

Of Actors and Non-Player Characters: How Immersive Theatre Performances Decontextualize Game Mechanics

Ian B. Faith

Abstract

*This essay argues that video game design informs the genre of immersive theatre both in its conception and in the ways participants interact with their narrative environments. It pays attention to marketing materials, the staging of environments, design of participant/actor interactions, and the limitations and affordances for audience choice and agency. Using an interdisciplinary framework drawn from game studies, theatre studies, and literary criticism, I focus on Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* and *Third Rail Projects' Then She Fell*, as well as draw comparisons between immersive theatre and walking simulator games. Critics have generally explained the popularity of immersive theatre in two ways: as a remediation of video games into live performances, or as avant-garde theatre in the same vein as mid-twentieth century participatory theatre experiments by *The Living Theatre* and *The Wooster Group*. Both perspectives assume immersive theatre voids itself of the spectator and their associated modes of perception, and therefore creates a new kind of subjectivity that audience members negotiate in medias res. Dramaturgs working within this genre explicitly cite digital games—including RPGs, narrative games, and walking simulators—as inspiration for their free-roaming narrative architecture. Co-director Felix Barrett claims that *Sleep No More's* design allows participants to make decisions about their own pacing and experience, and that this is an agentic expression yielding co-authorship of the work. But as I demonstrate, *Sleep No More's* borrowed mechanics limit the audience by binding them to the precise timing of the performance, limiting content behind scarcity models, and erasing meaningful role-play. Worse still is that Punchdrunk's productions have enabled predatory behaviors by virtue of creating spaces that anonymize and privilege consumers in an experience economy model. By contrast, *Third Rail's Then She Fell* restricts player choice, but in doing so utilizes the inherent strengths of live-performances: embodied proximity and interactivity. The trade-off for *Then She Fell's* choice constraints is clearly-defined terms for interactivity that draw*

*from game design to accentuate the dramaturgy rather than attempt to remediate a game-like experience. The final section compares environmental storytelling in walking simulators like *Gone Home*, *Firewatch*, and *The Stanley Parable* with immersive theatre. While both media forms share core mechanics, these procedures can yield different experiences. Walking sims often resist temporal, procedural, and meaning-making conventions in contemporary game design, but this upending of dominant design trends is lost when adapted for a stage which creates its own rules, expectations, and contexts. I conclude that while game design can productively inform dramatic performances (and vice versa), *Sleep No More* demonstrates the dangers of uncritically applying game design into embodied contexts while *Then She Fell* shows how thoughtful adaptation of player experiences can enhance interpersonal exchanges and introspection. We should therefore remain skeptical of immersive theatre's claims of audience empowerment because its remediations are susceptible to the exploitative dynamics associated with gamification and commodified experience.*

Introduction

The proliferation of immersive, promenade, mixed-reality, interactive, environmental, and site-specific theatres over the past decade has struck critics as strange, considering how few things in performance are dreaded so much as audience participation. Contemporary interest in participatory theatre forms has been generally explained in practical and theoretical terms, and both perspectives share a fundamental shift in the audience's expectations for the performance. In the former view, participatory theatre markets itself as not-theatre to a wider demographic of people who don't typically think of themselves as theatre-goers; in the latter, participatory techniques revive mid-twentieth century experimental theatre inspired by Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* (1958), most notably *The Living Theatre* and *The Wooster Group*. In other words, one position sees immersive performance through the capitalist framing of the experience economy, and the other regards the genre as avant-garde. Yet both positions assume immersive theatre voids itself of the spectator and their associated modes of perception, and therefore creates a new kind of subjectivity that audience members negotiate *in medias res*. The work of companies including *Punchdrunk*, *dreamthinkspeak*, *Wilderness*, *RIFT_*, *Blast Theory*, *Third Rail*, *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, and *We Players* promises to disintegrate the fourth wall by placing participants within physical and narrative archi-

Author Biography

Ian Faith is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Iowa. His research focuses on narrative in new media and digital cultures. Previous work has appeared in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *The Iowa Review*, and *First Person Scholar*. His current project shows the various influences of video game design on contemporary media forms, especially science fiction, immersive performance, digital poetics, film, and television.

lectures. In doing so, they aim to upend the structure of spectatorial theatre and encourage individually engaged forms of aesthetic experience. For nearly a decade, artists communicated these aims under the familiar late-twentieth century designation “site-specific,” until the British Council website borrowed the video game industry’s marketing language in 2011 to promote Punchdrunk’s work to American audiences (Carlson, 2012). “Immersive” proved a more effective descriptor because it was already shorthand for the familiar experiences of exploring 3-D environments and the attention-focusing effects of digital mediation.

For ludically-literate audiences, “immersive” theatre¹ promised the ability to “play” a play, and for non-theatre audiences it promised a unique interactive experience inspired by the digital age. As Michael Schulman writes in *The New Yorker*,

In an era of binge-watching, live-tweeting, and the Oculus Rift, how can theatre compete as all-consuming entertainment? Perhaps it’s our desire to be more than spectators...that has fueled the recent boom in immersive theatre, which trades the fourth wall for winding hallways and dance floors, in the hope of giving audiences not a show but an “experience.” (2016)

It was this kind of experience that companies wished to signal in their advertising, and Punchdrunk’s massive international success made immersive marketing language all but obligatory for companies producing similar work. By 2012, “immersive” had become a fashionable buzzword to describe almost any dramatic work involving audience interactions (Carlson, 2012). But rather than destroying and rebuilding subjectivity, immersive theatre draws—both in its practice and its promotional materials—upon already-established modes of perceiving and navigating fictive worlds found in digital games. Indeed, immersive theatre’s use of bounded space, multi-sensory perception, rules, decision-making, and interactivity has invited comparisons to alternate-reality games (Hunter, 2016), live-action role-play (Magelssen, 2014), VR (Popat, 2016), and video games featuring player choice (Klich, 2016). Perhaps counter-intuitively, performance theorists have borrowed from game studies methods to distinguish and privilege immersive theatre from digital games via fictive environments, embodied proximity, physical movement, and claims of agency yielding co-creation of the work itself (Machon, 2013; Hill & Paris, 2014; Bay-Cheng, 2015; White, 2012; Benford & Giannachi, 2011). And while at first glance it may seem appropriate to approach immersive theatre through immersive frameworks, what remains missing from those conversations is the genre’s intertextualities with game design and game culture.

This essay demonstrates that whether the focus is on bodily presence, the individual’s relation to their environment, their interactions with others, or decision-making, all these activities rely on a complex meta-medial literacy, specifically, invested participation in the drama and its environment, understanding of one’s role in the performance, and an awareness of immersive theatre’s relation to contemporary game genres. If immersive theatre performances challenge spectatorial modes, it is because they design participatory contexts that enhance narratives in which the audience is both actor and observer (Ramos & Maravala, 2016). Immersive audiences perform a complex, trans- and inter-medial form of metagam-

ing, which Stephanie Boluk and Patricia Lemieux have described as an approach “in which playing, making, and thinking about games occur in the same act” and which is defined by the material discontinuities that emerge between the experience of playing and systemic operations (8-9). And while immersion may be useful for describing momentary, media-transparent interactions in which the individual is fully invested in the performance (Machon, 2013) this kind of analysis is decontextualized from digital games, gaming communities, and the discourses around meaning-making in virtual environments. It also ignores how audiences negotiate social rules and how their understanding of the overlapping contexts of traditional theatre and participatory media forms influence their decisions. To fully grasp the ways immersive theatre draws upon digital games and their implications for interactive experiences, we need to account for how dramaturgs design and implement those experiences through the affordances and limitations they place on participants. Just as important, we need to place those design choices within the broader contexts of media cultures.

Performance theorists have tended to ground their analyses of immersive theatre on early conceptions of immersion and player agency as described by Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) and Callois’s *Man, Play, and Games* (1961). However, these terms have often been misinterpreted within the context of live performance and ignored the ways these concepts have been challenged within game studies. For example, Josephine Machon’s influential *Immersive Theatres* (2013) draws from Gordon Calleja’s (2012) definition of immersion as a shortening of the subjective distance between the player and game environment (p. 2). She does so to assert that presence has different implications for graphical displays and dramatic performance because the latter features physical, multisensory feedback.² She concludes that immersive theatre surpasses video games aesthetically because “the audience-participant-performer-player is anchored and involved in the creative world via her or his own imagination, fused with her actual presence, fused with her bodily interaction with the physical (and sometimes virtual) environments and other human performers” (62). Yet in the same text Calleja identified several challenges to the term’s viability that Machon falls short of resolving, including the ways that scholars have used “immersion” interchangeably with absorption and transportation, that media-specificity must be taken into consideration, and that immersion is not determined solely by the technologies involved (Calleja, 2012, p. 167). This underscores how immersion has often been regarded with skepticism in game studies (Lankoski, 2011; Ryan, 1999). Salen and Zimmerman (2004) go so far as to call immersion a fallacy that “misrepresents how play functions—and game design can suffer as a result. If game designers fail to recognize the way games create meeting for players—as something separate from but connected to the real world—they will have difficulty creating truly meaningful play” (p. 453). Meaningful play for them instead emerges from the interactions between the player and system, its discernible outcomes, and the broader contexts in which the game occurs (p. 33–34). Similarly, Miguel Sicart (2014) holds that play is experiential and dependent on a network of people, places, things, and rules that create the framing for play activities (p. 6, 29). The misstep Machon and some performance theorists have made in applying game studies frameworks is to assume the contexts of digital environments and live

performances are functionally similar, with the theater being more “immersive” by virtue of embodiment. Setting aside for now that this ignores the sensorial and embodied experiences of digital games (Keogh, 2018), this is a key assumption for Machon and others because immersion is seen here as a precondition for meaningful decision-making and thus, the ability to co-author the work.³

Performance theorists and practitioners tend to take for granted that interactive theatre offers participants agency, and this is often held up as that which distinguishes the genre from the passive spectatorship of traditional theatre. One of the questions this essay addresses below is whether interactive theatre really can create the conditions for agentic expressions. Of course, game scholars and developers have long grappled with players’ relationships with digital systems, and specifically the question of whether their decisions can be said to have meaningful consequences when they have always already been predetermined. Jane McGonigal (2007) refers to this challenge as the “Puppet Master Problem;” for her, the problem is that players are always aware they are subjecting themselves to the developer’s vision and are therefore not choosing an action but performing one. Similar considerations by Alec Charles (2009), Lindsey Joyce (2016), and Sarah Stang (2019) have concluded that digital games—ranging from those that privilege moral decision-making and its consequences like *Mass Effect* and Tell Tale’s *The Walking Dead* to those that seek to undercut the concept of meaningful player choice entirely like *Bioshock* and *Spec Ops: The Line*—instead present an illusory *experience* of agency. Because agency in games has traditionally been understood to reside in the player and expressed through choice and action, many game scholars have reconceived of it as occurring within the act of interpretation (McGonigal, 2007, p. 260–262), critically engaged procedures (Flanagan, 2009, p. 184), uncertainty (Frasca, 2003), distributed across a network of actors (Jagoda, 2016, p. 138; Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 5), and within engagements outside the game itself in fan communities and player/developer interactions (Stang, 2019). The sections below draw on these frameworks to show how meaningful interactions in immersive theatre performances are similarly located not within the scripted options and affordances of free roaming narrative environments, but within participants’ own interpretations of the work and exchanges outside the text itself.

