He classified this kind of dramaturgy as "always an engagement with the multiple systems of meaning and meaning-making." Meaning-making is an integral part of the course, so I appreciated his introduction of the domains and registers of a work and how they can create various ways for people to make meaning out of an experience.

Since he outlined how TTRPGs have many spheres of engagement for participants and how traditional theater has its own domains of engagement as well, I asked Mike what he thinks theater could learn from games. He said that regardless of the kind of game, we can learn an "analytic sensibility" to the ways that the technology, the text, the social aspects, etc., work and what they're capable of doing individually. He said that first, it's a question of understanding

theater in a different way, that there's an unfortunate tendency not to want to treat it like a political, historical, or ideological medium and talk about it solely in regards to craft. I agree with this, and I think that's subconsciously part of why I became interested in this thesis. Mike also flipped the question and said that games can also learn from theater. He said that in particular, dramaturgical theory and practice, especially globally, offers "a lot we have ready at hand that could be significant for making games." He explained that he likes it when drama happens in games, defining drama in the sense of "coherent movement through complexity" to some new ideological state.

Since Mike knows about both games and theater, I asked him why theater tends to shy away from genre (speculative fiction) and why games tend to embrace it. "Genre conventions, when one recognizes and understands them–that provides a platform for a lot of affordances for immediate performances," Mike explained. In theater, you'd have to work through all that for the sake of audience members, but in games, "You can role-play within the story world" that already exists. It allows people to take chances since they already know what the world is like, and therefore, "You don't have to build out a compelling world in a game." But he explained that for theater, you would have to have carefully constructed storytelling to build out a fantasy world, giving the example of *Wicked,* which has a huge budget. On the flip side, genre in games allows you to build upon a fantasy or speculative fiction world through the "extremity of the imagination" and have moments that are dramatic, controversial, or dangerous.

Though Mike had mentioned a number of books to look into, I asked him if he had more and then if he had particular TTRPGs that he recommended. Since he had mentioned writing extensively on dramaturgy and games, I also told him to feel free to recommend texts of his own. Mike recommended the book he's co-writing on Systemic Dramaturgy, which isn't out yet. He reiterated that Machon's book is definitely worth looking into and that he found it fundamental and brilliant. He also brought up a text by Caroline Levine entitled *Forms*, which he said talks about affordances

In terms of games, Mike highly recommended the combo of *Dream Eschew* and *Dream Apart.* He described them both as having good writing about how to play these games. The former deals with queer identity, and the latter deals with Jewish identity. Neither game calls for a GM, and both involve constructing a world and relationships using clear rules and mechanics.

Mike also brought up *The Ultimate Micro-RPG Book*. But he admitted that he has mixed feelings about it. He explained that it has 40 different games and various varieties, but the rules aren't always well-written. The games go across multiple genres, and they're all about getting to know the rules and they're a lot of fun. However, some are better in quality than others. I think it would definitely be worth it for me to get this book, if nothing else than to see what a bunch of tabletop role-playing games can look like and potentially find a few that would be useful.

For Mike and his teaching, he told me that he runs the same scene for each of his groups in a rule-heavy TTRPG like *Call of Cthulhu* for about an hour. He then has the students watch another session's playthrough to see how impactful this collaborative storytelling was, and then he gives them the scenario they used, and they talk about what changed and what he changed for each session as the GM. He outlined this example because he thinks there's an argument to be made to play a longer and more involved game before going to the simpler and shorter ones. I had mentioned thinking about using a shorter game and then going to more complex ones. But it might make more sense to teach a longer one like Mike does since I'd be on hand to answer questions and facilitate and then let the students play the shorter ones independently.

Bringing up the games I've procured, Mike knows *Honey Heist*, *For the Queen*, and *Fiasco* and likes them. For the ones I still need to procure, he doesn't know *Alice is Missing* but does know *The Quiet Year.* Mike finds the latter fascinating and challenging in the right way since players don't play a character but play out a narrative. He finds it different from many games in how it creates a shared artifact at the end of the game since the players draw a map. But thinking of *Alice is Missing*, they both focus people on the text and the importance of language and shared conventions.

I asked Mike who else I should speak with, and he mentioned Michael M. Chemers, who teaches at UC Santa Cruz. Mike said that he highly recommends I speak with him and that he's the person who's co-writing the Systemic Dramaturgy book, and that they play *D&D* together. He also recommends talking with misha cardenas, who has made interesting queer games, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, who also teaches at UCSC.

I asked Mike if he had any parting words, and he said that since he has extensive experience in incorporating TTRPGs into the classroom, he'd be happy to help anytime. Personally, he feels that this kind of work and teaching is really important for dramaturgs, and I wholeheartedly agree. As an example, he outlined that there are many factors that can make experimenting with theater difficult but not so with games. Because, as he said, they're "low-cost, high-intensity."

Sarah Bowman (4/20/22)

Next, I spoke with Dr. Sarah Bowman, who Alex Roberts had recommended as "THE scholar of LARP." Sarah is currently working as a game design professor as she has found it's the next step of growing the field of LARP. She has found that the field of video game studies is growing, but that of analog game studies is just starting to get recognition. Analog game studies

are fairly niche and LARP studies are even more niche. She has a role-play theory study group on Facebook. For her, she defines LARP as “Cocreated spontaneous playfulness that emerges when people are immersed in a character or fiction.” That said, Sarah realizes that that could pertain to improv and finds the concept of duration to distinguish the two, for the most part. She explains that LARP can be seen or run as a hobby, artform, or therapy.

I shared my definition of experiential dramaturgy with Sarah, as she said that it made her think of an article she wrote on the subject of immersion. In it, she discusses the various kinds of immersion, finding that those of environment and community seem to apply most, but that there’s also immersion of game, character, narrative, etc. Elaborating on this, she thinks about the time she went to *Sleep No More.* She watched a scene, but Evan Torner went through the drawers and the environment. She gives these two kinds of experiences as examples for outlining the immersion of narrative and the immersion of environment. Obviously, immersion is a key tenet of the course, so I appreciated this example from immersive theater. I will have to look into the breakdown of immersion and the various kinds.

I asked what she’d want a course about experiential dramaturgy to include, and she brought up Theater of the Oppressed and Brechtian Theater. Though these aren’t core mediums I’m looking into, I agree that they’re worth bringing up either in the history section of the course or as more “traditional” kinds of theater that have gravitated towards experience and interaction. To phrase this another way, a play by Bertolt Brecht illustrates how proscenium theater can draw from more experiential mediums, as his plays often acknowledge the audience in the room. Sarah said that she often thinks about the questions, “What role is the audience asked to play? And “What is their alibi?”

Sarah has found that for *Sleep No More*, one of the problems can be the permission given to audiences. As such, she wants to see the course address consideration around safety, support structure, and what is asked of the audience. She also wants to see guidelines for interaction and how audiences are given a role. She notes that it would be fairly easy to create LARP versions of tabletop games, like how *Fiasco* has been adapted to stage shows. For helping to mitigate confusion or disruption among the audience, Sarah says it’s about “giving the audience a place in the fiction.” While I’d heard the term “Spectactor,” Sarah brought in the term “first-person audience” to describe how players are both the performers and the audience.

I asked Sarah what she finds theatrical about role-playing, and she brought in a term I had never heard of before. “There’s this concept called inter-immersion,” she explained, and outlined how this functions. Some players are very immersive, they’ve thought through character and they’re very theatrical, but some people have their private experiences; they’re playing a character, but not interacting with others. But they could be having a deeply emotional experience as their character. Inter-immersion is if one character goes up to another and draws

them into the fiction. Supplementing this, Sarah brought up that method acting and what it means to be in character is fascinating for the LARP community because they can be in character for a long time. In short, inter-immersion is “bringing people into the scene.”

I then asked Sarah what elements she thinks traditional theater could learn from role-playing. “One of them is, it doesn’t have to be perfect,” she explained, adding that only a small percentage of people can have the talent, skill, and commitment to work in theater, and it can be very exclusionary. But LARP is “very democratic,” she says, “As long as you’re willing to play pretend, you belong here.” And there are still exclusions, she noted; some LARPs can be costly, but there’s a wide range, and at its most basic, it’s what she called “a democratization of creativity and performance.” It’s not about being entertained by others so much as being entertained by your own creativity. She brought up an article by Keith Johnstone, which argues that creativity becomes atrophied in adulthood, but LARP encourages a sense of play while traditional theater often doesn’t. For Sarah, LARP is about “inspiring creativity and expression.”

I asked Sarah a quick clarification question about drama therapy, as she had said that LARP can be a form of therapy. Is it a kind of drama therapy, or is it an extension? Sarah posited that many people doing this work have received education from people who may have learned drama therapy in school. However, they’re actually LARPers who have studied role-play in therapy and said, “Why can’t we bring in LARP?” She explained that role-playing as a term arose in the 1930s and came out of drama therapy. But at the same time, role-playing is also a human activity that humans have always practiced. As such, she finds that drama therapy can be limited in scope, but role-playing therapy can be unlimited.

On a similar note, thinking about what people can learn from role-playing, I asked Sarah when and how the conversation around consent and safety arose in the LARP community.“Later than it arose in BDSM,” Sarah told me. “BDSM created a lot of the language.” Sarah started in the Nordic LARP community in 2011 and tracked the discussion as arising there, noting that “there’s still a lot of debate around how much consent is needed.” She gave the example that sometimes one may have a physical battle with someone’s character or sexual relations with someone’s character. She noted John Stavropoulos, the inventor of the X Card, as influential in bringing safety conversations into LARP. Sarah added that in LARP, the community refers to content warnings as the “ingredients list” of what the LARP will contain. The community will also use “zoning” or “armbands” to denote the content that people agree they’ll be exposed to in certain sections of the LARP. On the flip side, some games might have “sanctuary spaces,” a form of zoning where explicitly nothing violent will happen, but a recent development is that of spaces where people can be out of character.

Since LARP is a form of role-play similar to tabletop role-playing, which often fosters improvisation, I asked Sarah what makes people comfortable with improv in LARP. She noted

what may perhaps be a difference, that even people comfortable with LARP may take a little time to become accustomed to the improvisation in a given LARP scenario. As such, she explained that a facilitator of a LARP wants to create calibration before the participants begin. Also relevant? “That inter-immersion, too, asking people to engage as their character,” she explained. As an example of how to promote this engagement, Sarah said that LARPs will frequently have “hot seat,’ asking people to respond to questions in their character.” Sarah brought up that neurological research has shown that people in character are in a different psychological state. There are also physical exercises that some LARPs may do, but Sarah has found those less successful on the whole.

Role-play, such as role-playing video games and tabletop role-playing games, often focuses on speculative fiction genres, and LARP is no exception. I asked Sarah why this tendency occurs. “I don’t really like the word escapism,” she began, “But there are people who self-define that way. It often comes off as derogatory. There’s a lot to escape from in this world.” She prefers J.R.R Tolkein’s definition, which she paraphrased as, “Escape in order to recover humanity and bring it back.” But she has found that genre can also give people distance and “permission for events to happen that wouldn’t normally happen.” And this conceit is “remarkably powerful,” Sarah noted, providing some people with “unprecedented levels of empowerment.” In role-play in general, Sarah explained that even early on, people in urban areas would role-play fantasy because it would be “re-enchanting their lives.” To paraphrase from a scholar, Sarah became introduced to the concept that “if people are flocking to enchanted worlds, that is a stark condemnation of the world we’ve built for ourselves.” For her, she has found that role-play brings people back to a sense of the mystical and play that we’ve lost in recent years.

Sarah provided me with several books and websites during our chat, so I asked her about other people I should speak with about the thesis. Sarah brought up Lizzie Stark, a journalist who wrote a nonfiction book about LARP, Moyra Turkington, who has a background in theater, Nina Runa Essendrop, who has her own genre of LARP and came from a theater background as well; Cesar Alvarez, who has done a lot of experimental theater and has worked with Nina, and Lindsay Wolgel, who has done a lot of immersive theater acting and also LARP. This marks a substantial list, but I appreciate the number of people here who come from both theater and role-playing backgrounds, and that overlap says to me that LARP is not something that the theater community should dismiss. As a final quote referring to the research around theater and LARP, Sarah said, “We need to learn these things from each other.” I couldn’t agree more.

Kathryn Yu (4/25/22)

A couple of people I spoke with mentioned reaching out to Kathryn Yu at *No Proscenium*. I joined their Facebook group a while back, but initially, I didn't think immersive work would be as big of a part of this course as it has become. *No Proscenium* documents and covers all kinds of immersive work, from theater productions to commercial experiences. Meeting with Kathryn, she told me a bit of her story. In 2011 Kathryn went to *Sleep No More* and it blew her mind. One of the friends she went with was a "huge video game nerd" who wrote a blog post about the show as a game, and Felix Barrett at Punchdrunk saw it and started thinking about games as an expressive medium. Later, Kathryn attended the Tribeca Festival and saw pieces that drew from theater and games. She asked where she could go to continue in this line of work, so she covered the immersive scene for a few years for *No Proscenium* and then moved to LA in 2019 for an MFA to focus on interactive mediums. She worked with Samantha Gorman, who started in digital theater and then moved to games. Most recently, Kathryn created a virtual game for her master's thesis.

Right off the bat, Kathryn had a few initial thoughts. She said that there's a distinction between immersive and interactive work, which made me feel good about separating those two categories. She said that she looks into "how you're casting the participant" because traditional theater often doesn't account for that. Again, something that resonated strongly with me. In terms of casting participants, Kathryn looks at everything from theme parks that offer a hat for audiences to wear for five minutes to a LARP that could go on for a few days. She brought in the work of Janet Murray, who calls this "scripting the interactor" in *Hamlet in the Holodeck*, a book I've read parts of and have debated including for this course. Kathryn also noted that many immersive productions use prior texts such as Shakespeare or *Alice in Wonderland*. This observation reminded me of genre tropes and how they can onboard audience members, but a well-known text would essentially serve the same purpose of being easily recognizable.

I then shared my tenets of experiential dramaturgy and asked for feedback. Kathryn said that for "immersion," she isn't sure about the phrases "learn its rules" or even "be a part of it." Backing this up, she said how she thinks about *Natasha, Pierre & the Great of 1812* and how it went from a banquet for the audience to a Broadway show in which audience members are at a show and might potentially be at a banquet. For Kathryn, she said, "I need to know who I am and why I'm there." This requirement brought up a few thoughts for me. First, I think an essential distinction to bring into the course about my definitions is that they're not a catch-all for every show that claims to be immersive or interactive. Quite the contrary, they're benchmarks for measuring the ideal levels of experientiality that I believe traditional theater can learn from in practice. In short, I'm not basing these definitions around existing works, but basing them around ideals and then finding works that fit those ideals. I think this is an example of something that has changed over time for my thesis, as it has gone from attempting to categorize experiential

works to instead focusing on the aspects that facilitate audience experience. Another thought that came to mind is the importance for Kathryn of knowing how she fits into a production as an audience member. And I think this is something traditional theater doesn't concern itself with much, but should. Even if a show isn't immersive theater per se, it should still have a reason for why it requires a live audience and isn't a TV program or a podcast. Theater needs to acknowledge that a live audience is present. Kathryn also said that I could talk about, "What are the mechanisms [creators] use to make people feel comfortable, and to what degree are they successful?" This question has an obvious link to immersive and experiential works, but it also applies to traditional theater. People need to feel welcomed whether into an immersive world or a traditional theater space.

Kathryn also brought up the concepts of agency and the illusion of agency. She provided a helpful definition that "agency is interactivity that matters." I like it, as it's succinct and to the point. She mentioned how discussions of agency come up particularly amongst the LARP community and that there are various types of agency, such as agency of perspective and agency of focus. She also acknowledged that "from a consumer perspective, they might not think about agency; however, it's very important from a design perspective." Since this course is primarily for artists making work, I would agree that this belongs in the course. She also recommended a chapter about meaning-making from Josephine Machon's book, one that I have read parts of and am thinking needs to be a part of the course. Kathryn finds that meaning-making and connection come from immersion and interaction and that the former two often occur in a room after a show ends. What I like about this is that it does validate my order of the four tenets, since I've felt that immersion and interaction belonged first, and meaning-making and connection came second–not in terms of importance, but in terms of the first two influencing the latter two.

This suggestion preempted my next question well, but I decided to ask Kathryn what she would want in a course about experiential dramaturgy regardless, in case she had a few other topics we hadn't discussed. She said it could also be interesting to bring in non-western theatrical traditions where the fourth wall is more porous and there are different etiquettes around performance. I think this is great and would go well in my history section. She seemed to think similarly, as that led her to mention history, since "a lot of this thinking is not terribly new but people act like it is." There's definitely a case for bringing in non-conventional, non-contemporary, and non-western practices. When I mention experiential dramaturgy to others, people tend to think of the recent rise in immersive theater, but experiential practices have predated that rise for a while. As a specific piece that's more recent but still predates the rise, Kathryn brought up *Tamara* by John Krizanc, which she described as "the *Sleep No More* of its time in a way, but a lot of people have forgotten about it." I vaguely remember having heard about it, and it may be worth getting the script as a potential work to bring into the course for students to read. As for contemporary groups, Kathryn recommends Third Rail and Woodshed

Collective. I hadn't looked too much into the latter, but Kathryn said she considers the artists at Woodshed as people who think about "casting the audience" as integral to their work.

In a talk with Alexis, Kathryn mentioned that immersive work often has parallels to first-person exploration games. I found this very interesting, especially since many of the games I've looked at for this course fit into the first-person exploration genre. I asked if she found any other parallels between games and immersive theater. Kathryn said she tends to see them most clearly in theatrical escape room experiences. She said that she believes that *The Nest* draws heavily from games like *Firewatch, Gone Home*, and *What Remains with Edith Finch*, all first-person exploration games I'm familiar with and have placed in the assignment for playing a game. Kathryn also brought up VR hybrid work that brings in live performers since they can take part from anywhere in the world, such as *Dr. Crumb's School for Disobedient Pets* by Adventure Lab. I hadn't delved too deeply into theatrical VR work, I think because VR is still a bit niche, but it does undoubtedly have opportunities for experiential work.

I asked Kathryn what more traditional or institutional theater could learn from immersive work or games. "I think there's an expectation for a lot of younger people that theater is not for them," she said, hitting a sharp point that I would agree with personally. "So how do you reach a broader audience?" She feels like there's a strong desire to have an experience where you have a degree of visibility, presence, or control because there are so many aspects of our lives in which we don't have that agency. In short, she said that with a good immersive production, it should feel like it matters that you're there. To make a sharp point of my own, I'd say that's the whole point of this course in a nutshell.

Since I love asking this so much, and since Kathryn has experience with theater, immersive work, and games, I asked why the latter two tend more toward fantastical genre. Similar to what others have said, Kathryn said, "Worlds that are already familiar, you can do basically whatever you want in [them]." She mentioned the touchpoints and social cues, especially for work that adapts prior sources. Even for those that don't, there are common cultural touchpoints that offer tropes and familiarity, which makes it easy for creators to impart and for audiences to pick up. She gave a fantastic example that I want to use, of Disney World and the fantasy land and tomorrow land and frontier land, though she admitted that it's not one she came up with herself.

I asked if she had any books or resources that she would recommend looking into, especially articles and podcast episodes from *No Proscenium* and any shows that she had seen. First, she mentioned the article "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" by Henry Jenkins and then said that for other work, she'd go through her files and send an email. After our chat, she sent me a list of a few of her favorite articles from *No Proscenium* and a curated book list that various folks in immersive work had compiled.

Kathryn had many people and groups to recommend I talk with for the course. These included Celia Pearce, Caro Murphy, Patrick Jagoda, Sam Roberts, Capital W Theater, Witness, Broken Ghost, Candle House Collective, Houseworld, Woodshed, Linked Dance, Strange Bird Immersive, Green Door Labs, Bricolage, Submersive, Alterra, Majestic Rep, Laura Hall, and Odyssey Works. I don't imagine I'll get to all these folks anytime soon, but it's helpful to have a list and see which people and groups others had brought up previously who might be worth reaching out to sooner than later.

I asked for any final thoughts, and Kathryn said that she likes the audience-centric approach to the course. Admittedly, I thought about calling the course audience-centric dramaturgy, which I often call my own personal dramaturgical pedagogy. But while there's overlap, there are key differences between this concept of experiential dramaturgy and what most people would likely consider audience-centric dramaturgy. Fittingly, Kathryn said that she often butts up against language since people from different practices, like game design or immersive work, will have different terminology for the same concepts. I agree with this, and the takeaway is to stress that I'm coming at this from a theater background, so I'll prioritize theater terminology but will effectively talk about concepts that may have different terms for people from other disciplines.

Andrew Hoepfner (4/27/22)

Next up, I spoke with Andrew Hoepfner from Houseworld Interactive. I had heard about his most recent immersive show, *Bottom of the Ocean*, from classmate Clarity Bian. She had told me that she found it different from *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* and that it would be worth looking into to bring some good variety into my research. Interestingly, Kathryn had recently done a podcast episode about the show. So I reached out to Andrew and got in touch. For the last seven years Andrew has been making immersive theater, and he recently placed all of his productions under Houseworld Interactive. In 2014 he saw *Sleep No More* and was inspired by this demonstration of a medium he hadn't seen before. He was living at a parsonage in a church and playing in bands, so he started an immersive theater piece at the parsonage, and it caught on and received a good amount of coverage. Andrew makes substantially interactive shows; in the first one, *Houseworld*, people could go where they wanted, but the last two, *Whisperlodge* and *Bottom of the Ocean*, are more on rails but with interactions and invitations.

I shared my definitions and tenets of experiential dramaturgy, and Andrew immediately responded to them. "Definitely each of them immediately makes me think of the elements of my piece that speak to them," he said, which came as a nice affirmation. "Immersion is a gray and nebulous word," he noted, in that immersive pieces may not have rules, or those rules may be

slim. This observation echoed Kathyrn's thoughts, so I may have to amend my "immersion" definition to emphasize the *potential* for rules, or use another word instead. He mused that for his first show, people interacted within the show itself, but for the more recent two pieces that would not come into play. Speaking on the concept of connection, he felt strongly about its presence, saying, "There is that element after the show where you say 'this happened to me.' There's always that."

What would he want a course on experiential dramaturgy to include? Andrew replied, "VR is living in this same world; it's like the digital version of it." So that made a further case for the inclusion of VR. Speaking on storytelling in immersive work, he noted how linear narrative becomes harder to achieve since the audience is sent places and may not see everything. He gave the example of how a film will foreshadow an event, but in a lot of experiential work that becomes more difficult to achieve. "There's a strong collage element. It's like a world-building collage. You take away a vibe more than you take away a series of events," he explained. As such, he finds that this is why immersive pieces often remove dialogue or utilize dance. "The amount that linear storytelling stays in or is thrown out is central," he concluded.

Since he's a creator of immersive works, I asked Andrew how he onboards people or facilitates interaction, and he responded by illustrating an example from his latest work. For *Bottom of the Ocean*, Andrew found that having audience members provide a password sets a tone. The audience then moves into a waiting room that's dimly lit and has white noise and decorations, further setting the tone. He finds the important thing is setting up rules and addressing safety and consent, in order to, as he puts it, "Address bad audience behavior before it starts and make the audience feel safe." He elaborated, "We won't touch you, we won't dress you up in our ponchos, you can refuse whatever." When he first started making immersive work, he felt the element of surprise was more important, but then he realized that what you gain once safety and consent are acknowledged is that people let their guard down, they trust you more, and they feel safe. The final step in the onboarding process is dressing people up in ponchos which means that the audience members become fully something else for the next two hours of the production.

Similar to that question, I asked Andrew how he utilizes test audiences, and he explained that he's been prototyping for years and still does it, emphasizing the importance of it. "Can't imagine any other way working for me," he stressed. For prototyping, Andrew explained that shows start out messy and tickets start out cheaper. Maybe for some people the experience proves awkward, for some people it doesn't work, and for some people it proves fun. In *Houseworld*, the show had a monster in the basement, and the audience members would think it was scary, but then it would take them back and talk with them. An early audience of Andrew's friends all wanted to free the monster, so that became an integral part of the show. Andrew put it

as simple as, "Seeing what people engage with and going with that." Andrew explained that the process is an informal one. He thought about running a survey, but still hasn't reached the point where he needs to since he's always given a lot to work with just by hearing responses. Driving the point home, Andrew emphasized that "it's super important to the process to prototype."

Out of curiosity, I asked if Andrew drew from other mediums or practices for his immersive work. "Not as directly as I'd expect," he mused. However, Andrew gave a fitting example of drawing inspiration from playing point-and-click games from his youth. He would play *Day of the Tentacle,* and whenever he played a puzzle that he felt would work well for audiences, he'd write it down. For some of them, they wouldn't translate from digital to in-person, but he would try to find a correlation. And maybe subconsciously, the results of all that research would seep in. On the research side for *Bottom of the Ocean*, he watched movies about ritual and surrealism. Generally, he said, he's always looking to music, film, and video games for inspiration. The concept of playing video games and attempting to replicate the puzzles in them really struck me as pertinent. It reminded me strongly of what Mike said about tabletop role-playing games and how playing them is a cost-effective way to practice and test theatrical storytelling without having to spend much money. I could easily see how an artist might use a game like *The Sims*, for example, to stage a piece of theater, like playwright Celine Song did for her virtual production of *The Seagull.*

Going through the *No Proscenium* podcast, I found a quote attributed to Andrew in an episode description, "When in doubt, LARP it out." Andrew explained that it actually came from a friend, Cesar Alvarez, who makes immersive work. Andrew hadn't heard of LARP before meeting Cesar, who made a show called *Futurity* that Andrew found was pretty well-liked. Cesar explained to the cast that the audience could say anything and that they could go to any place. So as a remedy for that, he said, "When in doubt, LARP it out." A catch all that Andrew elaborated on as, "You have the power to pretend, and riff, and improvise your way through the show to the end." People are playing characters, and they know their characters and can respond accordingly. And for *Houseworld*, Andrew found that these improvisations with audience members created moments that helped performers build their characters and became canon. There's a lot here that resonates with this course. First, is the concept of drawing from LARP to create theater, which led me to ask about the quote. But then this leads to the concept that improvisation is not a burden but a blessing that can help performers stay in character, and not only that, but learn more about their characters thanks to the audience. So in this way, the audience isn't just integral to the performance but also helpful for the performers.

I asked about any books or resources that Andrew would recommend. He said that he personally has listened to almost every podcast episode of *No Proscenium* so he recommends those. Recently, he discovered a free show of half-hour episodes on PBS called *Immersive.World* which features a lot of "classic shows." He also recommended just going to see shows. I'll

definitely have to check out *Immersive.World* and hopefully I can work seeing a show into the curriculum.

In terms of other people I should speak with, Andrew mentioned the folks at Third Rail and that while I talked to Kathryn from *No Proscenium*, it wouldn't hurt to talk to Noah from the site as well. I had been looking into Candle House Collective due to the company's unique practice of remote immersion. Sure enough Andrew highly recommended reaching out to Evan Neiden, who runs it and works in the realm of telephone experiences. He brought up Josh Randall, whom I already spoke with, and said he's glad I got to reach out to him already. Lastly, he mentioned Derek Spencer from Ceaseless Fun as someone who "has more of an academic angle and has cool takes."

Asking for final thoughts, Andrew had a fascinating historical theory for experiential work. "I do think that we're seeing a natural evolution in media play out," he said, illustrating how we started out in this world where we were farming or cobbling shoes, and we'd see a show on a stage or in the round. Then we had cameras, and we were doing close-ups and takes. And then the people who grew up with *Mario*, he explained, they're in their 40s, and people who grew up with *Resident Evil* and *Grand Theft Auto*, they're in their 20s." Andrew elaborated that the even-younger people are taking pictures and using social media in exciting ways, which he theorized is making proscenium formats less interesting, because we've been conditioned through video games and our phones. I don't have any data to back this up, but I think Andrew's onto something, and this seems to me to be a viable potential theory for why we're currently seeing this rise in immersive work. As someone who grew up with experiential games and later saw the rise in social media, I could see this theory accounting for my own recent disillusionment with traditional theater and renewed interest in experiential mediums and theater with more emphasis on the audience, especially in coming out of an isolating pandemic.

