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# Online Role-playing Games and the Definition of Theatre

Online role-playing games are a form of entertainment in which players create characters and improvisationally perform scenes together within a digital virtual world. It has many theatre-like aspects, which raises the question of whether it is in fact a form of theatre. To answer that question, however, one must first have a definition of theatre – an issue with disciplinary consequences – and in this article Tobin Nellhaus develops a definition founded on social ontology, suggesting that theatrical performance, unlike other social practices, replicates society's ontology. From that perspective, online role-playing meets the definition of theatre. But its digital environment raises another set of problems, since embodiment, space, and presence in online role-playing are necessarily unlike what we experience in traditional theatre. Here, Nellhaus brings these three aspects of performance together through the concept of embodied social presence, showing how they operate in both customary theatre and online role-playing. Tobin Nellhaus is an independent scholar who was Librarian for Performing Arts, Media, and Philosophy at Yale University. He has published mainly on the relationship between theatre and communication practices, and on critical realist theory in theatre historiography. He is the General Editor of the third edition of *Theatre Histories* (London: Routledge, 2016), and the author of *Theater, Communication, Critical Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

*Key terms:* social ontology, embodiment, space, presence, improvisation, virtual worlds, theatre/performance studies.

ARE online role-playing games theatre? The question raises significant disciplinary problems, for although online role-playing is obviously a type of performance, the question concerns the specificity of a genre. By 'online role-playing games', I am referring to an activity within 'virtual worlds' in which players create fictional characters who interact with each other through a kind of improvisation. In some respects it is similar to theatre as traditionally understood. However, other aspects are quite different. In particular, the digital environment means that embodiment, space, and presence in online role-playing are necessarily unlike what we experience in traditional theatre.

So how should we understand online role-play: as a game, or playful activity with a few trappings of theatre; a performance genre with significant theatre-like elements but (like much performance art) not actually theatre; or in fact a new type of theatre? The problem is that to answer this question, one must first have a working definition of theatre.

The issues I am raising depart from several trends in scholarship. First, most ventures into theatre in the digital age either stage conventional plays through electronic media (including virtual worlds) or incorporate digital displays or objects into live performance; interest within theatre/performance studies has followed suit. But online role-playing games have characteristics quite unlike those experiments, such as not being grounded by an authorial script or unifying artistic vision (being improvised instead) and having no intended audience other than the players themselves.

Second, online role-playing games are studied largely in terms of psychology (most often either identity or pathology, such as addiction), sociology (often group behaviour), game design (such as ways to make computer-run characters behave more realistically), or instrumentality (especially

education and training). Even within game studies, there is limited coverage of the players' performance activities, let alone in a way that theatre/performance studies would conceptualize gameplay as performance.[1] Strangely, then, both game studies and theatre/performance studies have overlooked the theatre-like elements of online role-playing.[2]

Finally, given disputes within theatre/performance studies, defining theatre may be controversial. Since the mid-1990s or so, theatre studies has tended to be seen as a subfield within performance studies. Concomitantly, ideas of what counts as theatre and performance have widened considerably. Indeed, one could declare that under a 'big tent' view of theatre, online role-playing obviously counts. But this approach lacks intellectual precision.

Certainly, in many respects widening the scope of 'theatre' benefited our field. Additionally, one of the motivations behind that move was resistance to the ethnocentrism that has and continues to taint our field (and the humanities generally). Still, the position and conceptualization of theatre within performance has been ambivalent. Richard Schechner places theatre as one genre under the enormous rubric of performance, which he arranges along various continua or neighbourhoods. The results have been contradictory. On the one hand, Schechner's strategy has led some scholars to conceptualize theatre strictly in its most conservative, commercialized forms.[3] On the other hand, at times the meaning of 'theatre' expands to encompass performance as a whole – a practice which drains the term of specificity.[4]

Sometimes no distinction seems to remain between literal uses of the term 'theatre' versus analogical and metaphoric usages, as though anything that has theatrical qualities simply *is* theatre. Such broadening has afflicted the concept of performance itself. For instance, at the 2014 ASTR conference in Baltimore, speakers argued that rocks and building cranes perform, and a paper ventured into political symbolism without even mentioning performance. In the hallways, seasoned scholars and graduate students alike wondered whether 'performance' still had meaning, and whether our thinking still constitutes a discipline at all.