Rather than focusing on an individual aesthetics or ethics of co-creation, this essay shows how video game design informs the genre of immersive theatre both in its conception and in the ways participants interact with narrative environments. It pays attention to marketing materials, the *mise-en-scene*, design of participant/actor interactions, and the limitations/affordances for audience choice. Using an interdisciplinary framework drawn from game studies, theatre studies, and literary criticism, I focus on Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* and Third Rail Projects’ *Then She Fell*. These two performances were chosen not only because they are two of the highest-profile and longest running installations, but also because they represent opposite approaches in terms of participant affordances. *Sleep No More* gives little structure to its free roaming environment, while *Then She Fell* designs a guided experience through its scenes. The final section compares these works to walking simulator games including

Gone Home, *Firewatch*, and *The Stanley Parable*, showing that while both media forms share core mechanics, they yield different experiences in large part because of contextual meanings. Walking sims often resist temporal, procedural, and meaning-making conventions in contemporary game design, but this upending of industrial trends is lost when adapted for a stage which creates its own rules, expectations, and contexts. I conclude that while game design can productively inform dramatic performances (and vice versa), *Sleep No More* demonstrates the dangers of uncritically applying game design to embodied contexts while *Then She Fell* shows how thoughtful adaptation of player experiences can enhance interpersonal exchanges and introspection. We should therefore remain skeptical of immersive theatre's claims of audience empowerment because its remediations are susceptible to the exploitative dynamics associated with gamification and commodified experience.

***Sleep No More's* Anonymity, Hidden Content, and Attention-as-Reward**

The popularity of immersive theatre productions is largely due to the overwhelming success of Punchdrunk' International's *Sleep No More* (2011-present). This prohibition-era reimagining of *Macbeth* filtered through the film noir lens of Hitchcock's *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* is set in three adjoining warehouse spaces in New York City, sprawling over 100,000 square feet of playing area, and divided between six floors and more than one hundred rooms. Taken together, the dimly-lit blue and yellow-tinged bedrooms, offices, and outdoor settings make up The McKittrick Hotel and surrounding town, including streets, an apothecary, bar, hospital, cemetery, and detective agency. The architecture is painstakingly designed. Two hundred volunteers spent months detailing the McKittrick by writing letters between characters, filling hotel guest registries, moving furniture, and positioning various objects in rooms for patrons to find. Accompanied by Stephen Dobbie's scratched-vinyl soundscapes of early 1940s popular music and low-bass ambiance, the cast performs Shakespeare's script almost entirely through interpretive dance in flailing (and at times precarious) movements across the furniture. Each character has a pre-determined sequence of events they repeat twice, wending their way through floors and rooms toward the next scene. Actors are responsive to the physical positions of audience members and may momentarily touch them, but most actor-audience interactions consist of patrons observing while scurrying out of a character's path. The participants—so designated by white Venetian-style masks—are free to roam, look inside drawers, read letters, watch scenes play out, and follow characters they find interesting. McKittrick staff tell patrons in a brief in-character tutorial to “find your own way,” and that the only imposed limitations are that they keep their masks on at all times, do not talk, and follow the instructions of black-masked staff who will turn participants away if they stray into restricted areas. Before letting spectators leave the elevator, staff assure them exploration is rewarded with the tagline, “fortune favors the bold.” Left to their own devices, the audience has two primary tasks: 1) exploring the McKittrick's geography and the objects within it, and 2) finding and observing characters.

According to co-directors Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, their goal is to challenge the na-

ture of audience experience by emphasizing space and its relation to the individual (Machon, 2006). A promotional booklet sold after each performance describes *Sleep No More (SNM)* as:

a game-changing form of immersive theatre, in which roaming audiences experience epic and emotional storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds...the company's infectious format rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences; their award-winning productions invite audiences to experience a real sense of adventure, and rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown. Free to encounter the installed environment in an individual imaginative journey, the choice of what to watch and where to go is theirs alone ("The McKittrick Hotel").

There is a lot to unpack in this blurb. References to immersion, fictive world-building, physical mobility, rejection of the traditional theatre's assumed passive spectator, promises of unique and non-repeatable experiences, personal decision-making, and the telling phrase "game-changing" echo a specific contingency of mid-century avant garde theatre on the one hand, and AAA game advertising on the other. If we compare this excerpt with packaging language from Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) for example, we find many of the same appeals: "*Skyrim* reimagines and revolutionizes the open-world fantasy epic, bringing to life a complete virtual world open for you to explore any way you choose." That Punchdrunk's promotional language mirrors the game industry's is not coincidental. Barrett has repeatedly mentioned games' influence on his creative process. In one interview with *The Guardian*, he speaks of Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* in terms of open-world exploration, stating, "It's similar to how in *Skyrim* you can follow a character and go on a mission, or you can explore the landscape, find moments of other stories and achieve a sense of an over-arching environment" (McMullan, 2014). Popular critics and scholars have come to similar conclusions about the relationship between Punchdrunk's environmental storytelling and digital games (Eglinton, 2010; Brown, 2011) to the extent that "game level design, modes of gameplay...and the socialities of virtual-world gaming culture converge to produce a sensuous spectatorship in immersive theatre" (Zaiontz, 2014). In this view, exploring a dramatic environment is an expression of individual agency because, according to Barrett, individuals must make decisions about their direction, pace, where they place their attention, how much time they invest in certain areas or scenes, and negotiate boundaries and risk (Tardiff, 2012; "The McKittrick Hotel"). This dynamic shares much in common with how players navigate game environments, but at the same time for all Punchdrunk's promotional language of freedoms—to explore, to choose one's own path, to direct one's own dramatic experiences—*SNM* limits the audience in temporal and identity-based ways that open-world and exploration-based games tend not to. On the one hand, Punchdrunk's level design does give audiences the opportunity to establish their own relationships with the space and narrative; on the other, *SNM*'s design choices frame choice as a burden and anonymity as erasure.

Positioning oneself relative to *SNM*'s narrative architecture and characters requires a deliberate investment of limited time and attentional resources that significantly restricts the range

of what participants can experience in a single show. This is perhaps an unavoidable limitation of a carefully choreographed live performance, and to their credit Punchdrunk does build in two scene repetitions so that knowledgeable (or lucky) participants can experience more than they would in a strictly linear performance. Moreover, curiosity is rewarded by finding hidden paths, crawling through open windows to new areas, stumbling upon objects that give narrative insights, or being drawn into a rare one-on-one encounter. But it is difficult for audience members—especially first-timers—to explore the McKittrick slowly and thoughtfully because they are irrevocably bound by the timing of *SNM*'s three-hour performance. Even as I explored the hotel, read through letters, and cognitively mapped its geography, I experienced a perpetual fear of missing out as scenes were playing out elsewhere. It is one thing to aesthetically experience a space, and another to delve into the materiality of a fictive world like *Dark Souls* or *What Remains of Edith Finch* and make connections among its architecture, objects, and characters. *SNM*'s anxious pacing is not just a result of my own compulsions toward 100% completion (though they certainly contributed) but is a feature of a self-consciously imposed scarcity model. As part of the sales pitch for post-show merchandise, I was informed that *SNM* had about fourteen hours of content, and that during the three-hour performance I'd at best only seen one-seventh of the show. Even more concerning is that this fraction only represents the actors' performances in the space, not the space itself. At upwards of \$200 per ticket in its singular NYC location, *SNM* does not easily lend itself to experiencing repeat performances, and yet Punchdrunk's pacing and post-show merchandising explicitly encourages participants to do so. The desire to see as much as one can within the time limit often makes choice an anxiety-inducing, rather than freeing experience because the audience is always aware that they are excluding content that may be critical to their understanding of the work and their role within it.

Barrett thinks of *SNM* in the same genre as open-world RPGs like *Skyrim*, but the discussion above seems to share more in common with time-limited games such as *Majora's Mask* (2000), *Shenmue* (1999), *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII* (2013), *Elsinore* (2019), and *Disco Elysium* (2019) in which players are bound to daily cycles. At first glance, both *SNM*'s cyclical choreography and these games' recursive play might even seem to illustrate the useful concept of queer temporalities in games. But there are a few key distinctions we must observe. For context, queer temporalities are commonly set in opposition to Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) understanding of "chrononormativity," a "carefully syncopated tempo" of life events that structures social and cultural expectations, including expressions of gender identity and sexuality (Ruberg, 2019). As Bonnie Ruberg explains, chrononormativity operates in games in two distinct ways: 1) internalization and reproduction of norms that exist outside the game (e.g. linear growth), and 2) foundational logics that shape how games are designed and experienced in relation to time (e.g. travel time, experience grinding, etc.) (p. 190–191). For them, speedruns and walking sims especially "offer opportunities for gameplay that stand at the intersection of temporality, spatiality, sexuality, gender, agency, and resistance—an intersection at which the very ontologies of video games begin to break down" (p. 186). Queer temporalities in play, therefore, allow users to backtrack, pause, rewind, reset, recon-

sider, reject actionable windows, and accept failure in order to make meaning within games in ways that disrupt normative linear game design (Knutson, 2018). Crucially, such actions “drop the pretense of high-stakes urgency; it unwinds the strict sequentialism of competitive game clocks and frame data; it carefully considers decisions and their consequences; it picks apart the game as an object of critical consideration rather than an apparatus for perfectible performance” (2018). And it is in these last instances that *SNM* falls short, by virtue of urgent exploration, of a strict sequence of scripted actions, of its insistence upon itself as a novel commercial experience with merchandising to fill in the gaps of its own designed limitations, and most importantly, its lack of meaningful decision-making for participants. Despite the immersive theatre genre’s aims of upending norms of traditional theatre, *SNM* cannot be said to afford personally-resonant and nontraditional experiences of time and space simply because the audience is not bound to a seat if it does not translate to meaningful control of the experience. In the same movement, first-time *SNM* participants like myself cannot be associated with the queer practice of speedrunning either, because as Rainforest Scully-Blaker (2014) observed, it requires a relation to games in a mode other than player. Speedruns are not characterized by frantic accumulations of narrative information, but rather an intimate understanding of systemic rules and normative strategies, often to a greater degree than the programmers themselves (Scully-Blaker, 2014). While it is true that there are some *SNM* fans who possess this kind of knowledge and interact with the work in similar ways, the vast majority of participants have not read the online guides, fan paratexts, or “played” *SNM* hundreds of times in order to gain this perspective (Burton, 2015; “Behind the White Mask”). That is, most participants approach *SNM* as an interactive work that they play, and thus their primary mode of engagement is through the choices they make in movement and observation.