Evan Neiden (5/19/22)

Having never heard of telephonic theater, I reached out to Evan Neiden, who runs Candle House Collective. Evan told me that he started early on working in Haunted Houses and had a love of alternate reality games, or ARG. I mentioned how traditional theater can feel distant and I wanted to see theater that felt more immediate. He explained that his fascination with haunted houses and ARG led him to think, "I love theater, but there's something about it that feels, similar to what you said, sort of distant." He thought about how haunted houses provide moments, even brief ones, of connecting with someone and affecting someone that you get immediate feedback from in the process. There was something really tantalizing about that. "I'm not really a puzzle person, but there's something else here, a moment of discovery, a moment of reveal," he explained about ARG. "And pairing that with the feeling of connection from haunted

houses, immersive theater felt inevitable.” Evan lived in Chicago for a while, and wishing for more immersive experiences, he thought, “Wouldn’t it be cool if this could be anywhere?” Evan told me that fundamentally he comes from a place of storytelling, like folk storytelling, and felt that a lot of theater strayed from this. The jump to immersive made sense to me, as I do believe that experiential works actually speak more to early theater and the ritual of them than contemporary proscenium theater. Evan said that he created an alternate reality story with just him and a phone back in 2018 and found that artists hadn’t explored telephonic theater much. Realizing it could work, Evan founded a full company.

After I shared my tenets and definition of experiential dramaturgy, Evan shared his definition of immersive theater as “a place where your presence changes something.” He said that he’s found this principle in everything from site-specific theater to cabaret. The presence of the audience matters. For interaction, the presence of you as a specific person matters. For Evan’s pieces, they are contingent on your engagement. I loved this because it speaks directly to the impetus for this project, in that during the pandemic, I wanted to return to theater and feel that my presence mattered and that there was a reason why I couldn’t just stream the show in quarantine.

In regards to my tenet of meaning-making, Evan said that Candle House shows can provide a twofold sense of meaning: One of different interpretations and another of unique paths for taking away meaning. I didn’t quite understand this initially, until he told me about “custom curation,” which he described as an old term from AR. He said that with experiences involving smaller groups of people, you can tailor them toward particular people who had experienced prior shows. In works that do this, each person can get interactions assembled for them. At the same time, Evan said that custom curation can prove risky. “It’s a question of ethics,” he explained, that in using information coming from a place of wanting to enhance the experience, “you have to come from a place of kindness.”

So how does telephonic theater work? How does the story get conveyed to the performer and in turn the audience? Evan explained that while all of the Candle House works are conversational in nature, some are based on scripts, and some are more of a treatment. He said that a creator should lay a foundation, and the performer should feel comfortable inhabiting the world as much as they can to find a way to embrace the multi-faceted way of moving through the narrative.

Talking about the success of these shows, Evan said that it’s not so much about whether people like them or not but that the shows stay with them. He illustrated this by saying,“We’ve literally been called *The Twilight Zone* of immersive theater, and there’s no higher compliment.” Candle House shows often have an element of realism leading into the surreal. He said that for

any immersive theater, “you are teaching someone a new set of rules every single time,” and speculative genre helps that because people can hold onto a clear set of identities. He said that a piece may not stay in a particular genre, but that “genre allows a way in. It’s a gate.” He explained that once people are through the gate, you can take them wherever you like. That’s interesting to me because I’ve previously discussed with folks how speculative genre offers a way in, but I had yet to have someone talk about how once the audience is allowed in through genre, it can move aside for them to go somewhere else.

I asked Evan what he would want in a course about experiential dramaturgy, and he replied with just two things. “Number one, have the students make something,” he recommended. Secondly, “Approach some of the creators that you’ve talked with,” Evan urged, saying how the class could see shows and then go through the process and realize “it’s not more or less than traditional theater, it’s different.” First off, I like both points, and I’ve added both to the syllabus. But also, I appreciate the sentiment that experiential work isn’t better or worse than traditional theater, only different. Sometimes people get the sense that I’m trying to argue that theater should be replaced or evolved through immersive work, and I’m not. Proscenium theater can be more experiential, but even then, I still see the value of theater that’s simply a passive experience for those who need that.

Since telephonic theater is its own niche within immersive, I asked Evan what’s unique about it. He said that Candle House’s shows frequently have a character known as “The Operator” who may appear at the beginning or end and share the line, “On the phone, you don’t have to be too human, only human enough.” Evan shared the popular saying, “Restriction is the mother of innovation,” which he finds true, but in this case, they can tell the stories they want to tell and let people open up or let their guard down because they’re just on the phone. “There’s that anonymity that ends up causing more intimacy sometimes,” he said. “We disarm someone with distance.” Evan has found that once someone “takes the ride” of theater over the phone, the stories can hit closer to home.

So how does Candle House onboard people to take this ride? Evan explained that it depends on the work, but for *Claws*, their latest show, there’s a four-minute recording from an ersatz helpline. He explained that Candle House always designs the onboarding to fit the piece. Sometimes there’s no onboarding and “if we call you suddenly, that’s the point.” But regardless, audiences always receive emails with careful instructions. Live interactions are always in-world, and sometimes emails or even ticketing sites will be, and sometimes not.

Once audiences are in the piece, according to Evan, “There’s no wrong way to interact.” There’s no way to break it, unless “traffic light” comes up, the safe word for performer and audience. That comes from establishing the participants' role early on. He also told me that Candle House tests shows internally with their ensemble.

Since telephonic theater is a unique blend of interactive theater and audio play, I asked Evan what mediums he draws from for his immersive work. “Old school radio dramas, for sure,” he confirmed, mentioning *Prairie Home Companion* and BBC dramas, as well as the Nightvale podcasts *Alice Isn't Dead* and *Within the Wires*. Why these in particular? Evan explained that many have immense voice talents talking about the mundane. He recommended I look into the book *Welcome to Scarfolk*, interestingly, a book that had intrigued me entirely independently of this project. But the connection made sense once Evan described it as “a masterclass in world-building” as it tells the story, or builds the world, of a terrifying yet mundane fictional town. He also said that intimacy training is a huge part of the work and recommended books like *Staging Sex* and other theatrical intimacy books. I only had one in the tentative syllabus, but in the various interactions between audience members and performers, it makes sense for people to learn about intimacy training.

In terms of who else I should talk to, and by this point I'm winding down but still curious, Evan recommended Justin Brink of Miasma in Chicago. He wasn't sure if they're still in operation but said it's a Chicago extreme haunt that ran for six years. Evan has worked for many companies and felt that Justin has the best safety protocols. Evan said that uniquely, Justin and their partner, the other person who also runs Miasma, are both in medicine so they may be sources with unique perspectives.

Taylor Winters (5/20/22)

Wanting more resources on immersive and experiential work, I stumbled upon two sister sites, *Haunting* and *Immersed*. Appreciating how an immersive theater site exists alongside one on haunted houses, I reached out to Taylor Winters, the creator of both. By trade, Taylor is a research and development engineer and comes from a strong science background, not one in theater. He entered the theater world growing up with haunted houses and other horror events, as well as video games and tabletop games. After he finished his Ph.D., he moved from San Diego to Los Angeles, finding more of a haunted house scene there. He was particularly drawn to the show *Alone* and wanted to see more pieces like it. He found that it didn't have a strong narrative but focused more on emotions and engagement, and that people could engage at different levels, from walking by or speaking with performers, for example. Taylor enjoyed going through the experience and meeting up with people after to discuss and compare stories and notes and how they felt different things and had their own personal journeys. Pinpointing the genesis of immersive horror, he personally found *Blackout* highly influential in subverting the haunted house experience. He described this as, “What they're going to do is never as scary as what they could do,” but the fear of the possibilities and the unknown makes it scary. Taylor cited Alone as standing on the shoulders of Blackout to create something that relied less on fear on more on

other emotions. He also mentioned *Have You Seen Jake?* as another show he enjoyed. Taylor wanted friends to attend these kinds of shows so they could discuss them. However, the friends were worried about how scary they would be, so he was "basically writing reviews for [his] friends" to convince them to go, so he started writing reviews online and then made a website of his own. The goal was to bring new people and friends in and create a community around the work, wanting to create awareness around creators and their shows. Originally the website was less horror-centric, called "Haunting" in terms of work that was "evocative" but then gravitated towards more horror. For one show, they didn't mention the review on their website because they didn't want people to think "haunting" meant it was scary, so Taylor founded a sister site which became *Immersed*.

I appreciated all this background information as it gave me a bit of history as to the origins of the haunted house shows, namely in LA, and also spoke to the tenet of connection in how Taylor's website came out of the need for a community. I shared my definitions and tenets with Taylor, who said that they all made sense and resonated. For immersion, he mentioned the discourse around what "is or isn't immersive," which I acknowledged. For interaction, he said that he would include mention of actors but also recognized that not all of these experiences have actors. While I don't specifically mention actors in that definition, I do consider them a potential part of the environment. For meaning-making, he found that the line "audiences take away their own lessons" can encompass the concept of interpretations. This assessment makes sense since interpretations are a big part of meaning-making, though not the be-all-end-all. And he recognized this, mentioning how meaning-making can also include the positive correlations that branded experiences seek to establish towards their given brand. He wondered about the term "narrative moments," since many of these experiences don't have full narratives. I agree with that; however, even an experience without a prescribed narrative can still have narrative moments, moments that suggest a sequence of events even if they do not comprise a story. And for connection, Taylor thought about the "how" of people sharing information, whether through a message board, forum, or in-person meetup. This take proved unique, since other folks had discussed the "why" of people connecting but not the "how." Yet Taylor found in his experience that communities have moved from "info dumps" on online forums to "discussion places" on communication apps such as Discord or Slack, if not in-person.

I asked Taylor what he'd personally want a course about experiential dramaturgy to include, and he had two choice quotes for me. Through his research and journalism, he learned that "Not everything is for everyone" and "Let people play how they want to play." Elaborating on these, he has found that when events, especially horror, try to become mass-marketed, they become too watered down for the hardcore fans and still too niche for regular people. As such, Taylor has found that there's an immersive piece for everyone, but that some will appeal to certain kinds of people and others will appeal to other kinds of people. For example, shy people will gravitate towards ones that outgoing people may not like and vice-versa. As for letting

people play how they want, he has found that sandbox experiences will allow for different levels of interaction in that people can explore as they wish. You can go to areas with actors or areas that are more environmental. And Taylor finds that there's no wrong way to do it, and dislikes the gatekeepers who say there's a "right way" to experience these works. He found *Speakeasy San Francisco* a perfect example of a sandbox experience in that it had three giant rooms: a cabaret, a bar, and a casino. Each offered different levels of engagement, allowing people to gravitate toward their preferred thresholds.

Since Taylor researches both horror and non-horror immersive experiences, I asked him why immersive work tends towards genre in the speculative fiction sense. Speaking on horror in particular, he said that it works well for immersive works because "The less you see, the scarier it is." He explained that in immersive, if you don't have much of a budget, you can blindfold people and play noises, for example, like in a piece called *Camp Whitsit* in which people had to cross logs and streams in the woods, but they only felt and heard these things that audiences would then imagine. And then immersive is interactive, and if you have interactions, "What genre lends itself to that the most? Horror, I'd say."

I asked Taylor what books or resources he recommended I look into, particularly ones from his sites since they would likely make good introductory articles for the course. He suggested the collection of articles under the "Fan Resources" heading on *Haunting* to start people off. And then from there he recommended the collection of articles under "Creator Resources." In terms of who else I should speak with if I have time, he mentioned David Ruzicka as a knowledgeable person to talk to, who started as a fan and then crossed over into the creator side with a horror piece entitled *I Want to Live in Your Mouth*. For final thoughts and responses, Taylor said that "it would be awesome if there's a section on ARG (Alternate Reality Games)" and that he's happy to share stories if I need them to illustrate a point in my writing or workshops.

Samantha Gorman (5/24/22)

Next up, I spoke with Samantha Gorman, who multiple people had mentioned as helpful to speak with from her work blending live theater with digital storytelling. Fittingly then, Samantha got two degrees at Brown, the very first digital interactive creative writing degree there and another in media performance, later obtaining an MFA there in experiential poetry with how the reader interacts with text. She describes herself as coming "from a place of interactivity, theater, and games."

I asked what she would want a course about experiential dramaturgy to include. As someone familiar with academia, she said that the element she finds most missing in courses like these is a discussion of basic game design elements and gameplay, especially from people in escape rooms, as there's a lot to borrow from them. I had looked into using game design guides for video games and tabletop games, but I hadn't thought of using one from escape rooms. As such, I think it would be good for the course to bring in one of the escape room designers I spoke with as a guest, among others. Drawing from escape rooms makes sense, since they exist in a physical space like live theater does. Samantha also recommended providing "a sense of interdisciplinary openness for people to pull in different frameworks for design and encouraging comfort." Initially, I conceived of this course as one for theatermakers, digital and analog game designers, filmmakers, and various interactive artists. Over time, I have narrowed it down to thinking more about how theatermakers can learn from various experiential mediums. However, like Samantha's own work, that's not to say students couldn't design theater in a digital space, an online space, or another of their choosing. So the course will have interdisciplinary openness in terms of where people can draw inspiration from, even if it won't be a game design course or an interactive filmmaking course per se. And it sounds like this goes along with Samantha's thinking. She recommended an examination of traditional dramaturgy alongside the more open kind, discussing what one can take from different disciplines to help develop work. Lastly, she said this could then feed into experiencing these works as audience members.

Since Samantha is someone at the cross-section of theater and games, I asked if she thinks there's a "theatricality" to games and, if so, how she would describe it. She said that she in fact found herself in the world of games through theater and interactive poetry and then stayed working in games because she found it the most widespread medium for sharing her theatricality. As someone who loves the live performance of theater but laments the limitations of its reach in America, I could sympathize with this. Through Tender Claws, Samantha worked on *The Under Presents*, a virtual reality experience populated by live performers that audience members/players can interact with in the space. Perhaps the most theatrical of these was an immersive production inspired by *The Tempest*. Samantha explained that for *The Under*, people inhabit roles, design levels, and allow for improv or emergent play in their creation of a theatrical type of game.

As such, I asked Samantha what she thinks theater could learn or borrow from games, and vice-versa, and she spoke directly to the impetus for the course. First, she started by marking the delineation between the conceptual and the practical. Elaborating on this, she said that she sees the theater industry wanting to spread out and diversify, and that desire actually happening with experimental theater. For how games can learn from theater, she uses Richard Schechner's Model for Open Theater as a framework for game design since there's a lot of overlap. But theater can learn even more from games. "There's a little bit of anxiety around this reputation and purity and understanding of games as 'other," she explained. "Theater people don't realize

how you can borrow a sense of interactivity and "buy-in" from [games]." Talking about how this manifests, Samantha mentioned how sometimes interactivity in theater can feel like hand holding when really it's about responsiveness. "If you watch how different people play games, you can know more about your audience." To me, this is valuable because it speaks to an easy way for theatermakers to prototype, whether they use a game version of their given theatrical play or any game to see how people navigate interactions.

Since Samantha works in making theater over VR, I wanted to ask specifically about the benefits and challenges of this medium. What's unique about making theater that occurs over VR? For Samantha personally, her work has silent and emergent play, so she concentrates on moderating physicality and getting people to join the scene and be open and balancing everyone's interactions. Drawing it to theater, she said,"It's basically crowd work. In theater it would be crowd work." I like this correlation since crowd work is a skill that some actors are good at and some aren't. Testing out crowd work, even in a virtual setting, could help performers become more comfortable with it in live performance. And for those who already have the skill, utilizing it in a digital environment could provide unique lessons about how to engage audience members in various circumstances.

So how does Samantha onboard people or facilitate interaction in her work? She mentioned what she described as the "controversial idea of 'the Magic Circle," coined by historian Johan Huizinga and popularized by Eric Zimmerman, Frank Lantz, and Katie Salen. Briefly, the concept refers to the game space in which everyday reality is suspended and replaced by the artificial reality of the game. For more info on it, she recommended the book *Rules of Play* by Zimmerman and Salen. Samantha discussed the creation of an "author space" where one suspends disbelief and uses those ideas for world-building and buy-in based on the invitation to come into the world. She finds a lot of design tends to be straightforward, so for her it's more about movement and inviting people in, opening up possibilities for iterative feedback to build the scene together.

In addition to the resource of Schechner's Model for Open Theater and the book *Rules of Play,* Samantha also recommended the book *The Well-Played Game,* which she heard was a good book about games and play. Regarding who else I should speak with, Samantha also recommended speaking with Tara Ahmadinejad from Piehole, who helped work on *Tempest*.

Jeff Leinenveber (7/20/22)

Throughout my research and interviews, I kept hearing about *The Nest*, an experiential piece that I understood as part escape room and part immersive theater. Intrigued by the uniqueness of the hybrid model and the conceit of a theater piece for just a couple of people, I reached out to Scout Expedition Co, also known as Jeff Leinenveber and Jarrett Lantz. I spoke with Jeff, who gave me a bit of background on the two of them and their company. They both worked for Walt Disney Imagineering for about 20 years. They were both avid gamers, enjoying titles such as *Gone Home*, *Firewatch,* and *What Remains of Edith Finch,* and fans of *Sleep No More*, seeing it around the same time. They then asked each other, “What if we pair up and leverage out our experiences to create a show?” They didn’t come from a theater background; Jeff has a degree in visual design and worked on projects such as Star Wars Galaxy’s Edge and Shanghai Disneyland, so they leveraged their experiences in theme park design to create *The Nest*.

Jeff and Jarrett describe *The Nest* to people as “a video game [or movie] that you’re stepping into.” They emphasize that guests become active participants. Jeff describes the physical quality of *The Nest* as organic in how it’s built, “It’s a storage unit, there are a lot of found objects, but it’s not just ‘copy-paste.” This description helped me better understand the piece, which I have talked about in workshops based on articles and reports of it. I also appreciated the use of the term “active participants,” as this is something I feel I, and perhaps others, want a bit more of in attending live theatrical shows.

I asked Jeff what he would want a course about experiential dramaturgy to include, and his answer pleased me since it echoed sentiments from Mikhail Mansion and Steve Gaynor. Jeff said he’d want a discussion of environmental storytelling. He also shared a great exercise with me. He gives small groups what he calls a “high-level prompt,” such as “fairy tales,” and the groups pick a story with that category that they want to tell and use materials such as craft supplies to conceive of a narrative. The exercise is specifically about creating an environment. “At the end, everybody walks through these environments, and they talk about them afterward,” he explained, elaborating that they then discuss questions such as: How do guests traverse these environments? Do they walk, do they crawl, is it linear, etc.? Emphasizing the creative potential of this exercise, he added, “Some of these experiments still stick with me to this day.”

Since this thesis has become about what theater can learn from experiential mediums, I asked Jeff, what’s unique about developing hybrid work that’s part theater/part something else? He explained that he and Jarrett do compare their work to escape rooms. But overall, in creating *The Nest*, they “mashed up elements of things that they liked into this new thing.” In *The Nest*’s case, they borrowed from immersive theater, narrative video games, and escape rooms. They do have to stick to a schedule, so they borrow from escape rooms for that aspect, though there’s no

timer in the room and no pressure. They also borrow from video game solutions, for example, in using a character who is sort of a guide and in “breadcrumbing you along the way, there’s an unseen hand that’s pushing you along without you knowing it.” They use light and sound cues and visual cues to guide guests along. Some cues are more direct, like the phone calls, and some are more subconscious, like the lighting or the layout. “People are pretty predictable, actually,” Jeff said, which speaks to the lesson of playtesting or prototyping that I believe theater could learn from immersive work. “Every show is a prototype for the next one” is their philosophy, as they can notice a pattern in guest behavior, say if participants don’t know where to go in a particular part, they can work on correcting that issue.

Though I learned about how *The Nest* draws from theater, escape rooms, and games in its experience, I still wanted to ask Jeff if Scout Expedition Co drew from any other mediums or practices in its work. Jeff mentioned puzzles, and that he and Jarrett refer to the puzzles in the piece as “interactives” because they’re easy; they’re not meant to stump you. They’re all through the lens of the character who used to own the storage unit. For example, Jeff considers one of the show’s best interactives to be gaining access to a cabinet that creates a darkroom, with some notes from Josie from when she was in Photography Class 101, so participants develop a photograph as they read her notes.

Thinking back to the concept of environmental storytelling, this allows *The Nest* to tell a story about Josie, the storage unit’s owner, without using actors and while providing an experience for the audience. This concept brought us to the subject of constraints. “Constraints are not bad,” Jeff asserted. “They are the best possible thing.” He explained that with the cost of rent being so high, their first thought was, “What if you did it in a storage room?” since they’re widely available but provide constraints. They thought about how audiences would explore these places that don’t have lighting, so they’d have a flashlight. This implementation is just one example of how constraints informed the experience, Jeff explained. “Constraints, in a lot of ways, launch you into the best parts of your concepts. It’s not something to be scared of.”

In discussing the tenets of experiential dramaturgy, Jeff had several thoughts on meaning-making in particular. *The Nest* tells its story through the use of audio tapes. For the most part, they’re chronologically ordered and purposely leave substantial gaps in time. Jeff explained that the gaps exist for two reasons. One, because “we can’t tell you everything that happens,” and two, because Jeff and Jarrett enjoy having the audience “connect the dots” and feel that “anything they interpret is valid.” They sense that *The Nest* ends up being emotionally impactful for people, as “audiences project their own experiences and meanings onto Josie and who she is” based on their own family members and loved ones. “They’re actively becoming a participant in the storytelling” and can take ownership of it. There’s no visual representation of Josie for that reason. The meaning-making in *The Nest* occurs from filling in the blanks, similar to how comic book readers imagine the actions between panels. But it also occurs due to

purposely placed objects from various decades that audience members may have owned growing up, and therefore ascribe meaning towards during their experience.

Since *The Nest* involves actively seeking out tapes to listen to, I asked Jeff if he worries that people might miss a story beat. To my surprise, his answer tied nicely into the tenet of connection. He explained that the design of *The Nest* ensures that audiences will encounter the core story through the tapes. However, *The Nest* includes a few secondary tapes that audiences may or may not encounter. As such, Jeff explained that audience members frequently meet up after the show to discuss the tapes that some people might have heard and some people haven't. Jeff asserted that for immersive theater like *Sleep No More*, this discussion, "it's as much a part of the show as the show." For *The Nest*, a solitary show for the most part, Jeff and Jarrett encourage "a library-esque atmosphere" through an ethereal and quiet soundtrack. Yet they still wanted a way for people to connect, so in what was originally a Kickstarter bonus, after audiences leave the storage unit they have an epilogue scene in another storage unit, filled with thousands of note cards and a desk with one final tape. The person on the recording talks about how audiences have gotten to know Josie, so now they may leave something behind. Audience members leave behind a memory "that's on the fringes of their mind, that they may forget soon. To write it down and add it to this ever-growing art installation." And they have time to read the written memories of others. In this way, *The Nest* fosters both internal and external connection, from the internal connection of the shared memories to the external connection of sharing information post-show.

Lastly, I asked Jeff about how *The Nest* onboards people, since during my experiential dramaturgy workshop presentations, the number one worry of attendees pertaining to interactive work is that they wouldn't know how to interact. Jeff explained that *The Nest* onboards through a big freight elevator that "goes up six floors, and it's a cool experience in and of itself." But it also crosses people into the magic circle, giving them safety info and teaching them how to use the cassette tape. When the elevator ride ends, the check-in folks check the audience in and are encouraged to improvise based on people's experience. For example, if the guest has a lot of experience with escape rooms, they'll temper that energy. They receive all kinds of people, from immersive fans to people who have never done it before, so the team meets them where they are. The team wants people to feel confident when they go in. Jeff and Jarrett did in fact find that the biggest concerns are people worried that they'll do something wrong or that they'll have to act. And they make sure that everyone gets to the end, "Even if we have to call you several times."

Richard Dresser (9/20/22)

In discussing my thesis, I mentioned it to director and story consultant John Eisner, who suggested that I reach out to playwright Richard Dresser since he had created a theater piece that occurred in a car. That certainly felt like experiential dramaturgy to me, but I didn't know how much of Richard's work would otherwise apply to the subject. I reached out anyways, and I'm glad I did since Richard provided a fitting final interview, tying together the elements of experiential dramaturgy into traditional theater–a primary directive of this thesis. Richard started his long career as a playwright and later began working in TV. He has written plays and musicals and eventually started teaching playwriting at Rutgers. He found that playwrights should also learn screenwriting and started teaching that at Columbia. Richard is one of the four writers who started the Writers Guild Initiative under the Writers Guild to give voices to people who didn't have them, such as LGBTQ people, former sex trafficking victims, and the incarcerated. He is currently the president of the Writers Guild Initiative, teaching at Columbia University, and writing a novel and a new play.

Though by this point, I'd put together the syllabus for the course, I nevertheless wanted to ask Richard what he'd want in a course on experiential dramaturgy. Unsurprisingly, he mentioned *Sleep No More*, but he had a unique take on the long-running immersive piece, saying, "The idea that people can wander through and have different experiences is exactly what life is." He found interest in how people see different things throughout the show and how it presents jagged, fragmented pieces, just as our lives are fragmented.

Richard developed his own immersive piece, entitled *What Are You Afraid Of?* In an email, Richard provided a synopsis of the piece, describing it thus: "A man picks up a woman hitchhiker. The play tracks their fast-evolving lives together, from feverish dating to courtship to marriage to the chaos of having three children (the audience in the back seat). By the end, when the man is left alone and distraught, we realize that he has not said a word to the woman, and the play is a chronicle of his fears of starting a relationship."

I had to ask Richard about *What Are You Afraid Of?* and how the immersive piece came about. Richard explained that he did several plays at the Humana Festival and Jon Jory, the artistic director, asked to commission him to write a play that occurs in a car with two actors and three audience members. Richard had just two responses: "I think that's impossible. I accept with pleasure." On the one hand, the concept answered the questions of who it's about and what the circumstances are. These are people in a car. But on the other hand, it also had challenges. Richard explained that it had two different casts. He shared the anecdote that the first time he experienced the piece, he found it really fun. But the second time it was a nightmare, because he was between two critics, one laughing and one eating and writing.

However, the play became even more immersive and experiential in its following production. A German director optioned *What Are You Afraid Of?* and staged it in Hamburg. But because it was Hamburg, it wasn't enough to just stage the play in a car, so the cast drove the car around. Richard told me about the changes he noticed when he experienced the new iteration of the show. At one point, the driver stopped, went into a grocery store, and came back with a paper bag with photos of the audience members when they had bought tickets, which Richard found "disorienting in the right way." Then the driver went to the Red Light district and started calling at a woman who kept walking, but then she got in as she was the second performer. Then they started fighting and yelling at the audience like children. There were several moments outside the car, such as an old man beating a tree with a stick. He later saw a flipped-over vehicle and asked what the budget was, but it turned out that was not a part of the show. Or rather, it wasn't an intentional part of the show. The show ended with one actor sobbing, and the actor found that most people understood that the show had ended after a minute, but some people sat in the car with the crying actor for 45 minutes. And after the show, the audience went to a bar to discuss. Asking the actors about the weirdest thing that happened during the run, Richard learned how the actors were in the outside argument scene and somebody came out of their house and asked what was going on. Staying in character, the actors said, "We're having an argument," to which the man responded, "Yes, but why have you had it here four days in a row?"

