

# DIGITAL ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AND THEATRE: RETOOLING AND REPURPOSING ENTERTAINMENT, ART, LEARNING

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## INTRODUCTION

What do Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and modern gaming have in common? According to Gina Bloom's *Gaming the Stage* (2018), the answer is a set of strategies of playing, such as withholding, divulging, speculating, and wagering on knowledge. These, on the one hand, allowed one to act upon their knowledge of gaming in settings such as sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gaming houses, gambling clubs, or blood-sport arenas. On the other hand, they got worked into the action of the drama of that period, but also enabled gamers in the audience to access the meanings of drama. Bloom shows that the histories of gaming and theatre figure rich connections dating to the early-modern period, and she documents how it is largely due to the similar experiences of attending a play and playing a game that theatre was established in the entertainment market. "Audiences did not just see a play; they were encouraged to play the play, and knowledge of gaming helped them become better theatergoers," she claims (Bloom 2019). Although Bloom's work lends itself to multiple uses, for the purposes of this article we will employ its central argument as our starting point: games can be approached and studied as theatrical media and theatre "as an interactive gaming technology" (2019).<sup>1</sup> This position is also being supported by ludologist and game studies scholars such as Johan Huizinga in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1938) and

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<sup>1</sup> It was Richard Schechner (2003) who first identified games as performance, albeit from a different angle than Bloom's as we shall see later on.

Sara Lynne Bowman in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (2010). Yet, whereas Bloom shores up her argumentation by drawing mostly from the realm of analog gameplay and theatreplay, here we will look into playing that has taken a decisive digital turn.

The advent of the digital revolution shifted the terrains of gaming more radically than those of theatre. It certainly affected the theatre as art, craft, industry, and the sweep of applied theatre, and it also gave rise to forms of theatre native or thoroughly adapted to the digital environment that now fall under the rubric of “digital theatre.” However, generally speaking, the basics of theatre (especially mainstream theatre), namely its aesthetics, politics, and ethics, have not so far undergone any radical transformation owing to the integration of digital technology into the theatre praxis. The case is different with games. Digital games’ prevalence over analog games in the last decades, and the proliferation of the former, have had a deep impact on the design, production, distribution, and reception of games as loci of sociality and socializing, as well as on their uses beyond the entertainment industry, in education, and in the intersection of games and the arts (Quandt and Kröger 2014; Dillon 2020). Digital gaming signals a dramatic change in the ontology and epistemology of gaming: what games are, what they do, and how we make meaning out of/with them. Ubiquitous and technologically forward-facing, digital gaming is not simply an intrinsic part of convergent media culture in contemporary societies, as game scholars Johannes Fromme and Alexander Unger have argued (2012); rather, it has emerged as one of the major actors therein. This could partially explain why post-2000s theatre has turned to digital gaming in search of tools and to engage new audiences. But the mutual feed between games and theatre was already there, as Bloom would remind us; although distinct, the two mediated realms have been interpenetrating for centuries.

It may be that the unique qualities of the digital (flexibility, mutability, openness, generativity, etc.) favored a more pronounced interrelation between digital games and theatre in recent years, in theory and practice—especially as professional theatre seeks to salvage its relevance among young and young adult demographics, key gamer demographics.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the dawn of the performance studies paradigm has also foregrounded and fortified the said interrelation. Performance studies pulled the spotlight from traditional theatre/drama scholarship toward an expansive conception of performance and toward an interdisciplinary multiplicity of entry points for performance analysis. What is important is that the connection under discussion is present in the very founding of the field of performance studies. Clara Fernández-Vara has demon-

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<sup>2</sup> According to [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), 38% of gamers are between 18 and 34 years old, while 21% are under 18. Although the numbers refer to the U.S.—major manufacturer of digital games that are successful across the globe, they can be safely extrapolated at least as an indication of key gamer demographics.

strated this in an article that delivers a theatre-based performance framework for understanding digital games, and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games in particular (MMORPGs from here onwards), as software and as gameplay (2009, 1). Seminal texts that essentially instituted the field of performance studies, writes Fernández-Vara correctly,<sup>3</sup> clearly establish that connection at least as potentiality. But in the nascent field of game studies too, “[d]ramatic models have been repeatedly invoked to study virtual environments, . . . in game design, to refer to different strategies to create uncertainty and tension in gameplay” (2009, 1)—although a comprehensive treatise on the matter has yet to appear.