Bluntly, then, determining whether online role-playing is theatre is also a foray into rethinking some basic concepts. Thus the present article concerns not so much online role-playing *per se* as what that activity can tell us about the nature and definition of theatre.

## Online Role-playing

Modern role-playing games arose in the 1970s. They are usually conducted by and for the players themselves, who create fictional (or at least semi-fictional) characters whose interactions develop some type of narrative. Many role-playing games involve scoring points, engaging in battles, or an element of chance, but not all – sometimes 'game' means 'play', and the fun is all in creating characters and scenes. Players can become deeply engaged and may feel strongly about the quality of the role-play.

In tabletop games such as Dungeons & Dragons, players simply talk through their characters' actions. In live action role-playing, players enact their roles in person with physical props in a physical space, perhaps staging an event in an imagined medieval world or a future dystopian prison camp. The first computerized online role-playing games were conducted in text only, but in the 1980s they gained graphical representations which in the 1990s developed into virtual worlds providing entertainment to huge numbers of people simultaneously. Virtual worlds can depict any place imaginable, from an historical location such as 1920s Chicago, to a fictive but naturalistic setting like a small town in a valley, to an interstellar battlefield, to a fantasy world filled with monsters and treasures. Players interact with the virtual world through avatars, which can also take any form – a human, an animal, a machine, or a creature from a fantasy or alien universe.

The best-known type of virtual world is the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG, colloquially called an MMO, although strictly speaking that's a

Screen shot of play in Remnants of Earth. a region in 'Second Life'.

larger category), which centre on adventure, combat, and strategy. These games, in which tens or even hundreds of thousands may play at once, are among the most popular forms of today's entertainment.

One of them, World of Warcraft (by Blizzard Entertainment), is so well known it has practically defined the genre; according to various estimates, in 2016 it ranked among the top ten most played PC games of any type.[5] The overarching narrative, setting, possible avatars, weapons, clothing, and all other elements are provided by the game company (although some companies allow or even encourage modifications). For instance, World of Warcraft's background narrative concerns a long-standing war between groups of 'races' (humans, elves, orcs, trolls, etc.) of various 'classes' (such as warriors, hunters, druids, and monks). Lord of the Rings Online (by Turbine) is obviously based on the novel.

Unfortunately the term 'online role-playing game' as used within the game industry is practically a misnomer: its concept of 'role' has generally decayed into merely having an avatar with a particular body type (such as a female troll) and an occupation or functional position accorded a certain range of powers (such as a Priest, able to cast healing and weapon-type spells), and their players pur-

sue quests of varying difficulty and engage in battles against either computer-generated opponents or other players as they strive to build up points, weapons, and skills. Often players play solo, and when they work in groups, their aim usually remains the pursuit of quests and battles.

The genre has continued to evolve, altering (say) the emphasis on to players' skills, teamwork, power, mercantile trade, wealth, and so forth. But in all these cases, only a minority participate in character/narrative driven role-play. Because of the marginalization of actual role-playing in most of these virtual worlds, I will refer to them as MMOs.

There are also 'platform' virtual worlds (Second Life, Francogrid, InWorldz), where everything – the settings, avatars, clothing, accessories, etc. – is created by users employing various tools and resources provided by the virtual world's technology.[6] People mainly socialize (and shop), some create commodities (and art), but again relatively few role-play. However, those who do create role-play regions follow their own tastes and interests. Some regions are inspired by a movie or TV show, such as *Avatar* or *Game of Thrones*, but most are original. For instance, Remnants of Earth (a region in Second Life) is set in a future when Earth has declined and humans share the planet with aliens and

mutants of various sorts, with an economy based partly on bounty-hunting and piracy.[7] Role-playing in platform virtual worlds can involve armed combat (comparable to MMOs) but usually the focus is on character interaction, without scoring points or even the use of weapons; the enjoyment lies in the role-playing itself.