I greatly appreciated the play-by-play of this experience, since it both gives insight into the unique qualities of experiential theater and also documents a show that sadly does not have much detailed documentation online, having debuted in the late 90s. From this description, several elements jump out. First, to bring back a term that others have mentioned, the concept of "the magic circle" and how staging events ostensibly outside the circle enables an expansion of the circle to include events not a part of the production. In this case, that's the flipped-over car, not an intended part of the show but labeled one nonetheless. Richard explained how the production struck this balance, saying, "They had a good sense to do just enough outside the car that you question everything. You see a dog cross the road and you think, is that a part of the show?" Another experiential element derives from duration and how audiences can theoretically enjoy the show after it ends if they don't realize when it ends, or if they decide it ends later. Interestingly, both of these elements speak to how an experiential show can allow for the external to become internal. Audiences can interpret events outside the show through the lens of the show. And for *What Are You Afraid Of?* and shows like it, these extrapolations can fuel another tenet of experiential dramaturgy, the connection of shared experience and discussion.

Richard mentioned that he spoke with the dramaturg in Hamburg about dialogue changes, and they said, "We always retain at least 33% [of the original]." This response prompted me to ask Richard if he felt that it's better to have a general framework or a tight script for this kind of a piece. He admitted that the directors in Germany made choices for his work that he would have disagreed with, but at the same time, they discovered new elements in the text that really worked.

"In the experiential world, I feel that there's a level of spontaneity that's really important," Richard told me. And so he felt it would "take the air out of [the piece]" if actors said exactly what they were supposed to say. He likened it to the difference between writing an outline for a television show that people improvise around versus writing a tight script. An outline reveals a certain structure. And for a show like *What Are You Afraid Of?* that structure becomes malleable.

"I always aspire to that feeling of spontaneity," Richard explained, tying his explicitly experiential work into more traditional theater. He described this as shattering the magic of the theater, something that the audience loves to see. *What Are You Afraid Of?* wasn't Richard's only experiential piece. He had another show in Albany in which the audience member goes into an office as if it's their first day on the job, and receives a call to delete files. The audience member then finds out that these files comprise evidence of a crime, and they have to face the dilemma of what to do. For Richard, the unique quality of this piece became writing for a person who is both the audience and the actor and will presumably have their own spontaneity in the piece. This quality also speaks to the earlier concept of the "spectactor," or the participant/observer of role-playing games.

Richard left me with one final thought, a fitting summation for my final interview. "Writing those shows really influenced me in those [experiential] ways, because if you think about actors and audiences together in a car, it really makes you think about what the experience of that is," he told me. For his show *What Are You Afraid Of?* he said that the added experiential elements of the Hamburg production made the piece "so exhilarating and powerful as an experience." And though perhaps slightly reductive, I'll admit that the purpose of experiential dramaturgy is just that, to cultivate those feelings of engagement in more theatrical productions.

Readings and Resources

Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, and Productive Participation

In this section of the course, I wish to include excerpts from the book *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, and Productive Participation.* I have to confess, I don't particularly agree with the book's reasoning, and it includes a number of logical fallacies. However, the sentiment of the book offers a unique perspective, and it's worth including and investigating in course discussions. I don't want students to feel like they have to subscribe to a single point of view. Therefore, including other resources, even those that don't quite sustain their arguments, can at least get students thinking about alternate perspectives.

So what is *Beyond Immersive Theatre* and what does it argue? The author argues that immersive theater is more or less inherently neoliberal and capitalist. Their arguments boil down to two lines of reasoning. The first is that immersive theater is a ticketed experience, and therefore participates in the capitalist economy. This is true of immersive theater, but also true of everything from traditional theater to books to houseplants to ketchup bottles. Ironically, under this reasoning the book itself is pro-capitalist since it does in fact cost money to buy it. However, the author counters this point by saying that for every other commodity, consumers pay for goods or services, whereas immersive theater charges audiences for "an experience." The author sees the commodification of experience as a uniquely neoliberal exercise, and by extension a problematic one. I don't agree, simply because creating an immersive experience requires labor that deserves compensation. However, this thinking does provide the interesting concept of what it means to "attend an experience" and how that differs from a traditional show.

The next line of reasoning for why immersive theater is inherently capitalist pertains to the medium itself. The author argues that immersive theater encourages the audience to participate, thereby creating a scheme of "productive participation." Here, the author equates participating in a show with labor, arguing that immersive theater rewards audience participation and trains audience members to seek participation and its rewards. They will then perpetuate this scheme in their day-to-day lives by seeking compensation for their participation, the backbone of capitalism. The problem with this argument is that it is a classic false equivalence. Capitalism and immersive theater may both "encourage participation," but that does not mean that they function in the same way. The constructs of immersive theater do not include concepts of profit, capital accumulation, competitive markets, price systems, or property. Yes, they both encourage participation for an abstract benefit, but many other aspects of life such as education, play, and

cohabitation do as well. In fact, participation is hard-wired into the human experience, since humans are social creatures. The author argues that a "progressive" theater experience should discourage or frustrate the attempts of audience members trying to participate, which may somehow promote an abstract notion of progressivism while likely ruining an audience member's day. Still, the argument does have kernels of validity to it. The author claims that the commodification of participation encourages productions to include more and more opportunities for participation, as they equate these opportunities with increased quality. This brings up an excellent question. Does increasing participatory opportunities correlate directly with increasing quality or is there a sweet spot that productions should aim for in their work? This is a worthwhile question for students to consider, which is why I intend to include passages from *Beyond Immersive Theatre* in the course.

While I may sound dismissive of the overall arguments at the core of *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, the author does excel at providing terminology for discussing immersive works and their goals and ethics. Likewise, the author raises a few pressing questions. In chapter two, Alston discusses narcissism and affect production, the ways in which productions affect audience members and the politics of this. He raises the point that, "In immersive theatre, this encourages a questioning of who or what it is that is doing the influencing and what the extent of their, or its, influence might be, in relation to an audience's ability to move, think, feel, or act differently" (Alston 43). This line of questioning is exactly the kind that would prove valuable to students thinking about the dramaturgy of immersive works. Though not always his own terminology, he adds to the discourse the terms narcissistic participation, affective memory, corporeal memory, risk perception, free-roaming, and affective text. In short, the book provides a useful structure for thinking about and questioning immersive theater, even as the author reaches his own individual conclusions.

Though a few of the ethical questions in the book feel disingenuous, namely those directly comparing immersive theater to Neoliberalism and Capitalism, there are some that are less abstract that raise important questions. Several of these revolve around sense and the way that sense deprivation plays into many immersive theater productions. After all, sensory interaction plays a key role in immersion, as being able to touch or smell aspects of a production can immerse audiences in the worlds they wish to create. Likewise, deprivation of senses can achieve the same effect through the opposite means. But some thorny issues around accessibility and impairment arise here. "Theatre in the dark, particularly performances that thematise blindness, risks romanticizing visual impairment, making experiences of temporary sight deprivation thrilling in a way that arguably does an injustice to the daily experiences of visually impaired people" (Alston 81). Creating immersive experiences that deprive audiences of senses can be ethically unsound when capitalizing on real disability. Likewise, he ties this to the concept of risk in a way that actually does bring in capitalism in an organic way. Many immersive productions, especially those with sensory deprivation elements, aim to attract audiences through

the promise of risk. The author questions why we see the pursuit of "risk" as something positive, chalking it up to capitalist values which are actually relevant. He admits that while taking risks can be positive, the way that productions often promise "risk" isn't through actual risk-taking but through the simulation of it. He brings in the term edgework to refer to taboo or extreme behaviors (Skydiving, BDSM, etc) that seem risky but that can be commodified in completely safe environments. I don't know if that's wholly a bad thing myself, but there is an interesting way in which immersive productions seemingly encourage risk but offer no actual risky ventures. I would say that the ethics of this comes down to how the production markets itself. Does it wish for audiences to have a taste of risk in a controlled environment or does it promise real risk but deliver a facsimile of it? Likewise the same can be said for sensory deprivation productions. Do they wish to promote empathy and understanding of a condition or exploit it for an audience's amusement?

To the author's credit, he does occasionally bring in alternate points of view when making an argument. In discussing the free-roaming nature of certain immersive productions, he argues that they derive from the capitalist concept of entrepreneurship. However, many creators of this kind of work mention their inspiration coming from games and game design. Alston acknowledges this, although he doesn't agree. The link between immersive theater and games is one that this course aims to explore, so this is a key argument to engage with in the course. Alston cites game theorist Josephine Machon who argues that immersive theater resembles games since it transports audiences to an "otherworldly-world that requires navigation according to its own rules of logic" (Machon 62). Alston, on the other hand, argues "that the navigation required of audiences in such otherworldly-worlds derives from systems of production, productivity and value that are not wholly particular or unique to the fictive cosmos of a given immersive environment" (Alston 112). Now, it's worth mentioning that the assertion of Machon could be a false equivalence. However, Machon doesn't assert that immersive theater and games are equivalent but rather share a resemblance. On the other hand, Alston asserts that the free-roaming of immersive theater derives from systems of production and that this isn't unique to the mechanics of game theory. This is a fallacy of causal oversimplification and causal determinism in that it assumes that immersive theater must have derived from neoliberalism and not from game theory because these qualities are not unique to game theory. But of course, they're not unique to neoliberalism and its systems of productivity either. In short, it's feasible that immersive theater could have derived from either, and it may be worth bringing up this debate in the course so students can evaluate each argument. As I said, I generally see the equivalence between immersive experience and neoliberalism as false. However, with the increase in immersive commercial and shopping experiences, I believe in this category it does have some degree of application. Here, Alston brings up examples of immersive theater companies creating branded experiences, moving away from abstractions and into tangible correlations. Immersive theater is not inherently neoliberal, any more than any other artform or construct in a capitalist society, but there are moments in which the two go hand in hand that are

worth mentioning in the course, such as immersive advertising campaigns. To Alston's credit, he mentions the pros and cons of these endeavors. On one hand, they essentially turn theater audience members into brand evangelists or brand ambassadors, but on the other they can be used to fund not-for-profit theatrical ventures and pay theater staff. It's also worth mentioning that while the course will discuss the various ethics of experiential dramaturgy, which Alston's book proves valuable for, it will not subscribe to one ethical argument or perspective but allow students to discuss these at length.

One case in point is Alston's discussion around free-roaming immersive productions such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. The author puts forth various points and observations about such experiences, ultimately boiling down to the argument that they promote exclusivity and a hierarchy. While this is one potential interpretation, it doesn't account for others. He argues that free-roaming immersive theater, shows in which audiences can choose what to see, inherently provide unequal experiences because there are "better" and "worse" interactions to uncover. It is true that audience members will not all have the same experiences, and cannot possibly see everything in a given amount of time. However, this is highly subjective and does not account for audience agency. The assumption is that whatever audiences miss out on is what they wanted to see, and does not account for audiences being allowed to go where they please and prioritize certain interactions over others. He does raise an interesting point about the one-on-ones of Punchdrunk, interactions limited to only a few audience members. These are given to those who show interest in interacting or who do research ahead of time. While this may also prioritize those who see the show multiple times, the argument does not account for the fact that some audience members will not want these experiences as they prefer to watch passively. Those who do express initiative or do their research are rewarded not so much for entrepreneurship as for merely indicating interest in a given interaction and signaling as much to the performers. Free-roaming immersive theater does not have inherently good or bad ethics, rather there are arguments for or against it based on how audiences posit the mechanics of it. For example, Alston may see the inability for every audience member to have the same experience as unethical, but another person could view a one-size-fits-all experience as unethical due to the lack of accommodations for different types of audiences. In short, the ethics of immersive theater are subjective, something that will come up in course discussions.

To facilitate this discussion, I would personally categorize this ethical split as the ethics of accessibility vs. the ethics of politicization. Many people, such as those mentioned in other readings, such as in "Immersive Theater Practice in Theater for Younger Audiences: Interviews with Three Companies," argue that immersive and interactive experiences are much more accessible for theatergoers for a number of reasons. They allow audiences freedom, and they don't have to sit quietly and passively and be at the whim of potentially draconian audience etiquette policies. Therefore, people who are children, neurodivergent, or from underrepresented backgrounds may meet immersive experiences on their own terms, as they're invited to engage

and participate. In this sense, immersive experiences are highly ethical, as they decentralize largely white or Western practices around etiquette. However, this is from the lens of ethical accessibility. From the lens of ethical politicization, as Alston argues, immersive experiences structurally represent unethical modes of political systems, such as capitalism. If an audience member were to catch on to these "subtexts" or be influenced by them, this audience member may continue to perpetuate unethical systems in their own lives. Similarly, in a neoliberal system, immersive experiences may bend to the whims of the system and uphold practices around inequality, such as the aforementioned differences around individual experiences at immersive events. Personally, I find the ethics of accessibility to be much more important, as they are tangible and have direct ramifications, while ethics of politicization are projected and abstract. But it may be interesting and useful for students to receive both of these viewpoints and debate which one applies most to their work and their outlook.

So if Alston finds immersive theater to be aesthetically unethical from a political standpoint, what kinds of immersive experiences does he find to be ethical? He answers this by stating that theater that suggests it will be immersive but actually impedes interaction is ethical. This kind of show is a pleasant surprise at best and false advertising at worst. His justification for this is that immersive theater has fallen into what is known as the experience economy. In drawing from the research of B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, Alston defines the experience economy as one in which "consumers pay for experiences that are commodified in commercially staged events; incorporated as an experiential feature of a product; or integrated as a part of their purchasing experience; or appealed to in a marketing campaign" (Alston 146). He cites examples such as Disneyland and flashmob campaigns as experiences in which engagement and participation activate consumers. Consumers aren't paying for a product, but for an "experience."The irony, which Alston includes from the research of Pine and Gilmore but conveniently glosses over, is that paying to see a play is itself paying for an experience. Nonetheless, his argument is that immersive theater is a part of the experience economy through its offering of an engaging experience as a kind of product, with an emphasis on "engaging." The only way to circumvent this is to "frustrate productivity." Frustrating an audience's desire or attempt to participate frankly sounds like a disappointing time at the theater. However, Alston does use this in a way that makes sense in talking about brandscapes. Large-scale corporations may adopt aspects of immersive experiences, such as having a store where visitors can take pictures with products, engage in performances around the products, or otherwise provide marketing through an interactive experience. Here I do agree with the unethical, or at least pro-capitalist ramifications of this kind of immersive experience, but I stop short of saying that the only kind of ethical immersive theater is the kind that frustrates the audience's desire for it.

For the course and my own research, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* provides a few questions to think about. In terms of excerpts to use, I'm most interested in pages 1-22 which discuss the thesis of the book that immersive theater is neoliberal, pages 122-128 which discuss how

corporations use immersive experiences for branding, pages 128-141 which talk about the entrepreneurship of free-roaming, and pages 145-158 which unpack the concepts of the experience economy. All in all, reading this book has given me a few questions, whether intentionally or not. Is immersion the proper term or a grossly overused one? How does a piece engage or affect the audience? The concept of engagement is a key one. How can one evaluate the aesthetics of a given piece? How do aesthetics guide engagement? How does "sense" play into an immersive experience, such as by having a work occur in total darkness? And how does free-roaming come into play for a given production, and what does that bring? These will be good questions to think about throughout the thesis, and by extension, the course itself.

Immersive Theatre: Engaging the Audience

For my next book on immersive theater, I looked into *Immersive Theatre: Engaging the Audience,* edited by Josh Machamer. The helpful thing about this book is that it is an anthology of essays about immersive work. Some are more relevant than others, but the wonderful thing is that you get a variety of perspectives around experiential pieces and processes. I didn't always agree with the views of *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, and this book does have essays that probably would have aligned with those views, but it also has essays that refute those points or are in dialogue with them. As such, I think this would be a great book to use for the course, but there are a few essays I want to highlight as being most relevant to what this course aims to teach.

The first essay is in fact the first chapter, "Immersive Theater Practice in Theater for Younger Audiences: Interviews with Three Companies," by Adrienne Kapstein. It discusses the work of three immersive theater companies that make work for children, or work that includes children. This quality is notable because immersive theater, especially in the US, tends to cater to adults and bar children from entry. But the quality of these immersive works in inviting children to participate inherently makes these works more accessible and has a few ramifications that promote accessibility as well. Since ethics will be a subject of the course, with Allston's work promoting the concept of "unethical" immersive work, this chapter has a few points that refute that argument.

Right off the bat, Kapstein makes the case that immersive theater for children has an inherently accessible quality to it. The author asserts that "these [immersive] companies are engaged not only in a creative act but a civic one of democratization and advocacy" (Kapstein 2). This assertion is certainly a far cry from the argument that immersive theater is neoliberal and pro-establishment. But what is this creative act that is also a civic one? Simply put, the concept of making art for children honors children as members of society and respects their ability to engage with art. But wait, how does making art for children inherently create advocacy? This chapter isn't talking about the content of immersive works as catering to children, but the way

that immersive works realize that childhood boasts different qualities than adulthood and appeals to these aspects of a child's development. For example, children are more inclined to learn about their surroundings through all five senses and are more comfortable with non-linear experiences than adults are. As such, these works appeal to children as audience members "by not privileging the traditional theater-going conventions nor hierarchizing spoken text or linear narrative as the only means of storytelling, but instead honoring all forms of 'language' to facilitate communication and create shared experiences" (Kaptstein 3). In short, children experience the world differently than adults do, and since they have not yet become conditioned to conventional rules of theater, immersive work that includes them can eschew those traditional structures in favor of those that are more accessible.

While any immersive experience that takes the needs and abilities of children into account becomes inherently more accessible in its interactivity, the next section of the chapter takes this a step further in discussing the work of Oily Cart. This London-based theater company began by creating shows for children and branched out into creating work for those on the autism spectrum and those with "profound and multiple physical and learning difficulties" (Kapstein 3). The immersive experiences cater to the needs of these children through interaction itself, by stimulating every sense of the audience as possible so as to provide multiple entry points to the work. This accessibility is something that traditional theater can't accomplish, since it requires interactivity. Oily Cart invites young audiences to engage through "aromas, vibrations, taste, touch, and movement" (Kapstein, 3) and actively considers the needs of these audience members and their caregivers when creating work. As such, Artistic Director Tim Webb describes the Oily Cart audience as "a far greater range than you would ever find in the stalls of the national theaters" (Kapstein 3).

Interaction is key to the immersive experiences of Oily Cart's work, and Webb views shows as being co-created by audience members. A critic of immersive work might say that this proves that immersive theater is pro-capitalist, as this interactivity exploits the audience member's work in a way that benefits the company. However, I believe the justification for this interactive practice absolutely blows that argument out of the water. Webb asserts that the reason for this co-creation is that at the company, the artists "don't see [the audience members] as passive consumers of the work" (Kapstein 4). Quite the contrary, this invitation to engage respects that young people on the autism spectrum have different ways of experiencing the world, and engages them to provide the feedback and choices that they need to accommodate that experience. Not only does Oily Cart encourage interaction, but its most radical form of accommodation is called Intensive Interaction. This technique acknowledges that some people don't utilize conventional forms of language but perhaps communicate through gesture or pattern, and it interacts with those people on those terms. Here, interaction is not just a means for people to engage with the work, but in fact sets up a path of communication that validates a person's identity.

In a sense, the interactivity of immersive work casts a wide net. It's easy to think of interactivity as a gimmick or a chore, but that's because traditional theater has conditioned people to interact primarily through only two senses, sight and hearing. Allowing for interactivity to encompass other forms of engagement, such as touch or smell, may seem like an unnecessary addition to a traditional theatergoing crowd, but it in fact allows for greater points of entry for those who are not traditional audiences as well. As such, I think having a subsection on the dramaturgy of "sense" under the section on "interactivity" in the course would be useful, to get students to think about how interactive work can actually promote accessibility in quite a direct way.

Likewise, the concept of "non-linear narrative" is another one that's commonly treated with contempt by how experimental it is in the theater world, but actually accommodates a greater number of audience members. This speaks more to the concept of immersion into a work than interactivity, but it still deals with accessibility. Oily Cart touches on this concept by explaining how autistic audiences respond better to non-linear arcs, since they're free to focus on what they want and aren't beholden to following a sequence. But the next theater group in the essay, the Danish company Carte Blanche, delves into how this is simply a preferable case for children in general. This company has the unique challenge of creating intergenerational work that invites both adults and children to take part. However, Artistic Director Sara Topsoe-Jensen describes abstraction as a "revelation" that bridges the gap between the adults who prefer underground theater and children who innately are "much more abstract [than an adult audience]" (Kapstein 11). And how does Carte Blanche facilitate this proclivity for abstraction? Through dramaturgy. Topsoe-Jensen says that "abstraction comes before drama not dramaturgy, but before storytelling" (Kapstein 11). They explain that older children and adults ask what the story of something is because they've been taught to ask, but we all have abstract dreams that we may not understand but still engage with regardless. In this analogy, abstract dramaturgy in immersive work is not a niche but rather an equalizer that brings together every person who has ever slept and dreamt, even if that person has been conditioned to search for a story in a production.

If Oily Cart leads with the interactive element of experiential dramaturgy and Carte Blanche leads with the immersive aspect, the third and final theater group interviewed in this chapter, Polyglot, leads with meaning-making and connection. The Australian theater company creates Play Space Works, interactive installations that invite the audience to play together and draw their own conclusions. The meaning-making comes from the "audience's commitment to a piece; and the idea that things can happen within it that have drama, that take you outside your everyday experience," according to Artistic Director Sue Giles (Kapstein 12). A given installation may not provide narrative, but the fact that audience members are allowed to explore together actually allows them to project their own meanings. Interestingly, Giles defines the term

immersive as being "embedded in the thing" but actually refers to the participatory installations of Polyglot as "experiential theater" which they define as "theater through doing, theater through being in it" (Kapstein 12). This aligns perfectly with my definition of experiential dramaturgy as including immersion as a facet but also consisting of the elements of interaction, meaning-making, and connection. Since this chapter discusses all of those elements of experiential dramaturgy and even makes an ethical case for it, I believe this chapter is an integral reading for the course.

The second chapter and essay is entitled "Site and Seduction: Space, Sensuality, and Use-Value in the Immersive Theater" by Paul Masters. Essentially, it is the same line of argument as that of *Beyond Immersive Theatre*. As such, I don't think it will pertain to the course as I'll likely use the Alston book to convey the argument around neoliberalism. However, it does bring up a good point that the other book doesn't cover as directly. One argument it lays out is that immersive theater productions can promote the hierarchy of neoliberalism by offering various price points. While traditional theater does this as well, immersive theater sometimes has the caveat that a higher price point will allow participants to access more content or rooms in the production. The essay argues that this practice "establishes the class-hierarchy of the event and [the audience's] role inside the space, from the very moment of purchase" (Masters 37). Though some of these price points consist of getting a meal or drinks included, I have seen examples where these prices correlate with content. As such, I think this is a worthwhile point to bring into the course. This chapter also brings in the terms "constructed history" and "total immersion," though it appears to borrow them from other sources and doesn't define them well (Masters 43-44). But as I understand it, the former applies to immersive works that are also site-specific and draw from their locations, and the latter applies to works that are completely diegetic in building a world for audiences to explore without outside interference. That's what I gather them to mean, but it may be worth looking into the Josephine Machon works that discuss these terms in more detail.

The third chapter is entitled "The Mists" and is an essay by Liz Ivkovich and Alysia Ramos. I don't know if I'll use this one in the course either, as it refers to a specific work that the two theatermakers created. As such, it's a bit in the weeds, so to speak, but it does illustrate a few good examples of experiential dramaturgy at work. It makes the case that while immersive and interactive theater is a relatively new phenomenon, it actually has been around for centuries in the form of "play." This resonates with me since the course will bring in various aspects of "play" from escape room puzzles to exploratory video games. The argument brought up in this essay is that immersive and interactive play is inherent to childhood, but "as soon as children engage in any kind of formal training, they learn that art happens in boxes" (Ivkovich and Ramos 51). I really like this quote as it articulates some of the issues of traditional theater. The rest of the chapter describes the immersive dance show *The Mists*, and while students wouldn't be able to see the show, which occurred in 2015, I do like how this essay brings in the responses from

focus groups who experienced the work. It's rare to get a text that incorporates audience feedback, aside from reviews, so I may try to work in this essay as suggested reading or assign parts of it.

Chapter Four, "Game/Play: The Five Conceptual Planes of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*" by Sara Thiel, is one of my favorite essays in the book and perhaps the most in line with this course. The argument behind it is that the success of immersive work *Sleep No More* stems in part from the popularity of dynamic story-based video games. Though *Sleep No More* was reportedly not created with video games in mind, Punchdrunk did become aware of the similarities and added gamified aspects to the piece over the course of its run. The essay assists in finding those similarities in the way the work is designed and how audiences engage with the show.

First, the chapter brings in statistics around the popularity of video games and role-playing games, which I love to see. It cites a 2015 report by the Entertainment Software Association that 42% of Americans play video games for over three hours a week and that four out of five households own a device for playing games (Thiel 55-56). I imagine that this number has only increased over the years, especially since a global pandemic shifted people towards entertainment that they could enjoy indoors.

Thiel uses a lot of useful terminology in her essay, beginning with the term "play space" to refer to the area of the *Sleep No More* performance and the three-dimensional spaces of video games. Aside from bringing in terminology, the essay also does a good job of explaining what *Sleep No More* is, which may prove helpful to students who are unfamiliar with the work. In discussing how audiences move through the production, it compares the physical space to a tutorial in which audiences are onboarded, followed by a mediated space in which they explore the environment. It also brings in the more abstract concepts of the fictional space of the adaptation and the social space of the audience community. The discussion around fictional space adaptation has a few interesting nuggets in it, as it compares *Sleep No More*'s loose adaptation of the text of *Macbeth* with famous video game *BioShock*'s response to the book *Atlas Shrugged* (Thiel 61). The argument is that in drawing from past works, interactive pieces anchor audiences in aesthetics that have come before that they may already have some level of familiarity with through their lives.

But the section on the social space and audience community proves the richest in pertaining to the course, as Thiel uses the taxonomy of Richard A. Bartle to discuss how *Sleep No More* audience members may resemble various types of game players in their goals and wishes for their experience. These four broad categories are defined as the Socializers, Achievers, Explorers, and Killers. The Socializers are those who wish to discuss the experience with others, the Achievers are those who wish to see and complete everything, the Explorers are

those who wish to discover what they haven't seen before, and Killers are those who wish to "win" the competition (Thiel 62-63). I don't know how neatly these terms apply to either immersive theater or even video games, but I do think they're very useful in illustrating the point that players and audiences are not a monolith and that they may have various goals from their experiences.

One aspect that I do want to focus on particularly is that of the "Socializers," as this speaks to the duality around the definition of "Connection" that I've provided, and in fact helped to inspire the second aspect of the definition. At first, I figured that connection would refer to the socializing between audience members during the course of a performance. However, not all immersive experiences facilitate such interactions. And for *Sleep No More*, the production actively discourages this kind of interaction, separating groups once they enter the performance space. So how can it still allow for a sense of connection between audience members? The essay notes that Michael Billington has criticized the production for this lack of community during a given performance. However, Thiel argues "that the communal experience, if absent 'in-game,' takes place once the play has concluded in person and online" (Thiel 62). The idea is that the Socializers get the communal aspect of the experience from meeting in the bar after the show or from going on social media to learn what they missed and share what they discovered. The essay compares this to discourse around single-player role-playing games, in which players learn how the in-game choices of their friends made for different gaming experiences compared to their own. Occasionally, this in fact becomes practically a mandatory aspect of games from the original 1986 *Legend of Zelda* to the recent release of *Elden Ring*, titles that contain secrets so arcane that players essentially have to socialize outside of the game to gather the information necessary to progress, or at least to do so with ease. With this aspect of the essay alone, not to mention the other facets comparing theater with games, this chapter becomes an integral part of the course's teachings.