Performance can be defined as a structured, regulated cluster of events in which the participants are engaged in meaning-making processes which involve objects as signs and which have social basis and implications in a specific space and according to specific time configurations. As such, it accurately describes what people experience when engaged in digital gameplay (Fernández-Vara 2009, 3). Yet it is the theatrical performance specifically that Fernández-Vara associates with digital games, not to equate the two but to render our understanding of digital gaming more nuanced. There are indeed good reasons why theatre is chosen as the basic reference model to study MMORPGs. We are going to focus on a selected few in the next section, and use the narrative, open-world digital game *Fallen London (FL)* to illustrate them. In the first part of the paper, the example of *FL* will help concretize the similarities and correspondences in the design principles, fundamental features, operative conventions, and sociocultural uses of theatre and digital games. The second part, reversedly, will zoom in on theatre projects that exemplify how theatre taps into digital games, capitalizing on their logic, mechanics, and sociocultural import. Together, the two parts aim at showing that the theatre-game alliance entails substantial benefits for both sides of the hyphen, as well as for the social domains of entertainment, art, and learning in which both are involved and which both affect. Of primary importance among these benefits is the replenished productive capacity of attempts at effectuating social change; in other words, their “re-equipping.”

## DIGITAL GAMES AS THEATRE

The contested question of what makes theatre theatre has been inseparable from the art form’s biography since time immemorial. Most theatre works, however, do not try to justify how “theatre” they are, nor do they fall neatly into any one of the existing categories. Still, it serves the aim of this section to clarify that theatre generally refers to a performance practice in which a combination of elements creates a (usually self-contained) *fictional world* oriented toward a *text/narrative*, which can be more or less

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<sup>3</sup> She mentions Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1955), Gregory Bateson’s “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” (1972), and Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), among others.

authoritative and open depending on its content and purpose (the story and thematic material). This fictional world is (often) organized “by causality, psychological motivation, and conceptual coherence,” and spectators are invited to enter and participate live (although not necessarily physically) in it, mentally, affectually, viscerally, and sometimes kinaesthetically (Boyle, Cornish, and Woolf 2019, 2). Fundamental among these elements are:

- *characters*, embodied by the performers/actors (although characterization can be woven into a work via absent characters, non-human agents, or even elements of the setting);
- *plot*, the action of the theatre work, basically what happens in it, which is more gripping when filled with tension;
- *setting*, the time and place of the action but also the scenery, or onstage physical elements and arrangements (although theatre stagecraft also includes lighting, costuming, and props, among others);
- and *dialogue*, speech or other forms of text usually directed by characters to other characters or to oneself within the context of the fictional world, by means of which this world comes alive, character gets revealed, action advances, and themes are introduced (Jacobus 2008, 17–22).<sup>4</sup>

Fernández-Vara does not enlist the foregoing elements for the framework she composes in her attempt to show the connection between theatre and MMORPGs. However, we find that taking them into account lends credence to our attempt at further elucidating existing affinities between the two realms. Yet, in order to flesh out these affinities, we should also consider the design principles that support the development of the components of the (dramatic) theatre apparatus. Drawing on applied theatre literature, we can identify at least six: *theme*, *context*, *role(s)*, *frame*, *signs*, and *strategies* (Bowell and Heap 2013). The following table illustrates the content of each and presents key ways in which design principles relate to basic theatre elements:

Design principle	Content of the design principle	Relation to theatre elements
<b>Theme</b>	What is the work about? What is the focus/foci? What aspect of the human condition gets examined? (Bowell and Heap 21)	The theme is integral to the content and purpose of the text/narrative and thus of the fictional world. It drives decisions about characters, plot, setting, and dialogue.