Yet the promotion of choice in Punchdrunk’s environments ultimately overstates the uniqueness of each experience and their individual contribution to the work. Recall that the audience must remain anonymous (via their masks), silent, and within the bounds of the playing area. Any interactions between actors and spectators are initiated, carried out, and ended by the characters, even in one-on-ones. Effectively, the interactivity of *SNM* extends only as far as different positions for observation while the drama plays out prescriptively, regardless of any audience input. This runs contrary to a hegemonic discourse in game culture that takes for granted how player choices have measurable consequences on the characters, narrative, and virtual world around them (Nitsche, 2008). Contrary to the rhetoric of co-authorship, in *SNM* there is nothing one can do to, say, prevent Duncan’s murder or Lady Macbeth’s suicide as the play heads toward its inevitable tragedy. This stands in opposition to narrative games which show the player exactly which actions have consequences and to what extent. This includes *The Walking Dead*’s habit of informing players that NPCs will remember dialogue choices and *Life is Strange*’s ominous warnings that certain actions will have consequences. The horror game *Until Dawn* even includes a menu depicting choices and their eventual outcomes with a butterfly effect motif so players can keep track of previous playthroughs. An even starker comparison can be drawn with Golden Glitch’s *Elsinore*, an

adventure game set in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which the player can manipulate characters and events as the plot plays out in real time. But here again the distinction is the player's ability to revisit playthroughs and understand the effects their actions have on the narrative and virtual world around them. *SNM*'s participants experience the same kind of dramatic irony as Shakespeare's original script: we know that Macbeth will be enticed toward murder and the tragedy will unfold as prescribed, and if only we could make the characters privy to the spectator's insight, perhaps those deaths could be avoided. Functionally-speaking, our silence means that the fourth wall's distancing effects are still at play. If *SNM* is interested in tragic inevitability, it limits audience agency to protect it. This renders Punchdrunk's dramatic environments active, but not *reactive*.

If *SNM* does create conditions for emancipatory audience experiences, the restrictions it places on their behaviors and influence means that any transformations are subjective acts performed by the individual on themselves, not co-authored events contributing to production of the work. Barrett would contend that taking control of one's aesthetic experiences is a form of empowerment, one fostered by Punchdrunk's trademark masks and the effects they produce within the performance. According to him, the masks "create a sense of anonymity; they make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences, so that each person can explore the space alone. They allow people to be more selfish and more voyeuristic than they might normally be. Hidden behind a fictional layer, they lose some of their inhibitions" ("The McKittrick Hotel"). Here, Barrett acknowledges that the audience carries sets of social rules with them into the performance and sees their anonymity as enabling acts that would normally be considered abnormal, for example, rummaging through a stranger's dresser drawers or watching them bathe. His use of the word "voyeuristic" resonates especially with one unnerving *Eyes Wide Shut*-esque scene, in which I watched Macbeth and Lady Macbeth share an intimate moment on their bed while masked spectators peered through the windows. As *The New York Times*' Ben Brantley put it, *SNM* is "a voyeur's delight, with all the creepy, shameful pleasures that entails" (2011). Besides causing discomfort, *SNM*'s voyeurism places the responsibility of aesthetic experience on the audience and their self-negotiated relationship with the performance. In doing so, it encourages "narcissistic participation," a mode of self-absorption that positions the spectator not "as an author or agent who has the power to create or enact concrete change, but as an *experiencer* of the piece" (Zaiontz, 2014). And their expectations for those experiences can carry a sense of entitlement, either toward accessing the space before others and/or individual relationships with the actors (Alston, 2016).

Underlying *SNM*'s actor-spectator dynamics is its remediation of game environments built entirely for the player and the ubiquitous design choices that reward players for satisfying certain requirements, even in romantic encounters. Players of *The Witcher 3* (2015) or *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) for example can enter sexual relationships with characters simply by satisfying a series of quest-based objectives and dialogue choices, and the procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) dictates that if one goes through the "right" motions, they will be rewarded

with sex. Similarly, Punchdrunk spectators feel entitled to actors' attention because they've paid for an experience that privileges them, and because they have performed the "necessary" actions to warrant a reward (i.e. followed a character, remained close, maintained eye contact, etc). The mask has succeeded to, in Barrett's words, "empower the audience by making them feel like they're the most important person in the space" (Tardif, 2012), and some have taken advantage of that sense of self-importance to varying degrees. *SNM* allows blogger Evan Cobb for example to roleplay in self-affirming ways: "I liked who I was when I was there," he tells *Forbes*, "[the mask] allowed me to do all these things I am terrified to do. With the actors I can become a more flirtatious, suave, debonair version of myself" (Slade 2014). But others have used their empowerment in criminal ways. Blogger Aimee Dewar has described Punchdrunk audience behavior as "obsessive, even stalkerish," and another writes that the masks' anonymity turns "normal people into bastards" (qtd. in Zaiontz, 2014). In 2018, *Buzzfeed* confirmed seventeen instances of *SNM* participants sexually assaulting cast members, one of which remarked, "Once you gave people a mask, it was carte blanche to let them do whatever they wanted" to the performers' bodies (Jamieson, 2018). Wingenroth (2018) claims that *SNM*'s frequent nudity, one-on-one encounters, and ethos that privileges individual experience over the cast's safety made assaults inevitable, adding "if audiences were treating *Sleep No More* like a contest, the performers were the prize" ("Why I Wasn't Surprised"). Emursive insists their actors' safety is their primary concern and that they have trained the cast to respond to inappropriate behavior, but they have yet to train audiences not to assault performers. As one former cast member suggests, the least they could do is add a phrase to the tutorial about not touching performers "so the fucking 'fortune favors the bold' phrase isn't misinterpreted by drunken assholes to mean 'do whatever you want to performers'" (Jamieson, 2018). Here we see the familiar rhetoric of rape culture, telling victims it is their responsibility to avoid being assaulted and accepting as matter of fact the inclinations of predatory people. Punchdrunk facilitates the conditions for abusive behavior through its systemic choices which maintain player anonymity and uncritically adapt digitally mediated player-NPC relations into live contexts. Even worse, they dismiss these behaviors as fringe aberrations rather than acknowledging how they emerge as a result of their own dramatic policies and practice.

This dynamic imports more than environmental storytelling or open-world exploration; it recreates the toxicity and harassment in online gaming culture characterized by Gamergate, including the industry's refusal to moderate user behavior. Whitney Phillips and Christopher Paul have convincingly shown that coordinated harassment of women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals across platforms is a cultural problem that emerges precisely because of the ways online spaces are designed and administered (Phillips, 2016; Phillips, 2019; Paul, 2018). At the outset of Gamergate, Jim Spanfeller (2014) writing for *Deadspin* predicted that "what we have in Gamergate is a glimpse of how these skirmishes will unfold in the future—all the rhetorical weaponry and siegecraft of an internet comment section brought to bear on our culture, not just at the fringes but at the center. What we're seeing now is a rehearsal, where the mechanisms of a toxic and inhumane politics are being tested and

improved.” And the mainstreaming of doxing, threats, trolling, swatting, and other forms of harassment in nearly every arena of social and political life (including Brexit and the 2016 U.S. Presidential election) have proved her right. Retrospectives on Gamergate show that online platforms in fact never learned how to shut down disingenuous conversations about free speech nor moderate “ironic” racism and misogyny, and the result is that vulnerable people are at even greater risk today by internet mobs than they were in 2014 (Romano, 2020; Wu, 2019). *SNM*’s masks all but recreate the anonymous trolls on 4chan and Reddit around the same time online harassment was being organized, and at a moment when the internet was shifting from a largely anonymous culture to one centered around personality-driven influencers.

Indeed, Gamergate attracted right-wing culture warriors, alt-right activists, and men’s rights bloggers including Mike Cernovich, Roosh V, Milo Yiannopoulos, Steve Bannon, and Christina Hoff Summers who served as harassment influencers for anonymous mobs (Warzel, 2019). Accordingly, hardcore *SNM* fans aka “The Sleepless” have their own blogger-influencers. And while some like Evan Cobb encourage positive expressions of alternative identities (see above), there are also bloggers like Brian Moylan (2011) who wrote the telling *Gawker* article titled “How to Find All the Nudity in *Sleep No More*” in which he bragged about groping a cast member: “I grabbed his ass, because I’m like that. It was wonderful.” T.L. Taylor observed last year that Gamergate was never an isolated incident, but a convergence of offline harassment with online platforms (Cohen, 2019). And in attempting to remediate game design and game culture onstage, Punchdrunk provides a familiar context offline for the worst impulses of would-be harassers perceiving the same enabling conditions. The upshot is that even if some dramaturgs do not fully grasp the potential dangers of adapting digital interactivity for the stage, they are at least noticing Punchdrunk’s mistakes and trying to give their actors more protection. In the same year *Buzzfeed* reported sexual assault at *SNM* shows, two were reported at Alexander Wright’s immersive showing of *The Great Gatsby*, and he has since given his actors personal panic buttons there and in his latest immersive production *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Bakare, 2019). But these are temporary and reactionary measures. Immersive theatre as an industry needs to recognize how their design choices facilitate harassment and implement preventative practices to ensure the safety of their performers. This means above all personal accountability and clear expectations for audience interactivity.

One productive step would be for Punchdrunk to abandon the mask altogether. First, it’s a safety issue. The eye holes constrict participant’s visual field significantly in an already dark environment. During my own playthrough, I tripped up a flight of stairs and collided with several participants. I also saw others fall over furniture and rugs. One poor person knocked over the water basin during the scene where Malcolm shaves Duncan. But anonymity also poses experiential challenges. The phrasing Barrett uses to describe how the mask turns spectators into “generic, ghostly presences” applies to the self as much as it does to other patrons. Anonymity may disinhibit the wearer, but it also removes their individuality and

marks them as a nameless, faceless spectator rather than a character (Carlson, 2012). In Worthen's (2012) view, *SNM*'s mask allegorizes the illusory immediacy of theatre, emphasizing all the ways its interactivity is carefully choreographed and repeated, and "reifying character as an extension of a socially and materially determined environment. *Sleep No More* literalizes the physical and ideological confinement of the fourth-wall objective realism, surprisingly abstracting the 'immersive' performance from the agency of its audience" (p. 95). *SNM* participants are less like characters than non-player characters (NPCs) in open-world games, the generic avatars that populate the public areas of virtual worlds as mere scenic dressing and act out the same finite series of gestures *ad infinitum*. Foreseeing this abstraction, Marie Laure-Ryan (2001) advised artists that the only way to create truly interactive and improvisational dramatic experiences is to "let only one or two users, at the very most a handful, into the virtual world" which is precisely the strength of digital media (p. 305).