I'm not sure if the next chapter, "From Space to Place: The Audience Journey in Anu Productions 'The Boys of Foley Street" by Pamela McQueen is integral reading for the course, but it does offer two intertwined concepts that do play a useful role in the course. Similar to the third chapter, Chapter Five talks about a specific immersive production and brings in the responses of audience focus groups. As such, I do think it might be useful to have one of these chapters or the other in the course, to give students an idea of how audience members may respond to experiential works, or at least to give an idea of the variety of responses that they may impart. In this case, the essay discusses an immersive site-specific piece that occurred in Dublin, Ireland, entitled *The Boys of Foley Street*. This chapter focuses a bit less on the content of the piece itself compared to the third chapter, and more on the journeys and responses of the audience members who participated. It does provide a lot of context for the piece, which is interesting from a historical perspective but not necessarily from an experiential one. Nevertheless, it brings in a couple of useful terms in talking about audience engagement.

The first set of terms deals with memory, and consists of the terms “collective memory” and “social memory.” Though these terms are not unique to experiential theater, McQueen uses them to apply to theater. *The Boys of Foley Street* deals with bombings that occured in Ireland in the 1970s, so the peice taps into the collective memory of audience members who would’ve remembered this event by evoking it. Citing the research of Edward Casey, McQueen discusses the transmutation of collective memory into social memory which requires a common place where history is enacted. For the purposes of this theater piece, “through the enactment of a place of memory, a co-reminiscence happens between the participant and the performer” (McQueen 70). The essay goes on to share the example of an audience member who is unaware of the history, and therefore can’t tap into the social memory of the piece. To tie this concept back to the previous chapter, it helps explain why immersive events often adapt prior works, as they rely on the collective or social memory of people who have experienced those works and can tap into them readily.

On the other side of the coin is the concept of the “oneiric space.” Oneiric refers to the dreams and dreaming, and McQueen defines the oneiric home in the piece as “a composite of dream and memory, an interpretation of the actual original place in which we assign imagined values to specific spaces” (McQueen 72). The example given is of an audience member who complimented a character on their kitchen, because they were brought up to do so and felt it an appropriate action to perform. Complimenting the kitchen is not a part of the show, but it draws on a dreamt interpretation of what one is supposed to do in the space. Along with the concepts of “collective memory” and “social memory,” that of the “oneiric space” perhaps explains why many experiential works gravitate towards popular genre, as they allow for the audience to easily recognize or take part in the preconceived rituals of whatever genre the work exists in.

From then on in *Immersive Theatre*, the essays are interesting but perhaps less relevant to the scope of the course. There are a few interesting tidbits, including a proposed history of immersive theater in Chapter Seven, however the breadth of this chapter feels strangely limited. It does discuss other scholars and researchers on page 96 such as Gareth White, Josephine Machon, and Adam Alston who have proposed historical lenses with which to view immersive works. While Alston’s work is already part of the course, it may be worth bringing in the work of the other two, especially for a discussion of the history of experiential works. Lastly, the final chapter, Chapter 9, lists a bunch of groups that work in the field of immersive theater on page 135, which may be worth researching just to get a good grasp of the field. Otherwise, the early chapters of the book prove the most integral for students to read to learn more about experiential dramaturgy.

Replay: A History of Video Games

For my own edification, I read the book *Replay: A History of Video Games* by Tristan Donovan. I knew a decent amount about video games going in, but even I learned a lot about their early history. As I suspected as well, the book provides a couple of chapters that give helpful overviews of video games and speak about some of the aspects of them that I hope this course will cover.

The first chapter that sparks my interest in potentially applying to this course is Chapter 5. This chapter deals with how early tabletop games inspired computer programmers to create games based on role-playing and simulation. While arcade games in the 1970s dealt with action and competition, such as in the ping-pong game *Pong*, computer games that offered a sense of adventure and discovery arose around this time. In 1966, a computer science professor at MIT created *Eliza* (actual name *Doctor*), a computer program that would play the role of a therapist and ask users about their feelings and respond accordingly (Donovan 50). While not a game, this rudimentary concept inspired programmers to create "adventure" games that would allow players to type questions and commands into the computer to explore virtual locales such as caves and forests. A few notable titles arose, such as the educational title *The Oregon Trail*, allowing players to explore the western frontier. Most of these games focused on text and were made around the limits of technology. However, programmer Roberta Williams always thought of story, characters, and world-building first, creating murder mystery games inspired by Agatha Christie novels, saying "The game engine was built around my ideas, not the other way around" (Donovan 58). It wasn't too long before programmers took a cue from popular tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and created virtual fantasy worlds for players to interact with and explore.

The section of this chapter from pages 58 to 63 proves especially relevant, as it chronicles the history of tabletop role-playing games into their influence on role-playing video games. It gives the background to tabletop role-playing games as having originated in tabletop war games from the 18th century, namely the Prussian game of Kriegsspiel. This pastime became increasingly popular throughout the 19th century, even inspiring H.G. Wells to create a rulebook for a casual version of the game in 1913. Shortly after, the game dropped off in popularity, nevertheless influencing the creation of other war-themed tabletop games, which in turn inspired *Dungeons & Dragons*. However, one person took inspiration from it in a different direction. Inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons* and *The Lord of the Rings*, high schooler Richard Garriott took a computer course and decided to make his own fantasy games for his friends. Eventually, companies noticed, publishing these video games and kickstarting a whole slew of titles inspired by tabletop role-playing games. Sharing this chapter in the course, or at least this section, would give students a good background for both tabletop role-playing games and role-playing and adventure video games and show how they're interconnected.

Though I'm not as sure about including this chapter in the course as when I first read it, Chapter 10 covers the history of video games in Europe and how they arose due to the cultural and political landscapes of the region, unlike their American counterparts. The chapter does a great job of making a case for the artistic merit of games, but I don't know how relevant it is to the concepts of experiential dramaturgy. Still, a couple of anecdotes illustrate how experiential games can cover certain subjects in ways that other mediums can't. One great example comes from the games of Muriel Tramis, a French-Caribbean woman living in Paris who created adventure games exposing the history of slavery in the French Caribbean. These games emphasized exploration facilitated by action, strategy, and role-playing, allowing players to discover the painful reality of this history on their own terms. I think this speaks to the power, and potential, for interactive work to discuss difficult subjects. With a passive work such as traditional theater or film, an audience member can fully disengage and the work will continue forward. But in a participatory work, the audience member dictates the pace and level of engagement. They can learn or shy away from as much or as little as they're willing to engage with, and the work will adjust accordingly. After releasing her 1987 game *Méwilo,* Tramis won a silver medal from the Parisian department of culture. She then made the game *Freedom* the following year. "At the time I made the game, these stories were not known because they were hidden," she explained, and while France got into the games industry later than other western countries, it nevertheless gravitated towards political and social themes (Donovan 127-128). The chapter also discusses the differences between German, Dutch, Italian and other games from across the continent. I think it's interesting to learn about the ways in which various cultures look toward certain kinds of experiential art and media, and I'd like to bring this into the course in some form, but I don't know if reading this chapter is necessary. I could bring in the pages that talk about this anecdote and give some more context, such as those from the start of the chapter on page 125 to page 133.

Similarly, I think several concepts towards the end of Chapter 11 around the ethics and controversies of interactive storytelling are worth bringing up, but I'm not sure if having the chapter as a course reading is necessary. Perhaps just pages 146 to the end of the chapter at 149. This section discusses how games switched from players typing in commands to having avatars–virtual characters–that they could control. Around this time, in the mid-80s in America, role-playing games–tabletop and video–received much pushback from the Christian far-right. Richard Garriott received hate mail about his fantasy games, as players could play as good people or bad people without repercussions. This response made him look into books on philosophy and morality and add particular virtues to his games, broadly based on "truth, love, and courage" (Donovan 147). In his games, the computer code would hold records of players' actions, providing fitting consequences down the road. For example, in his *Ultima IV* game, players could short-change a blind woman running a shop, but later in the game she would refuse to help them. The mail that came in praised his games for showing that "cause and effect" apply to people's actions in games and real-life (Donovan 149). Since then, many role-playing games

have instituted systems of morality that keep track of how ethically a player's character or avatar acts in the game world. Again, I'm unsure if reading this chapter is necessary for the course, but it's worth bringing in this concept to discuss how experiential mediums can incorporate interactive ethics systems.

The next chapter, Chapter 12, has some interesting tidbits about how role-playing video games changed in Japan, becoming a unique take on the genre. The chapter primarily focuses on the history of gaming in Japan and the rise of Nintendo. However, the section from page 159 to the end of the chapter on page 163 discusses how American role-playing games influenced the rise of distinct Japanese role-playing games. This differentiation may be too inside baseball for this course, though it does illustrate an interesting point about how interactive mediums can change from culture to culture. What we in America think of as "role-playing" can be something different across the world in Japan. Contrasted with American titles such as *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, Japanese role-playing games like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* focused more on character development, resource management, and using music to convey atmosphere. Though Nintendo disliked role-playing games, game designer Shigeru Miyamoto borrowed from the genre to create the 1986 adventure game *The Legend of Zelda*, "to recapture the excitement and awe he felt as a child while wandering the countryside and never knowing what he would discover" (Donovan 162). The exploration-based game allows players to take different routes on their quest and find hidden passages and discover strange characters. Even though I'm not sure about this chapter or even this section for the course, *The Legend of Zelda* is a highly influential game in terms of providing the freedom of exploration and encouraging curiosity. I may not use this section, but I will definitely talk about this game in the course.

Chapter 19 isn't relevant to the course and I wouldn't include any pages from it as required readings, but there is one small segment that I find engaging and relevant that I want to bring in. It briefly talks about the game *Myst*, a computer game inspired by classic adventure games. Rand and Robyn Miller created the puzzle game; however, they didn't consider it a game at all. They said that their work "had no real goals and the only point was exploration," so they referred to their early games as "interactive worlds" (Donovan 243). The game had players explore an island and uncover its past by solving puzzles. "We wanted to build a narrative into the environment," said Robyn. "That's what attracted us to this different kind of world. We never saw the puzzles as simple mindbenders; we saw them as extensions of the story" (Donovan 244). This description illustrates a few points, namely that of the environmental storytelling concept. But it also brings in the narrative potential of puzzles, and how puzzles can provide gameplay and narrative beats, like in certain kinds of escape rooms. It also talks about the power of exploration and allowing people to discover these moments. I had debated bringing puzzle adventure games into the conversation, but I think they're actually quite relevant in showing how the medium of interactive games–or interactive worlds–can bring experiential narrative into a medium that often lacks narrative, like puzzles.

Another chapter that isn't quite relevant in and of itself but briefly provides a relevant concept is Chapter 23. The chapter itself mostly talks about network and online gaming. Today it's a big phenomenon, but back in the 1970s it was quite nascent. The chapter touches on the concept of the relationship between player and avatar, and the potential to explore identity through that. Richard Bartle helped create *Multi-User Dungeon*, or *MUD*, a game connecting players' computers through telephone lines. Since games hadn't included online multiplayer before, how would players relate to each other's representational avatars? Bartle illustrates that in the male-dominated computer science department where he played with others, "they weren't really role-playing because they hadn't got the idea that they were playing as someone else, not themselves, so they didn't create female characters and all that" (Donovan 293). Bartle responded by creating Polly, a female character he would play as in the game. At first, the other players were unsure how to react to Polly, but he explained that it was a character, permitting players to play as characters different from themselves. In 2008, a study showed that 54 percent of men and 68 percent of women playing online games had characters different from their own gender identity (Donovan 294). I find this concept interesting because in a traditional work, an audience member experiences the work as themselves. But experiential works, particularly those involving role-playing, allow players to take on the parts of characters that may be different from themselves. *Replay* brings up an inciting incident for this occurrence in a medium, but other texts go into more detail on the subject and the intersocial ramifications.

Lastly, Chapter 27 talks about the rise of sandbox games, titles in which players have a significant degree of freedom to not just explore a game world, but to interact with it and even alter it, creating their own narratives along the way. These games often have aspects of role-playing in them, but not always, and I find them analogous in some ways to large-scale immersive theater productions, though with some key differences depending on the individual work. The start of the chapter mostly talks about the development process for *Grand Theft Auto*, but the section from page 346 to the end of the chapter on page 355 details the many different sandbox games and how the genre functions. It discusses a crucial aspect of sandbox games like Bethesda Softworks' *The Elder Scrolls*, explaining how the game essentially offers "two narratives–the one created by the developers and the one defined by players within the game's world" (Donovan 346). This is a really groundbreaking idea, as it suggests how an experiential open-world work can bisect narrative into that of the player and that of the artist or creator. This is a concept that not many immersive theater productions allow for, but they easily could. Arguably, immersive museum installations come the closest to live-action versions of this phenomenon. They're relatively open-ended in how visitors interpret their narratives, even while providing their own to a degree. Following this, the chapter discusses how open-world or sandbox games can incorporate political, ethical, and moral concepts and systems that allow players to engage with them in conversation with their own values. Since these kinds of titles could easily lend themselves to immersive theater, I think this section of the chapter would be

invaluable for students learning about how experiential dramaturgy can open up the potentials for dramatic storytelling in considering audience agency.

Dungeons + Drama Nerds

A while ago, I had learned of *Dungeons & Drama Nerds*, a podcast looking at tabletop role-playing games through a dramaturgical lens. While I wasn't a big player of tabletop role-playing games at the time, I nevertheless found it intriguing. Returning to the podcast after starting the thesis, I listened to a few more episodes and found some particularly relevant. On a side note, Anthony Sertel Dean put me in touch with the creators, Percy Hornak, Todd Brian Backus, and Nicholas Orvis. On another side note, they provided useful resources for my research, recommending the books *Queer Game Studies* and *The Ultimate RPG Gameplay Guide*, and the webseries *Extra Credits*. As for their podcast itself, a few episodes drew my attention right off the bat.

Since the general concept of the podcast relates to the topic of my thesis, I found that the first episode, "Session Zero," had much introductory info that may prove helpful to students who may have a background in theater but may not have familiarity with tabletop role-playing games. The first episode introduces the concept of collaborative storytelling, having a group of people work together to tell a story facilitated by dramaturgy. The hosts talk about how to make stories most effective, a key part of dramaturgy. They discuss similarities to genre with this kind of storytelling, how people have an understanding of what it means to be in a world and what that contains, and what expectations are and how to receive a story. They mention how in role-playing games, the performer, or player, is simultaneously the audience. They find this different from theater, even immersive theater, so I think this is particularly useful to think about how role-playing games further distill the role of the audience member as an active participant. They promise to discuss this later in a future episode, but I think it's useful for students to get the basic concept. An assertion is made that the American theater pushes popular genre to the side in favor of realism, one that I agree with personally. One point that gets mentioned is how TTRPGs don't have a win state, as they foster a collaborative place where either everyone completes the campaign or the campaign comes to an end. Last but not least, the first episode introduces the invaluable concept of TTRPGs as not so much games in their own right, but rules or systems for a storytelling game. I find this concept especially intriguing for fostering experience. Though the episode doesn't go into too much detail on any one concept, saving that for future episodes, I find it useful for briefly introducing what TTRPGs are and the various concepts surrounding them.

The next episode I found relevant to the course is the seventh episode, "Storytelling in *Dungeons & Dragons*." One interesting area of discussion is how the mechanics of a TTRPG can

facilitate certain experiences within a system and make them work. For example, they mention how *Dungeons & Dragons* is not a system made to accommodate having players pull off a heist or solve a mystery–however, modifications and other games can facilitate this kind of gameplay. I like how this expands on the notion of systems of storytelling, and illustrates how some systems are better suited for certain types of stories than others. So a heist system doesn't literally tell the story of a heist, but it does serve as a vessel for telling heist stories. On somewhat of a side note, the hosts mentioned a few horror TTRPGs, such as *Dread, Ten Candles*, and *Bluebeard's Bride*. Since horror is a recurring genre in a few experiential mediums, it could be useful to bring in a horror example for the class to think about the genre, though I wouldn't want one that's too scary for students to play. The podcast makes the excellent assertion that horror is about vulnerability and being up against insurmountable odds, which I think speaks to the design philosophy around these games that deal in the horror genre. As for the heist genre, the hosts mention the TTRPG *Blades in the Dark* as a good example, and likewise, I'm curious about the concept of introducing games from various genres to see how their systems differ. Alluding to the first episode, they refer to *Dungeons & Dragons* as not so much a game as a set of tools. Overall this episode has much pertinent info about how games facilitate storytelling and how different systems can lend themselves to different genres. At the same time, I wasn't planning on bringing *Dungeons & Dragons* into the course aside from a surface-level description, since I think it may be too complex a game for illustrating the mechanics around role-playing game experiences. So if I chose just one episode to bring in, it would still likely be the first, but this could be a good suggested resource for students who want to dive a little deeper.

I had especially keen interest in checking out the ninth episode, "Player as Performer and Audience," as it elaborates on the concept of a participatory audience introduced in the first episode. This episode even brings in other comparisons between role-playing and live theater, as the hosts liken the DM, or Dungeon Master, to a kind of stage manager and playwright and occasional performer rolled into one. The hosts also discuss *D&D* as a form of improvisation, further building the bridge between theater and TTRPGs. I appreciate these comparisons because, like in the first episode, these offer easy access points for theater students who may have had little to no exposure to role-playing games. These analogies give students a simple point of reference to understand these games. Speaking on the benefits of role-playing, the hosts mention how these games can serve as ways for people to explore identity, such as gender identity. They also offer a simulation of risk, interestingly a term from Alston, letting participants try something out in a safe way. The hosts also cite the work of Dr. Katherine Witlock with the term "mask play," trying on a role or simply seeing things through a different perspective. Building on this, they bring in a Stanford study that shows how stepping into a role increases empathy. I find this fascinating as it suggests a real value for audience members to not just witness a role being played, but to have the opportunity to easily try one on for themselves in a low risk setting. Lastly, the hosts do mention that there are examples of tabletop role-playing as pure entertainment, such as *The Adventure Zone* and *Critical Role* podcasts in which the playing

of games becomes a performance for audiences to enjoy afterwards. I listened to a few other episodes that I personally found interesting, but for students who need episodes that easily acclimate them to TTRPGs and make a case for them as experiential theater, I think this is another good one for them to check out.

Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance

Initially, I had shied away from reading *Immersive Theatres* by Josephine Machon. The title suggested a book detailing a specific lens for viewing immersive theater–that of intimacy–and I already didn't want the course to focus too much on immersive theater regardless. However, as folks suggested the book and I looked into it, it seemed a cornerstone text for immersive practice. And in reading it, I came to find that it does discuss experiential elements of theater, even if it primarily focuses on the immersive medium. The first section mostly discusses that medium, but the second part of the book features interviews with creators, which I found particularly relevant as providing insight into how these artists work, something students would benefit from reading.

In the introduction section to *Immersive Theatres*, Machon defines elements of the immersive practice, but also discusses why it appeals to a wider audience than traditional theater. Part of the impetus for this course arose from finding that traditional theater, especially in America and even more so in New York, caters to a specific demographic, evident in the high price of ticket sales and the etiquette put forth by theater companies. In fact, Machon attributes the rise in what she calls "intimate work" to the attraction of a "new, non-traditional theatre audience" (Machon 22). She cites the range of participatory work presented at the 2012 London Cultural Olympiad as widely accessible because it blurs artistic boundaries. Machon describes how the attendees at these works consisted of "an alternative audience; those who would not necessarily consider themselves theatregoers" (Machon 23). Backing this up, she mentions the artists she interviewed who described their work as attended by diverse audiences. This assertion begs a few questions for the course to consider: Does participatory work inherently promote an egalitarian atmosphere? And what does the label of "theatregoer" suggest about an audience's background or standing?

Machon does take a stab at answering these questions, or rather in providing more context for readers to reach conclusions on their own. First, she describes immersive and participatory theater as allowing audiences the potential for "experiencing more fully." She suggests that the advent of social media such as Facebook has alienated people from real intimacy, and immersive practices may therefore fill the human need for direct engagement. She

defines the contestable terms of "traditional" or "conventional" theater as bound by sets of rules, which immersive shakes off in juxtaposition. These rules, such as having audiences "sit in their assigned seat" and "obediently hush," promote a spectatorial and passive experience. Machon–perhaps harshly–suggests that "it does not matter if you are there or not (Machon 26-27). However, she does acknowledge that others do find a paradox in whether they matter and that admittedly immersive does have its own sets of rules. However, she denotes these as "rules of engagement," promoting openness and safety. Again, this line of thinking may provide an engaging debate for potential students. Lastly in the introduction, Machon admits the significant differentiation of theater work that isn't immersive but is experiential, the true backbone of this course (Machon 40). She doesn't elaborate much on this, which suggests a knowledge gap for this course to fill. As such, I believe this introduction should serve as reading for students to get acclimated with immersive work, even if it doesn't delve as much into the experiential.

The difference between the goal of *Immersive Theatres* and this proposed course is that the book seeks to make a case for immersive theater juxtaposed with traditional theater. In contrast, this course seeks to make a case for a middle-ground, that of experiential theater. The former suggests a dichotomy, while the latter suggests a spectrum. That said, the dichotomy put forth in *Immersive Theaters* as Table 1: 'Traditional Theatre' vs. Immersive Theater introduces an easy juxtaposition between traditional and immersive work. It allows students to think about how experiential works may marry the two in their design principles. It's worth noting that several of the juxtapositions Machon denotes between traditional and immersive work are social constructs and not inherent within the work. For example, she describes the marketing for traditional theater as coming from "mainstream adverts and regular marketing strategies," while that of immersive theater often comes only from "word of mouth and online sources" (Machon 54-55). Nothing inherently stops a conventional performance from advertising in a way that evokes intrigue, and this is precisely an element of experiential dramaturgy–composing theater in a way that actively engages audiences. After proposing this table, Machon again nods to experiential theater, describing it as "not conventional" in putting forth a "total theater' aesthetic" with "experiential essence" (Machon 56). While I agree with this in principle, the wordiness of the haphazard description begs for a greater discourse around what I would simply call "experiential theater." Nevertheless, I would include these pages as an addendum to the introduction for course readings.

Moving onwards, part one of *Immersive Theatres* discusses various facets of how immersive work engages audiences directly. I don't know if this section should serve as required reading, but it does offer some commentary on aspects of immersive that have come up in the interviews. For example, I have primarily used the term "spectactor" to describe participatory audiences, courtesy of Augusto Boal by way of the folks from *Dungeons + Drama Nerds*. However, Machon acknowledges various terms that practitioners use, from "visitors" and "audience-participants" to "playing-audience" and "guest performers" (Machon 74). This

information suggests a more open-ended approach to teaching the section on “spectactorship,” bringing in these various terms and discussing the connotations of each with the students. Machon also notes the variety in how companies onboard audiences with a contract of participation, whether before or during the show, and whether conveyed through the written word or verbally through a person or audio device (Machon 84). I did note this variety through the productions I experienced, but this point bolsters the value of a discussion around the different ways to acclimate audiences. *Immersive Theatres* further validates this discussion by mentioning how non-immersive productions can utilize these techniques to “add an experiential quality to a particular event, without being wholly ‘immersive” (Machon 101). As I mentioned, this section wouldn't teach students anything particularly new, but it does validate the goal of this course.

That said, part one does offer some tidbits to work into the course directly. Machon brings in the theories of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, who, in the 1980s, both came upon the perspective of the “birth of the reader” or “the active judgment of the audience member” when interpreting and experiencing artistic works (Machon 113). This perspective speaks directly to the concept of meaning-making in experiential dramaturgy, and both sources may prove invaluable to cite in the lecture on the subject. On a tangential note, I believe the timing of these theories suggests a rise in an audience’s desire for experiential works, perhaps as technology diminishes traditional communal interaction. And in fact, part two teases this idea out in its first interview, with Michael Morris of Artangel, who notes a recent growing appetite for participation and interaction. He offers the reasoning for the increase “as more and more people spend their time online. If you are going out, to something which is live, you’re going to want to feel alive, and there’s something very vital and very life-affirming about the experience of being immersed in a piece of art, rather than watching it from a distance” (Machon 158-159). Other immersive practitioners support the dramaturgical underpinnings of this communal facilitation, with Felix Barrett of Punchdrunk explaining how the best kind of immersive work casts participants as “comrades with you, on the same mission, or… part of the scenography” (Machon 164), and Christer Lundahl of Lundahl & Seitl explaining how three-dimensional performances have to account for “the dramaturgy of the visitor moving inside the exhibition space” (Machon 173). While any kind of theater that advocates for a sense of community likely has a noble cause, experiential dramaturgy offers tools for maximizing that potential.

While the aspects of these interviews provide reassurance, the first interview I’d like to fully include as course reading comes from Silvia Mercuriali, who advocates for creating theater with the audience in mind. In fact, Mercuriali suggests that any performance can learn from an audience-centric approach, saying in regard to their own work, “The audience is always absolutely the focus, as theatre should be, otherwise you’re self-indulgent” (Machon 191). I am sure some would disagree with this scathing take, but the accompanying descriptions of the principles behind Mercuriali’s *Wondermart* and *And the Birds Fell from the Sky*… denote strong

cases for designing with audiences in mind. Case in point, Mercuriali describes the deliberate process of bringing audiences into the worlds of each show "in order for people to buy into what you want them to believe," explaining that for audiences, "that 'waiting room' experience tells you somebody's taking care of you" (Machon 194). This justification makes a case for experiential best practices in not just promoting community, but doing so in a way that promotes care.

Likewise, the following practitioner interview in *Immersive Theatres* also suggests requisite reading, as Tassos Stevens of Coney discusses principles that promote good interactive practice. He lists his own principles as: "Curiosity,' and rewarding curiosity; 'Reciprocity' – you get as much back as you put in… 'Adventure,' making [the show] as exciting as an adventure; and the principle of 'Loveliness,' … making a gift of an experience that's surprising and delightful" (Machon 199). Immediately, I thought about how these complement or align with my own tenets of experiential dramaturgy. Naturally, they do not correlate 1:1 because Stevens is designing for productions, whereas I am designing for dramaturgical purposes. Experiential dramaturgy provides a lens for analyzing each of these principles. For example, one could view the principle of "loveliness" through the lens of meaning-making, how audiences find delight in interpretation, or through interaction, how a given interplay elicits surprise. Complementing these principles, Stevens also brings in research on Resilience Theory, a framework characterizing resilience in terms of agency, connectedness, and adaptability. Similar to Mercuriali's discussion of bringing audiences into a world, Stevens discusses how this framework can encourage "the place where reflection happens" (Machon 201). The folks I have interviewed have discussed this place as one of external discourse or off-boarding, but whatever the terminology, I welcome a new theory for how to view this element of experiential dramaturgy. And in fact, Stevens affirms the notion others have posited in describing as crucial to their work, "the idea that the experience of an event for any audience begins the moment they first hear about it and only finishes when they stop hearing or talking about it" (Machon 204). While several immersive and interactive practitioners have mentioned variations of this concept, conventional theater rarely seems to take advantage of it. Stevens also offers a description affirming the methodology of this course on experiential dramaturgy, drawing a correlation between his term for participatory audiences, the "playing audience," and playing a game. "Game-design is a brilliant discipline because it gives you a set of tools to enable you to understand how and why audiences are interacting as they are," explains Stevens, defining their piece *A Small Town Anywhere* as "a marriage of game-design and dramaturgy" (Machon 203). Reading this entire chapter, certainly a reading to include, I'm struck by how the principles and comparisons outlined here dovetail so neatly with my own structure for a course on experiential dramaturgy, even if the terminology differs.