<sup>4</sup>Other fundamental features, such as music and movement, are not included due to considerations of space.



<b>Context</b>	The fictional circumstances of the theatre work in which the theme gets explored. It is constituted by time, place, and event/situation. (21)	The context derives from or relates directly to the text/narrative. It is integral to the composition of the fictional world and the plot. It drives decisions about setting, characters, and dialogue.
<b>Roles</b>	They are dynamic constellations of human characteristics, behaviors, and functions that express character. They emerge from within and around the context. (45)	Roles correspond to characters that (usually) evolve as the plot progresses. They are expressed mainly via the dialogue and interact with the setting. They link the text/narrative and the fictional world immediately with the human condition.
<b>Frame</b>	The frame of communication within which everything meaningful happens. The field of forces which is created by the different viewpoints and workings of characters and other agencies. It charges the work with tension. (24–25)	Frame relates directly to the setting as well as drives and energizes character, plot, and dialogue. It enlivens the fictional world. It turns the text/narrative into a distinctly social experience.
<b>Sign</b>	The “intricate system of signs including objects, sounds, language, gestures and images [which] combine to bring significance to the events . . . and direct attention to them” (21–22); multifunctional “information-bearing phenomena” that create meaning for the audience. (77)	Signs offer clues so that the audience can “read” the fictional world. They invest character and plot with meaning and allow the audience to decipher it. They make the setting and dialogue signify purposefully so that the audience can access the thematic material of the text/narrative.
<b>Strategies</b>	They are “ways of working based on performance forms that bring the drama to life” (22). Strategies allow theatre creators to adjust all the elements at their disposal so that meaning can be made “through the friction at the interface between them” (22). They are the structured, sign-encompassing means by which the theme gets explored.	Strategies are purposeful combinations of the fundamental elements of theatre that allow the text/narrative to be(come) a fictional world onstage. They organize characters, plot, setting, and dialogue for significance: strategies make them happen in ways that invite the audience to engage in meaning-making processes as they experience the theatre work.

Tied to the aforementioned elements and principles are theatre conventions. The three conventions that Fernández-Vara isolates are present even in works that involve spectators in live theatre-making processes or that move “away from drama” toward theatre that “foregrounds its own conditions of production and reception” (Boyle, Cornish, and Woolf 2019, 4): (1) the *text* that, in dramatic theatre, involves dialogue and stage directions, and that constitutes a narrative (at the heart of which lies a story), although it is not necessarily pre-set or fixed; (2) but the text is actualized by the *performance*, by “the ensemble of stage systems used [in a production]” (Pavis 1982, 160), or by what the performers and other onstage elements do to concretize the text. (1982, 3); and the link between text and performance is the *mise-en-scene*, which here means the interrelationship of the systems of performance received by the audience (1982, 160).

Together, these operative conventions, design principles, and fundamental elements help effectuate theatre’s sociocultural uses not only as artform, but also as medium of entertainment and learning. Next, we argue that they also apply to digital games and gameplay and that they enable MMORPGs to have similar uses. The following paragraphs illustrate these affinities through the example of *FL*.

*FL* constitutes a liminal case among MMORPGs.<sup>5</sup> Though categorically defined as an MMORPG, in the sense that thousands of players create custom characters which they role-play in a common server, it can also be described as a narrative, storytelling game, since the emphasis is placed on the discovery and production of text and story. For this reason, the theatre elements identified above are of primary importance in it. In *FL*, the visual elements (graphics) are not promoted as the main selling point or prioritized in game design. The focus is on the performative, narrative-centric creation of the fictional world. Visuals are purposefully treated as components of a theatre-like stagecraft; characters, plot, setting, and dialogue become central in multiple ways; game mechanics are curated so as to promote immersion. Notably, this immersion is extended beyond the game, in the official forums,<sup>6</sup> where players voluntarily continue the act of performing to generate more narrative/text and expand the fictional world. Such a deep level of immersion is one of the factors that makes this, and similar games, uniquely positioned to promote social change.