## Improvisation in Online Role-playing

Whether in an MMO or a platform virtual world, the basic methods of character creation and performance in online role-playing are the same. Players choose an avatar and develop it into a character, usually adding a personal backstory. Sometimes the backstory is quite particular, furnishing the character with a biography, motivations, attitudes, fears, desires, and other traits. In this way the character can become nearly as detailed and individual as many modern dramatic characters (as some stage actors envision a complex backstory for their character).

Most character interactions develop without a scenario, let alone a script (although there may be a goal), and involve under a dozen people, sometimes only two. The underlying method is essentially a technique in improvisational theatre which Keith Johnstone described as 'offering and accepting': one performer establishes a situation or even the bare beginning of a situation (the offer), which the other performer accepts and builds upon through another offer; the first performer accepts this offer in turn and develops the scene further. Johnstone gives this example:

A: Augh!
B: Whatever is it, man?
A: It's my leg, Doctor.
B: This looks nasty. I shall have to amputate.
A: It's the one you amputated last time, Doctor.
B: You mean you've got a pain in your wooden leg?
A: Yes, Doctor.
B: You know what this means?
A: Not wormwood, Doctor! . . .
B: Yes. We'll have to remove it before it spreads to the rest of you.

A*'s chair collapses.*

B: My God! It's spreading to the furniture![8]

Online role-players, unlike Johnstone's improvisers, seldom create a situation from whole cloth: their role-playing usually has parameters based on the background narrative, the available roles, each character's personality, the relationships the players may have already established within it (e.g., boss and employee), and any goals such as a quest for treasures guarded by a monster.

Additionally, again unlike most improvisational theatre, multiple scenes occur simultaneously in locations throughout the role-playing region, often with little connection between them. Occasionally there may be large events such as battles between groups of players. In this case the location and overall course of action are generally planned by group leaders, but nevertheless most specific encounters between characters are still devised on the fly, wherever the avatars happen to be.

## The Use of 'Emotes'

However, the digital environment creates both limitations and possibilities that make online role-playing games distinctive. Notably, performance is generally conducted through writing. Although some people use voice for role-playing, usually it is reserved for team coordination, commentary, or socializing; often it isn't used at all. Movement is even more restricted, as it must draw from a set of pre-programmed animations, mostly at the body level, with very few hand gestures or facial expressions. To overcome the lack of vocal tone and the paucity of avatar movements, players describe these elements in sentences called 'emotes'. Even combat, which generally assumes weapons, can be conducted through emotes, and in platform virtual worlds there are regions where that's the only possibility.[9]

The following example shows how emotes work.[10] Its setting is a city riddled with crime and corruption. Cassie Manga, an arsonist, has set fire to a building; Murk23 Oh is a cop who has nabbed her. The emotes are italicized. (The players use a computer shortcut that displays their avatar's name at the beginning.)

Further example of play in Remnants of Earth. a region in 'Second Life'.

*Murk23 Oh sighs. 'Now you pesky little firebug, what will we do with you?' He begins to pat her down, searching for her lighter.*

*Cassie Manga feels him pat her down and tries to kick him back off of her.* 'Leave me alone ya ass, I didn't do nothing wrong.'

*Murk23 Oh gets a kick to the shin and growls,* 'I saw you on the camera, now where's that lighter?' *He steps back a little.*

*Cassie Manga smiles a bit.* 'What lighter? I don't smoke, if ya need a light I smell smoke somewhere, go get a light off of that.'

*Murk23 Oh grumbles as he leans down and attempts to grab her guns.*

*Cassie Manga feels him take her guns.* 'Dammit, give them back, I paid good money for them ya ass, if ya want a set go get ya own.'

*Murk23 Oh smiles as he begins to move away from her with her guns in hand.* 'See you soon!'

The exchange follows the 'best practices' of online role-play. Two rules are foremost.[11] First, emotes should be written from an on-looker's perspective – that is, in the third person – without access to the character's thoughts or feelings. 'Cassie Manga smiles a bit, knowing Murk23 won't find anything' would be a faulty emote, because an outside observer can't read Cassie's mind. I'll call this the *rule of objectivity*. In practice, experts allow casual players occasionally to write 'subjective' emotes, and sometimes quasi-subjective emotes are necessary in order to convey the right tone, such as when a snarl is playful, not threatening.