And still, the following interviews in *Immersive Theatres* offer justifications for experiential work and best practices that students may benefit from learning. Samantha

Holdsworth of Nimble Fish shares how their company's "pop-up pieces," outside traditional theater spaces, offer "a much more democratic approach" to storytelling that is "not white and middle class" (Machon 206). This approach speaks to making theater more accessible through experiential elements, in this case, using a truck instead of a proscenium theater. Holdsworth seems to refute the "immersive as individualist" argument of Alston in explaining how the work of Nimble Fish promotes "an active rejection of the hierarchies of producer, director, designer, writer, and then performers" as well as a rejection of "buildings and [their traditional] values" (Machon 214). Though an egalitarian company structure is not inherent to all immersive or interactive theater, Holdsworth seems to suggest that rejecting traditional institutions opens the door to the acceptance of practices that value alternative forms of structure.

Jen Thomas and Janet Evans of Punchdrunk Enrichment support this perspective in the next chapter while affirming other benefits of experiential performances. Evans notes that immersive theater can encourage a kind of collectivism different from the individualistic nature of spectatorship in traditional theater. Evans describes this action of immersive works as simply "sharing," in bringing audiences together "in this world" of the piece "with you so that you're all sharing" (Machon 215). Aside from the obvious connotation of connection, this remark also makes a point about how the connective tissue of this kind of work also promotes immersion, since the more fellow audience members buy into the world, the more immersed one becomes in it. And if Evans describes internal discourse of connecting within a piece, Thomas describes an occasion of external discourse of connecting outside a piece. They share an anecdote of audiences buying into a production so much that "they would stand outside the door chatting nineteen-to-the-dozen about the experience they'd just had, waiting for the next group to come out so they could find out what their experience had been" (Machon 227). This anecdote suggests that certain immersive experiences can correlate with the number of audience members–under the right circumstances–as the more audience members, the more they'll build the world of a piece, in turn providing more for them to discuss after.

The interview in *Immersive Theatres* with Louise Ann Wilson of wilson+wilson offers support to the theories posited by Holdsworth and Stevens. Holdsworth discusses how non-theatrical spaces can prove more widely accessible. Wilson explains this, saying that performances outside of traditional spaces encourage non-theater-going audiences, "Firstly, because the spaces are 'real,' 'everyday' places that people have lived in, spent leisure-time, or worked in," and "Secondly," because these people who know these spaces become "involved in the creative process and they, and their community, become interested in seeing the final production" (Machon 231). These points admittedly do speak to the nature of wilson+wilson pieces that become integrated into the community–not all immersive pieces or even site-specific pieces do this. However, along with Holdsworth's non-hierarchical practices, Wilson's practice also illustrates how immersive site-specific pieces can welcome a sense of community more easily than that of institutional theaters. And similar to how Holdsworth describes their work as

combining dramaturgy and game design, Wilson describes theirs as "dramaturgy… informed by rites of passage and religious rituals" (Machon 240). As a surface-level analysis, both of these claims suggest how theater can benefit from interdisciplinary practice. But digging deeper, these specific added disciplines both promote a sense of the experiential, from the interaction and play of game design to the prescribed actions of ritual and ceremony.

In an interview with Bill Mitchell and Sue Hill of WildWorks, Machon explains how these disciplines have ancient elements that help craft the form. Though Mitchell describes the form as "young," Machon posits that "the ideas around participatory practice have existed as religious festivals and ceremonial pageants for years and years" (Machon 244). Though perhaps a thesis for another time, it is worth noting how theater has shared roots with these disciplines, whether through pageant plays connecting with religious ritual or through the world "play" itself connecting performance and games. And coming full circle to game design, Hill explains how the pieces of WildWorks don't tell audience members what route to walk but "create opportunities for the audience to intuit where they should be next," whether through "a distant saxophone" or a "string of bunting" (Machon 245). This design aligns with the sign-posting that multiple designers I interviewed mentioned, describing how experiential works can borrow from game design to guide participants forward through environmental cues. Similarly, Hill explains how environmental elements, like visual imagery and music, "crosses boundaries of culture and language," giving audiences the tools for "making their own show, telling their own story" (Machon 250). Again, game designers I've spoken with have described this as "environmental storytelling," but one can see how it both promotes meaning-making and provides guidance. And finally, Hill draws another, perhaps unintentional, parallel to game design by discussing "proxies," select audience members that perform actions for a larger audience (Machon 251), similar to video game "avatars" and the discussion around their functions in *Replay.* With the various parallels between other aspects of the course, this section may also prove relevant reading.

In the interview with Adrian Howells, the immersive practitioner draws a line through previously discussed ideas behind ritual, dramaturgy, community, and connection. Howells describes the work they do as drawing from "ideas of ritual and symbolism taken from different world religions," explaining how a teacher once said this made sense since ritual "has an in-built dramaturgical element" (Machon 261). I'm noticing a recurring correlation between immersive work and ritual, in everything from these readings in *Immersive Theatres* to interviews with artists like Andrew Hoepfner of Houseworld. But this succinct explanation accounts for the dramaturgy that underpins them both. And Howells continues to bring these concepts into the tenets of connection, explaining how they have come up against the criticism that "one-to-ones might in some way be encouraging individualism," but respond with the point that one-to-ones offer "an opportunity for people to take time to invest in themselves; to have qualitative time and recharge, to then go back into society and be an effective member of their community" (Machon

261). Though I personally don't fully buy into the "immersive as individualist" argument, I imagine its defenders would argue that an opportunity offered does not necessarily mean an opportunity taken. And that is true, but it hardly means that immersive work is inherently individualistic. And in fact, Howells goes on to add that performing one of their works in a festival encouraged participants to go share with each other and go "to the pub to carry on talking and having drinks together" (Machon 262). So I would argue that any interactive piece that encourages connection will realize that connection, and that an interactive piece that blocks off that opportunity is not a very good one–and likely not truly interactive by design.

At the end of *Immersive Theatres*, through its final interview and conclusion, the book discusses the difficulty in defining the kind of work discussed and finding catch-all terminology. Tristan Sharps of dreamthinkspeak mentions finding it hard to "define what immersive, site-specific, site-responsive, site-sympathetic means." Sharps acknowledges the value of having shorthand terms for these works and what they do, but states that "it's less important how people choose to label our work, and more than they appreciate it" (Machon 268). They touch on this in regards to how people define the work, but also how people categorize it in a bigger sense, whether their work is theatre or art. Sharps asks an intriguing question, "Should theatre be a big enough house that it can have all these different rooms in it that might involve the sort of work that we do or do we need to stop using the word theatre and create other labels? I'd much rather leave that as a conundrum for other people to work out" (Machon 269). I smiled as I read this, since I hope that this course will in fact comprise those "other people." But while Sharps doesn't answer the question, they do provide a bit of a hint, mentioning how their work draws from various disciplines, from visual art and architecture to film and theater. And in fact, the starting impetus for this course was to figure out what theater could learn from other disciplines.

The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters

When Leah Cardenas suggested I read *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker, I initially put off reading it in favor of other, more theater-centric texts. Now, having read it, I have to say that if this course had to have just one single text (and thankfully, it doesn't), I would pick this book. Though it does mention a couple of theatrical productions, mostly immersive ones, *The Art of Gathering* is not primarily about gathering for theater, or even for art. It rather examines how to plan gatherings in general, particularly through the lens of conferences and conventions. And yet, in just about every chapter the book mentions an area of good practice that theater could learn from, whether in establishing purpose, onboarding guests, facilitating connection, or providing an offramp. The fact that these fall in line well with the tenets of experiential dramaturgy speaks to how theater, whether conventional, immersive, or in-between, can not only serve as a gathering, but as a good one with purpose and meaning.

In starting the book, Parker argues that the way people oftentimes gather, whether for reasons relating to work or personal life, operates under false assumptions. I would argue that this assertion also applies to many theatrical productions. Parker explains that frequently when people seek advice for gathering, "we inadvertently shrink a human challenge down to a logistical one" (Parker *x)*. The cites how the planning around gatherings then revolves around "stuff," things like invitations, tickets, equipment, and other tangible objects. But as a professional facilitator, Parker works to find out what organizers hope for people to get out of an event. The same can be said of much traditional theater, when directors and producers spend more time on the technical logistics of a show rather than what an audience will experience.

And so, the first former chapter of *The Art of Gathering* opens with a question: why do we gather? It explains that a category is not a purpose, and provides several anecdotes of how institutions gain potency by examining deeper reasons for gathering instead of replicating what has always been done. Examples provided range from a courthouse that actively seeks to rehabilitate offenders instead of just serving justice, to a baby show that prepares first-time parents instead of simply celebrating them. One could easily apply this depth by envisioning theater that seeks to activate audiences rather than passively entertain them. Parker argues that a good gathering should be disputable–in a good way–by creating a unique gathering with a purpose that sets itself apart from others of the same category. Parker expands on this practically with an exercise that I once learned in a class as "the five whys." Regardless of its title, the principle is that one should continue asking "why" to get to the deepest reason for an event, ideally striking a belief or value (Parker 22). It's no wonder that so many shows close quickly or lose money. Applying Parker's principle to theater, producers should ask, why would audiences come to this show in particular? And if they continue asking why, they must eventually think about the experience of said audience.

In chapter two, Parker discusses taking the needs and desires of guests into consideration, and hits on an aspect especially relevant to theater in discussing venue. She quotes several professionals who comment on the importance of a space with one common sentiment: "Venues come with scripts" (Parker 53). Locations often come with unspoken connotations that people draw from in how they act in a given space. I would conjecture that theater audiences typically react poorly to participation not because they are against it–after all, we participate in everyday life–but because a traditional theater space comes with the intimation that audiences should stay silent and passive. Breaking that unspoken rule feels transgressive, even if otherwise encouraged. This phenomenon perhaps explains why so much experiential dramaturgy occurs in immersive or site-specific productions, which often take place in locations such as stores, hotels, or churches. These all denote places where one expects to interact. But Parker offers an idea that could even apply to traditional theaters, sharing an anecdote about none other than a board game that people could play at a museum. When the designers surrounded the playing area with walls that suggested a cave, it created an "alternative universe." Players symbolically left the area that was

"museum" to step into the new area–a place of play. But when the designers removed the walls, visitors didn't take part, as the museum displaced the alternative space (Parker 66). Similarly, traditional theater can become more experiential by creating "alternative universes," whether by redecorating the house or by setting up unique lobby spaces that foster artistic engagement.

Chapter three expands on these principles of creating space for guests in its discussion of how to provide rules and protect them. Parker argues that a generous host is not, in fact, one who is "chill" but one who practices authority. A host who does not dictate policy will lead to confused or irritated guests, while a host who lays ground rules will ensure that each guest feels taken care of while attending (Parker 71-82). For immersive productions, this means laying ground rules so that performers, guests, and crew all feel safe in their various interactions. But even for experiential theater in proscenium settings, letting audiences know upfront how they should interact will likely make them more comfortable with it later on. Even an aspect of conventional theater in its purest form–the post-show talkback–can learn from this principle. Parker explains how "generous authority" means protecting your guests even if they don't realize it, citing the example of a panel moderator who insists on only taking questions, not long-winded comments. Though it may seem harsh, this practice protects the audience as a whole by "anticipating and intercepting people's tendencies when they're not considering the betterment of the whole of the group or the experience" (Parker 86). Many audience members–and artists, for that matter–may dread the post-show talkback not because it inherently harms anyone but because it typically lacks experiential purpose. By practicing experiential dramaturgy, theatermakers can protect the audience's experience from rogue disruptions, whether in an open-world immersive piece or even in a traditional post-show talkback.

While some shows will be more experiential and others more conventional by nature, Parker implicitly makes a case for why the rules of immersive productions may prove more accessible than those of traditional theater. Traditionally, especially in the west, theater etiquette consists of spoken rules, such as silence and no photos, as well as unspoken rules, such as dressing up, applauding only at certain intervals, or leaving after the final bow. The fourth chapter of *The Art of Gathering* admits the value of etiquette in providing a common code of conduct for homogenous groups. However, it explains that outside a given culture, others may proceed quite differently. In an increasingly global and multicultural world, etiquette may not suffice. So what's the alternative? Parker introduces "pop-up rules," explicit guidelines for a given event that "assume difference" yet get people together who are "open to having the same experience (Parker 121-122). Pop-up rules often dictate expectations well before an event so that everyone arrives on the same page, regardless of the etiquette of their own culture. So what does this have to do with immersive theater? Parker herself seems to answer this, explaining how pop-up rules often create a "temporary alternative world" by providing a special set of rules that "give rise to a fleeting kingdom that pulls people in, tries something new, and yes, spices things

up" (Parker 121-122). In other words, pop-up rules can easily immerse audiences in a given event while teaching them how to interact in a group setting.

If *The Art of Gathering* provides advice relevant to theater through interpretation in previous chapters, the fifth chapter explicitly discusses immersive and participatory theater practices in explaining how gatherings should begin. Calling back to the earlier assertion that gatherings should prioritize people over logistics, Parker elaborates that this isn't just for planning an event, but for preparing people for an event. She makes the case that several immersive practitioners have made, that a "gathering begins at the moment your guests first learn of it," and in fact illustrates this point by mentioning the immersive director Felix Barrett of Punchdrunk (Parker 145-149). Setting a tone or aesthetic for an event before it officially begins allows audiences to know what to expect and can even encourage certain behaviors or risks taken during the event itself. And in turn, the pre-show "pregame" can foster any of the tenets of experiential dramaturgy, whether immersion, interaction, meaning-making, or connection. Parker shares a highly relevant anecdote about another director who, realizing he hadn't decorated his Christmas tree for a holiday party, instructed guests to send photographs of happy memories from the past year. When guests arrived, they found the tree decorated with their photos, sparking conversations about the many memories behind them (Parker 152-153). This anecdote not only makes the case for pre-show preparation priming an audience, but also illustrates how it can accomplish various goals and occur quite easily. Even a conventional theater production could ask audiences to share memories or photos well before a performance and incorporate these into a lobby presentation or even onstage.

In this chapter, Parker discusses other ways to prime audiences for a given event, especially if the event proves unconventional. She explains that the most essential part of an invitation isn't the physical design or means of sending but "what it signals to your guests about your gathering and what it asks of them" (Parker 159). She explains that one of the easiest ways is through the name or title used for the event. A title for an event affects how people perceive it, and the language or extra content in the invitation also presents opportunities for "priming language" in signaling the tone or mood of a piece (Parker 160). Fittingly, she gives the example of participatory theater and the theatergoers who are terrified of them. Parker explains that it's not that participatory theater shouldn't exist, or that its detractors need to take it or leave it, or even that they shouldn't be invited. Rather, participatory theater must "be explicit" with audiences in its requests and "hold their hand from the moment you first let them know about your gathering/massive-opportunity-for-a-panic-attack." This goes back to a point I've made before, that it isn't participatory theater that is bad, but rather the companies that don't look to game design/immersive/role-play for best experiential practices in onboarding audiences. Hence this course. And in fact, Parker expands on the concept of priming with that of "ushering," using immersive and participatory theater pieces as examples. She explains how shows like *Then She Fell* create literal rooms and passageways for audience members to spend time and interact in

before the show itself, to transition audience members from the outside world into the world of the show. Parker provides various examples of this phenomenon, from audience members pouring drinks or wearing headphones to putting on masks or sharing introductions. However this pre-show ritual manifests itself, it serves as a “threshold moment,” building anticipation for the opening moment which reveals that “a magical kingdom exists, and you are invited inside” (Parker 162-171). It’s fascinating to note that Parker shares immersive and participatory theater practices here not just as signposts for good theater, but for good gatherings in general. She brings in a study that “audiences disproportionately remember the first 5 percent, the last 5 percent, and a climactic moment of a talk” and shares a belief that gatherings work the same way, despite the fact that “we often pay the least attention to how we open and close them, treating these elements as afterthoughts” (Parker 173). To expand on this belief, this is also true of many conventional theater gatherings, defining “theater gatherings” as not just the show itself but the pre-show and post-show experiences for the audience. Theaters often invite audience members to arrive early, but frequently squander the opportunity for a striking lobby display or an exciting program prompt.

So what should a pre-show include instead? Succinctly put, Parker says that a good opening should “honor and awe your guests” and grab their attention. She cites as good practice that of design, such as the work of hoteliers who create impressive lobbies, and that of storytelling, such as the writing of authors like Herman Melville who address readers directly—“Call me Ishmael.” A quality opening isn’t just an act of passive spectacle–a flashy opening number–but an action that plants in audiences “the paradoxical feeling of being totally welcomed and deeply grateful to be there” (Parker 178-179). To apply this to theater, this can be anything from a lobby decked out in the world of a given performance to an opening address for the audience performed in-character. The key is that it happens to the audience because of them, not in spite of them. And this kind of opening not only immerses audience members but can also connect them to each other. Parker shares how even in lectures, moderators can encourage audience members to bond by doing something as simple as asking them to turn to the person next to them or raise their hands, which “transforms a one-to-many speech into a collective experience” (Parker 189). A program or pre-show announcement can easily facilitate a quick audience poll that connects audiences, even in the most minimal way. Whatever the intention of a pre-show is, the important thing is simply that a pre-show opening *has* an intention.

Even though *The Art of Gathering* contains numerous principles and guidelines that prove analogous to theatermaking, the book has less relevance in its later chapters. But it still has information that students can potentially learn from for the course. In chapter six, Parker talks about comfort levels through the “swimming pool” analogy of Leng Lim, a facilitator and minister. In my interviews, Josh Randall mentioned a similar version of the analogy for immersive theatermaking. Essentially, both versions state that one can design a participatory event like a swimming pool, with shallow ends and deep ends for how much an audience

member wishes to participate (Parker 224). In the seventh chapter, a similar analogy is used for risk-taking, this time in the idea that participatory events give gifts in exchange for risks, and creators must ask what this gift exchange looks like (Parker 244). These analogies make a case for allowing audience members to engage differently from one another based on comfort and for them to receive various incentives for said engagements.

But just as *The Art of Gathering* discusses the importance of openings, it also discusses that of closings to an extent. And while Parker doesn't go into as much detail–after all, one needs more time to prepare for an event than to debrief from an event–she still explains how closings offer an opportunity for reflection. She suggests that most gatherings use "the clock–and only the clock" to determine an ending, but that instead of gatherings truly ending, "they simply stop" (Parker 247-248). But what's wrong with an event simply coming to a stop? Parker explains that in creating a gathering, you "hopefully created a temporary alternative world in your gathering, and it is your job to help your guests close that world, decide what of the experience they want to carry with them, and reenter all that from which they came" (Parker 249). As Jason Morningstar noted in his interview, many shows lack an offramp and could learn from role-playing exercises that have them. One can easily think of Broadway shows that simply open the exit doors and hurry audiences out into the streets, juxtaposed with regional or Off-Broadway theaters that increasingly have resources for further engagement in their lobbies or provide some sort of post-show event. Towards the end of the book, Parker explains how a closing event provides a chance for "meaning-making and connecting one last time" (Parker 259), coincidentally two of the tenets of experiential dramaturgy. Parker argues that meaning-making will occur regardless of whether an event creates space for it, so one might as well create space in order to foster that energy through connection. This occurrence is certainly true for any kind of theater, in which audience members will have analyses, interpretations, and takeaways, and theaters themselves can create spaces or activities for people to bond over these if they so choose. Parker elaborates that a closing doesn't have to be anywhere as grand as an opening, as "even a minimalist closing can manage to acknowledge what transpired and offer a release" (Parker 280). Personally, I've witnessed theaters achieve this sentiment through everything from handing out buttons saying "keep the secrets" for the illusion-filled *Harry Potter & the Cursed Child* to providing a post-it board where audience members can share regrets for the memory-play *The Nosebleed*. In each case, simple gestures allowed audience members to make meaning and connect after a performance. While these examples come from my own personal experience, *The Art of Gathering* provides many examples and anecdotes for this aspect of hosting a gathering. In drawing from the general concept of a gathering instead of simply theatrical purposes, the book will likely inspire students to think outside the box in designing theater and experiential events that can also serve as meaningful and memorable gatherings in their own right.

Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age

In speaking with Dr. Mike Sell, he mentioned his upcoming book *Systemic Dramaturgy,* co-written with Dr. Michael Chemers. A few months after the interview, the book arrived in print, and I procured a copy to analyze its relevance for the course. First, what is systemic dramaturgy? Though the book has a variety of nuances, it succinctly describes itself as "a handbook for thinking theatrically about technology" (Chemers 3). The authors make the case that digital media is not incompatible with theater, since the artform has always utilized the technology of the time dating back to its origins. On a side note, the book immediately brought a smile to my face on the first page, imagining a scenario in which a student has equal interest in theater and games. Dear reader, that student could be me. And that interdisciplinary interest is what brought me to experiential dramaturgy, which brings me to my next question.

How does systemic dramaturgy relate to experiential dramaturgy? Reading the book, I found that the two dramaturgies don't relate as much as I thought, or rather, the book does not directly tie them together as much as I thought. But that's where this analysis comes in. As I understand it, systemic dramaturgy analyzes the various technological systems of dramaturgy. What tools do we use to tell a story? Experiential dramaturgy analyzes the way theater can directly engage with the audience and emphasize their role in a production. In a way, one may think of experiential dramaturgy as an analysis of an interface or specific set of tools–those pertaining to the audience. As such, I would argue that experiential dramaturgy is a subset of systemic dramaturgy. Systemic dramaturgy looks at all the tools necessary to tell a story, while experiential dramaturgy only has interest in those that actively engage the audience.

That said, the first chapter of *Systemic Dramaturgy* may prove useful to students in giving them both an introduction to dramaturgy itself and a slightly narrower definition of dramaturgy interested in the tools of storytelling. This first chapter provides a succinct and easy-to-grasp guide on "The Elements of Effective Dramaturgical Practice." The book provides more detail but essentially divides the practice into the tenets of "meticulous analysis," "effective collaboration," and "thoughtful outreach to the audience" (Chemers 3). Though all are useful, the third proves especially valuable in centering the kind of audience-centric dramaturgy at the heart of this course.

From then on, the book provides various interviews with creators and treatises on systemic dramaturgy, but now and then, it touches on the experiential. In an interview with Noah Wardrip-Fruin, the computation professor mentions a piece that came out of his lab entitled *Bad News*, a live-action game in which a performer tells the participant that they must inform someone in a town that there has been a death in the family. As the actor–playing various townspeople–interacts with the audience member, an unseen third-person procedurally generates information for the town through a computer (Chemers 23-24). This computational aspect

applies directly to systemic dramaturgy in its use of tools, yet it also applies indirectly to experiential dramaturgy in its use of tools for facilitating an experience. In this case, the computer building out the lore of the town promotes immersion, bringing the participant into the world, and interaction, providing the performer with information to impart.

Later on, in an interview with Marianne Weems, the Builders Association artistic director shares a story from their show *Elements of Oz.* Audiences could download an augmented reality app to view digital effects through the lens of their phones or devices. At first, actors worried about the distraction and distancing of this. But they found that people would pass their devices around. “What we thought might have been an isolating experience was communal, ultimately,” Weems explains. “It created a kind of weird little carnival atmosphere in the theater” (Chemers 69). Again, the augmented reality aspect applies directly to systemic dramaturgy, but the communal aspect derived from that applies directly to the experiential concept of connection between audience members. The “carnival” reference also hints at how traditional theater can learn from a place of games and play. These two production anecdotes illustrate the relationship between the two dramaturgies.

While various anecdotes apply throughout, the chapter “Playing with Play” correlates most with experiential dramaturgy. Admittedly, it primarily looks at “play” through the lens of the performer, but touches on how this can apply to audience engagement as well. *Systemic Dramaturgy* mentions a production of *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* produced by Woolly Mammoth Theater and the Black Women Playwrights’ Group’s Cyber Narrative Project, which employed a video game that introduced audiences to the themes of the show and granted a discount ticket upon victory (Chemers 76). This is an excellent example of how even a traditional (or experimental) show can employ experiential dramaturgy through engaging pre-show gambits. The chapter ties games and theater together through the concept of “play,” citing Professor Gina Bloom, who explains that in medieval times even the word “ludus” could refer to either games or plays (Chemers 84). Bloom further ties game rules and dramatic scripts together as “systems of information’ that provide opportunities for playful interaction” (Chemers 86). The concept of these as systems ties into systemic dramaturgy, but also ties closely into the idea mentioned by several interviewees in this thesis of “systems of storytelling.” Systems of storytelling exist as the perfect combination of game rules and dramatic script, as they facilitate dramatic storytelling through gameplay. In fact, *Systemic Dramaturgy* introduces the term “playable media” as a big-tent term for games or systems that one may play (Chemers 87). Not every form of “playable media” necessarily involves a system of storytelling. However, the term does allow for people to think of media, such as interactive theater, that one may not consider a game but is nevertheless “playable.”

So why does this intersection between playable games and theater matter to dramaturgs today? Later in the chapter, Sell and Chemers introduce the work of LaRonika Thomas, a digital

dramaturg advocating for the new value of dramaturgy in the increasingly digital and virtual society we live in today. As such, she identifies four roles for digital dramaturgs. All of these have value, but the fourth provides the most relevance to the subject of this course: Experience designer. Interestingly, this is a title I occasionally use myself as shorthand for "experiential dramaturg" when making work in non-theatrical contexts. Thomas sees the experience designer as "the dramaturg [that] helps develop theatrical experiences beyond the usual scope of theater (Chemers 95). Supporting this description are further examples of games or gamified experiences that shed light on a given production or integrate with a production directly. Tying this back to the past historical correlation between games and theatrical plays, Chemers and Sell argue that the current climate of "gamification" begs for a contemporary revival of this link (Chemers 100). The pandemic and the way it forced people to rethink the importance of liveness and interactivity led me to think of this thesis project. However, contemporary society has moved towards gamification even before that. This chapter makes a case for the importance of play, how theater and games both utilize play, and why this lens proves more relevant than ever. As such, I do appreciate this chapter as making the basic case to theatermakers of why they cannot dismiss games and interactivity or ignore their compatibility with theater.

Though not as all-encompassing, the following interview and chapter in *Systemic Dramaturgy* both bolster the argument for a playful dramaturgy. Game designer and professor Elizabeth Swensen pushes back against the popular notion that "play" is exclusively for children. Whether for theater or games, she asserts that "engaging that creativity [of play" and "our ability to make choices, to invent personas, and to practice critical thinking in a safer environment, isn't childish" (Chemers 104). These explorations tap into a couple of elements of experiential dramaturgy that also happen to be key elements of the human experience: interaction and connection. After all, humans are social creatures. Swensen also puts forth the trend of digital games being seen as increasingly for adults as the players of said games age alongside the medium. And as games evolve, so do their mechanics, which may account for people wanting more from a theatrical experience. In fact, in citing the MDA (Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics) Framework, Swensen explains that mechanics don't just refer to game rules but to all of the mechanical or physical components of a work (Chemers 110-111). The interview elaborates on the case for a sense of play in theater, and from an experience perspective, for the sake of the audience. The following chapter also aids this perspective in discussing the popularity of games and how they can foster empathy.

Though the chapter "The Empathy Machine" talks more about the culture around games and gaming than how games themselves tap into empathy, it does share a few key facts. First off, it shares the sobering statistic that while the U.S. theater industry brought in $3 billion from 2017-2018, the U.S. games industry brought in $36 billion and hasn't slowed down since (Chemers 119). There are a few rebuttals to the perceived monetary argument: games are easier to come by and are popular with younger people, and theater isn't about the money. And sure,

that may be the case to varying extents. But consider that 61% of Americans over eighteen play video games, with 41% percent of those being women (Chemers 157). And while artists may decry that theater isn't about the money, commercial theater says otherwise. So what is the takeaway? That all theater should become more like digital games? No. Rather, theater can utilize the same experiential aspects as games to tap into a form of play or engagement that people desire. *Systemic Dramaturgy* posits that empathy-provoking systems, whether in theater or games, can satiate the human desire for something meaningful.