An effort to map the elements of theater onto *FL* must begin from the aim of the game, stated in the introductory webpage: explore in depth the fictional world of “Fallen London.” The premise is that in 1862, London sunk into the depths of the Earth. Forty years later, the residents have adapted into a sunless existence, while society and culture have been partially restructured. The setting draws inspiration from a diverse body of literature, including Gothic pulps as well as the works of writers such as T. S.

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<sup>5</sup> The term “liminal” is used here in the sense of “outlier.”

<sup>6</sup> The forums are located at [community.failbettergames.com/forum13-fallen-london.aspx](http://community.failbettergames.com/forum13-fallen-london.aspx)

Eliot, Shakespeare, Borges, or Ishiguro. As such, the setting is not only constructed via a combination of primarily textual means (and occasional abstract/evocative illustrations) but is also heavily metatextual in nature.

In order to explore this setting, players create customizable characters who have recently arrived in London to achieve a personal goal (chosen among four thematically diverse goals at the beginning of the game). Their avatars consist of “silhouette art,” which allows players to project their chosen characteristic unto the shadow, similar to how costuming and scenography are employed in the theatre. They are also requested to write a short text concerning the rumors surrounding their character, thus rendering characterization more social and more nuanced. As they progress in the game, their story generates a shifting description under their name. Character creation, then, is not entirely dependent upon the player but is achieved through a constant dialogical relationship with the game’s software.

Following character creation, players are required to perform these characters by making certain choices, which in turn unravel larger segments of plot, and thus text. Their performance will simultaneously uncover the setting as well as occasionally alter it, since many of the offered choices cause shifts in *FL*. The game also offers two types of dialogue choices: pre-programmed dialogue, in which the player chooses one out of several given options, and intra-player dialogue, in which two players engage in communication. Communication can take the form of letter-writing, conversations around a game of chess, dinners, sparring, and so on. These interactions fulfill two functions: they promote the unfolding of the plot, by producing qualities that help player characters achieve their goals, and they reveal and generate part of the setting. For these functions to be fulfilled, the player is required to perform their character not only in a gamist manner (i.e., choosing actions and optimizing gear), but also in a theatrical manner, by obeying the rules and observing the etiquette of the fictional Victorian culture. Notably, the subculture created around *FL* promotes and rewards the option of offering text-driven, in-role performances when players communicate in action. The importance of performative dialogue and the extent of player immersion is reinforced when we consider *FL* online forums, where players create textual adventures for other forum-goers to participate in or discuss in-game events in character. Even in sections of the forum where role-playing is not required, most players continue to produce text in line with Victorian decorum while discussing game issues of a technical nature. This evinces how central dialogue-based drama and characterization are to the game; it also showcases how players continue to generate plot, expand the setting, and thus co-create the text outside the confines of the pre-programmed game, or the game as code and mechanics.

A close examination of *FL* also reveals that theatre design principles are manifest in the game, further highlighting its connection with theater and theatreplay. To follow

Bowell and Heap's typology, the game has a clear theme, summed up in the formulation: *in the matters of the Bazaar, always look to love*. This constitutes a *leit-motif* encountered in various instances throughout the game. All plot lines, conflicts, and events are constitutive of an exploration of Love. The context is also clearly defined: an emotionally restrained society suddenly plunged into eldritch darkness must find ways to adapt, evolve, and thrive. The most obvious iteration of the roles principle in the game is the roles taken up by the players themselves. The frame of in-game communication is permeated by Victorian formality and defined by the dynamics of the players' interaction among themselves (as they embody allying or antagonistic forces) and of the interaction between players and inbuilt game agencies (as players are requested to communicate through letter-writing, invitations, dinners, etc.). Observing the etiquette by design maximizes enjoyment, immersive capability, as well as the game's communicative potential. Several signs are also used to invoke and convey meaning. For instance, the deck of cards at the players' disposal has different colored frames according to the type of plot they unlock; the change in game locations is signified by silhouette art banners; and equipped instruments signify different plot-related professions. Finally, *FL* clearly utilizes as well as encourages players to develop a variety of strategies to integrate character, setting, dialogue, and plot. The gameplay they perform is contingent on their strategies, especially how they choose to maneuver through the game's rules to achieve goals and maximize enjoyment, which, in turn, depends on the game's runtime behavior (how its mechanics unfold). This is the quintessential *modus operandi* of the immersive game experience, grounded in the players' customizing processes of meaning-making as they co-create its fictional world, whether in- or out-of-role.