The greatest desire players have in *SNM* is to escape the crowds of NPCs and secure the rare one-on-one encounters, in which actors take spectators into secret rooms, remove their mask, and allow them to speak. One of the most sought-after characters is Hecate, who first appears in the Replica Bar and summons the three witches during a rave, before strutting down High Street and returning to the bar to eat a meal of raw liver. If chosen, a participant will be drawn into a locked room alone with Hecate, who forces them to drink a vial of tears and tells them they belong to her. Sometimes, she will kiss the participant's mask as she places it back on their face. Players who successfully deliver a message from Hecate to one of the McKittrick staff will be invited to her lair to share a cup of tea and hear a story, receiving a bloodstained paper boat as a souvenir. Unconfirmed rumors suggest that finding a series of items and returning them to Hecate will allow the spectator to become a character for the rest of the evening (*Sleep No More Wiki*). Although scripted events, Punchdrunk's one-on-ones are the only moments when spectators experience the cast responding directly to them, and in which they feel they've had a truly unique exchange. Unsurprisingly, there are plenty of *GameFAQs*-esque online fan guides providing tips of how to find them. However briefly, one-on-ones fulfill the desire to become minor characters, even if their responses are inconsequential to the interaction at hand or to the piece writ large. But one-on-ones are also the events where *SNM* most resembles a game. The fetch-quest structure of delivering Hecate's note or returning her lost ring recalls a convention of RPGs that reward players for completing menial tasks for characters. And their prize is a personal interaction away from the anonymous crowds and a sense that they've experienced something that only a few *SNM* patrons have. This underscores one of *SNM*'s frustrations: The performance is at its most interactive in one-on-one scenarios, which are subject to a scarcity model. Only a small number of spectators can remove their masks and converse alone with the cast, and usually it is those who have read the online fan-guides, seen the show multiple times, and have had a fair bit of luck. *SNM* takes one final note from game design in encouraging its replayability, promising that the most knowledgeable players will uncover the most satisfying content and have the most meaningful aesthetic experiences.

Punchdrunk appropriates video game design toward an experience economy contingent upon the choices it offers to audience members. In its best moments, *SNM* does create the conditions for game-like interactions and environmental explorations that are personally significant, non-repeatable, and genuinely exciting. But it also gamifies theatre, and, in the process, commodifies and gentrifies avant-garde theatre aesthetics into what Alston (2016) called “entrepreneurial participation.” In this view, immersive theatre shifts the responsibility of delivering dramatic aesthetics from the performers onto the consumer, thereby reifying the neoliberal ideologies of free enterprise, individualism, risk taking, and meritocracy. If participatory performance negotiates a tension between structure and agency, and between scripted and spontaneous acts, Punchdrunk errs toward its structure while simultaneously displacing the burden of aesthetic experience onto the spectators themselves. Art historian Claire Bishop (2012) is likewise skeptical of claims that participation is synonymous with collectivism and thus inherently opposed to capitalism. But despite the threat of theatre attendees becoming workers producing their own affect, she argues that if participatory art offers spaces where norms are suspended, scrutinized, and “put to pleasure in perverse ways,” it can in fact be liberatory (Bishop, 2012). I agree, but it is difficult to conceive of *SNM* serving these functions when economics are so engrained in its production and consumption.

Punchdrunk’s success is only made possible by copious funding—from the Arts Council of England, private donations, and numerous corporate partnerships including Louis Vuitton, Sony PlayStation, Absolut Vodka, and Samsung—and its aggressive marketing campaigns (Blyth, 2016; Soloski, 2013; Needham, 2017). Additionally, Punchdrunk relies on volunteer labor to build their sets, promising collaborators the opportunity to build a competitive portfolio for the job market through an “engagement ethos” (Alston, 2016) that functions like an unpaid internship. And as I have argued here, it depends on the labor of participants for its own aesthetic delivery. Punchdrunk’s performances embody the uneasy relationship between art and commerce, and their tie-in bars, coat check fees, and excessive post-show merchandising selling, for examples, art books, lithographs, decks of cards, and postcards, only exacerbate claims that they are more entrepreneurial than experimental (Soloski, 2018). And Punchdrunk has done little to counter those who see their performances under what Anna Klingmann calls a “brandscape,” a unique formulation of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) which “constitute[s] the physical manifestations of synthetically conceived identities transposed onto synthetically conceived places, demarcating culturally independent sites where corporate value systems materialize into physical territories” (p. 83). Indeed, Felix Barrett gave the 2013 keynote address at the REMIX Summit in London⁴ titled “Experience Economy: Creating Extraordinary Moments and Stories that Get People Talking” (REMIX). Punchdrunk performances therefore resemble the AAA game industry in economic terms: in their design ethos, their reliance on user-generated paratexts, and their employment and production models. Like the AAA game industry, Punchdrunk seems willfully ignorant—if not uncaring—about the human costs needed to produce their massive installations and the precarious positions in which they place actors. Barrett’s promotion of their engagement ethos particularly resonates with statements made by Rockstar co-found-

er Dan Houser, who bragged to *New York Magazine* that thousands of game designers and interns worked on *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) for seven years, putting in excessive unpaid overtime and often working one hundred hours per week (Schrier, 2018). “Games are still magical,” Houser added in another interview, “It’s like they’re made by elves. You turn on the screen and it’s just this world that exists on TV. I think you gain something by not knowing how they’re made” (White, 2018). For Houser, the ubiquity of “crunch culture” in game design is proof of artists’ dedication to producing important works. This is a common refrain by corporate developers that conveniently ignores the labor practices that commodify the time and passion of not just their own employees, but unpaid interns, volunteers, and fan communities. If Punchdrunk’s use of game design ultimately encourages players to buy another \$100 ticket, and the terms of their performance’s production mirrors the exploitive business practices of corporate game developers like Rockstar, it becomes difficult to see them as innovating theatre in the same way The Living Theatre or The Wooster Group did. The strict timing, anonymity, and scarcity model of Punchdrunk’s designs ensure some spectators become more important and influential than others, and this complicates claims to immersive theatre’s promises of facilitating personal expression, agency, and co-authorship of the work, let alone democratizing live performance. The question follows then, would an immersive performance centered around one-on-one actor-player interactions achieve a different effect?

A Play on Rails: *Then She Fell*’s Guided Interactions

Third Rail Projects’ Zach Morris sees the strength of immersive theatre not in its environmental storytelling or audience mobility, but in its ability to stage meaningful interpersonal encounters. As he tells one interviewer, “in the wake of our increasingly digitized world, it’s becoming really clear that people are craving experience,” and that audiences respond differently to immersive theatre because of an intimate proximity that has them “on edge, uncomfortable or at least very keenly aware” of their surroundings (qtd. in Slade, 2014). For Morris, immersive theatre allows the audience to build their own narrative, stating, “It’s a little bit like the game *Myst*. We actually did a lot of thinking about game design, about the difference between a branching narrative and an object-oriented design, and figuring out ways that we could create a theatrical convention where, whenever a user was engaging with something, it would further their narrative” (qtd. in Porges, 2012). Barrett’s reference to the open-world RPG *Skyrim* (see above) and Morris’s to the adventure game *Myst* reflect an important difference in how Punchdrunk and Third Rail interpret game design for dramatic performances. Whereas *SNM* tasks users with exploring a massive virtual environment on their own, *The She Fell* (*TSF*) guides players along a series of events which allow for minor variations in the player’s responses. At first glance, *TSF* would seem to place too many constraints on the audience and thus undermine the meaningful interactions it strives for. But unlike *SNM* which often overwhelms the user with too much ambiguity and choice, *TSF*’s structure makes the terms of its interactivity more intuitive, memorable, and meaningful for the player.

Contrary to *SNM*'s distance from Shakespeare's script, *TSF* is, like *Myst*, a work suffused with intertextuality. Based on the life and work of Lewis Carroll, *TSF* staged surreal dreamscapes within a Victorian-era sanitarium,⁵ with hospital staff and characters from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* chaperoning people in small groups (usually one or two, but never more than five) from scene to scene. The actors repeat each scene multiple times so that each participant sees (for the most part) the same content, only in different orders. That is, unlike *SNM*'s recursive sequences, repetition is a hidden systemic feature of *TSF* with the goal of presenting comparable player experiences for each person. During an in-character introduction/tutorial held in the head psychiatrist's office, nurses gave spectators an "elixir" and a set of antique keys (an inventory!), encouraging them to explore the rooms when left alone. Unlocking drawers, cabinets, and trinket boxes usually revealed pages from Carroll's *Alice* stories, poems, or photography. The only two restrictions were that audience members only speak when spoken to and do not open any closed doors. Put in systemic terms, we were asked not to look behind the cultural coding of the environment and to respond to predesigned exchanges rather than initiate them. And yet interactions varied wildly along the way. During the two-hour performance, I was left alone to explore a library, attended the Mad Tea Party, transcribed a letter for Carroll, shared a drink with the Red Queen, played a game of three-cup monte with the psychiatrist, watched Carroll and Alice perform a silent pas de deux, and had a conversation with Alice. Third Rail's website describes *TSF* as

a fully immersive, multi-sensory experience in which only 15 audience members per performance explore a dreamscape where every alcove, corner, and corridor has been transformed into a lushly designed world. Inspired by the life and writings of Lewis Carroll, it offers an Alice-like experience for audience members as they explore the rooms, often by themselves, in order to discover hidden scenes; encounter performers one-on-one; unearth clues that illuminate a shrouded history; use skeleton keys to gain access to guarded secrets; and imbibe elixirs custom designed by one of NYC's foremost mixologists ("About").