As various folks interviewed in this thesis have discussed, theater can learn to borrow from games, and games can learn to borrow from theater. *Systemic Dramaturgy* mentions a few shows that borrow from video games in either content or form. It's worth noting that a show about video games doesn't necessarily denote experientiality, but one that borrows from the form, like how *Sleep No More* borrows from adventure games in its exploration, does. In addition to the aforementioned example, the book mentions adaptations of theatrical texts presented in customizable online games such as *LittleBigPlanet 3* and *World of Warcraft.* Transposing a stage text to a world that players can navigate does create a player experience, even in the single-player game *Kentucky Route Zero,* featuring a section in which players take on the role of an onstage actor with stage designs evoking those of actual designers (Chemers 160). In addition to inspiring each other, games and theater may even blur the lines between themselves, as with *Play the Knave*. Developed by Gina Bloom, *Systemic Dramaturgy* describes the motion capture tool that allows students to digitally stage Shakespeare plays as "Shakespeare karaoke" (Chemers 174-175). From a systemic perspective, *Play the Knave* is a system that facilitates digital performance. In turn, this system allows participants to experientially engage directly with a performance through the use of the digital interface. The participants are simultaneously performer, player, and audience.

This section leads to a codified dramaturgy of video games in *Systemic Dramaturgy*, broken down into six points. Again, the first two deal more with the context of video games themselves, but the last four apply heavily to experiential dramaturgy. First, facilitating collaboration in "the designing of experiences in traditional theater spaces that use videogame technologies or other playable media;" second, advising artists and companies that wish to "create theatrical experiences that are interactive, environmental, gamified, or participatory;" third, educating audiences on productions "through the use of videogames and other playful media; and fourth, improving video game literacy pertaining to "storytelling, the artistic use of space, character, interpersonal relationships, the modeling of effect, and other theatrical questions" (Chemers 183). These final four aspects of a dramaturgy of video games prove helpful not simply as a dramaturgy of the medium, but for the experiential qualities that theater may borrow from games and vice-versa. The first two of these directly deal with creating experiential productions, while the third of these deals with experiential pre- or post-show

aspects of productions, and the fourth deals with creating experiential games through a theatrical lens.

Although systemic dramaturgy and experiential dramaturgy are not synonymous, they nevertheless share a connection. One could easily view experiential dramaturgy as a subset of systemic dramaturgy, or argue that the two occur adjacent to each other. Regardless, *Systemic Dramaturgy* provides a practical framework for viewing the relationship between theater and technology and how productions may use the components of digital media, whether experiential or otherwise, in conveying artistry. In fact, the book often refers to its dramaturgy and those of various experience and game designers as "playful dramaturgies." I like this term, since however one views these various dramaturgical practices, they all speak to a need for a sense of play. Towards the end of the book, Chemers admits that he'd "rather go to the theater than go to a movie" and (scandalously!) that he'd "rather play videogames than go to the theater." Finally, he says he'd rather "play *Dungeons & Dragons* with a group of people than play a videogame about *Dungeons & Dragons*" (Chemers 238). He shares that this ranking prioritizing liveness may come off as naive. And I understand why that may seem a bit oversimplified or reductive. Why liveness? But if I may make an oversimplified and bold claim of my own, I would say the ranking promotes the increasingly experiential, that which brings humans together, which theater needs to strive towards and catch up on.

Experiences

Tabletop Game Sessions

While I know a good deal about immersive theater and video games, I did not know much about tabletop gaming. Listening to *Dungeons + Drama Nerds* gave me the idea to conduct a few tabletop game sessions of my own. After all, what's a thesis around experiential dramaturgy without experiences? I reached out to classmates in the dramaturgy, playwriting, directing, and producing programs at Columbia and asked if any of them would be interested in taking part in a tabletop game night. I stressed that familiarity with tabletop games was unnecessary, as the course would itself welcome students that had little experience with various interactive mediums but wished to learn more. Several of my classmates responded, so I set up sessions to play.

Honey Heist (3/5/22)

To start off, I wanted to play a tabletop role-playing game similar to *Dungeons & Dragons*. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, players take on the roles of adventurers, guided by a Dungeon Master or DM who provides the setting and stakes for the game. However, *Dungeons & Dragons* sessions can go on for hours and days, so I wanted a game that would emulate the gameplay but wrap up in a considerably shorter amount of time. Similarly, I wanted a game that would be easy to learn and jump into, unlike *Dungeons & Dragons,* which grants players an array of stats and abilities to keep track of throughout a game. Through an article Percy sent me I learned about *Honey Heist*, a comedic tabletop role-playing game about a group of bears undertaking a heist to steal a boatload of honey.

Honey Heist, a game created in 2017 by Grant Howitt, consists of a single page of rules as well as a pair of character sheets for each player. The game involves a DM, or here a BM, Bear Master, who guides the players through the heist they aim to pull off. The setting is determined by rolling dice at the start of each game, with randomly selected scenarios provided. Similarly, players select their abilities, of which there are only three, by rolling dice, as well as their clothing, which serves practical as well as aesthetic purposes by allowing players to "pass" as human should the BM roll lower than the "Human Believability Score" determined by their clothing. But most actions deal with two stats, the "bear" stat and the "criminal" stat. These always start at 3 for each player, and then increase or decrease based on success or failure. Players have to roll a number equal to or lower than one of these stats, depending on whether

they're attempting to perform a "bear" or "criminal" action. Throughout a game session, the BM leads the campaign with the players performing actions to carry out their heist.

For the first session, I played the game with Chaesong Kim, Begum "Begsy" Inal, Dezi Tibbs, Liv Rigdon, Fiona Gorry-Hines, and Aidan Carr. Level of familiarity with tabletop games varied, from Dezi, who did not consider themselves a tabletop gamer, to Liv, who had played several. Leading up to the session, I sent an email with a few articles about tabletop gaming as well as a link to the *Dungeons + Drama Nerds* podcast. During the game itself I served as the Bear Master. For posterity and interest, the campaign played out with the bears having to carry out a heist on a truck convoy led by a cunning organizer. The convey carried "black orchid" honey that would turn them into goths, and little did they know a rival gang of bears was also after the honey. With the exception of this last part, the other elements of the plot were determined via my rolling dice and sharing the results with the players. The last element would remain a secret until I revealed it during gameplay. But first, the players took their time designing their bears based on the clothing options they rolled. I underestimated the level of interest that players would have in this, and the level of detail that they would undertake. But I think that having a bear that one designed, based on the input of dice rolls, seemed to immerse a player in the game more or at least have them identify with their bear. The dice might determine the outfit, but the design came down to player implementation.

Once we started, the game moved at a brisk pace. I set the game in Canada, with the convoy moving from Vancouver to Edmonton. The players, or rather their bears, attempted to take a minivan for a "test drive" so they could steal it from the dealership. While they convinced the dealer that they were a family from Serbia, they failed to get away with the minivan as it ran out of gas. Attempting to frighten the dealer failed as well, leading to him calling the Canadian Mounties. The dealer also had a cub in his possession, which he thought might belong to the bears. Once the Mounties showed up, the group elected to steal the horses of the Mounties while leaving the cub behind as a distraction. Reaching the convoy, they successfully pulled the trucks over by impersonating the Mounties. One bear created a diversion while another got into the driver's seat and the others got on top. While they only managed to steal the lead truck, they knew this one had the "black orchid" honey. Here I introduced the rival gang of bears, who wanted the whereabouts of their cub and rode up on motorcycles. The group successfully duped them by eating the black orchid honey to become goths. Convincing the rival bears that they were all on the same side, they approached a police barricade. They had the rival bears go after the Mounties, who had the cub, and they successfully smashed the truck through the barricade, making it back to their lair and completing the game.

Aside from general information and amusement, I also mention the plot of the game to give an idea of how mechanics and story interact. As one can see, much of the game hinges on "failure" and "success," determined by dice rolls, as well as the players exhibiting teamwork in

making decisions for the group. Improvisation plays a slight role as well, with the characters who were not the primary group of bears played by me. Mindful of the time constraints of the players, I made sure to pace the story so that it would wrap up around an hour and a half after starting, not including the half-hour of introductions and character design.

After the game, I asked a few questions of the group. I first asked about general responses and thoughts about the game. They all agreed that it was fun and easy to learn. The game moved along fairly quickly by tabletop role-playing standards, which Liv attributed to the way in which they worked through it, "discussing strategy as people rather than characters." While there absolutely were moments of role-play, these came up primarily when I was addressing the group as a character in the story.

I then asked, what was theatrical about the game? Dezi mentioned the characters and skills that they received at the start of the game, which "gave tools to lean into to give the illusion of character role-play." Fiona said that she felt attached to her bear, which she ascribed to designing her character's costume which "felt like pre-production work." As I observed, everyone became immersed in the design and implementation of their character's costume–the game provides a space on one of the character sheets for players to draw their determined clothing and accessories onto an illustrated bear. Others talked about feeling a sense of the theatrical through the dramatic tension of the game. Liv talked about the unintended consequences that would come from decision making in the game. Aidan was drawn to the literal moments of determination through dice rolls. He highlighted the "rhythmic shift of focus of everyone" when somebody would roll a die as feeling like a scene in its own right, "a dramatic shift of tension followed by celebration or something else." Since the dice rolls would directly tie into story beats, and determine outcomes no less, the dice rolls became more than their literal function and ascribed meaning-making to the action itself.

I then asked the players what mechanics of this game they had seen in shows, or could imagine being in a show? Dezi remarked that it would be interesting to see a play where actors improvise "based on a core skill set or character." There are, in fact, a few examples of this that I've seen, namely at fringe festivals. A 2017 Edinburgh Fringe Festival show, *Improvised Doctor Who*, provided audiences with performers representing various incarnations of the fictional sci-fi character from the BBC show. Once the audience selected which performer would be the star of that evening's performance, a story based on a suggestion of a plot would unfold around that character.

In response to the question, Liv introduced another route for implementing tabletop mechanics into live theater. She suggested that one could create a play by playing a tabletop game and then "develop [it] into a polished script to craft dialogue." I don't want to say that I laid a trap, but I then introduced Nick Fortugno's theory that tabletop game stories are inherently

uninteresting because they're meant to be played, and therefore hold interest for the players, but not for observers. Dezi posited that a tabletop narrative could hold interest for a non-player in that it follows "sequential understanding." They admitted that "the plot itself is predictable" but felt that "in crafting it or playing it, there are a lot of surprises." This thought did come back to the idea of having interest only for those playing, something that Aidan expanded on, saying that "when you take spontaneous generation out of [the story], it may seem like telling someone your dreams. It may be funny to watch someone come up with it, but when you're not [experiencing it] you don't have the context." He then suggested that that could still be wrong. For me, it does seem like a key part of the enjoyment of a tabletop story revolves around knowing the mechanics behind it. To use a theatrical example, most improv stories are not interesting as scripts either, but they're interesting in performance since the audience knows that they're following a system of spontaneous generation. This is to say that a tabletop narrative may be interesting to those not playing, but those not playing would have to have an awareness of the mechanics dictating the narrative.

I then opened the conversation up to general observations and points of discussion. Dezi found that it was easy to collaborate and discuss during the game, but difficult to make a decision. This response led to a conversation on duration. Aidan commented on the disparity between decision-making in real-time and in the story, remarking that "you can deliberate in what would be 10 seconds of plot, but actually take the whole night [to make a decision in real-time]." Similarly, Liv said that she's more drawn to the role-play elements of tabletop games rather than the game mechanics, which can make a game take longer to play. That being said, they were all keen on completing the game in the allotted time.

Lastly, we chatted about the improvisational elements of the game. Many people are afraid or reluctant to perform improv, but everyone playing this game would take on the role of their character when I addressed them as a character myself. How come? Liv posited that tabletop role-playing is "easier than [unstructured] improv because you know what your stakes are and you know what the goal is." Dezi admitted to not being an improviser at all, and yet enthusiastically said that during one of our improv exchanges, she "could have stayed in the dialogue for much longer." It seems that having systems and structures in place helps facilitate improvisational performance for those unaccustomed to it. However, on some level it also comes down to being placed in an improvisational situation suddenly and without warning, which Dezi agreed didn't give anyone a chance to think about whether improv was in someone's wheelhouse or not, they just had to do it. While being reluctant to take part in improv and tabletop gaming, Dezi later sent me an email stating that the experience was "both incredibly fun and artistically stimulating." It's also worth noting, as my thesis reader Adrianne Krstansky pointed out, that many improvisational games and methods do rely on systems and structures. So I would say that tabletop role-playing games mimic the comfort of those as opposed to other forms with fewer systems behind them.

Honey Heist (3/8/22)

With several people responding to my invitation to take part in a tabletop game session, and with *Honey Heist* only accommodating up to six players at a time, I set up a second session of the game. This time, I led the game for Kanika Vaish, Sydney Guye, Amelia Johnson, Dillon Jones, Phoebe Brooks, and Connor Scully. With a different group playing the same game as the last, I was curious to discover how their experiences would differ or hold similarities. Naturally, the story would not stay exactly the same, as it would be determined through rolling the dice.

This time around, the campaign involved the bears carrying out a heist at a convention held in a dangerous fishing village presided over by "a trust-fund bro," who had also captured the queen bee and was holding her hostage. But once again, little did the players know that a rival team of bears would also be after the honey. As one can see, I rolled a "3" for the hidden element of the plot once again, so a rival team of bears would play into the plots of this session and the one prior. In fact, I initially rolled for a "truck convoy" instead of a fishing village, but decided to roll that one again so that the key setting would be different.

Right from the start, I noticed a few differences in this group. The players were also interested in designing their bears, but not to the extent of the group prior. This group became much more interested in strategizing and planning the heist. The prior group had moved along at a brisk pace, making decisions that the dice would determine. But this time the players moved more cautiously, planning out several "moves" in advance before even rolling to determine if the first would succeed. Dillon and Connor drew maps of the fishing village and updated them as I filled them in on information throughout the campaign. All in all, I would say this group was also much more interested in world-building than the first team.

This time, the campaign played out with the bears renting a U-Haul to drive to the fishing village, which was 30 miles away. I wondered if they would simply walk there, as bears, but they ended up applying for a credit card, successfully getting approved, going to the rental station and successfully passing off two of the members as a grandchild and grandfather to pick up the keys, and then driving the U-Haul to the village. While driving was an integral part of the prior session due to the truck convoy, and ironically became abandoned once horses became a possibility, this group enjoyed the details of renting a U-Haul for a short journey. Arriving at the fishing village, the group deliberated for a long time about how to infiltrate it. They wanted to know more and more details, and the more I provided the more they took them into consideration. Eventually, to move the game along, I told them that the doors were opening to allow the convention goers to leave for the day. They deliberated some more. I then mentioned the doors started beeping, and immediately they threw out their plans and opted to have one bear run through the doors, which failed, then have another attempt to free that bear, which succeeded, and then simply drive the U-Haul into the doors which failed disastrously. The group then picked up the pace a little bit,

and admitted that in real-life, none of them had a hard out for when they had to leave. So I allowed them to meander a bit more. Back in the game, the bears inside the village proceeded to explore the compound to varying degrees of success, ultimately shutting the power down to allow the others to join them. Reuniting, they succeeded in rescuing the bee, getting the yacht of the trust-fund bro to drift away, and stealing the honey. While sailing away in a boat of their own, they ran into a ship commandeered by the rival team of bears. Sydney's bear stat got to 6, something the other group had carefully avoided, meaning that her bear "betrayed" the group. I then had the rival team of bears work for Sydney's bear, and the rest of the players debated whether to surrender, parlay, or attempt to fight them. When it was clear that a consensus would not be reached, I had the ship crash into shore, sending all the bears flying.

As one can see, this narrative became different from the one prior in playstyle, content, and gameplay. Was this session more or less successful than the one prior? From a gameplay standpoint, it was less successful, as the players did not quite complete their goal. But it seemed like they didn't really care, and were more interested in fleshing out the world of the game as much as they could. While the prior session lasted about an hour and a half, this one went for around two and a half hours. The players seemed more content to take longer in making decisions and playing through the story. However, this occasionally resulted from a lack of consensus. While the group from the other session generally took turns making decisions or all came to a mutual agreement, this group often had players splitting up or debating what to do without a clear consensus. I wonder, to what extent is this affordance a benefit of the game, allowing people to do what they want, or a hindrance, preventing teamwork?

Afterward, we had a discussion about the game. I again started by asking what was theatrical about it. Sydney cited "the drama" and "the acting," while Kanika brought up the "character building" and the "feuds." Interestingly, the other group did not mention the feuds, and while it resulted from disagreement while playing, it seems that on some level, the guided disagreements became features.

When I asked which mechanics of the game they had seen in the show or they could imagine being in a show, this group gravitated towards the former part of the question for a change. Sydney mentioned *Privacy*, an interactive show that utilizes audience interaction through smartphones, and Phoebe brought up *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which changes its ending based on audience choice. In a general sense, Kanika talked about shows where the audience knows something that the characters don't, or where one character knows something others do not know. This device comes up in many plays, and wasn't something I had thought about, but it absolutely is a part of tabletop gaming as the Game Master does in fact know things that the players don't, and occasionally in some games, certain players will have information that others don't as well. She also mentioned a more interactive mechanic, that of "plays where you follow characters but may not catch the whole plot," specifically citing *Fefu and Her Friends*.

Phoebe brought up the term “inflection points” to refer to moments in immersive plots where “something is happening, it doesn’t matter [what it is] but you can either go in or not go in.” Essentially, the nodes of choices where you have a window to act and it’s up to you how you respond.

Some people did look at some of the articles and resources that I shared. Phoebe only read the Guardian article “The Rise and Rise of Tabletop Gaming” and was interested by the pitch of tabletop gaming as “an alternative to clubbing or drinking where you hang out with people and with a community” and felt that this was something that “theater also tries to get in on” from an industry standpoint. Kanika read the Howlround article “Theatre of the Mind” and thought about how everyone became an ensemble during the game. She wasn’t sure which article these came from, but she also thought about how tabletop games afforded connection, community-building, and communal storytelling during the pandemic. This idea resonated with folks, and Sydney talked about playing tabletop and video games online with friends for the first time during the pandemic. Phoebe had an interesting observation here: they only “experienced these games through theater people, where cooperative play is part of their practice.” In the course, it will definitely be interesting to look at tabletop games through the lens of cooperative and ensemble play and compare them to theatermaking. I asked about how they would want a course to implement these kinds of games. Dillon had a specific thought of having people play half of a game in class and then dramatizing it in a theatrical exercise. Connor said he would want to play two games, one in class and one outside of class. Kanika added that she’d have interest in one of those games played in person and one virtually.

We wrapped up with closing thoughts. We talked again this time about the improvisational aspect and if people uncomfortable with improv were comfortable with this. Sydney responded that she went with it because she had to make a choice to move the plot along, and she said, “I wasn’t trying to do voices, to be funny, I was just trying to move the plot along.” I was also curious about how this was as a bonding experience. Unlike the other group, a few of the people in this session didn’t know each other. Kanika felt she got to know the people who participated in the game, more so than if they had attended a regular party, likely because they were all a team.

For the Queen (3/27/22)

I still had a couple of people who wanted to take part in a game session, so I figured this would serve as a great opportunity to test out another game. This time I played *For the Queen* with playwright Greg Nanni and director Jorge Schultz. *For the Queen* is a tabletop role-playing game that focuses more on building a story than on winning a campaign. The game uses question

cards to prompt players to build a story about accompanying a queen on her journey to a distant land. Players first choose a card that represents their queen for the game. They then go in a circle choosing question cards and answering them until a specific card gets chosen, which denotes the final round of questions. Players also have the option to pass a card or use an X card to veto something.

The three of us played twice, and the two rounds were quite different. The first round had a dark comedy bend to it, as we picked a warrior queen whom we all agreed seemed mischievous based on her picture. The story involved stealing a baby hippo, studying the mating rituals of reptiles, and one character having to eat his brother as punishment for talking with him while on guard duty. The second round was a bit more serious, as we chose a queen covered in a dark shroud. This story dealt with magic and sorcery and having to cross a great ocean, though it did have some lightheartedness due to fast food analogies that were potentially metaphorical or literal.

After the two rounds, the three of us discussed the game. First, I asked what Greg and Jorge found theatrical about it. Greg found that "because it was so storytelling centric… it lends itself to good improvisers," and he found the game "closer to improvisational theater than scripted [theater]." Jorge agreed and said that players had to "yes, and" what the other players said, referring to the improvisation concept of affirming and building upon a performer's choices. He was also curious about what it would be like to play the game with people without a theatrical or improvisational background.

We also had interesting relationships with our characters, and in the first game we all debated whether to speak of our characters in the first or third person, ultimately opting for the first. Jorge said that he felt "we are playing characters" but that if he was playing with people he did not know, he might wonder if he confessed something in-character, "Are people going to think that I'm confessing this [personally]?" Greg brought in the idea of having different goals between rounds relating to his character, saying that,"In the first game I was expressing more as a character, and in the second game I was building a character." The game leaves it fairly open-ended for how players can define their characters, play as their characters, and devise their characters.

I then asked what mechanics of the game they had seen in shows or could imagine being in a show. They both agreed, as they said before, that they had seen elements of this game in improv shows, particularly with forms that involve monologues with some interjections. Greg also found that "the instructions [of the game] being a part [of it]... elevates the participants in an interesting way" and could see that being a part of a show, find the onboarding practice helpful as it gets people used to talking and provides drama in and of itself, such as which queen to choose. Going off of this, he also found that choosing the queen set the tone for the game to

come. Many improv shows use an audience suggestion or starting impetus that sets the tone of the show, which stood out to me as well.

Since I had asked the previous groups about how the game they played facilitated improv, I decided to ask the same question for this game. Jorge found that the game struck a balance in encouraging improv but not demanding it, as "the questions give you something [to work with]," but then the game also "[gives] you the chance to block or pass," so you always have the choice "to say something or not say something." Greg thought that with the passing mechanic introduced, the questions might be weird or difficult, but he wondered "if the passing [option] is to say 'this is more interesting for your character" so you could build your character the way you'd see fit. He also found that the rules facilitated people listening and talking, and that "at the end of the day, everyone tells stories," so he figured non-theater people could enjoy the game as well.

Jorge disagreed, and thought that the game wouldn't work with people who didn't come from theater or creative backgrounds. I asked how they'd want this course to integrate playing a tabletop role-playing game, and Jorge felt that somebody with improv experience would at least have to facilitate it. However, he thought it would be a good game for the course due to its "endless possibilities" in being "all about storytelling." Greg felt that if somebody signed up for this course, they'd at least be willing to try games like this, so he figured that "the professor would have to lead an experience that is gaming-like, but once they do it once they don't have to do it again." That's helpful to know, and I definitely would give students background on both tabletop role-playing games and how to play one.

Giving an opportunity for final thoughts, I heard from Jorge that he appreciated the level of freedom in player choice that *For the Queen* offered him. Greg had an interesting observation, that both times we played, he noticed "a desire to 'button' the story" and provide an ending. In the first round, Jorge jumped in to provide an ending, and in the second round we all worked to wrap up the story. He said that ending the game without an ending to the story "almost feels weird" and that "the natural, inherent 'win' of storytelling is finding an ending. But that's not even in the rules." I would say the game facilitates an ending by making it clear which card the game will end on, but otherwise, I agree; it doesn't say you have to wrap up the story itself or give you any tools to provide an ending to the story, only for the game. I would be curious how various interactive theater shows could work with a structure that would not dictate an ending but provide an opportunity for one to arise. A few improvisational forms offer structures that say when an ending will arrive (for example, after a third monologue occurs) but I feel like there's even more potential here.

Live Experiences

Stranger Things Pop-Up Experience (3/18/22)

On the last weekend of the *Stranger Things* pop-up store on 42nd street in New York, Amelia Johnson reached out and asked if I wanted to go with her and Dillon, her husband, before it closed. You had to get tickets to visit, but the tickets were free, so I figured why not? I enjoyed the show and wanted to see what this experiential store offered. It wasn't just a store but promised "an immersive shopping experience themed around the *Stranger Things* universe." The website also promised realistic set recreations that visitors could explore, an array of products integrated into each location, and the chance for photo ops and interactive activities. So naturally, I had to check it out.

The immersive aspect brought visitors into the world of *Stranger Things* and also proved its greatest consumerist ploy. Each section had goods interspersed diegetically into the installation. For example, the high school installation had Hawkins High School socks in a gym hamper, and the living room section had cereal boxes on the table that were, in fact, *Stranger Things* branded Cheerios and Lucky Charms–but as if those products existed in the world. As such, they didn't say *Stranger Things* on them, but had imagery alluding to the world-building. On one hand, you weren't sure what was part of the installation and what wasn't, but on the other, once you realized an item was up for sale, it had an extra allure. You could suddenly purchase something that was hitherto part of the installation.

To the uninitiated, the store installation consisted of a living room, an arcade, a school, and a lab. Yes, with some quirks here and there, and certain aspects that would prove engaging whether you knew the show or not, such as actual playable game cabinets in the arcade. But otherwise a non-fan wouldn't have any idea of what these locations signified. No plot summary or museum-style plaque told viewers what the significance of a given area was. Rather, it was up to fans to ascribe meaning to these locales based on their knowledge of the show. For example, the living room wasn't just a living room; it was Joyce's living room from the first season, denoted by the Christmas lights blinking atop a handwritten alphabet above the couch, a key image from the show. This layout also signified unofficial photo ops, as people could take pictures anywhere within the living room, but the couch proved a highlight.

People would gather at particular areas of the installations, whichever spot had the most resonance for fans of the show. This congregation then led to another aspect of experiential dramaturgy: connection. In short, fans knew where to take the most significant photos, which would attract small gatherings of other fans. When Amelia, Dillon, and I took photos around the Demogorgon, an interdimensional creature from the show, other fans gathered round. We asked

them to take photos of us, and in fact they coached us, telling me “to make a more scared face.” After all, the Demogorgon is one of the scariest parts of the show. The meaning-making from these signifiers led to connection between fans. In turn when the other fans asked me to take pictures, our group commented on their poses and how they interacted with the Demogorgon, tying the experience all the way back to interaction.

Is this a pro-capitalist experience? Absolutely. It’s easy to see how the installation brings people in and encourages them to make a purchase. Of the three of us, I was the only one who bought anything, opting for a bookmark. Nevertheless, this capitalist venture is still a form of experiential dramaturgy. The installation was clearly created by people who both knew the source material and knew how to provide fans with ways to engage with it in the most exciting ways. The lab section allowed visitors to come face to face with a terrifying monster from the show and act out tableaus of fear or bravery, while the school section allowed couples to take prom pictures at the Hawkins dance. Friends groups could hop on stationary bikes against a backdrop of a road. From a marketing standpoint, it’s a win-win. Visitors either purchase goods or take photos; either way, it promotes the brand of *Stranger Things*.

Money Heist Experience (3/19/22)

Right after the *Stranger Things* store experience, dramaturg Liv Rigdon invited me to a narrativized escape room experience based around the show *Money Heist*. Naturally, I had to take part. The experience consisted of going to a disused bank that provided the setting for a fictional bank heist based on a television show. After an employee explained the rules to us, we had to choose code names based on city names, and then a performer led us on a “tour” of the bank. Other performers jumped out and instigated the heist, playing rival groups attempting to pull off a heist at the bank. For the most part, the experience consisted of gathering codes and clues to get through the bank’s security with the assistance of one or two performers. At certain points, scenes would play out with audience participation. The experience ended with the audience and one of the performers successfully pulling off the heist, before everyone exited into a debrief hall to chat, take photo ops, and buy food or merchandise. I definitely found that this experience fit within my definition of experiential dramaturgy, and while it was another commercialized experience, it did do something innovative in blending together two mediums, that of the escape room and that of interactive theater, almost akin to a haunted house.