It follows from all the above that there is merit in Fernández-Vara's argument that there is some measure of correspondence between the theatre convention of text and the digital game components of code and mechanics (2009, 5). Nevertheless, the player's input and their workings vis-à-vis the game's workings, point to the fact that text creation within the game spills over these two components and becomes integral to the game as art-inflected, social platform. Similarly, the theatre convention of performance, defined earlier, involves far more than a game's runtime and runtime behavior, which Fernández-Vara parallels to it (5–6). It entails strategies of gameplay but also kinds of in-role and out-of-role engagement with the text of the game that truly "concretize" the latter in ways akin to how theatre performance operates and that demand significant exercise of agency on the part of the players. At the same time, when applied to the game, the *mise-en-scene* is not simply evoked by the latter's aesthetics and the interactions that constitute it (5–6); it goes beyond those elements to the kinds of generative play that mark *FL*'s reception by its own internal audiences, the game-playing communities.

It becomes evident from our discussion so far that the sociocultural import of games like *FL* precludes their dismissal as mere light entertainment. The play of open-culture games like this “occur[s] on a cultural level” and involves the exchange of meanings “with their surrounding contexts” (Salen and Zimmermann 668). As such and as a vital part of popular culture, they are thus uniquely positioned to reflect the negotiations of this culture. The highly participatory nature of gaming subcultures accentuates this quality, and *FL* is a great example of this. Initially, the game included very few non-playable characters of color, instantiations of Victorian patriarchal structures, and references to problematic Victorian attitudes (i.e. the term “Orientals” and dismissal of homosexuality). However, as the game evolved, and as similar issues were addressed in forum discourse, the designers decided to sacrifice historical authenticity for a more socioculturally inclusive and empowering experience. These changes attract commentary in the forums which, given their performative nature, remains civil. Partly because of these liminally performative discussions, which, it should be noted entail many important intercultural learning experiences for the participants, all components of *FL* play shifted to promote visibility and justice. In a very real sense, then, the high level of immersion generated during and around *FL* gameplay ensured that the *FL* audience would learn more about cultural shifts from one another, respond to these shifts, and demand that the drama(s) in which they participate reflect their own shifting values, priorities, and concerns. Thus, *FL* actively “re-equips” rehearsals of social change within and beyond the digital environment.

Games like *FL* may not be theatre, but they borrow productively from its equipment. In so doing, they generate a level of immersion that inevitably brings to the forefront issues of sociocultural resonance that concern its player base. When proximity to theater ensures that the discourse remains bound to art-prescribed civility, as in the case of *FL*, change with significant social implications can be enabled with minimal friction. That many instances of the current “culture war” originated not in “high art” but within gaming culture suggests that building on the intersection of theater and digital games can facilitate social transformation in the worlds of entertainment, art, and learning; a topic that we also take up in the next section.