In contrast, breaking the second rule can be a serious breach of role-play etiquette. When a player takes action, the others must be allowed to decide its result. Murk23 *attempts* to grab Cassie's guns: his player leaves open whether he succeeds – Cassie's player decides that he did. 'Murk23 Oh grabs Cassie's guns' would raise hackles because his player takes over the scene, not allowing Cassie to maybe dodge and draw her weapons. Letting Cassie's player choose the outcome of Murk23's grab makes the role-play much more interactive, surprising, and fun. I'll call this the *rule of reciprocal player agency*. Again, casual players may forget or bend this rule.

The rule of objectivity aims to give the other players something they can respond to while also barring them from acting on fictional characters' thoughts; the rule of reciprocal player agency ensures others' freedom to respond. Together the two rules make the role-playing highly collaborative. Players must be both spectators and per-formers sharing a scene – eliminating the traditional division between actor and audi-

ence. Essentially role-players are one form of Boal's spect-actors, although not driven by his political method or intent. Nevertheless the erasure of the actor/spectator division departs from traditional theatre.

## Playing 'In' and 'Out' of Character

Role-players are always simultaneously in and out of character. This is manifested in online role-playing practices. As we saw in the arsonist/cop scene, the direction that a scene takes can be decided on the fly. Alternatively, however, players can discuss what will happen before launching their scene. The online environment introduces a twist to this situation. Even more than planning, players commonly need to alert others about something happening in their material world (such as having to take a phone call) or wanting to note some other non-scenic issue. These activities require players to communicate out of character, which they may do through backchannel IM or voice, but frequently they do it by surrounding text with double parentheses. Here are two examples:

Meeroo Milan: mhmm, what he said
Meeroo Milan: she*
Meeroo Milan: ((sorry))

Meeroo's player corrects a typo (flagging the correct text with an asterisk), and writes out of character to apologize for any confusion or inadvertent insult.

In the next excerpt, a player teasingly remarks that, although the characters are together in a virtual world, the players themselves are scattered about in the physical world, putting unconscious assumptions into question.

Liz Bennett: Why someone gotta be shooting
   in the morning?
Greg Samsa: ((It's afternoon here :) ))

Explicit out-of-character communication (rare on stage, even in improvisational theatre) underscores the fact that the two realms of online role-playing activity – actual world and fictional world – are not 'worlds apart': they coexist and continually interact. Never-theless, the two realms remain distinct. In fact, slippage can be a source of trouble. For example, a player might misunderstand insults aimed at their character as intended for the player, which can ruin the game play.

Consequently experienced players recommend keeping some psychological distance between oneself and one's character: in most types of role-playing strongly identifying with one's character can be counterproductive. The problem is common enough to indicate that performing through an avatar rather than one's own body doesn't ensure disidentification – indeed, the process of choosing or creating an avatar, modifying its appearance, designing its outfit, and inventing its backstory sometimes fosters a kind of personal relationship between player and avatar. Players should, however, understand and feel their character enough that they can act appropriately.

The ability to keep the real and the fictional apart, to stay in character, is an index of skill in role-playing games as much as in stage acting. However, although confusing character and person reveals poor skills, it is not in itself a violation of game etiquette. In contrast, meta-gaming – exploiting real-world information in order to act in the fictional world (e.g., reading an avatar's name tag and then addressing them by name when you haven't been introduced in-world) usually raises hackles. Thus there is an overarching rule of fiction/reality dualism: the rule of objectivity and the prohibition against meta-gaming are two of its corollaries.