We see a few key distinctions when comparing this blurb with Punchdrunk's promotional language that give insight into the drastically different experiences they afford audience members. First is that while *TSF* also locks hidden content behind the player's fulfillment of certain conditions, it literally gives audiences the keys to unlock them. When audience members find themselves alone in a room for a few moments and see the tell-tale keyholes in drawers, cabinets, or jewelry boxes, they find they have both the time and resources to explore, and doing so always yields interesting artifacts that add to the narrative. Through careful positioning, scenographic design, and pacing, Third Rail ensures all participants have access to *TSF*'s environmental storytelling in segments. But Third Rail also understands that it is interactivity, not immersion, that is immersive theatre's most salient quality. Marie Laure-Ryan (1999) argued a similar position on virtual reality, asserting the media-transparency associated with immersion relates more to a pretended belief in an extratextual world, whereas interactivity "exploits the materiality of the medium" and "thrives in a fluid environment of changing relations." Henry Jenkins's (2004) oft-cited essay "Game Design

as Narrative Architecture” held that environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for immersion, serving simultaneously as a staging ground, resource for emergent narratives, symbol of pre-existing narrative cues, and embedded site of narrative information. More recently though, frameworks for environmental storytelling have pushed back against the media-transparent assumptions of immersion altogether. Kristine Jørgensen (2013) for example has countered that because players interact with game systems via interfaces, game worlds are always self-referential, and therefore we should consider any aspect that makes clear its systemic features and rules to be content as well. She differentiates between fictive worlds that function by representation and game worlds that “integrate the abstract game rules into an environment where they may be contextualized spatially” (Jørgensen, 2013). This conception of environmental storytelling is not purely diegetic; it incorporates player interactions into that which not just observes, but actively changes an environment as part of the acts of exploration and interpretation. As noted above, *TSF* makes its interface protocols apparent; but it does so to set the conditions of the participant’s interactions with the space and characters as well as to specify a range of personal expressions.

Even more important is the above promotion’s reference to the production of a thematically resonant “Alice-like” subjective experience. Fantastical *mise-en-scene*, nonsensical dialogue, bewildering questions, erratic dance movements, jarring shifts between Wonderland and Hospital settings, and imbibing alcoholic “elixirs” produce a disorienting effect. For example, after watching two Alices dance hypnotically on either side of a “mirror” in the Red Queen’s drawing room, one nurse took me to an upstairs hallway in the Hospital, seating me just outside the psychiatrist’s office with the assurance that he would be along shortly for “an evaluation.” Inside, I watched a white-coated psychiatrist somersaulting over his desk, spinning, and—to use the idiom suggesting insanity—literally climbing the walls. After a few minutes, he calmly jumped down from atop his filing cabinet, straightened his coat, and came to me with impassive confidence, saying “well done. Please follow me.” What I’d expected to be a moment of clarity following a hallucinatory one upended the power dynamics of inpatient and doctor, and left me confused as to what I’d seen and even questioning whether it had really happened. In another scene, I try to follow the Mad Hatter’s train of thought as she reasons, “Not all matters are had, and not all hatters are mad. And if not all hatters are mad, then we cannot say all matters are had. Isn’t that right?” Unpredictability within and between scenes leaves the player mentally off-balance as they constantly try—and usually fail—to discern the (ill)logic of each scene, much like the proto-surreal episodic sequences that frame Carroll’s stories (Dembin, 2016). *TSF* challenges the individual to reassess the systems governing each interaction, their role within each scene, what is expected of them therein, and to employ a wide range of possible responses (e.g. to watch silently, to converse, to follow a character to the next room, to pantomime gestures, to write, to play a game, etc). These procedural juxtapositions frame a constant sense of ambiguity, but their structure also ensures that the player negotiates that discomfort following the lead of *TSF*’s cast and set design. In doing so, the performance demanded that we become invested participants in the drama while maintaining an awareness of ourselves as theatrical participants.

The performance's structure evinces an awareness that "uncovering the space, its drama, and meaning goes hand in hand with the gradual comprehension of events and objects into narrative context," and this means centering those elements first and foremost around the individual (Nitsche, 2008). At the same time, there must be a degree of uncertainty to encourage players to explore. Following Callois's assertion that uncertainty is essential to play, Greg Costikyan (2013) has identified several types of uncertainty in interactive media, including performative, analytic, narrative, developmental, temporal, and perceptual. For example, he observed that hidden information fosters experimentation as the player tries different strategies and tests the environment's response to their actions (Costikyan, 2013). In the same way, narrative and sensorial uncertainties in *TSF* challenge players to engage with different modes of interpretation and reflect on their meaning relative to one's own position in the drama. Yet there is a delicate balance of uncertainty that game designers need to manage; Costikyan (2013) argued that too little uncertainty disengages players and proves unchallenging, while too much ambiguity can be stifling: "Warning signs of excessive uncertainty include players unable to figure out what to do; games whose path and outcome seem out of control and unrelated to player actions; and 'analysis paralysis,' the phenomenon of games delayed by lengthy player pondering." By Felix Barrett's own admission, *Sleep No More* inspires discomfort through its ambiguities: of the performance itself, the audience's role, and what can be considered acceptable behavior. As we have seen, *SNM*'s free-roaming environment and player-anonymity promote a self-centered mode of perception that is immensely rewarding for those with the knowledge and resources to make the most of their playthrough. But placing the responsibility of aesthetic and dramatic meaning on the spectator means that *SNM* suffers from the same problems Costikyan (2013) outlines of excessive ambiguity, particularly paralysis and loss of agency. Although *Punchdrunk* gives audiences nearly uninhibited mobility, they also burden them with the task of deciding where to go, what to see, which scenes are more important, how to interact with the space and cast, how to interpret those scenes, and how to find hidden information. By contrast, *TSF*'s audiences parse its Wonderland-inspired disorientation with a series of clear directions. In addition to creating more satisfying dramatic experiences, this operational clarity combined with smaller groups of participants and lack of anonymity likely explains much of why *TSF* has not had reports of participants assaulting actors (Soloski, 2018).

I've already mentioned above how *TSF*'s design elements indicate certain actions (i.e. explore, unlock drawers, read) to the player, and an even more prominent example can be found in actor-character interactions. These are often the most awkward and anxiety-inducing moments in audience participation where people blush, stammer, laugh, or freeze. But *TSF* ameliorates discomfort through a combination of intimacy, signaling participants when to respond with questions and body language, and limiting their options to discernable choices. Here are a few examples: the White Rabbit enters the Tea Party, exclaims "we're late!" and holds the door for me to follow; the Mad Hatter draws me into a bedroom and rummages through the closets, handing notes and photographs of Alice Liddell behind her for me to inspect; in an office, the psychiatrist explains how Alice won her chess game in

Through the Looking Glass in eleven moves, specifying pieces and pointing to each square I was to move them to; in a study, Lewis Carroll enters and hands me a pen and paper, asking “do you take dictation?” In these moments, players are never unsure about *what* to do, but rather *how* they should do what is being asked of them. At the same time, these interactions are highly controlled. An outstretched arm passing a drink presents the obvious response to take it, and Carroll asks a binary question that all but demands that I transcribe his letter (or else refuse to participate in the performance). Because audience members are instructed to only speak when spoken to, Third Rail’s script prompts them with individually addressed questions to which they improvise responses. Although clear, interactions occur within extremely limited parameters: answer affirmatively or negatively, fill in the blank with the information being asked for, move the indicated chess piece to the indicated spot, write exactly what Carroll says, etc.

Such restrictions were obvious even in my conversation with Alice. During this scene, I was seated underneath a staircase outside a bathroom, its door opened just so I could see Alice’s bare back as she sat at the vanity. The discomfort in this scene intensified when she looked over her shoulder and made eye contact with me through the mirror, and maintained it as she covered herself, walked across the room, and closed the door. This scene constricts the spectator’s visual field, nearly necessitating that they watch Alice, only to have her chiding gaze indict them for voyeurism. But then, their expectations are again upended as she asks, “Could you hand me my blouse?” Now tasked with plucking articles of clothing from the back of the door and handing them to her as she dresses, Alice asked me about my first love. Our exchange was as follows:

Alice: “Is it better to do what you want, or what you’re told?”

Me: “I think it depends on the situation.”

Alice: “Do you get into trouble when you don’t do what you’re told?”

Me: “I suppose so.”

Alice: “When was the last time you broke the rules?”

Me: “...I can’t remember. I guess I usually do what’s expected of me.”

Alice: “Have you ever broken the rules to spend time with someone?”

Me: “Yes.”

Alice: “Someone you liked?”

Me: “Yes, actually.”

Alice: “How old were you when you first fell in love?”

Me: “Fifteen or sixteen, if you can consider teenage obsessions love.”

Alice: “What was their name?”

Me: “Kim.”

Alice: “*Why did you love her?*”

Me: “She was honest in ways most people aren’t. I felt understood by her.”

Alice: “*Are you still together?*”

Me: “No, we went different ways. It was for the best.”

Alice: “*So...you didn’t end up happily ever after?*”

Me: “I think I did, just not with her.”

Alice seemed to think carefully about my responses and place more significance on them than I had, and this forced me to revisit the conversation days, even weeks after with the *esprit d’escalier* sensation that I could have offered better responses. Her questions were deeply personal and covered a topic I hadn’t had to reflect on in over a decade. Yet this exchange is, as Gareth White (2012) observed of Punchdrunk’s one-on-ones, highly scripted so that my responses are inconsequential to the work itself. Alice’s questions are often binary or closed, warranting short responses that don’t direct the conversation, but allow her to segue into the next scripted question. The first four questions could be asked in sequence no matter how one answers. She does seem to improvise to some degree, for example using a feminine pronoun, or asking a follow-up question about being “still together.” But like dialogue options in RPGs, Alice’s words are chosen from among a limited number of scripts and employed depending on a series of binaries: in this case whether one responds in the affirmative or negative, or whether they specify a male, female, or nonbinary lover. This exchange doesn’t impact any other scene, and it is questionable how my answers directed the conversation, if at all. Yet despite those limitations, I left feeling as though Alice had expressed genuine interest in me and weighed whether what I’d said applied to herself and Carroll’s highly questionable relationship. *TSF*’s design means Alice directs the conversation while restricting the player’s responses to a set of definable variables. At the same time, it structures the conversation around something personally introspective. These are *TSF*’s most successful moments, in which it challenges the audience member to determine the rules of engagement, participate fully in the drama, and then reflect on their interactions afterward. And they mirror *SNM*’s one-on-one scenes that are offered in such short supply and behind hidden opportunities. Although some *TSF* scenes reveal themselves to be too restrictive to allow the player any unique input (how many ways can I move chess pieces silently?), scenes like the Alice conversation highlight how the performance can create unique dramatic experiences.