## THEATRE AND/AS DIGITAL GAME

As Lori M. Shyba has proposed, central among the benefits to be reaped by MMORPGs via the incorporation of theatre tools are enhanced gameplay experiences, games’ development as “a unique art form,” and their emergence as “an experiential way to rehearse social change” (2007, 779). The latter insofar as this development has the potential to empower participants, cultivate their social skills as well as their political informedness and cultural awareness. Theatre has also tapped into the possibilities that digital games and their affordances present. Indeed, theatre creators have pushed

the interpenetration of the two realms forward, thus rendering the foregoing affinities more prominent. In this way, they allow their works and their audiences to negotiate novel ways of co-owning the theatre experience and actively engage in meaning-making processes. Many theatre practitioners since the 2000s have figured that borrowing conventions, narrative structures, and plot devices from digital games would open new vistas of possibility for theatre's poetics. Immersive theatre creators, particularly, were early adopters and started experimenting more rigorously with gamification in the last decade. What follows is an overview of indicative theatre projects and their reception, moving from projects in which the digital component of MMORPGs is less conspicuous yet figuratively and narratively present, to those in which digital technology is integral to the conception and production of the works.

A case in point is the much discussed and award-winning *Sleep No More* by Punchdrunk, first produced in 2003. The work is a take on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that relies heavily on game logic and mechanics. Its "[a]udiences move freely through the epic story of Macbeth, creating their own journeys through a film noir world," according to its creators ("Sleep No More"). Staged in large-space locations filled with meaning-laden architectural details, *Sleep No More* invites audience members to embody their own "avatars" by wearing masks throughout the performance. Masked and silent they can wander through the carefully designed 3D physical setting; follow actors who lead them to their parts of the story, set up like side quests that add intrigue and enthrall the participant; gather information and unlock developments or separate tales by searching drawers, looking at the pages of books, and going through letters containing clues. They can also share private scenes with actors, whose content (such as tasks to be performed) allow the chosen audience members to access other courses through the fictional world and drama. As Megan Reilly (2014) has reported, the audience of *Sleep No More* is "turned into a group of first-person players in a game," since the theatre experience "lends itself well to planning approaches and achieving goals" in ways akin to those of digital games. Moreover, similar to gamers immersed in a game like *FL*, audience members are immersed to explore a branching-out/non-linear narrative, and they can choose how they will move through the storyline, and they can revisit a production to experience more "folds" of the drama, thus replaying the theatre game. The underside is that, again similar to gamers, participants may downplay the social aspect of the experience by deciding to treat fellow attendees as non-playable characters, self-isolate as single players, or become aggressive "in an effort to attain their goals" (Reilly 2014). Displays of defiance toward theatre conventions can derail or disrupt the experience of the performance as art.

These less favorable, inbuilt possibilities in gamified theatre that may compromise the artistic experience have been dealt with effectively by other immersive and interactive works. *Then She Fell* by Third Rail Projects provides a good example. Like *Sleep No More*, this work has international reach and is distinguished by the awards it has

attracted over the years as well as by its longevity: it was first performed in 2012. Its title alludes to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, from whose life and writings it was inspired. In fact, it has pulled game mechanics into its design precisely for the purpose of placing each audience member at the center of their own Alice-like journey, as its director, Zach Morris has explained (qtd. in "Press release"). The carefully set up "dreamscape" of the performance creates "poetic space where individuals could find themselves seen, heard, and integral to the action, and thereby find themselves reflected in it" (qtd. in "Press release"). As in *Sleep No More*, here too audience members are encouraged to explore the space "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 [custom designed] elixirs" ("Then She Fell"). However, there is a key difference between the two works that hinges on how the audience's experience has been curated. As Reilly (2014) documents, the fifteen-member audience, much smaller and manageable than that of *Then She Fell*, "is split up and led to different start points on" the journey through the fictional world and drama, which they are to experience in an intimate yet less autonomous mode, similar to how "on-rails" digital games are played. And although the lack of autonomy may make the experience feel somewhat artificial for those seeking enhanced agency, its integrity as art—the quality of the audience's interaction with the drama and relation to the story—is properly safeguarded.