The rules of role-playing are forcefully explained in every guide to role-playing I've seen. However, observing actual role-play makes one suspect that insistence is futile: role-players, especially inexpert ones, often break the rule of objectivity and occasionally reciprocal player agency. But the errors themselves point to a definitional matter. The following scene provides an example:

Ruth Cairo sighs and pulls her glocks out loaded with tranquilizer shiz. She had never tested it on humans but she guessed it would be a good time to start. She would not have another piano ruined. She kicks open the door as it was beginning to swing shut and strikes a violent pose. She flicks

some hair over her shoulder and imagines herself looking like one of Charlie's Angels, no better because she was a sexy bish. Clearing her throat she yells 'Back away from the piano you fucker or I will light into you like a fucking Christmas tree bish!'

Joel Wonderly ignores her as he has a bad case of selective hearing along with his mental condition. He takes a seat down at the piano and bashes his head against the ivories making some new kick-ass music that only a person on meth and crack could appreciate.

Ruth Cairo squints her eyes and takes aim like she has seen in the movies while mumbling 'Stupid crazy people with no class!' She fires at him a few times and tries her hardest to not hit the piano.

This passage is full of emotes that are either subjective or by an omniscient narrator – the writing is clearly novelistic (which is not surprising since most players have read far more novels than plays). Possibly, then, online role-playing could be more like collaborative fiction than theatrical performance, or there's a continuum between dramatic and fictional writing in online role-playing. In that case the rules of reciprocal player agency and objectivity would aim for fairness and stylistic coherence, and are less significant operationally than role-players think.

**Similarities and Dissimilarities with Theatre**

But above and beyond questions of technique, the virtuality of online role-playing – its use of visual simulations – raises the most fundamental questions about its relationship to theatre. Players don't use their own body, but instead choose an avatar; likewise, they play on a stage that exists only digitally.

Now, surrogate bodies are far from new: puppets have supplanted actors' bodies for centuries. Obviously, if performers must use their own bodies, then bunraku cannot be theatre, rendering us an exceedingly restrictive definition. Thus the avatar's digital nature isn't inherently problematic. However, it poses questions about presence in theatre, because the players are usually physically isolated during play, sometimes by continents, whereas presence – often understood as 'immediacy', 'aura', and some-

times 'liveness' – is often viewed as theatre's most distinctive feature (albeit not by all scholars).[12] This sense of presence is generally understood as involving the spatial proximity of living, breathing, embodied actors and spectators. For that matter, even puppets present themselves materially before the audience. If presence is spatial proximity to a physical body, then online role-playing simply isn't theatre.

Thus online role-playing games have both similarities and dissimilarities with theatre as ordinarily understood. Important similarities between role-playing and theatre include the creation of fictional characters, narrative action, and external observation. Some features are atypical but do occur in a few theatre genres, such as developing characters and storylines improvisationally, and eliminating the actor/spectator division. Others involve a shift in goal; in particular, the rule of reciprocal player agency exists in large part to enhance the free-play aspect of role-playing.

The use of text as the primary medium of performance and the common (albeit rule-breaking) use of novelistic narrative raise the issue of whether perhaps role-playing games are best seen as collaborative fiction writing. Finally, the online environment puts the concepts of embodiment, presence, and space in theatre up for question: if theatre requires them, we need to identify what they mean in that context so that we can determine if role-playing games have them. But both similarities and differences must be viewed in relation to a definition of theatre.

**A Social Ontology for Theatre**

Many concepts of theatre take an aesthetic or formalist approach to defining the art – an approach that began with Aristotle, who founded his analysis on a theory of mimesis. The weaknesses of his approach are by now well attested and I will mention but two: only with considerable awkwardness can it accommodate, say, Vladimir's dash to the actual theatre building's restroom in *Waiting for Godot*, and it focuses on drama at the expense of performance.

Schechner's anthropological take is equally flawed – for one thing, he fails to recognize the centrality of fiction. However, he was right to focus on theatre as a social event. I will consider theatre first as a *social practice* undertaken in the material world. Critical realist social theory, with its multifaceted understanding of social activity, is especially valuable in this regard.[13] Applying it to theatrical performance requires starting with some basic concepts.

A key issue for all social theories is the relationship between social structures and agents. Some theorists maintain that society can be reduced to the activities of individuals. Others argue that individuals are basically governed by social structures such as economic systems, political systems, gender relationships, race relations, or semiotic structures. Still others view structures and agency more or less as two sides of the same coin.