First, I was struck by the environmental immersion in holding the experience in a former bank. As such, a few of the rooms were diegetic, and the final scene in the bank vault actually did occur in a disused bank vault. A few of the readings have discussed the use of diegetic space in hosting immersive theater events in the actual locations where they would naturally occur.

This practice prevents world-bleed, a term referring to when aspects of the outside world creep into an immersive production, shattering the illusion. Instead, this was a self-contained world. The first performer that led us on a tour did in fact give us a tour of what I presume to be the real history of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank. At the very least, it did not provide a fictional name for the bank but acknowledged it as a real place in our world. This shared history of the space organically lent itself to the experience that the piece wished to impart, as a renovated bank that could be the site of a heist.

In terms of interaction, *Money Heist* invited the audience to interact with almost everything in the environment of their own accord, but heavily guided the game and performance aspects. For example, one section involved using blacklights to uncover the secret codes on objects hidden throughout a room. As an audience member, I could interact with anything in the environment that I wished to interact with there. However, the performer in the room helped lead the other participants and me to the conclusions we had to reach to find the codes, especially by handing us the blacklights. Liv pointed out that because of this, there was never any risk of failure. Unlike a true escape room, there was an illusion that we could fail, but the reality was never a possibility thanks to the performers. I sometimes wondered what would happen if an audience member did not participate or if they gravitated toward the wrong clue. I pointed out a suspicious-looking painting in the room, which the performer acknowledged in character as something that would probably be useful down the road.

Though I had not seen the *Money Heist* show on which the experience was based, some of the other audience members had. Therefore, they knew the significance of the code names, as each character in the show has a name based on a city. As such, some people chose the names of their favorite characters, and I realized that the performers would allude to the significance of this on occasion. I did not know the names, but as someone who had seen a few heist movies and shows, the experience held up to the structural tropes of that subgenre. Interestingly, one of the people who joined the audience members in the lobby was a secret performer, which I realized after the experience started, and they responded a bit too well to another performer's query. This choice proved fairly clever, as it ensured that the actual audience members would have a benchmark for how to interact with the performers. The fact that the hidden performer could talk back showed that we could as well, but it also kept us as audience members on task, as this performer could guide our experience as well.

Lastly, I found the onboarding and debriefing sections fascinating as opportunities for connection between audience members. We received a decent amount of time to share our codenames with each other, and I believe that the amount of time was also for us to get to know each other so that we'd all feel more comfortable communicating during the experience. This element met its goal, as a few of the puzzles, while still guided deftly by performers, encouraged us to solve them together. After the show, the large hall that held the debrief encouraged people

to take pictures for each other, similar to the *Stranger Things* experience, and likewise bond over their familiarity with the show. Though I hadn't seen it, my fellow audience members reacted positively and encouraged me to check it out, as we had bonded through solving puzzles together throughout the experience. That said, it also had the ramification of encouraging people to buy the show's merchandise, and naturally, promote it. Similarly, as Liv suggested, I felt a sense of accomplishment that I could use to build camaraderie with my fellow audience members. However, deep down, I knew I didn't actually achieve anything with my own insight or skills. Nevertheless, for an experience that uses the trappings of an escape room–but is really a kind of guided theatrical experience, does that matter? I still enjoyed the experience, and it served as a good example of how one form, the theatrical walking tour, could provide a unique take by borrowing from the mechanics of another form, the escape room.

Fantasy Tavern Night (7/17/22)

Liv Rigdon told me about an event entitled *Fantasy Tavern Night* occurring at a bar in Brooklyn. She had learned about it through TikTok, and I found out that many immersive events get passed around through word of mouth on that platform. While I'm not on TikTok myself, I'd wager that this may point to increased interest in immersive events from Gen-Z, as I've theorized before. However, that may be a thesis for another time.

I attended the event with my friend Connor Wahrman, whom I did theater with in undergrad. WildHunt, which ran the event, noted on the event page that costumes were optional but encouraged. I found some nautical-themed coats (close enough to fantasy) for us to wear. I'm glad we did, since to my surprise, most of the attendees arrived in costume. At the start of the event, with everyone seated in booths and tables in the bar's backroom, the performers made rounds to check in with folks. Asked who we were, Connor and I both came up with characters who would plausibly visit this fantasy tavern.

Interestingly, the event never instructed us to role-play, but everyone I spoke with came up with a character based on their costume. I believe this speaks to a few elements of experiential dramaturgy. People found costumes and role-playing to offer a greater buy-in to the immersion of the "magic circle," wanting to give themselves that experience. As the LARP folks I spoke with said, the fantasy genre and its conventions can help people come up with characters and make decisions, since folks would have familiarity with them.

That said, I did find that the shorthand provided by genre conventions could also prove a double-edged sword. After initial greetings, the hosts invited the attendees to the "quest board" to choose a quest and find suitable companions for a questing party. This is a common staple of

many fantasy role-playing games as well as books, films, and other media. Each quest's unique qualifications, such as proficiencies at navigating or fighting monsters, lent themselves well to encouraging role-play and building out characters. And having to find people with specific skills to form a party encouraged the sharing of backstory, promoting connection through internal discourse. However, once each person formed their party of adventurers, the event didn't offer any way to follow the quest. As such, I noticed several parties, including my own, going up to each performer to figure out how to begin the chosen quest. In reality, that was the extent of the exercise. But the problem came from the structural knowledge provided by the genre conventions of the exercise. A quest experience facilitates the creation of a party, encouraging people to join together, but it also implies the existence of a quest itself. As such, I learned that a genre-based experiential piece could not pick and choose the extent of a genre convention utilized. To use a literary example, an *Alice in Wonderland* piece inviting audiences down the rabbit hole would then have to invite audiences into a kind of wonderland; otherwise, the shorthand used for the experience would prove unreliable. This type of experiential mechanic falls under the purview of meaning-making, as genre conventions can quickly convey meaning but must prove consistent.

However, the *Fantasy Tavern Night* got the meaning conveyed through fantasy tropes back on track with a series of games and performances that built the world of the fantasy tavern out through a sense of consistency. Each game would focus on a different fantasy "class" of adventurers, such as mages or rogues, offering an easy structure for audiences to interact with in their experience. WildHunt would intersperse musical or comedy performances in between, which in turn would help with world-building and character development. From what I could tell, the musical numbers of the piece consisted of traditional tavern tunes and sea shanties. Naturally, the cast presented them as sing-alongs, and the history behind them again helped to establish the location of the event. I would say that the most significant achievement of the piece pertained to connection, as the games and exercises of the event fostered meeting new people, aided by the LARP aspects that provided a framework for these interactions.

Halloween Nights at Eastern State Penitentiary (10/2/22)

Every fall, aside from the during pandemic, I like to check out a haunted house event. This time around, some friends and I attended *Halloween Nights* at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. I had wanted to attend for some time, but I realized I could evaluate this event through the knowledge gained from the haunted house folks I spoke to for this thesis. Eastern State Penitentiary used to serve as an actual prison, operational from 1829 to 1971. Today a National Historic Landmark, in addition to guided tours, it offers a set of haunted attractions every fall.

This year, *Halloween Nights* consisted of five haunted houses, each one with a theme: "Delirium," a neon haunted house with 3D effects courtesy of glasses provided, "Big Top Terror," a circus-themed fright, "Nightmares," one with a sleep paralysis theme, "Machine Shop," an industrial themed one, and "The Crypt," a vampire-themed haunted attraction. Of these, I found "Machine Shop" the most successful in what it aimed to accomplish. Looking through the lens of experiential dramaturgy, it did a few things the others did not in its execution. First, the strong theme of it aided in immersion. Each performer played the role of a creepy shop worker, and the actual prison walls and wrought iron elements diegetically fit into the world of this machine shop. Strangely, the vampire-themed one didn't utilize any of the tropes of vampires, proving more confusing than scary. As for interaction, "Machine Shop" had a couple of key moments when performers would make a request of the attendee, such as a section where one would get their hand stamped by a machine.

For each haunted house, guests would have the opportunity to take a glowstick, permitting the performers to touch them. When I interviewed Char, they spoke about this specifically regarding Eastern State Penitentiary and how they found that performers did not know what to do with someone once they caught them. This problem proved the case for a few of the haunted houses, but once again, "Machine Shop" found the solution. Towards the end of the haunted house, guests would start to walk down a long corridor to exit, presumably running down the long corridor once a performer would chase them. What would happen if they got caught? "Back through the machine!" the performer would scream, sending the caught individual through a revolving wall (think *Scooby-Doo* or *Young Frankenstein*) and back to the beginning of the attraction to go through it again.

Not only did this interaction successfully utilize the glow stick mechanic, but it also inscribed a kind of meaning. The haunted house built a clear world of trapped workers in a factory, and getting sent through repeatedly had an assembly line feel to it, with my hand once again stamped and me again witnessing the repetitive machine-like actions of the performers. Almost all haunted houses operate repetitively, as actors perform the same scares over and over again as new guests enter the space. But "Machine Shop" used the necessity of this in a pseudo-diegetic way, actively encouraging people to witness the repetition rather than suspend disbelief over it. I believe this speaks to the concept a few interviewed folks brought up of constraints breeding innovation. I wonder if this haunted house drew inspiration for its theme from the repetitive nature of most haunted house attractions.

Lastly, I want to touch on the concept of connection in this piece, and the interesting way in which "Machine Shop," in particular, fostered connection through the initial deprivation of it. For most of the haunted house attractions, groups could go in together. One would imagine that this would promote connection, and on some level it does, but it does not encourage attendees to

actively think about connecting with other people. For “Machine Shop,” attendees had to go in individually. During my experience, my friend Jimmy Yeager, who went in after me, ran ahead since he feared going alone. The deprivation of company actively made him seek it out. Sure enough, we both got caught and “sent through the machine.” Unfortunately, or hilariously, on the second dash to the exit, Jimmy proved too slow, and he got sent through again while I escaped. This occurrence added another layer of connection, this time of external connection occurring post-experience. Our other friends wondered why they all made it out simultaneously and I did not, and why Jimmy remained unaccounted for until his eventual exit (don’t worry, he did not get sent through for a fourth go-round). Here, the aspects of the experience unique to each individual fostered discussion. Similar to many immersive theater productions with optional or diverging paths, the differences prompted group discussion around each person’s unique experience.

Theatrical Productions

Ultimately, I concluded that this course's primary purpose is to teach students how they can utilize experiential dramaturgical tools to create works that engage audiences actively. Students may wish to use these techniques to create proscenium theater with experiential elements, fully immersive theater, or productions that lie somewhere in between. Regardless, I would like to highlight a few productions that vary along the experiential spectrum to show how experiential dramaturgy can apply to works in a variety of ways.

Traffic (3/26/22)

During the height of the pandemic the year previous, my friend and classmate Connor Scully reached out to invite me to a show produced by his company, DOG STUFF. Originally intended as a live show (more on that in a moment), *Traffic* became an online production instead. Written by Christina Tang, the show consisted of the view of tiny toy cars bumper-to-bumper in simulated traffic. Audience members received invitations to scan a QR code, logging them into a website that would allow them to choose a car based on the numbers placed on each one. Once the selection phase ended, audience members received a prompt via the website asking for them to make a choice, such as merging left, merging right, moving ahead, or honking the horn. During the next phase, the production team carried out each of these actions live on screen.

Meanwhile, audience members could read a snippet of a story on their phones pertaining to being stuck in traffic. This set of actions constituted a round, or act, of *Traffic*. Each round, consisting of a choice followed by the follow-through and story snippet, would integrate more options for the choices each time. The show culminated in absolute chaos, by design, with such outlandish options as an earthquake shaking the highway, aliens abducting cars, or a giant snake plowing through the assembled vehicles.

Experiencing this digital iteration a year prior to the live show, I wondered how the work would translate to an in-person experience. It had felt not only adequate online, but in fact ideal. So naturally, the announcement of the show as a double-header at the Exponential Festival piqued my interest. Appearing alongside *Still Goes*, another experiential show coincidentally in line with the scope of this thesis, *Traffic* opened at The Brick in March. In going to see it, I experienced the production in much the same way as its online counterpart, with a couple of notable distinctions.

I want to speak a bit about the elements of each production that stood out to me regarding experiential dramaturgy, in order to compare and contrast them. In terms of immersion, the show operated mostly in the same way in each iteration. Both times, audience members scanned a QR code to select a car. The immersion comes from the knowledge that one exists as both a traditional audience member, or viewer, and as an avatar in the form of an on-screen

vehicle. Even in the in-person production, the highway of cars appears projected on a screen, with the actual playset backstage. This conceit also allows for meaning-making, albeit not as strongly as the others elements, in the sense that audience members can derive meaning from the premise of being stuck in an absurd traffic scenario and whether the piece intends for them to take that literally or figuratively.

Though *Traffic* immerses its audiences in much the same way, whether digital or in-person, the unique facilitations offer up threads that unspool for greater ramifications pertaining to interaction and connection. Online, viewers could not see one another, only their cars, but they could interact with each other through a chat function. The anonymity of the text chat seemed to foster connection, as people did not mind calling someone out for refusing to merge into an open lane or idling their on-screen vehicle. In-person, audience members could in fact see each other, and the production tried to encourage interaction through each person taking a party hat with their car's number on it. However, whether due to the front-facing orientation of a traditional seating bank or peoples' reticence to approach strangers about their vehicles (perhaps like in real traffic), not much interpersonal connection occurred from this ploy. But at the same time, the in-person nature of the production made me realize that each audience member had received a different accompanying story via phone, something I had not known when I had experienced the piece online. This realization did in fact prompt conversation with my neighbor next to me, and I noticed the same for others.

Overall, *Traffic* exemplified the type of experiential theater this course seeks to describe and encourage. It drew from games in its presentation and implementation, with audience members essentially "playing" the role of a person stuck in traffic. As an experiential theater piece, it encouraged audience members to actively engage with the piece itself, with others around them, and with a story told. While I dedicated this section to a discussion of *Traffic,* I would like to give a brief description of *Still Goes*. This piece, by Nola Latty, consists of a video game about two dogs finding each other. Presented at The Brick alongside *Traffic*, the game's creators played it together live in front of the audience. Ultimately, I would categorize this piece as a game played live, as opposed to *Traffic,* a piece of live theater incorporating elements of a game. But it does raise an interesting question, can any scripted game become live theater if an audience watches it unfold?

Try This On For Me (5/20/22)

Having already provided a few recommendations for this project, Anthony Sertel Dean asked if I knew of The Neo-Furists and invited me to attend their show *Try This On For Me*. I had seen a prior show of The Neo-Futurists back when I lived in Chicago. The experimental theater group primarily performs short plays and monologues, with the conceit that the actors never play characters, always appearing as themselves. I had enjoyed their show that I had seen, and oddly hadn't thought of them for this project until Anthony mentioned them. That being said, they certainly fit the bill for a group that deals in experiential dramaturgy. Their latest show, *Try This On For Me*, proved no exception.

Try This On For Me consists of three performers discussing their relationship to clothing throughout their lives and how clothing and identity inform each other. Each performer shares anecdotes, ranging from the profound to the comedic. An example of the latter comes from a story about growing up with parents who confused boxers for children's shorts, complete with the performance of the original song, "They Thought They Were Shorts." While the show itself proves entertaining, the experiential elements come from the staging and the final gambit it facilitates.

Try This On For Me is staged in the round, with the performers mostly in the center, the audience seated around them, and then the outer circle consisting of the set, composed of clothing racks filled with garments. First, the staging allows for the signature Neo-Futurist sense of immediacy, with performers speaking directly to the audience and sometimes individual members. Here we have a general sense of connection, and perhaps a bit of interaction. However, the final section of the show proves the most experiential. The performers invite audience members to try on any of the clothes on the racks, and then return to their seats for the final scene before leaving with their chosen garment.

This ending conceit facilitates all of the aspects of experiential dramaturgy. Audience members become immersed in the show, which casts them as pseudo-shoppers at a thrift store, through the invitation to sift through clothing and take a piece home. Interactions occur between audience members and the clothes they try on. Connection comes from audience members complimenting each other on their choices or asking for opinions. And meaning-making comes from the themes around identity that the play shares leading up to this segment. One could wonder why the show does not have more experiential moments leading up to this, but based on what I learned from those I interviewed for this thesis, the smaller moments prime audience members for the bigger ones. I would say this phenomenon is true here. For example, a performer talking about radically changing their style facilitates an audience member feeling empowered to do the same.

Lastly, I want to touch on the unique way that the prime conceit of The Neo-Futurists–not playing characters–facilitates the experiential dramaturgy of *Try This On For Me*. I think about

what Char said about haunted house performers and how the best ones do not play characters but rather scare audience members as themselves. The immediacy provides a heightened emotional response and, thereby, an experience. Here, the immediacy of *Try This On For Me* builds a sense of trust and an atmosphere of comfort. The audience and cast don't "act" like the space is a thrift store, but mutually accept this diegetic mapping of a thrift store onto a theater space through a give and a get. For my experience with the show, I chose a jacket that fit nicely with the rest of my outfit and style. Coming up to me afterward, a performer asked if I needed help picking an item of clothing, and I said that I had picked the jacket. They responded that they genuinely thought I had arrived wearing it, since it fit so well. I mention this small interaction because, while only a brief moment, it contains each of the tenets of experiential dramaturgy, from the immersion into the rules of the space, interaction with an object, connection with a performer, and the meaning-making ascribed to my choice. This is not to say that all shows should get rid of the concept of character, but it does illustrate how the practice allows for an easy tool for facilitating the experiential.

Claws (5/22/22)

After hearing Evan Neiden talk about Candle House Collective and telephonic theater, I decided to try his latest piece. Entitled *Claws,* the experience consists of a phone call from a boy claiming that he found a monster under his bed. Audience members–or rather, the audience member, picks up the phone and helps the boy with his monstrous problem.

As I talked about with Evan, Candle House has extensive onboarding to prepare audiences for taking on the role of someone who can assist in this call. I received an email after placing my order, confirming the date and time and reminding me of other pertinent info. Since experiential work often hinges on the audience understanding any rules of a piece, or how they fit into the world, the email contained extensive information to help immerse me in the piece.

First, the email diegetically thanked me for volunteering with the Etcetera Helpline. Similar to role-playing games and activities, this gave me a role to work with during the experience. An orientation video linked to the email began with a short snippet of the Beatles song "Help" before providing a voiceover orientation welcoming me as an Etcetera Helpline representative and referencing the "automated shift confirmation" emailed to me. It then instructed me to answer the call with the phrase "how can I help you?" before offering a humorous practice session. It then went over other instructions and advice, including the safe phrase. While seemingly simple, the introductory email and voiceover orientation serve key roles. The role-play and offbeat humor immerse the participant, conveying roles and a tone for the piece that will follow. Both the email and orientation repeat the same instructions in slightly

different ways, ensuring multiple engagement points for a participant to receive pertinent instructions. The voiceover orientation proves completely diegetic, with the voiceover remaining in character throughout. However, the email does drop out of the universe of the piece to remind participants that they will be talking to a character. This information proves necessary, ethically and legally, given the nature of the piece. So the semi-diegetic email and fully diegetic orientation provide a "have your cake and eat it too" means for audiences to both engage and understand the upcoming performance.

As for the piece itself, *Claws* delivers what I would certainly describe as a dramaturgically experiential piece of theater. Though it occurs entirely over the phone, it still involves a live performer and live audience, just not in the same space. Picking up the phone, the performer breathed heavily into the microphone as he explained the dilemma of the monster. The believably fearful performance added a sense of urgency to the piece, which bills itself as playing for around 40 to 50 minutes on average. This urgency moves the piece along, even as the audience member may speak or ask questions. The performance also encourages the audience to listen, so as to get the full extent of the plot over the duration of the piece, receiving necessary developments as they occur.

Since the audience has so much freedom, how does *Claws* facilitate interaction and how much agency does a participant have? Interaction flowed seamlessly thanks to a type of system of storytelling. As Evan had told me, the works of Candle House Collective acknowledge that they occur over the phone. Since phones serve as a ubiquitous mode of communication, the piece gives audiences a framework for interaction right from the start. The performer never seemed to talk over me, and in fact would defer to me if we both spoke simultaneously. They likely never felt the need to rush me since the horror genre conventions already placed a ticking clock on the experience, and occasional noises from the monster ensured that the spotlight could return to the performance if necessary.

That said, while the experiential design of *Claws* fosters seamless interactivity, I found that agency proved trickier to navigate. I wondered how much agency I had, deciding to devise a plan to help the boy based on all the information I received. Thinking about the correlative and non-correlative decisions in choose-your-own-adventure works, I wondered whether *Claws* would accommodate a one-to-one implementation of choice or an inverse implementation. For example, if one chose for the boy to kill the monster, would he then kill it or rather attempt to and fail? Ultimately, I found that while the performer would directly accommodate any variable choices throughout most of the piece, those at the end would have agency removed in favor of staying true to the constant of the narrative. This proves a dramaturgical dilemma for any experiential work that gives participants high degrees of freedom, boiling down to the question of whose story does the work ultimately tell, that of the author or the audience?

For *Claws,* the piece ostensibly wished to tell a story about taking things for granted. In a way, the agency given to audiences and then taken away conveyed that narrative. Though at the same time, the piece didn't quite make the affordances clear. I only infer that I had agency throughout and that I didn't towards the end, but a participant could feasibly assume they always had agency if they made all of the "correct" choices. That brings us to the concept of meaning-making. Personally, I didn't find *Claws* to tell a story around taking things for granted, but rather one around forgiveness. One of the joys of experiential work is that it often encourages audiences to take away their own unique meanings from a piece, thereby promoting discussion with other attendees and a more audience-centric means of storytelling. In that regard, I would label the experience a success, even if it didn't necessarily convey its intentions.

I think about what Evan said in that whether or not a person enjoys a Candle House piece, it will likely stay with them for a while. And I would agree with this and argue that even if the wildly experiential nature of the piece forces it to make a tough decision on agency, it still provides audiences with a deeply personal theatrical experience. No two performances would ever be the same, and as such, audience members can have a uniquely tailored immersive theater experience without having to pay top dollar or even leave their own homes. As such, I would like to include telephonic theater as part of the course, since it offers students a low-risk yet high-reward experience.

The Strangers Came Today (6/25/22)

On a whim, I decided to see what shows were playing, and stumbled upon *The Strangers Came Today* by Emily Zemba. The marketing synopsis of the play describes a support group interrogating otherworldly experiences that gradually goes out of control. There's an imposter present, and the description asks how many there are and if it's "you," meaning the audience. This synopsis piqued my interest, so I visited the New Ohio Theatre to check out the play.

Right off the bat, the play offers a highly effective example of onboarding. In the lobby, the front-of-house staff encourages audience members to write down an otherworldly experience they had and hold onto it. Once the house opens and audience members enter the theater, a performer–who I thought was an usher at first–greets each attendee, then goes around the semi-circular seating arrangement and collects responses in a jar. They proceed to do this multiple times, offering paper and pencils for those who need them and then bestowing a button for those who hand in a response.

Why did I find this onboarding so effective? First, because it contains multiple catch-points. Somebody who missed the prompt in the lobby would then get the chance to

provide a response in the house. The performer then making multiple rounds allows hesitant audience members to witness others taking part and gauge if the “ask” of the piece is right for them. For me, for example, I did not know if I would have to read my response aloud, but once I saw the jar, I knew a bit more of the context. I also appreciated that each person who turns in a response receives a button, a nice incentive for some folks who may be more interaction-averse. In short, each catch-point not only provides multiple opportunities for onboarding, but the slight differences between each one can accommodate multiple types of audience members.

Though many people do not contribute a response–about half and half at the performance I attended–I would argue for this piece that honoring the request is not as important as the existence of the request in itself in onboarding every audience member into the piece. The play tells the story of a support group, and like any support group, some folks share and others watch. The fact that audience members receive the same opportunity as the cast members helps to invite them into the world. Seated in the semi-circle around the cast, the audience of *The Strangers Came Today* essentially exists as an extension of the support group of the play.

In terms of the plot itself, the rest of the show follows straightforward theatrical conventions without any experiential or interactive qualities. The only exception comes from one character, the imposter, picking a story from the jar and passing it off as their own. Though a small moment, the fascinating thing about it is that its significance relies on the experiential quality of the play’s opening. The characters around this one would not know that the story belongs to someone else, but the audience would, since someone watching the play provided said story. This tiny moment allows the audience to take meaning from the interaction, as the opening request fulfills a dramaturgical function in the play.

Several months later, while working on another show, I happened to cross paths with Violeta Picayo, the director of *The Strangers Came Today*. She told me two fascinating stories about the experiential moments in the show. I mentioned how much I appreciated the onboarding, and Violeta explained that it existed as a kind of world-building exercise. If audience members sat in the semi-circle and a performer asked them for anecdotes, providing a button in response, then audiences would get a shorthand for how the meetings of this support group typically operate. That way, when the play properly begins, the script doesn’t have to take time to establish how the meetings operate. That work has already occurred. For example, a character receiving a button would mean that they had contributed, and the audience wouldn’t have to get told that information since any folks who had contributed a story themselves would have received their own button. Likewise, Violetta also explained that the original script stated that the imposter would tell a story that was not their own, and the idea to use one from the audience came after–since, like I said, the audience would inherently understand the significance of taking a story from the jar. In these experiential moments, interactions exist as shorthand, conveying important information to the audience as efficiently as possible.

Overall, *The Strangers Came Today* is more like a traditional play than much of the work I've investigated. While it does immerse audiences into the world of the play, it is not immersive theater in the widespread sense of the word. However, it serves as an ideal example of how any play can add small experiential moments to a production to convey just a little more theme or narrative to the audience. This is in fact one of my goals for experiential dramaturgy, to get theatermakers to think about how theatergoing can become a more active and less passive experience for audiences, even if productions otherwise follow the traditional model.

Bottom of the Ocean (7/15/22)

In speaking with Andrew Hoepfner about his show *Bottom of the Ocean*, I knew I had to see it for myself. A classmate of mine compared it to *Sleep No More*, but said that she personally enjoyed it more. Even though it does not offer the open-world experience that *Sleep No More* does, *Bottom of the Ocean*, or *BOTO*, delivers a more personal on-rails experience. The welcome email told me to look for the "sign of the sine" down the basement stairs, and utter the password "BOTO" upon arrival.

Right from that initial invitation, the piece provided an entryway into immersion and interaction with the piece. The concept of looking for a symbol and uttering a password evoked a speakeasy, a vibe I received when I undertook those actions upon arrival. In fact, one segment of *BOTO* alludes to a speakeasy when providing the history of the setting that audience members step into for their journey. The simple act of requiring a password coyly informs audiences that this piece will include interactions without outright saying so. However, the invitation does list various elements included in the performance, such as experiencing fog and oils as well as eating vegan foods. As a few people have mentioned, it is worth stepping outside the immersion of a piece beforehand to ensure that audience members feel safe.

As for *BOTO* itself, once I arrived and gave the password, a performer played tunes on a xylophone and instructed me to repeat them. This "ask" reminded me of simple puzzles in video games such as *The Legend of Zelda,* in which musicality and musical instruments figure prominently in the lore. However, I must admit that while I sufficiently memorized the notes (for the most part), I struggled to get them to sound on the instrument itself. I did not fail on purpose, but this did prove an unintended experiment in witnessing how immersive shows accommodate audience failure. The performer (Andrew Hoepfner himself) treated me with infinite patience, going over the instrument's playing until I had more or less mastered it.

In a way, this initial request highlights one of the repeating motifs of *BOTO*, that of the "ask." The performers guide the five audience members, individually or in pairs, through the room of the piece. In each room, a performer makes a request of the audience member. For the first main room, it revolves around sharing events from one's day. In a middle room, the participant shares memories from long ago. And in an optional, penultimate room, an individual audience member shares thoughts relating to death and the afterlife. As one can tell, the "asks" of the piece start small but gradually ramp up throughout seven or so rooms. This design demonstrates an integral rule that a few folks have shared about interactions, to start with small requests to gradually earn the trust for bigger requests that may prove more emotionally impactful. And while readers may raise eyebrows at the optional "afterlife discussion" room, it in fact proved to be one of my favorites, and I felt that each request and ritual along the way helped prepare me for that intimate experience.