Located somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between autonomy and dependence and breaking new ground with regard to how the theatre-game alliance can be configured are the works *Now Now Oh Now* by The Rude Mechanicals (first performed in 2012) and *Whist* by AΦE's (first performed in 2017). The former invests in the notion of theatre and games as loci of sociality and socializing, while the latter invests in the digital component of digital gaming. *Now* can be described as a combination of the social dynamics of Live-Action Role-Playing Gaming, MMORPG logic, escape room design, and serious games content, with a Brontë-alluding aesthetic ("Now"). Audience members collaborate amongst themselves, interact with their environment, and use knowledge from the field of evolutionary biology to solve puzzles that allow them to not only unlock the drama, the mysteries of the story, and the room they are in but also gain a more profound understanding of the loss(es) with which the choice and chance driving evolution are shot through. The multi-player component of the performance is what allows the process of mentally, affectually, and kinesthetically navigating the drama of randomness, beauty, and destruction that lies at the heart of this work to be experienced as a shared, social quest. This is its most significant asset. It effectively shifts the weight from the well designed and executed entertainment side of the production to its value as dramatic theatre with an artistic, social, and pedagogical mission, in the sense that it treats a socially resonant, thought-provoking theme

via innovative and engaging theatre poetics, while encouraging the audience to mine meaningful lessons about the human condition.

*Whist*, on the other hand, explores the changes in audience perception and meaning-making that accompany the digitization of gamified theatre. A true theatre-art installation-digital game hybrid, *Whist* pushes the boundaries of theatre poetics forward, as Rebecca Gordon (2017) grants, at the same time as it invites audiences to participate in the transformation of prevalent notions of what constitutes interactive theatre. It orchestrates this transformation by setting Virtual Reality-headset-donning audience members off “on a journey into a Freudian world of unfolding dreams” (Gordon 2017). Which dream the audience member experiences depends on how they play a game that involves ocular and kinesthetic interaction with sculptures planted in the performance space. Targeting specific spots on the sculptures, while engaged in digital gameplay powered by the VR technology, visually unlocks dreams which the audience member navigates and is free to explore, while also navigating the physical space (i.e. moving from one sculpture to the next). How they will experience the dream, journey through the dreamworld, and interact with the drama also depends on where they choose to focus their attention while in the dramatic context around which the dream revolves. Their personal response to the experience in social terms issues in a brief psychological profile received at the end of the show (Gordon 2017). Perhaps the most important affordances of a work like *Whist* are not those that concern how it changes the terms and stakes of entertainment and art, but those that concern what audiences learn about the possibilities of entertainment and art, and about themselves as they take ownership of their experience of both.

The question of ownership of meaningful experiences involving digital games and theatre, and the learning that people gain as a result lie at the center of many applied theatre practices developed in the past decades in the field of theatre in education. Numerous educational programs and implemented research projects have enlisted digital games to serve diverse educational purposes. Some interventions aim at promoting learning about theatre and drama, and others at promoting learning through theatre and drama about other subjects (Anderson, Cameron, and Carroll 2009). The well-known, applied theatre and theatre-in-education methodology of Process Drama has proven to be markedly compatible with digital games, which it first attracted in its orbit in the mid-aughts. In a 2015 article, Joanne O’Mara expounds on the benefits to be reaped from the marriage of Process Drama to digital games in terms of literacies acquisition: acquisition of functional, critical, and creative skills pertaining to language use and beyond. O’Mara draws on a project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) to, first, deliver a learner-centered, highly participatory model in which the strategies of Process Drama are integrated with the text- and action-related properties and uses of digital games; and second, to prove that application of the model enhances literacy outcomes for students. Apparently, the combined affordances of Process

Drama and digital games allow for the development of socioculturally resonant texts-in-action, with the learners as active co-creators, which can revolutionize practices of literacy education and training in the arts.