From a critical realist perspective, structures and agents are distinct. More, society actually possesses not two but three main elements that continuously interact. One element or plane consists of social structures, which depend on relationships with material resources, such as land, livestock, factories, communication systems, and human bodies (for labour, procreation, and so on). However, having social relationships to material objects does not mean structures *are* those objects: a cognitive element is necessary to identify what sort of relationship obtains. For instance, owning, renting, and squatting are all possible relationships to the same physical building. The second plane of social ontology consists of agents – that is, people acting within society, especially their social interactions, alliances, groups, conflicts, and the like. People's skills and abilities deeply affect how they undertake their agential actions. Finally, there are discourses, encompassing ideas, values, words, images, sounds, and so forth. Structures and discourses are always preconditions that enable and constrain agents' actions as they strive to achieve their goals.

This theory corresponds to lived experience: for example, in a down economy an actor may find few opportunities to get cast, but when she does get a role she discovers herself persistently typecast; likewise, an instructor may attempt to follow her guiding beliefs and values, but struggle to implement them in the face of growing class sizes arising from university budget cuts during a recession. Society, then, can't be collapsed down to just one of these layers: all three are necessary for social analysis, because social activity consists of their development and interplay, and untangling their interaction helps to provide explanations for historical events and an understanding of particular practices.[14]

This general concept of social ontology also applies to institutions and even simply organized practices – all collective activities, in fact. A university, for example, has a material structure encompassing buildings, faculty, staff, library collections, laboratories, etc.; discourses, including curricula, a 'mission' (in, say, its role as a public university), a reputation, an institutional culture, and so forth; and a wide variety of agential activities, among them instruction, research, faculty meetings, dorm parties, and the like.

Similarly for theatre as an organized activity, whether or not it is formalized into a company. At its structural level, it involves performers, spectators, space (typically a stage and a seating area), and often sets, lights, props, and costumes; it can also include ticket booths, support staff, concessions, and other resources not directly part of a performance. Discursively, a theatre group implements the concepts guiding their artistic choices, audience appeal, training programmes, inner culture, etc. Finally, theatre's agents are people with functional positions in the activity, and capabilities and characteristics including skills in acting, directing, design, and so forth; in fact it includes the audience as well. All organized practices have their own structures, agents, and discourses, and thus have homologies with society itself.

As an organized material practice, online role-playing also has an ontology of structures, agents, and discourses. Its structure consists of resources, bodies, and real-world

social relationships to them. These include the internet, the game company's business needs, the virtual world and its technical capabilities, players' computers, their demographics, and so forth. Its agential level encompasses the players themselves, their interactions with each other (teamwork, hierarchies, sharing, exclusions, conflict, etc.), and their physical-world activities (including typing, mouse clicking, and moving images on a computer screen). The discursive level consists of images, situations, and scenarios devised by the company or the players, and the values and other ideas that the players use to create characters and actions, along with the attitudes they bring into their role-playing activities. As an organized activity, online role-playing is straightforwardly homologous with social ontology.

## Theatre's Doubled Social Ontology

Theatre, however, is unlike other forms of organized activity: it possesses this structure/agents/discourses ontology not just as an organized material practice, but also in *the practice itself*, which involves the production of a fictional world. First, the structural plane of theatrical performance consists of the performance event, which we can also call the theatrical level. Similar to the structural level of theatre as an organized practice, this is a set of social relationships pertaining principally to material entities (such as bodies, the *mise en scène*, etc.), but in this case only those involved in the performance itself. One of its key social relationships is the duality between being a performer or a spectator, which improvisational performers and spect-actors readily switch between.

The performance event is also defined by a discursive or cognitive element – in fact another duality. On the one hand is theatre's intrinsic aspect, the activity of producing and enjoying a fictional world: the actors are in character, and the spectators are 'in world'. Thus, a real human plays the fictional Rosalind (actor-as-character: the character *per se* is abstract). On the other hand is theatre's extrinsic aspect, occupied by real-world activities and objects: actors hit their marks, adjust their pace, figure out how to reach a misplaced prop and the like, all of which are cognitively out of character; and spectators admire the set, shift in their seats, suppress a sneeze, and remember to turn off their smartphones – activities that are 'out of world'. The extrinsic aspect also includes spatial elements such as the shape of the stage and arrangement of audience seating.