Just as important is *TSF*’s reconfigurability of scene order which allows the relationships between each scene to connect both the player and the narrative. For all its choice and interactivity, *Sleep No More* still tells the linear narrative of *Macbeth*, if in a decentralized and distributed way. Artifacts scattered around the McKittrick hint at the space’s history, and as one might be observing a scene, others are happening simultaneously to drive the characters toward the tragedy’s lethal conclusion. And one of the player’s tasks is to place each object

and scene within the play's timeline. But *TSF* doesn't have a linear narrative to begin with, or even a proper one to reconstruct for that matter, despite its constant references to literary texts. Instead, each scene is a reflection on Carroll's work and its inextricable relation to his and Alice Liddell's lives. The characters dance, argue, vie for dominance, explore their surroundings and each other, and reach out to the player in an examination of the author. At times genuine, and at others uncomfortably inappropriate, *TSF* doesn't flinch from the implications of Carroll's infatuation with Liddell, forcing us to look at his sexualized photographs of her and leaving us at the end with a copy of his acrostic poem to her. In one meta-scene in the Hospital, the Mad Hatter told me her thoughts about the intricacies of writing fictional characters and the purpose they serve. She alluded to Carroll himself as a character because, as she asked rhetorically, "Did you know that wasn't even his real name?" The Hatter then gestured to the conditions of her own creation, musing, "I was written to amuse a little girl. Who writes any of us? And what writing do we do?" *TSF*'s narrative—if we can call it that—is a discourse that fractures storytelling and finds theatrical form in the aesthetics of personalized experiences of digital media, wherein "every spectator claims the power to follow their own hyperlinked story from moment to moment" (Neher, 2016). *TSF* is less interested in telling a story or arriving at a definitive view of Carroll than it is in giving audiences meaningful staged interactions.

SNM and *TSF* thus represent two fundamentally different approaches to adapting video game design onstage and highlight the challenges of each respective interpretation. Perhaps the most striking difference is orientation: *TSF* centers its action and environments around the participants, while in *SNM* participants revolve around the action, sometimes being literally moved out of the way by actors. Part of what makes *TSF*'s structure more effective than *SNM* is that it makes the terms of interactivity clear at every stage. Punchdrunk capitalizes on an experience of individual choice through mobility and rewards player knowledge with hidden content, generating an enthusiastic online community in the process. *TSF* places significant restrictions on individual expressions, but offers audiences greater access to its secrets and a more satisfying single playthroughs as a result. Comparing the two reveals a trade-off of access contingent upon the resources of live performance. If these installations were digital games, we could explore the McKittrick indefinitely, with its cast awaiting our approach to begin their movement sequences. Or, we would be able to ask Alice questions and have the performance change according to our decisions. Rather than facilitating actual agency or freedom of expression, these two immersive performances simulate an experience of them through controlled interactions. *TSF*'s guided movements and structured exchanges dramatize how the rules governing interactivity need not run opposite to player expressions, and can create the conditions for moment-to-moment, non-trivial decisions that co-produce the work. Indeed, this is the same dynamic we see in many video games; whatever choices the player makes and whatever their outcomes, their playthrough and the meaning they make of it is only facilitated by a series of design possibilities which may or may not resonate personally with the player's own desires, history, and personality.

“Your only true choice:” How Walking Simulators Subvert Player Expectations through Metatextuality

Clearly immersive theatre productions draw from various genres of digital games, but the most productive comparison is with walking simulators. This is both because of their core mechanics and because both walking sims and immersive theatre are generally regarded within their respective industries as running counter to traditional commercial undertakings. Felix Barrett asks, “How can you take theatre and put it into games?” pointing to *Gone Home* specifically as a design that resonates with Punchdrunk’s environmental storytelling (McMullan, 2014). According to Barrett, “*Gone Home* has an implicit narrative...you’ve either just missed the action or it’s just about to happen and you’re suspended in-between...rather than an audience crafting their own narrative they are peeling back layers of story, almost archeologically” (McMullan, 2014). Barrett isn’t the only dramaturg to see the theatrical potential of walking sims. Mona Bozdog’s *Inchcolm Project* (2016) remediated The Chinese Room’s *Dear Esther* (2012) into a live performance, using walking as the main mechanic that “progresses the narrative and encompasses the narrative itself” (Bozdog & Galloway, 2016; 2017). Recursively, Fullbright’s Steve Gaynor has referenced immersive theatre, particularly *Sleep No More*, as one of his influences in designing *Gone Home* and later *Tacoma* (Homan & Homan, 2014; Sinclair, 2014). But while Gaynor sees similarities between immersive theatre and walking simulators, specifically in how players inhabit the same fictional environment as characters and can engage with the narrative by exploring and interacting with objects, he insists, “*Gone Home* is very much a game, [and] its game-ness is what gives it any meaning at all” (Sinclair, 2014). For Gaynor, what distinguishes games is that through interactivity, players establish a dialogue with the game, its systems and characters, and its designers. And I would add that those conversations have meanings within the historical and cultural context of the game industry that explain why walking sims challenge industrial norms in ways immersive theatre does not on the merits of design alone.⁶

Walking sims like *Dear Esther* and *Virginia* pushed back against traditional game design by reducing and removing elements many considered essential (Muscat & Duckworth, 2018). Bozdog and Galloway (2019) observed that the disruption of skills, goal-oriented action, and linear narratives experiments with alternative kinds of play that “foreground players’ interpretive, aesthetic, and emotional capabilities” in ways that “redefine, diversify, and expand the territory of gaming and player communities.” This is especially apparent in *Gone Home*, whose inspiration came from Gaynor’s previous work on *Bioshock*, from which he took non-linear environmental exploration and object-oriented world-building and then jettisoned the combat mechanics that make up the FPS’s primary mode of interaction. The removal of guns from the player’s field of vision and as the principal mechanic challenges the hegemony of U.S. militarism and the assumptions embedded in first person exploration, leading Melissa Kagen to call it a genre of “anti-games” (qtd. in Dowman 2019) that fundamentally questions what games are. Titles within the genre including *Gone Home*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *Dear Esther*, and *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* even remove NPCs, an omission

that immersive theatre has not adopted, nor have some game devs like Doc Burford, who explains that his approach in designing *Paratopic* was to “fix” the walking sim by adding a vocabulary of verbs it apparently lacks: “*Dear Esther’s* island is empty. *Gone Home’s* home has been abandoned. *Amnesia’s* castle is virtually uninhabited, except for the occasional foe. Walking sims are devoid of life. The games I love are practically bursting with it” (2018). Thus for many, walking sims are characterized foremost by their absences: of familiar mechanics and feedback systems, of traditional interactive storytelling devices, of role play, and of character identification.

But game scholars have also identified several other common traits, including non-linear time and space (Kagen, 2018), fractured archives (Darby, 2019), intimate aesthetic relations with virtual environments (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016; Bohunicky & Milligan, 2019), Bozdog & Galloway, 2016), and encouraging interpretation through ambiguities of information, context, and relationship (Muscat et al., 2016). Broadly, these traits have been understood within game studies to produce new ways of interacting with and understanding virtual spaces and the time we spend in them. For many critics, the player’s critical movement through and interpretation of the virtual environment is the walking sims’ most important feature, and one productive framework has been Situationist psychogeography, which Guy DeBord defined as a playful activity “constructed out of wandering in which it is required to subconsciously abandon oneself into the environment and simultaneously become consciously aware of its effects” (qtd. in Carbo-Mascarell, 2016). Specifically, critics have looked to the practices of *derive* as playful mechanics and meaningful experience, and *detournment* as the exploration of new associations with spatiality and pathways to explain how players productively use movement in walking sims (Ennslin, 2013). Elsewhere, game scholars have borrowed from literary theory including Garrett Stewart’s neologism “lexigraphs,”⁷ as well as Roland Barthes’ distinction between “readerly” and “writerly” texts⁸ to argue how walking sims converge the acts of reading and walking with a “disruptive passivity” that rewrites the player’s and the gamespaces semiotic meanings (Bohunicky & Milligan, 2019). Barrett’s comment about *Gone Home* suggests that this is the kind of relationship he wants participants to establish with immersive dramatic environments, but it is worth questioning what relationships live performances can meaningfully remediate from walking sims. Following Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon’s (2019) suggestion, this section accounts for walking sims’ transgeneric experiences by studying their hybridization with other digital game genres and its implications for immersive theatre.

Unlike immersive theatre productions that populate their stages both actors and NPCs, walking sims are usually only inhabited by the player. This absence renders its narrative fully in the past such that the player must make sense of a fragmented archive of information (Darby, 2019). Borrowing from Derrida’s hauntology and the related concept of ghosting in theatre studies, Kris Darby argues the genre is “doubly haunted,” first by dead characters who were never alive, and second by the near absence of a player avatar that renders it like a poltergeist (2019). If Barret desires “ghostly presences” (see above) in *Sleep No More*, the

presence of literally hundreds of participants and dozens of performers inhibits the effect Darby describes here. Additionally, these presences mean that immersive theatre creates tension between archives and present action. *Then She Fell* is the exception here in that it manages to avoid imposing a choice between the two by building in oscillations between these two modes of free exploration and guided interaction. Punchdrunk's productions take for granted that unstructured movement and exploration run counter to traditional theatre aesthetics in much the same way Situationists like Guy DeBord and Michel de Certeau upended city planning and walking sims challenge AAA game design. This last point has been challenged for a few reasons. As Jesper Juul (2018) observed, walking sims "reject the gameplay and strategy optimization that characterize most games, but in doing so...present a quite conservative and traditional idea of aesthetics, in order to create video games that can fit in art gallery settings." Similarly, Dowman (2019) asserted that we do the indie game sector a profound disservice when we see it as diametrically opposed to the AAA industry, instead urging that we understand them in a complex network of reciprocity that co-creates one another. We perform a similar disservice when we see immersive theatre as opposed to an ahistorically-conceived spectatorial theatre establishment (Jannerone, 2010), because despite asserting an immersive epistemology, the genre is predicated on a conventional understanding of dramaturgy: that the stage reveals fully-formed and psychologically-knowable characters to whom the audience responds as much as they do to people off-stage. The difference, as Worthen (2012) observed, is that immersive stage design spatializes literary character, in effect "materializing elements of the play's verbal texture as objects in a thematically resonant environment" (p. 86). What participants encounter in their trajectories through the McKittrick or Wonderland is a network of verbal imagery rendered as a scenic landscape of performance informed by *Bioshock's* Rapture and *Gone Home's* Greenbriar home as much as literature and traditional theatre stagings. What immersive theatre misses in their adoption of environmental storytelling is the ways walking sims often rely on metafiction and metaprocedure to subvert players' expectations.

Walking simulators deal extensively in productive misdirections of form, mechanics, and genre in ways that become decontextualized in immersive theatre performances. In *Gone Home*, for example, players assume the role of Katie Greenbriar, a college student visiting her family's new Oregon home after one year of studying abroad in Europe. She arrives at night during an ominous thunderstorm to find the house dark, locked, and empty, with a note left by her seventeen-year-old sister Sam begging Katie not to find her. The game has no defined goals, objectives, or guidance besides the looming mystery of what happened to the Greenbriars and the familiar mechanics of first-person exploration. Set in June 1995, Katie has no way of contacting her family immediately, and so she ventures into the unfamiliar home looking for an explanation. One of her first clues is a series of voicemail messages from a young woman, frustrated at first that Sam isn't answering, and then desperate, pleading for her to "please be there." Already we see a crucial difference between *Gone Home* and *Sleep No More* in the motivations for exploring. The game establishes several narrative reasons why Katie would need to explore an unfamiliar space, foremost among them a mystery.

