

ARTICLE

Make Theatre Playable

Evan Torner 

German and Film and Media Studies, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

Email: evan.torner@gmail.com

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Abstract

This manifesto addresses the global decline in humanities investment by way of one of its relatively novel but underfunded sectors: “immersive” or playable theatre. While traditional, proscenium-based theatre faces a cultural crisis, immersive experiences and playable theatre continue to suffer from a lack of legitimacy. The manifesto emphasizes how pivotal such productions are to re-kindling passion for drama and literature among a new generation of theatre-goers accustomed to playable media. The time for long-term institutional support for the large tent called “immersive” is now.

Keywords: game; play; playable theatre

American performance theatre ticket income dropped 88% during 2020–2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic raged worldwide.¹ Few theatres have recovered to 2019-level ticket sales. While many have engaged their stakeholders with digital options such as streamed or virtual reality (VR) performances, retaining significantly more of their audiences as a result, the traditional theatre in the United States now struggles to make ends meet. Meanwhile, participatory or interactive theatre, such as the kind of immersive royal medieval banquets that Gary Izzo ran in the 1980s, or the classic *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding*, has been claiming its stake in “the future” of theatre for the past forty years, as Diep Tran’s recent article in *Playbill* documents in detail.²

Playable theatre’s presence can be felt everywhere in the theatre world, but its definition is elusive. Theatre is intrinsically ludic, or inviting a playful imagination from both performers and audience.³ Is the future of theatre still *Sleep No More*, which announced its impending closure in 2023 and has since extended its season through summer 2024?⁴ Is it Disney’s now-closed *Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser*, a multi-day theme park hotel experience that paired immersive design with live-action role-play (larp), mobile app choice design, and escape room puzzles?⁵ Is it Craig Quintero’s *Over The Rainbow*, a VR piece which stares aggressively

¹ Wallace 2023.

² Artificial Intelligence 1985; Izzo 1997; Tran 2024.

³ Bloom 2018; Rapti 2013.

⁴ Barrett and Doyle, 2011.

⁵ Disney 2022–2023.

at its audience, automatically alienating them in the tradition of Shklovsky and Brecht?⁶ It turns out that theatre continues to engage, but requires further public imagination and support.

The future of theatre is in its playability. Playable theatre emerges at the intersection of bespoke financial models and equally bespoke design communities, an ever-shifting bridge between form and content.

To make theatre playable, the medium should follow these axioms:

- Play isn't just for children. It's also the "play" in a mechanical ball bearing, the *looseness* in a given set of material where a participant might sense or be able to do something.
- Participants seek *connection*, especially human connection, and the medium is at its strongest when it reinforces what is shared in the world, both tensions and joy.
- *Consent* is a cornerstone of all interactive experiences, and both organizers and participants must continue to calibrate their involvement as emergent fictional and real events proceed. Depriving participants of consent and calibration refuses a participant's fundamental agency over what happens to their mind and body during an experience.
- Playable theatre lives and dies with its *communities*, both of participants and creators, who are usually the same people. To choose to expand playable theatre events is to consciously cultivate a long-term, resilient community of practitioners, not a passive audience of consumers.

I speak here as current secretary of the Playable Theatre organization, which exists to promote "participatory, immersive theatrical events – embodied experiences where audiences have meaningful agency to influence the outcome." It's not only the subject of a special issue of the *Well-Played* game studies journal, but also found in the recent William W. Lewis and Sean Bartley's edited volume *Experiential Theatres*, which sees this form at the nexus of immersion, participation, gameplay, and role play.⁷ Caro Murphy, a fellow member of the board of Playable Theatre, calls "immersive" entertainment a combination of "physical environment, participants' agency, and gamification" through "tasks, activities, puzzles, and mechanics."⁸ These lists of attributes share an investment in entirely reimagining the performer, granting agency to the participants, and gamifying the theatrical space.

A range of productions fall into the "immersive" category. The Next Stage Immersive Experience Institute in 2023, for example, contained workshops on everything from "ritual design" and "XR sandboxes" to escape rooms. Minneapolis-based Walking Shadow Productions incorporated group escape room design into their COVID-19-pandemic-era performance *Reboot – An Online Play with Puzzles*.⁹ In that work, online audiences contributed escape-room answers to an interactive performer, who explored a puzzle-filled set. Human interpersonal connections were the basis of puzzle-solving. Boston-based Incantrix Productions have murder-mystery pub crawls that draw from a similar theatrical skillset as another of their productions: their

⁶ Quintero 2023.

⁷ Pearce and Fortugno 2021; Lewis and Bartley 2023, 7.

⁸ Murphy 2023.

⁹ Walking Shadow Productions 2021.

immersive *Romancing Jan* live-action role-playing game (larp), in which participants can engage in Regency-era matchmaking and status intrigue.

Larps, which rely on structured adult pretend play, have been able to directly add playable elements to classic theatrical productions, such as *Inside Hamlet* for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *The Lesser Player's Tale* for Racine's *Phèdre*.¹⁰ In these experiences, larpers engage in meta-level negotiation and consent to play out intensive microcosms of the broader works in question. Participants take on the roles of figures with tragic or tragi-comedic story arcs, using their agency within the experience to see those arcs through according to their preferences and the relations with other characters.

Larp's ambition can also be seen in the passion to re-create studio-set-level scenery, costumes, and props, as in the *Battlestar Galactica*-inspired Finnish larp *Odysseus*, which involves the conversion of the Torpparinmäki Comprehensive School into a technically integrated spaceship set.¹¹ As with Disney's *Galactic Starcruiser*, the purpose of *Odysseus* is to keep its participants busy with activities that then lend significance to a broader, shared plot line. Millions of fans tune into role-playing actors who are live and performing together before streaming cameras, including *Critical Role*, *Dimension 20*, or even bespoke role-plays enacted in the game *Minecraft* for Twitch and YouTube viewers. Possibilities for performance and audience engagement are now vast and deep.

What these experiences and formats also share, unfortunately, is a general lack of legitimacy compared with "traditional" theatre, rendering them ineligible or marginal for cultural funding and corporate sponsorship. They are not even documented or archived particularly well. Tools that traditional theatre have had in the twentieth century, including print media, glossy photos, and extensive documentation, are the absolute envy of the immersive theatre of the twenty-first century. In addition, traditional theatre has the advantage of offering a short-term, low-stakes investment, whereas larp, XR sandboxes, and other playable theatre experiences require a whole high-stakes community apparatus to make themselves intelligible and sustain themselves. Agency in media is not without cost.

As traditional theatre continues to recede unabated, playable theatre not only introduces the ludic dimension that younger generations seek in their entertainment, but also re-invests attention and importance in traditional theatre. Bridging between the playfulness of *commedia dell'arte* and larp, between Fluxus happenings and machinima gatherings, between phantasmagoria and escape rooms, seems not only a creative opportunity that uses the affordances of play, but also a way of earning revenue for several whole generations hungry for alternate forms of performance, ones that grant them a degree of agency and community. The future of theatre lies in its history, for creators to embrace the many performance experiments of the past through the new affordances and hard-won community experiences of the present.

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¹⁰ Participation Design Agency 2015 2018; Racine 1677; Shakespeare 1601; Six of Hounds 2021.

¹¹ Illusia ry 2019, 2024.

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