Thus performers and audience members alike maintain two levels of consciousness – the factual and the fictional – throughout the performance. Occasionally one may mistake (or be led to mistake) which is which, but they remain distinct. The two dualities and their interaction are central to defining the structural level of theatrical performance. The relationship between the structural levels of theatre as an organized activity and of theatrical performance, with the latter's extrinsic and intrinsic aspects, can be visualized respectively as the actor (on stage and off), the actor while performing, and the actor as the character she plays; or similarly, the theatre building, the set, and the scene.

Next, the discursive plane of theatrical performance is its scriptive level (its performance 'score'), which typically involves a text, but not necessarily: a rough scenario, or even a rudimentary character trait and goal is sufficient to constitute the scriptive level of theatrical performance. As Bert States puts it, 'From the phenomenological standpoint, the text is not a prior document; it is the animating current to which the actor submits his body and refines himself into an illusionary being.'[15] Finally, performance's agential plane consists of the dramatic level (the performed event), with its characters, actions, and settings – paradigmatically but not necessarily a staged play – constituting the fictional world into which the performers and spectators enter.

In short, theatrical performance has two types of homology with social ontology (structures, agents, and discourses). The first homology, possessed by all socially organized practices and institutions, consists of its material, human, and ideational capabilities and resources. In contrast, the second homo-

logy arises in performance itself: its theatrical level (the performance event), its dramatic level (the performed events), and its scriptive level (the performance score).[16]

We can apply this analysis to online role-playing. Despite its virtual environment, it too has this second set of structures, agents, and discourses. The role-playing event is the structural level that, like theatre's performance event, is marked by two dualities. In role-playing, the performer/spectator duality takes the form of players as spect-actors. The second duality consists of the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects.

The role-playing event's extrinsic (real-world) aspect principally includes the players, their computers, and the virtual world and avatars displayed on their screens (along with the internet, electricity, and so on), as engaged at the moment. Role-playing's intrinsic aspect is composed of the avatars-as-characters within a depiction of a particular fictional location. Both the rule of fiction/reality dualism mentioned above (which encompasses the rule of objectivity) and the flagging of out-of-character communication to separate scenic and non-scenic texts help enforce the distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects.

Next, the discursive level covers the virtual world's overall narrative, themes (such as honour and criminality), powers, the characters' backstories, and the words and images the players employ. Finally, at the agential level, there are the characters (as imaginary persons) and the dramatic actions they perform in the fictional world. Online role-playing, then, seems to have theatre's doubled homologies with social ontology.

Despite the fact that online role-playing has the same ontological structure as theatre, its use of text – especially emotes – bears examining. As I noted earlier, emotes can look novelistic, not dramatic, suggesting collaborative fiction. However, the rule of objectivity makes emotes akin to stage directions or blocking notes. In addition, the rule of reciprocal player agency leaves outcomes open to the other players, whereas collaborative fiction lacks a rule of reciprocal writer agency: any writer can determine the acts

and responses of all characters, even if they concentrate on one. Role-playing requires immediate interactivity between the players; collaborative fiction writing needs no such interactivity and can get along quite well asynchronously. Finally, role-players operate both out of character and in character. Thus, whether or not role-players describe their activity as acting, their activity has to be theorized that way.

## Presence and Virtuality

So far, so good. But the issues brought by the online environment remain. Those issues are more phenomenological than ontological. The virtual, mediatized nature of online role-play contrasts with the immediate physicality we are accustomed to in theatre. In particular, virtuality poses the interrelated issues of presence and embodiment.

The concept of presence in theatre has taken a wide variety of meanings, all involving some heightened sensibility. Cormac Power groups them under the rubrics 'fictional presence', 'auratic presence', and 'literal presence'.[17] But anterior to the notions of presence that Power identifies – before any heightened sensibility – is a more basic sense of presence hinging on the simple fact that as a collective practice theatre involves the co-presence of two or more individuals. The sense of presence involved is thoroughly quotidian, a part of ordinary social life and activity: *embodied social presence*.