SNM however adapts a script audience members are familiar with, making their exploration yield the quirks of *Macbeth* viewed through the lens of a 1920s hotel. By contrast *Gone Home* invokes the iconography and plot beats of popular 1990s-era horror films, leading players to assume some tragedy looms deeper within the dark and creaky house. And as the player explores the home, turning on lights, opening still-unpacked boxes, picking up objects, and reading notes strewn about the rooms, they uncover details about the Greenbriars that play into those assumptions. They find a note from one of Sam's classmates making fun of her for living in a "psycho house," and uncover Sam's supernatural investigations, including a ouija board and séance. But supernatural fears are misplaced, and the game even chastises the player (and Katie) for acting on those fears, such as chiding notes for leaving lights on all over the house.

Brendan Keogh (2013) observed, "*Gone Home* is a scary game. The things that scare you are the things that scare you as a teenager. Childish fears that you are old enough to know are silly but not old enough to completely disbelieve." Compounding environmental horror, there is a narrative terror in *Gone Home* that extends from the oppressive absence of its characters (Billotte, 2018; Burr, 2015), most of all Sam's. In addition to the front-door letter, the player finds a crumpled note mentioning the locked attic, and another telling Katie she won't be needing her room anymore. As the player finds key areas and items, we hear Sam narrating her developing romance with Yolanda "Lonnie" DeSoto, her feelings about realizing her queer sexuality, and her parents' dismissal of them as a phase (yet also forbidding Sam to close her bedroom door when Lonnie visits). Consistent with its 1995 setting, *Gone Home* is embroiled in "don't ask, don't tell" politics, and Lonnie especially experiences distress as she grapples with her ROTC membership and impending Army enlistment in which she must hide her sexuality. And as Sam's narration becomes strained by her parents' lack of support and the thought of losing Lonnie, we fear that the narrative is heading toward another familiar genre trope: that queer love will end in tragedy. But this too turns out to be misdirection. When the player finally finds the attic key, they don't find Sam's body, but an empty space littered with her photography and a diary detailing to Katie how Lonnie left the military on her way to boot camp, and how Sam left home to be with her earlier that day. And with the realization that their parents left on an anniversary trip to strengthen their marriage, Katie (and the player) only have an empty, unfamiliar home before them. This is a misdirection *SNM* cannot achieve as an adaptation of a well-known script, not matter how it voids itself of language. We know the plot and characters heading into the performance; all we can do is marvel at the attention to detail and reflect on the aesthetic choices the designers made in this adaptation of *Macbeth*. This too is perhaps why *Then She Fell* is so successful in creating meaningful personal interactions: it isn't an adaptation of *Alice* so much as a consideration of fictional worlds themselves.

Another aspect to consider is the character insights we glean from the environment. Heading into *SNM* and *TSF*, we already have a sense of who the characters are, their motivations, and their decisions. But these are all unknowns in walking sims, and often comprises the

network of interrelated relations we try to understand. Because of its characters' absence, players glean details about the Greenbriars through their possessions. Pillow forts and empty pizza boxes, *Street Fighter II* move lists, zines, and punk rock cassette tapes frame Sam and Lonnie's romance around the then-burgeoning riot grrrl movement; Terry's poorly-received political thriller novels and his father's disapproving letters paint an image of a struggling father; Janice's letters suggest frustration with her husband. *Gone Home* is a nostalgic game, telling the Greenbriar's story through the garbage, prized possessions, and leftover artifacts of late twentieth-century middle class American life. And that rummaging through those possessions is *Gone Home*'s primary mechanic makes this a game fundamentally about archives. Yet, *Gone Home* also complicates the idea that archives comprise a repository of easily-read and discernable artifacts. Many of its objects only have significance when contextualized with Sam's narration. For example, when what at first appears as a blood-stained tub turns out to be red hair dye, Sam's voiceover describes dying Lonnie's hair and the intimacy associated with touching another person's scalp. *Gone Home* stages a messy collection of objects that could otherwise be dismissed as disposable or ephemeral, but which are invested with meaning only through their associations with one another and with their owners. As Pavlounis (2016) argued, *Gone Home* is not an archive characterized by the rational catalogues of administrative processing, but the affective registers of objects that punctuate the practices of everyday life, and it does so better than any material archive can (p. 583). Unlike *Sleep No More*, all the action of *Gone Home* is in the past when we arrive, and the player's task is to piece together the mystery of what happened by attending to the evidence left in its narrative environment at their own pace and in their own way. *Gone Home* also benefits from the retrospective explanations given by Sam's narration which, as we learn in the conclusion, are taken from the journal Katie finds in the attic. Like a museum, the game stages commentary about a point in American cultural history to change the way we understand people through artifacts, and to provide context for the way we understand ourselves in the present moment (Veale, 2017).

This runs contrary to Punchdrunk's emphasis on individual experience, lack of apparent meta-critique, and its competing roles as aesthetic experiencer, observer, interactor, and archaeologist. Katie's only importance is as a medium through which we have access to Sam's life. This is not to suggest however that *Gone Home* is beyond reproach in its mechanics or representations. Anna Anthropy has argued that Sam's coming out story is too convenient and structured like a puzzle to be solved (qtd. in Pavlounis, 2016). Moreover, the initial framing of Katie's exploration as trespassing means that in exploring the home, the assumed straight character systemically reproduces the tendency of queer stories to be appropriated by and mediated through normative paradigms. And for all the game's claims to queering contemporary game design, Bonnie Ruberg has shown that the practice of speedrunning ironically shows how stiflingly linear *Gone Home* is (2019). Nevertheless, the strength of *Gone Home*, like most walking sims, is to use level and artifact design to contextualize a narrative with which the player affectively engages. *Gone Home* has meaning not just because of its game-ness, but because it is in conversation with other game genres. In the contexts of popular

FPS game design and mainstream gaming's aversion to these kinds of stories—especially those involving queer characters—independent developers like Fullbright represent experiments which question not just what counts as a game, but the heuristics we use to interact with them, the kinds of relationships we expect with them, and why.

The kind of introspection and self-awareness demanded by walking sims makes many uncomfortable, leading to predictable toxicity within game communities.⁹ Even “walking sim” as a descriptive category was intended to be derogatory, indicating how taking away central FPS mechanics leaves these games without anything to do but walk.¹⁰ But as Nicole Clark (2017) observes, walking sims aren't the first games to resist militaristic game design and, moreover, nearly every game includes walking as a primary mechanic. For Clark (2017), the threat that walking sims represent to purists is rather in their resemblance to FPS games and their demands for the player's moral engagement. Some players feel misled by familiar mechanics while at the same time discomfited by the introspection walking sims encourage. One telling example comes from streamer PewDiePie,¹¹ who vented his frustrations upon finishing Campo Santo's *Firewatch*. In this game, the player assumes the role of a new forest ranger named Henry, who relocates to a park in the Pacific Northwest to escape dealing with his wife Julia's terminal cancer. Over the course of the game, Henry has a flirtatious relationship with his supervisor Delilah by radio while investigating a mysterious figure on the mountain. But like Henry's desire for a transcendental, *Walden*-like experience in Nature, most of his expectations are left unfulfilled. There is no killer on the mountain, a missing child turns out to have died years earlier in a tragic rock-climbing accident, and Delilah has already left when Henry finally reaches her outpost at the climax. Upon seeing this scene, PewDiePie rants:

Lame! Is there a different ending where she's actually staying? Cuz that was pretty disappointing. What the fuck was that ending? That was so bad. How is that a fucking ending? 'Oh, by the way, nothing changed. And a kid died.' What? I'm really upset right now... What, I didn't flirt with her enough? Like, what was the fucking problem?... I feel like we accomplished nothing here today. If he's just going to go back to Julia, like, what, that doesn't make any sense. And, like, the story was that a kid died, that at least is sad, but... it didn't lead up to anything (qtd. in Kagen, 2018).

What PewDiePie misses is that his disappointment is precisely the point. The player, like Henry, is supposed to feel empty and perhaps foolish for entertaining the idea that they could run from their problems. As Melissa Kagen (2018) argued, *Firewatch* uses the conventions of survival horror games to create a rising tension left unresolved by the ending, and in the same moment, denies a retroactive hypermasculine justification of a serious violent threat. By repurposing the tone and mechanics of horror games, *Firewatch* offers a commentary not just on other game genres, but also encourages players to think critically about the ways we typically interact with them. The question PewDiePie should have asked is not why his flirtations with Delilah “didn't lead up to anything,” but why he expected them to in the first place. These kinds of introspective possibilities which reflect on the medium and our thoughts, feelings, and behavior in relation to them is a critical stance that certain modes of

interactivity—movement, camera reframing, reading and inspecting objects, and environmental exploration—achieve in the walking sim, but do not translate neatly to immersive theatre productions. Without a longer history of participatory theatre to draw from, participants often lack a frame of reference besides digital media, and yet the two experiences differ enough that it's difficult to define exactly what their expectations are besides what the online guides, reviews, and promotional materials tell them about installations like *Sleep No More*.

Immersive theatre thus lacks the metafictional awareness of walking sims, both in their mechanics and in their content. If walking sims frequently levy formal critiques of video games and players' relations to game systems, Galactic Café's *The Stanley Parable (TSP)* opens an explicit conversation about the relationship between players and game designers. The premise of this game follows Stanley, a non-descript office employee whose job is to sit at a computer and press buttons in response to cues that appear on screen. One day, his monitor goes blank. Unsure what to do without guidance, Stanley wanders about the empty office building searching for other people. Most of the action occurs between the player and a narrator, who describes Stanley's next actions as he navigates a series of obvious binary choices, for example, "when Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left." Following all the narrator's instructions uncovers a conspiracy in which corporations have turned people into mindless drones, literally controlling their minds and bodies through digital technologies. In the first of nineteen possible endings, Stanley powers off the mind control interface and wanders off into a lush glen. In another format, this might be an epic about overcoming corporate greed, freeing the oppressed, and escaping the drab gray interiors which have come to represent alienated labor in the digital age. But the "Life Ending" is profoundly unsatisfying because all the player did was complete a series of boring, instructed tasks: enter the left door, type in a passcode that only the narrator knew, find the secret lab and press the "off" key. Rather, much of the game's pleasure lies in refusing to follow the narrator's instructions and subsequently, to hear his frustrations. *TSP* stages a consideration about the affordances and limitations of player choice in video games, with Stanley serving as a stand-in for the player, and the narrator as game designer. And in nearly all its endings, it is skeptical about the prospect of players having any real choice, because even when players refuse to follow the narrator's instructions, they are only ever choosing one of two options that the designers have planned for them in advance.