Around the same time, and as if informed by ARC's and O'Hara's research, Pierrepont School in Connecticut gave a fresh spin to classics education by staging classic texts on digital game platforms like *Halo*. Theatre director and drama educator Eddie Kim and his middle and high school students formed the EK Theater company, which specializes in developing digital theatre pieces that blend classical literature with epic and devised theatre, Bunraku puppetry, and MMORPGs. As Paul Darvasi (2016) writes in his cover piece of their innovative work, in a "typical" EK Theater production, live performers (students) "narrate dialogue from classic works to scenes of video games as avatars move through the action," while "[t]he director decides which game scene will project on the main screen." During the performance, the action takes place on the large screen while the "[d]igital puppeteers, voice actors, and technicians sit below the screen in a highly visible row of computer terminals and game consoles, speaking lines, moving characters and managing the sounds and transitions" (Darvasi 2016). This is not the only instance of gamified digital theatre used to serve educational purposes out there. But, to our knowledge, it is the first to experientially engage students in the production of original classics-based, digital driven applied theatre projects that contribute not only to a radical retooling of classics education, but also to a daring repurposing of classics reception more generally, much needed in today's "expansive media environment" (Darvasi). Although students of a young age, the "digital natives" of our societies (Prensky), may be the primary beneficiaries of an educational praxis that taps into their entertainment/media interests to respond more effectively to their educational needs, "digital immigrants" too can profit greatly from educational practices that integrate "the benign and empowering uses of [digital] technologies" with the inherently pro-social medium of theatre.

Along the tracks of a similar rationale but placing emphasis on how digital games can be utilized to stave off the risk of alienating demographics accustomed to digital games as an interactive form of entertainment and socializing, Greg Foster (2017) advocates the development of a "theatre for gamers." There is notable value in how Foster justifies and showcases via his practice-as-research project "how game design, in terms of its concepts, theories, technologies and notions of play, [can] to the design of live performance and engage the new game playing audience within contemporary society" (iv). Although the specifics of Foster's proposition lie beyond our scope, it is worth noting the pillars of his "theatre for gamers" for what they reveal about "re-equipped" contemporary rehearsals of social change. With (1) the focus of activity centered on audience members repositioned into the roles of players, (2) theatre practitioners recast as facilitators, (3) distributed authority and authorship of the theatrical event, and (4) the replacement of storylines with generative story-worlds, the "theatre

for gamers” earns a place in the long genealogy of theatre as a field and vehicle of social action. Yet, the digital thread running through it means that the social action toward which it is oriented can be energized in a most timely fashion. Indeed, it can be powered by the four modes that social researchers Nicole Mirra, Ernest Morrell, and Danielle Filipiak (2018) consider crucial for contemporary people to be able to interrogate and transform the social and material conditions of their communities. These are: critical digital consumption, critical digital production, critical digital distribution, and critical digital innovation. This, we believe, can potentially hold for all kinds of gamified digital theatre; an encouraging, and much anticipated, prospect.

## CONCLUSION

There is a lot that theatre and digital games can still learn about each other, and a lot more that the world can learn from their alliance, in whatever configuration this may manifest. Ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interruption of theatre’s workings as well as the workings of other forms of entertainment, art, and learning which require social intimacy, has caused an avalanche of attempts to digitalize previously analog media of socializing. There is much that the said attempts can draw to their benefit from the hybrid, intermedia, and multimodal cultural texts that theatre and digital games have built upon an existing fertile ground of structural, functional, and psychosocial affinities. It is to these affinities that we focused on in the first part of this paper, where we showed how the theatre’s fundamental elements, design principles, operative conventions, and sociocultural uses find application in an MMORPG like *Fallen London*. Digital games such as this have shown us that social distance does not have to mean absence of productive socializing or lead to a degeneration of social skills, and theatre can certainly see further to that. As we have tried to show in the second part of this paper, by acting upon their affinities both the theatre and digital games can enhance their appeal for new kinds of audiences as media of entertainment; enrich their toolboxes as forms of art; multiply and diversify their affordances as portals to meaning making and platforms of learning. In this way, both theatre and digital games will be more likely to contribute to a “re-equipping” of contemporary “rehearsals of social change,” as per Shyba’s usage of the term, in all three of the above spheres of activity and sites of cultural production.

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