Naturally, this ties into safety, since audience members must feel at ease in order to agree to a "high-stakes" request. For several rituals in *BOTO*, a performer would give me a choice to take part in a slightly alternative ritual should I find the initial one too demanding or uncomfortable. For example, performers would sing lyrics and guide me to sing them back, or speak them back if I preferred. As someone who does not sing, I surprised myself by singing each time, finding myself perfectly at ease with the dim lighting, tranquil soundtrack, and soothing performer voices throughout *BOTO.* Whenever a ritual in *BOTO* involves physical touch, a performer first asks for consent. At a workshop in the space the following week, Andrew explained that having performers ask, "Do I have your consent?" both integrates smoothly and puts audience members at ease. Similarly, he noted the dim lighting as a conscious choice to help audience members suspend their disbelief in the surrealistic fantastical world of *BOTO* and make people feel more safe and immersed.

The design of *BOTO* provides immersion, building out the world of the piece, but it also conveys meaning. The show proves light–practically nonexistent–on plot, and yet the characters and settings of the piece prove evocative. The production occurs in the space of an old church, and the designs of *BOTO* all suggest a general sense of religion, without specifying any in particular. The robes of the performers, the candlelit rooms, and the rituals themselves, all convey the concept of spirituality, allowing audience members to fill in the blanks for themselves. The focus on aquatic and deep-sea life, referenced in the title, conveys the concept of the unknowable or the sublime. Whether a person is religious or not, every human being has a relationship with whatever lies beyond the known world. In serving as a container for those ideas rather than the ideas themselves, *BOTO* allows audience members to confront their own thoughts on spirituality and draw their own conclusions.

Having gone through such a deeply personal journey, I must admit that I did not feel the need to chat with any of my fellow audience members after the performance, and I imagine they

felt the same. That said, I would still say the piece fostered connection, since the final room brings the audience together from their individual journeys to take part in a sound bath, making music together with various instruments–also drawing from the very first task of the piece. Later on, I enjoyed discussing my experience with others, especially since not everyone went into the optional room, and many wanted to know what it entailed. But walking to the train that night after *BOTO*, I felt a sense of profound calm, as the soothing interactivity of the show provided a sense of catharsis. While *BOTO* is firmly a piece of immersive theater, not traditional, it gets at the feeling of catharsis that Aristotle described as a goal of theater more than many traditional shows.

The Twenty-Sided Tavern (7/22/22)

Always on the lookout for experiential shows, I stumbled upon a *Dungeons & Dragons* play entitled *The Twenty-Sided Tavern*. I have noticed a few *D&D*-inspired shows have cropped up recently, perhaps affirming my theory that theatergoers crave more experiential works coming out of an isolating pandemic. But when I lived in Chicago, I regularly went to see *Improvised Dungeons and Dragons*, a comedy show where improvisers would act out a *D&D* campaign every weekend. Curious to see how *The Twenty-Sided Tavern* would compare, I found that *Improvised Dungeons and Dragons* focused more on the content of the tabletop role-playing game, and *The Twenty-Sided Tavern* focused more on its form.

I attended the show with my friend Connor Wahrman, an actor and avid *D&D* player. Arriving at the theater, we each received a colored die. I received a green one, and Connor a red one. The front-of-house staff also instructed us to scan a QR code on the wall. As we sat down, performers went through the auditorium, chatting with audience members and asking for any name suggestions. The humorous chat set the comedic tone for the piece and thereby clued us in to the kind of off-the-wall suggestions we should write down on the papers provided. As readers may realize, many of these experiential pieces discussed differ in many ways, yet have the commonality that they showcase simple audience interactions up front.

Once the show began, the performers explained that our colored dice corresponded to a character class. Green meant “rogue,” blue meant “mage,” and red meant “fighter.” Throughout the piece, the audience members would participate in the show through their phones as if playing a game, hence the QR codes. First up, each colored faction received a poll to vote for the specific character of their class that they wanted to take part in the story. For example, the audience members with blue dice could vote for the mage they wanted to see go on an adventure based on a list of character descriptions provided on a giant projector screen. Once the audience chose these, the performers donned costumes and assumed roles for the performance.

Throughout the show, the game master, or narrator, would provide dilemmas for the characters as they journeyed on their fantasy quest. Whenever a character had to overcome one of these trials, their faction would take part in a phone activity to determine their success. These ranged from tapping the phone repeatedly for an endurance-based trial, such as running away from a monster, or typing in the answer to a riddle to solve a mystery, such as gaining passage from a gatekeeper. These games arguably comprised the show's lynchpin and facilitated every tenet of experiential dramaturgy. The fantasy-based design and queries immersed audiences in the fantastical world. The interface of the phone provided interaction. And the correlation between a digital activity and its represented action provided meaning-making. But what about connection? Occasionally, the characters would have to overcome a dilemma together collectively. In these instances, each faction would receive a phone activity that would only solve the problem in tandem. The most notable instance came from a riddle, in which each faction received one part of the riddle, and audience members had to communicate with people from other factions to figure out the solution. Though failed in solving the communal riddle at the performance I attended, the intention of the design itself paid off, as the invested audience members immediately spoke up to determine who around them was of a different faction and could work together to solve the riddle.

Though the phone proved the primary means of audience engagement throughout the piece, the game master also facilitated interaction by asking audience members to name any tertiary characters that the core protagonists encountered in their quest. This mechanic, and the initial collection of the slips with names, deftly allowed for multiple engagement points. Though audience members would not get the same level of engagement if they did not have access to a phone, they could still engage through verbal or written means, albeit in a more limited capacity.

The engagements stood in for the dice rolls and decisions of an actual tabletop role-playing game and proved the key draw of *The Twenty-Sided Tavern*. But if the production had a blank spot, similar to *Dungeons & Dragons* itself, it proved more of a system for storytelling than a story itself. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, this doesn't cause issues, since players tell their own stories over the course of several sessions. But for a roughly hour-long performance, *The Twenty-Sided Tavern* could not tell a complete story. The freedom given to the audience meant that the narrative and character-building suffered, as even the collective band of heroes themselves came down to the whims of the audience. That said, one could argue that the emotional resonance came not from artful storytelling but from the knowledge that success or failure hinged on gameplay, similar to a real-time sporting event's emotional highs and lows.

The Nosebleed (7/30/22)

Earlier this year, I served as a dramaturg on a production of *Der Ring Gott Farblonjet* by Charles Ludlam. The director, Phoebe Brooks, brought me on to the production due to my love for the works of Ludlam, but also because they wanted it to have an experiential aspect to it. We came up with the concept of professional opera performers quitting the production of *The Ring Cycle* at the last minute, necessitating the "front-of-house staff" to perform Ludlam's parody of it. This production is how I got to know Ashil Lee, one of these intrepid performers and one who completely evaded detection at the top of each performance. They got cast in *The Nosebleed* by Aya Ogawa, and I went to the Lincoln Center show to see them and found myself pleasantly surprised by the experiential elements of the show.

On the Lincoln Center website, the marketing blurb states that "the play invites audience members to consider unasked questions of their own." This description stood out to me, since I have noticed other traditional shows with experiential elements also use the word "invite" in their marketing. For example, *The Strangers Came Today* "invites us all to interrogate our own beliefs and skepticism." I admit, I find this validating since one of my first definitions for experiential dramaturgy was for immersion to "invite audiences into a world." I think this is because leading with "participatory" or "interactive" denotes a kind of mandatory activation that many theatergoers may shy away from, but an invitation suggests a request that one may accept or decline as one sees fit. Both *The Nosebleed* and *The Strangers Came Today* fall under the more traditional theatrical end of the spectrum of experiential works. So, I believe the softer intonation of the word "invite" has value here.

As for the show itself, *The Nosebleed* begins in a diegetic way by having each performer tell a story about a personal failure of theirs before inviting an audience member to share one of their own. Notably, the cast does not stand on the stage while doing this, but rather right in front of it. This staging plays with immersion and the notion of "the magic circle" in a unique way. A proscenium stage separates audience from performance, reality from fiction (or heightened reality), so a prologue in front of the proscenium slyly keys the audience into the notion that they may play a role in the unfolding drama. And like Kevin said in his interview, an early demonstration of an interaction can help an audience learn said interaction through, as he called it, an "opening gambit." Sure enough, someone immediately volunteered their own personal anecdote after each cast member had shared their own, prompting others to raise their hands and for playwright Aya Ogawa (also a performer in the show) to apologize that they only had time for one audience story but that people always want to share more.

After that opening gambit, the play moves onstage, recounting the narrative of the history between Aya and their distant father. Much of this does not lie in the realm of the experiential, but it does not have to for its themes to land. The opening gesture does, however, prime audience members for a significant interaction that occurs late in the show. The cast hands out papers and pencils and invites–there's that word–the audience to write something they wish they could tell

their own father. The cast then offers to collect and shred the pieces as they explain that they will use them to model a traditional Japanese funeral rite. In the actual practice, relatives pick up the bone fragments of the cremated deceased with chopsticks and place the pieces in an urn. For this iteration, the cast allows several audience members to take part in a scene evoking this practice with the shredded paper pieces in place of bone fragments. With this scene, the paper notes of each audience member take on a greater meaning. The play essentially casts certain audience members as mourners at a funeral through their participation, giving them a framework for interaction in this piece.

At the end of the show, the cast invites audience members out to the lobby to write down a regret of theirs on a post-it and add it to a lobby display. As a dramaturg, I have mixed feelings about lobby displays. I believe that some exist as a kind of band-aid, providing exposition that really should've existed in the play itself. But I'm a big proponent of interactive lobby displays, as they can facilitate connections between audience members or with a work before or after the given show. While I did not add a post-it to this display, I appreciated reading the notes and watching others volunteer their own or discuss them with each other. I highly recommend interactive lobby displays for dramaturgs looking to incorporate light experiential elements into otherwise traditional shows. But across the board, *The Nosebleed* did an exemplary job of showing how proscenium theater can incorporate various experiential elements to aid in thematic and narrative development.

Thesis Workshops (5/2/22, 5/3/22, and 7/11/22)

As Char and a couple of others suggested, I decided to test the thesis out as a 90-minute workshop for my classmates, mentors, and colleagues. This way, I could both use the thesis for the intended purpose as a tool for education, and also prototype it to learn how to refine it for a future occasion. In making the presentation, I kept all four of the tenets I established but spoke for just a little while on each one. Thereby I broke the workshop into a lecture of four parts: immersion, interaction, meaning-making, and connection, followed by a fifth seminar part of discussion. In deciding what to include and what not to include, I focused on a mix of points that felt most relevant, interested me the most, and seemed to speak to a theater-familiar crowd in providing direct practical applications for the use of experiential practices for live theater.

For the first iteration of the workshop on Monday, May 2nd, I'd say it went well overall. Liv Rigdon, Jorge Schultz, Amelia Johnson, and Greg Nanni served as my test students. I became conscious that I talked for a while without a break, which I think became a bit of an information overload for these students. Likewise, this wasn't helped by the fact that I still tried to cram as much information as possible into an essentially 75-minute presentation. I did say that people could interrupt with questions, but I did not specifically pause for questions until the end. As such, the students did not seem to have much to comment on at the end. That being said, the few comments they did have on the content proved invaluable. Jorge mentioned that he was especially interested in the concept of "meta-gaming" and tied it into the *Rocky Horror Show*, an example that somehow never occurred to me, but I decided I would have to include. Similarly, I had put a long-winded definition in for meta-gaming, but Liv summed it up perfectly as "superimposing a game onto a game." Greg brought up walking tours as a potential experiential medium, something that had occurred to me recently after going on a ghost tour.

But while the participants had few comments about the content, they had a wealth of suggestions for improving the presentation, which proved no less invaluable. Amelia suggested having the interactive part of the workshop come earlier, and Liv added that it would be helpful to have more interactive sections to break things up. Similarly, Jorge suggested a different color scheme for each section, to help students keep track of each of the four parts. Generally, people wanted more active examples throughout to help people feel creative and engaged, less text and more images, and more labels or captions for the images. They also suggested cutting a few subjects, since they admitted feeling a bit overwhelmed. I happily obliged, and decided to have these changes ready for the next day.

These suggestions helped immensely, as I sensed a more engaged and excited energy from the participants on Tuesday, May 3rd. This time I also had a larger group, consisting of Kanika Vaish, Chaesong Kim, Anthony Sertel Dean, Sydney Guye, Christian Parker, Phoebe Brooks, and Greg Nanni, who returned to compare and contrast the two sessions. In addition to the one interactive moment from the day before, I added three more to this session, so each part

of the lecture could have an active example. Ironically, not only did the first example help to illustrate the concept of onboarding, but it also onboarded people into the workshop. Permitting people to speak from the beginning encouraged them to ask questions throughout, and this time I paused between each section to check for any burning questions. Less content helped promote a sense of quality over quantity, and I imagine the change in color scheme helped to make the content more manageable since people seemed to retain more information.

As such, this group had much more to ask about and respond to for the content discussion section. Christian brought up the feeling of worrying about doing the right thing in immersive theater, and Phoebe echoed this sentiment as well. Adding the example of the *Rocky Horror Show* proved invaluable in giving the presentation more of an ending since the show includes many concepts from the presentation. It fostered a discussion about onboarding audiences so that they know what they are doing. Christian shared a story of going to the Broadway production and finding that audiences were unsure whether to adhere to Broadway or *Rocky Horror* etiquette practices. Greg shared a story of the Bucks County Playhouse production, which included guides for audiences to follow. Anthony brought up the differences between "meta-gaming" that creators intend for versus those that they do not. Greg brought up participatory shows where audience members are not sure whether they have permission to dive into certain topics in the interactions. Christian talked about the interactive Taylor Mac play *The Lily's Revenge*, which I had not heard of though Sydney admitted to not being a fan. We then concluded with a discussion about audience talkbacks and how they are not often onboarded or structured well. All in all, it proved a fruitful discussion about the content of the workshop. I opened it up for feedback about how the workshop itself went, and people generally seemed content with it, and Greg later told me that he felt it was a marked improvement over the previous day's.

I heard from a couple of people who could not attend the prior workshops, so I held another at Columbia on Monday, July 11th. This workshop allowed these people to participate and also allowed me to practice the workshop before officially debuting it at the Literary Manager and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) conference in Philadelphia. Connor Scully, Aidan Carr, and John Eisner attended this workshop at Columbia. Despite the small group, we had a lively discussion. First, for the previous iteration of the workshop, I added light role-playing exercises for each tenet of the experiential dramaturgy. For the first one, I described a fantasy world and asked what object each person wanted to take on their quest. Fittingly, Connor, Aidan, and John each picked something magical or fantastical to take. I believe this speaks to the concept a few folks I interviewed mentioned, that popular genre provides an easy framework for onboarding participants.

As for our discussion, this group became particularly interested in the concepts of affordances and capacity. Connor brought up Andrew Scheider's show *YOUARENOWHERE,*

which involves the reveal of a second seating bank of audience members opposite the first. The affordances of a conventional theater imply the existence of just one seating bank and one stage. However, one can alter the affordances by adding a second bank, thereby changing the literal and emotional capacity of those in attendance. John commented that in this way, one can "teach people that their assumptions are correct by affirming them, and then reveal that they're incorrect." This is one way in which creators can use affordances and capacity to provide meaning-making to audiences. But it fits for theater, since John added, "theater is about expectations you have going in and how they're overturned."

Regarding audience interaction, John mentioned the book *On Metaphor*, namely the chapter "Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy" by Ted Cohen. It talks about how metaphors, especially those imparting humor, rely on a mutual understanding between the teller and receiver, thereby cultivating closeness or intimacy. John likened this to the relationship between audience and performer in interactive theater. Aidan shared the story of working as an onboarding guide for a haunted house. He found that when he acted like a drill sergeant, people didn't listen to his instructions. However, when he acted like he was having a panic attack, people took notice of him. Like a metaphor, this interaction relied on mutual understanding. Someone may not understand why they should listen to somebody acting like a drill sergeant, especially if they lack familiarity with military tropes. However, anyone would likely recognize a panic attack as a sign to pay attention. This isn't to say performers should mimic panic attacks, but rather that familiar tropes or modes of behavior can cue audiences in on how to interact. As I said, a most fruitful discussion despite the smaller group. It primed me well for the workshop at the LMDA conference on Saturday, July 23rd, when I expected around twenty people and had an attendance of nearly sixty. I didn't take notes on that presentation, but I would say the workshop proved a success with the longest discussion of them all following the presentation. Altogether, I would say the interest speaks to my initial impulse for this thesis: many people want a greater level of active engagement when attending shows.

Conclusion

Looking back on the initial proposal of the thesis, I have found that the course has dramatically changed over time as I have honed in on the purposes of my research. A significant change comes from a shift in organizing the course by artform to organizing the course by concept. This order is much more robust, as teaching what various mediums are and how they work may be useful for the sake of knowledge, but it does not build to a particular goal of understanding how these mediums utilize practices that could aid in theatermaking.

Another change comes from a shift to including more information on immersive and interactive theater. Initially, I wanted the course to be light on theater and heavy on other disciplines, so as to give students as much exposure to external mediums as possible. However, I came to realize that teaching by comparing and contrasting is more effective than assuming that students already have an intensive understanding of the most applicable theatrical work for these concepts. This change also makes the course more welcoming for not only theater students but those from other disciplines who wish to know more about how their work can impact theater. It builds a two-way street of knowledge sharing.

A big change has come from removing many of the artforms that I initially thought the course would cover, such as rituals and architecture, and focusing the course on the most relevant ones, such as various forms of role-playing games and exploratory environments. It is worth stressing that I am not using experiential dramaturgy as a rigid classification system so much as a set of ideals. While the course has changed to focus on certain mediums and not others, this is not to say that other mediums are not experiential. Rather, I have found that certain mediums, such as role-playing games and haunted houses, tend to align closely with the tenets of experiential dramaturgy across the board, while other forms, such as street theater or concerts, tend to fall more into a case-by-case basis.

It is also worth noting that while the course tends to focus on recent developments, such as the rise of immersive theater and video games over the past decades, I would now argue that the experiential qualities of theater are ones that were part of the original intentions of live theater. However, American theater today often occurs at the whim of modern Western structures and etiquette. Thereby, I hope to showcase the rise of experiential mediums and what theater can learn from them in order to get in touch with its roots in communal gathering and ritual.

The most significant change has come from the development of experiential dramaturgy itself and the goals of the course around it. Initially, as I have said, the course's goal was simply to look at these experiential mediums and find out what theater students could learn from them in their own practices. At the same time, I was not yet using the term "experiential," as only through my research did I pinpoint the goal of learning about these mediums to promote audience engagement and experience. That aspect of these mediums drew me to them and served as a source of frustration when thinking about traditional theater. I could not articulate it at the

time, but after conducting research, I honed in on this concept of the audience experience. Initially, the goal of the course was to uncover how these experiential mediums functioned, but now it’s to learn about how they promote an active and integral audience and how theater can learn from them. At first, I thought the course would be for both theater and non-theater students, but I do think it relies on an understanding of theater from the beginning. As such, I see it as a course for graduate theater students as well as interdisciplinary artists who may come from backgrounds in performance art, digital art, or experience design, for example, who wish to learn more about best practices around creating theatrical experiences. In summation, the course went from teaching students about theater-adjacent mediums to teaching students how the practices of various experiential mediums can emphasize the role and experience of the audience.

Syllabus

Course Goals
The course will introduce students to the concept of experiential dramaturgy, the study and practice of dramatic composition focusing on the engagement with and involvement of the audience and the impressions left on the audience. Students will examine traditional theater, immersive theater, role-playing games, haunted houses, and other experiential mediums through the lenses of immersion, interaction, meaning-making, and connection. The goal of this course is for students to gain a greater understanding of the active role of the audience or participant in these works and foster ways for students to further promote audience experience in their artistic endeavors.

The only prerequisite is a foundation in theater studies, however, students from interdisciplinary or adjacent artistic backgrounds are welcome to attend should they have experience or knowledge of general theatrical practices.

Class 1: Introductions

In-Class: Introducing the course and its main tenets of immersion, interaction, meaning-making, and connection, and how they facilitate the essentiality of the audience. Also a brief introduction of the mediums of theater, role-playing games, haunted houses, escape rooms, museum installations, etc. Learning and sharing the backgrounds of where each student is coming from for this course and where their expertise lies.

For next week: Read *Visit to a Small Planet* and *Poetics.* Suggested reading: selections from *The Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

Class 2: Experiential Dramaturgy: What is it?

In-Class: An overview of dramaturgy and its context in the world of traditional theater. A history of interactive and immersive theater covering passion plays, commedia, experimental theater, and site-specific theater. Discussion of how students can evaluate experiential mediums through a dramaturgical lens.

For next week: Read chapters from *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* and articles provided from *No Proscenium*, *The New York Times*, and other sources about *Sleep No More*, *And Then She Fell*, *Houseworld,* etc.

Class 3: "Immersion:" The Overused Word

In-Class: Covering what it means for something to be "immersive," including various definitions and how the immersive theater "genre" arose. Discussing various examples and how they differ from traditional plays.

For next week: Read selections from *Immersive Theatre: Engaging the Audience*. Suggested viewing: Selected episodes of *Immersive.World* on PBS.

Class 4: Immersive Theater Ethics: Intimacy and Accessibility

In-Class: Discussing the pros and cons of immersive theater compared to traditional theater, with a particular focus on the unique challenges that these shows present in terms of interactivity and intimacy and the unique opportunities that they afford in terms of approachability and accessibility.

For next week: Read selections from *Beyond Immersive Theatre*.

Class 5: The Experience Economy: Commercialism and Neoliberalism

In-Class: Presenting the arguments for and against experiential works as perpetuating capitalism or offering alternatives to it. Covering the experience economy and how brands use "experiences" to sell services as well as how and whether immersive works fit in this definition or not.

For next week: Reading articles about various Haunted Houses, Museum Installations and Escape Rooms. Design a short exercise that lays out the rules for onboarding or audience participation in a show with a written portion that proposes a design process for said show.

Class 6: Interactivity and Agency: Engaging and Taking Care of the Audience

In-Class: Presenting student exercises introducing audience participation followed by a discussion around the core principles and challenges of onboarding audiences and introducing them to interactivity and its rules. Bringing in concepts relating to Haunted Houses, Museum Installations, and Escape Rooms and evaluating how they onboard audience members to their challenges. Introducing the concepts of "agency," "environmental storytelling," "prototyping and playtesting," and "interaction design." Discussing how traditional theater can welcome audience members through lobby displays and pre-show announcements and invitations.

For next week: Read selections from *Theater of the Oppressed* and *Systemic Dramaturgy*. Listen to episodes of *Dungeons + Drama Nerds*. Watch selections of longform improvisations and

shortform improvised games. Write a paper responding to one of the arguments or cases found in the readings about immersive works.

Class 7: SpectActorship: Audience as Performer

In-Class: Covering the concept of "systems for storytelling" and further discussing the unique challenges and opportunities of having audience members that are also participants. Introducing ideas pertaining to role-playing.

For next week: Read selections from *Replay* and *Queer Game Studies*.

Class 8: Role-Playing: Tabletop, Live Action, and Games

In-Class: Covering the history of role-playing and its use in tabletop games, LARP, and video games. Introducing tangential histories and concepts relating to games. Devoting class time to playing a tabletop role-playing game and discussing how it relates to the topics of the course.

For next week: Play a tabletop role-playing game outside of class (list provided) and write a response essay evaluating the theatricality of the game, tying it back to at least one reading. Read selections from *Mimesis is Make-Believe*. Suggested viewing: *Shirley Curry: The Gamer Grandma Documentary.*

Class 9: Meaning-Making: The Stories We Create Ourselves

In-Class: Covering storytelling and how audiences can create their own stories from the structures of games and exercises. Introducing the concepts of "capacity," "affordances," and the debate around "ludology vs. narratology." Discussing with students which tabletop role-playing games they played outside of class and how these concepts applied.

For next week: Read articles provided from *With a Terrible Fate* and *The Guardian*. Read the rules and concepts of selected tabletop role-playing games. In an ideal world, take a field trip to an escape room, interactive museum, or immersive theater production.

Class 10: Genre: Horror, Sci-Fi, and Fantasy Aesthetics

In-Class: Covering the prevalence of speculative fiction genre in experimental works and contrasting this with the tendency for traditional theater to embrace realism and naturalism. Bringing in the concepts of "collective memory," "escapism," and "theater of the mind" as potential explanations for why this prevalence occurs in experiential mediums. Discussing the various theories and reasons for these tendencies.

For next week: Read selections from *The Art of Gathering* and articles about LARP and *The Rocky Horror Show*. Suggested reading: Articles about online games and digital performances.

Class 11 Connection: Collaborative Storytelling

In-Class: Covering how various experiential works invite audiences to connect with each other during the piece, paying particular attention to how this is facilitated in virtual environments as well. Introducing the term "inter-immersion."

For next week: Play a video game outside of class (list provided) and write a paper relating it to at least one of the tenets of the course.

Class 12: Meta-Game: Communal Narratives Outside the Text

In-Class: Covering how experiential works also invite audiences to connect with each other outside of the piece, paying particular attention to the way certain live shows and digital games encourage participants to share info and advice with one another.

For next week: Read the plays *Fefu and Her Friends* and *Every Brilliant Thing*. Suggested reading/viewing: Articles and clips about The Neo-Futurists and The Second City.

Class 13 Experimental Theater: Where Have We Seen This Before?

In-Class: Covering the history and notable examples of experimental, interactive, and improvisational theater works that incorporate aspects of experiential dramaturgy. Discussing how theater can borrow from other mediums and artforms to become less monolithic and more approachable or innovative.

For next week: Create an experiential project that may be tested in class and present it for the class to take part in or learn about.

Class 14: Presentation Day: Experiential Dramaturgy in Practice

In-Class: Student presentations of the experiential works that they have created or designed and either running them live or discussing how they would work in practice.

For next week: Bring in a medium not covered in class and make a case for why it belongs in the experiential dramaturgy "Cannon."

Class 15: Experiential Everywhere: Expanding the Scope

In-Class: Covering examples of concerts, films, architecture, and other works that have adopted the principles of experiential dramaturgy. Discussion around artforms that may fit this paradigm. End of class and offer to meet with students to give feedback or advice for any experiential work that they'd like to pursue.

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Special Thanks

Christian Parker, Adrianne Krstansky, Ian Klein, Char Simpson, Fiona Merullo, Claire Chapelli, Anthony Sertel Dean, Percy Hornak, Leigh Honigman, Kerry Concannon, Nick Fortugno, Steve Gaynor, Olivia Mansion, Mikhail Mansion, Monte Monteleagre, Kevin Hourigan, Josh Randall, Aaron Suduiko, Alexis Soloski, Alex Roberts, Leah Cardenas, Jason Morningstar, Mike Sell, Sarah Bowman, Kathryn Yu, Clarity Bian, Andrew Hoepfner, Evan Neiden, Taylor Winters, Samantha Gorman, Jeff Leinenveber, Jarrett Lantz, John Eisner, Richard Dresser, Todd Brian Backus, Nick Orvis, Chaesong Kim, Begsy Inal, Dezi Tibbs, Liv Rigdon, Fiona Gorry-Hines, Jimi Stine, Aidan Carr, Kanika Vaish, Sydney Guye, Amelia Johnson, Dillon Jones, Phoebe Brooks, Connor Scully, Greg Nanni, Jorge Schultz, and Jimmy Yeager.