Like *Gone Home*, *TSP* invokes conventions of mainstream game design to subvert the player's expectations. At the same time, *TSP* illustrates that choice is not inherently liberating, or, as Ian Bogost (2016) described, a way of "operating a constrained system in a gratifying way." If *Gone Home* strips FPS games of their primary mechanics to foreground a virtual environment's materiality as the preferred medium for interacting with narrative, *TSP* strips video games down to their bare procedural elements to examine what games fundamentally are, and what our relationship is with them. In its most cynical moments, the game finds nothing there. In one ending, the player leaves the story altogether after Stanley's certain

death by metal jaws. The player is given a short interlude in a museum which showcases the digital artifacts that make up the game, further removing the game's assets from the interactive contexts which give them function and meaning. Unlike *Gone Home's* play with archives as constituted by the personal artifacts of lived experience, *TSP* emphasizes the obsolescence of cultural objects. As if the institutional-grey walls and identical cubicles and furniture of Stanley's office building weren't meaningless enough, Galactic Café raises this trait to exponential levels by placing the game's reused assets on literal pedestals with all the gravitas of the museum's function as curator of cultural artifacts. When the player is finally transported back to Stanley's attempted escape from the game, a second narrator reflects on the narrator's and Stanley's co-dependency, addressing the player:

Can you see? Can you see how much they need one another? No, perhaps not. Sometimes these things cannot be seen. But listen to me, you can still save these two. You can stop the program before they both fail. Press "escape" and press "quit." There's no other way to beat this game. As long as you move forward, you'll be walking someone else's path. Stop now, and it will be your only true choice.

Here, *TSP* seems to dismiss the idea of choice in video games altogether, suggesting that the only real agency players have is in choosing whether to play the game in the first place. But what the game rather does is to offer a complex web of choices without the traditional markers of predictive consequences or closure to player actions. Choices are freely offered, only to be met with the assertion that those choices amount to nothing. Antranig Sarian (2018) compared *TSP* to the Theatre of the Absurd,¹² arguing that both share an "existential effacement of meaning, which confounds the player with contradictions, before drawing the player in to try and construct their own interpretation." *TSP's* ostensibly dire view is that games are not "a series of interesting decisions" as Sid Meier describes (Alexander, 2012), but a series of meaningless ones. Yet in its postmodern tone, *TSP* is not a nihilistic work vying for the abolition of video games as an experiential medium. Instead, it finds meaning in the personal decision-making processes and self-reflexivity involved in navigating virtual worlds and interactive narratives. *TSP's* metaprocedurality is a means to its own end, making the player aware of their own interactive tendencies to explore how games encourage certain behaviors and their associated cognitive and affective states. Immersive theatre does not interrogate the meaning of game mechanics so much as use them with the assumption that doing so is by its very nature, opposed to spectatorial theatre. Comparing *SNM* with *TSF* illustrates why walking sim exploration mechanics can become hollow in live performances, because while the former relies on these mechanics juxtaposed scenes that function like passive cutscenes, *TSF* adapts them to enhance the embodied interactions with characters that are live performance's greatest asset.

As a genre, walking simulators rely on and resist mainstream conventions of game design to engage players more fully in their content, whether stories of marginalized people, or a rumination on what it means to play a video game. Explicitly and implicitly, games like *Gone Home*, *Firewatch*, and *The Stanley Parable* subvert contemporary first-person game mechanics, player choice, and narrative outcomes. In doing so, they arrive at a conclusion

similar to Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator* (2009) that runs counter to Punchdrunk's promotion of immersive theatre as a liberatory genre: that the player's cognitive and affective involvement is their unique contribution to a co-authored work, rather than their mechanical interactivity. This essay has shown that digital games inform immersive theatre productions more than the mid-century experimental theatre. It has also shown how the live resources of theatrical performance place temporal and logistical constraints on spectators when remediating digital games for the stage when adapted uncritically. According to White (2013), immersive theatre is ultimately an inviting but faulty term because ontologically speaking, it can only achieve what other forms of performance can: "a relation in which the event of a work of art occurs between its material being and the person who encounters it. If it has claims to make – as well as its persuasive claims for having found new and excitable audiences – they must be to do with its potential to stimulate these relations, rather than with creating realms of experience not available in other kinds of work." White's assertion is that immersive theatre often loses sight of the unique dynamics of the stage. To some extent, he is right. Immersive companies like Punchdrunk have advertised their productions as physically embedded productions of the digital age, declaring that the likes of ...*And Darkness Descended* is unique because it is game-like by virtue of its design and partnership with Sony PlayStation. But immersive theatre is most affecting when it takes advantage of live performance's strengths (e.g. physical presence, improvisation, sensory input) as a necessary companion to environmental and interpersonal interactivity. The reason for *SNM*'s success is in large part due to opportunities to interact with characters, so much so that if one leaves *SNM* feeling disappointed, it is because they did not experience a one-on-one encounter, or if they did, it felt artificial. Likewise, *TSF* has been so widely praised because it affords the experience of authentic interactions to each participant. Immersive theatre may not take for granted the sensorial engagement of interactive media like in video games (Keogh 2018), but too many productions misunderstand why it is important in digital contexts. Certainly, the theatre has much it can learn from games, and vice versa; but immersive theatre should not strive to remediate the video game. Like Gaynor's acknowledgement that games have meaning because of their "game-ness," immersive theatre companies should bear in mind that the material and social realities of the stage are what gives it meaning, and it should capitalize on its strengths even as it borrows from other forms.

Endnotes

1. Concretely defining immersive theatre as a genre has proven difficult given the diversity of techniques, stagings, and interactions that fall under "active audiences." Many critics—including those who propose typologies of immersive techniques and effects—have simply framed the genre opposite an ahistorical "traditional theatre." For example, in 2016 Jonathan Mandell proposed a list of common "immersive" features as a way of parsing them from synonyms like interactive, mixed-reality, site-specific, environmental, and promenade. For Mandell (2016), immersive theatre productions: (1) stimulate all five senses, (2) double as

art-installations, (3) give the impression of individual experiences that differ from others, (4) emphasize the social through playful interaction, (5) tell a story, often without dialogue, and (6) create a physical environment that “differs from traditional theatre” [emphasis mine]. One year later, Mandell (2017) observed that despite the omnipresence of immersive marketing language and his own efforts to describe precisely what that means, there is little critical consensus about what lies within the genre’s bounds. Compounding this confusion is that the artists most associated with immersive theatre—including Punchdrunk’s Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, and Third Rail’s Zach Morris and Dave Malloy—do not like the term to describe their work.

2. Machon’s distinction here is a reaction against what she describes as Western’s theory’s dismissal of proprioception. She wants to account for a “kinaesthetic hapticity,” or a holistic focus on haptic sensation and perception. However, she does not adequately explain how the proprioception she distinguishes differs from the haptic feedback of VR systems or even vibrating controllers. See Machon, 2013, p. 46.

3. This is not to suggest performance scholars have not also been skeptical of immersion or agency in live performance. Gareth White for example has argued that immersive theatre fails to deliver on its promises precisely once the participant finds themselves in intimate encounters which reveal themselves to be artificial. As White (2013) conceived of it, participation is a shared creative process that “changes its character as a process of authorship, but not does fundamentally undermine it: what is authored, as well as any performance that results, is the interactional space into which the audience member can step as a participant, if they choose to” (p. 195).

4. According to their website, “REMIX Summits explore the intersection of Culture, Technology and Entrepreneurship.”

5. *Then She Fell* originally opened in 2012 in an Arts@Renaissance restoration site, the condemned outpatient building of the Greenpoint Hospital in Brooklyn. Third Rail later moved the site to The Kingsland Ward at St. John in East Williamsburg, where it is still running.

6. Recent examples of immersive sims include *Dear Esther*, *Virginia*, *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture*, *Gone Home*, *Tacoma*, *Firewatch*, *The Stanley Parable*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*. But the design philosophy behind these games is nothing new. In the 1980s, freelance coder Graham Reif released two games—*Explorer* and *The Forest*—that were purely exploratory in a procedurally-generated environment. Although utilizing only 16kb on a black-and-green Tandy display, *The Forest* boasted thirty-seven square kilometers of space populated with trees, lakes, and towns. See Mason, 2018.

7. Stewart coins the term “lexigraph” to refer to paintings and drawings of written text that combine the act of reading and looking. See Stewart, G. (2006). *The Look of Reading*. Chica-

go: The University of Chicago Press.

8. Barthes distinguishes between “readerly” texts whose representations are linear and apparent such that meaning is pre-determined and fixed, and “writerly” texts characterized by multiplicities in cultural and ideological meanings. For Barthes, most texts are readerly and only demand a detached, passive engagement that merely receives information. By contrast, he conceives of writerly texts as avant garde, without stable meaning, self-referential, and demanding the reader take an active role in the construction of meaning. See Barthes, R. (1970). *S/Z*. R. Miller (Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang.

9. *Gone Home* received abundant criticism from self-described “hardcore gamers.” In response, the website Dorkly produced a satirical trailer for a shooter sequel titled *Gun Home*, featuring “ex-plode-ration” gameplay and “high-octane introspection,” much to Gaynor’s amusement. See Dorkly, 2014.

10. Despite the term’s pejorative origins, “walking sim” has become neutralized as a general descriptor, in large part because developers embraced the term against those who were weaponizing it. Platforms like Valve’s *Steam* service even use walking sim as a searchable category.

11. Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg aka PewDiePie is a Swedish YouTuber, comedian and video game commentator, best known for his Let’s Play commentaries, vlogs, and comedic formatted shows. At the time of writing, he has over 80 million subscribers. Despite his frequent use of racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic language and imagery, and subsequent loss of corporate sponsors including Disney, PewDiePie remains one of the most popular streamers in the world. Part of his popularity is due to the support of alt-right members like Vox Day. See Herman, 2017.

12. A post-WWII movement which abandoned conventional dramatic forms, often to portray the senselessness of human struggle. Critic Martin Esslin coined the term in his 1960 essay, “Theatre of the Absurd.” Esslin describes the ToA as being comprised of plays that leave the audience uncertain as to what is happening on the stage. As a result, they cannot anticipate what will happen, and instead must ask existential and epistemological questions about what is happening. Practitioners included Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Eugene Ionesco. Sarian sees resonances between *The Stanley Parable* and Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957) which features two characters without context; one cannot walk and the other cannot sit. By the end of the play, the characters begin recycling dialogue, suggesting they exist in a temporal stasis and only in relation to the other character they converse with. See Sarian, 2018.

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