An analysis in terms of this type of presence, which is in keeping with the social analysis above, focuses on how people share not so much a physical space, but rather a *meaningful* space within which a social relationship develops.[18] Nevertheless it *is* a space, which underscores the significance of the physical stage/audience relationship constructed by the architecture of the performance area. The foundation of presence within theatrical performance is simply self-aware co-presence, which transforms an aggregate of separate individuals into a collective, be that collective the performers, the audience, or the combination of performers and audience that turns a rehearsal into

a performance. This sort of presence requires no special training or skill, and (at least of its own accord) produces no special sense of closeness, catharsis, or *communitas*. In essence it says nothing more than 'So, here we are, aware of each other in this place.'

The question, then, is whether media block the sense of co-presence. Typically presence in theatre is understood as physical and direct, literally non-mediated. Thus the performers' physical proximity is viewed as the *sine qua non* of theatrical presence. Media supposedly introduce a barrier to presence, or at best compensate for its absence. However, proximity and non-mediation are not in fact crystalline criteria – a point both raised and muddied by technologically determinist analyses, such as Philip Auslander's. Critiquing theories of presence in performance, he argues that a spectator in a back row during a large rock concert may be 'present at a live performance, but hardly participates in it as such since his/her main experience of the performance is to read it off a video monitor'.[19]

However, this approach makes technology the determining factor. But if, instead of looking at a monitor, a spectator were watching through binoculars, one would scarcely claim that she wasn't a participant: her experience of presence at a performance was actually heightened by the technology. Moreover, if there are alternatives that give a reasonably similar experience (e.g., a recording), there would be little reason to attend a live show, which is usually far more expensive. The spectator attends precisely because she wants to experience the sense of presence, even from a back row. Physical proximity and non-mediation, then, aren't crucial for the experience of being present at performance.

Instead, the key components of presence are embodiment, space, and other people. Embodiment in theatre has a different status than at Auslander's rock concert. Crucial to theatre's creation of a double homology with society is the division at theatre's structural plane between the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects (the realms of in- and out-of-character). However, that creates a split in the performing body itself between its literal and figurative characteristics. It becomes, so to speak, neither fully present nor fully absent. It becomes simultaneously multiple and partial. This dual state creates the tension that makes the issue of presence so vexed and intense (and sometimes unnerving) in many concepts of theatre.[20]

## The Performing Body's Dual State

A result of the performing body's dual state is that its physical form is replaceable. The duality produces a possibility not of disembodiment but rather trans-embodiment. Something other than the human body can stand in its stead, such as a puppet. Its embodiment is transferred to something else – a something that becomes a metaphor (as in the Greek *metaphora*, 'a transfer') that refers to the human body. Indeed, the body's dual state makes it already a metaphor.

However, whatever form the body takes, its positioning as an icon of a (fictional) agent at the dramatic level means it will be anthropomorphized, subject to perception as having intentions.[21] But while the performer's body can be made 'absent' in this manner, it nevertheless remains socially present, because ultimately an actual agent retains intentionality. Thus, whatever its physical form, the body on stage has an iconic nature for fictional agents and also functions as an index of real social agency.

Steve Dixon, making a related argument, similarly contends that the virtual body is neither an actual metamorphosis of the human body nor a form of disembodiment. On the contrary, the virtual body 'operates as an index, as another trace and representation of the always already physical body. . . . The performing virtual body is [neither] less authentic than the live, nor is it disembodied from the performer.' It is, he concludes, an alternative body.[22]

The surrogate for the human body in virtual worlds is of course the avatar. Compounding the sense of presence obtained through an avatar body, role-players may develop a sense of presence in which the avatar represents a self, as a singular personhood – a possibility role-players frequently

exercise through their close attention to their avatar's appearance as well as through character biographies. The result may be a sense of self-presence, but the avatar body may instead be invested with a different set of social meanings (e.g., social roles) than the player's own body, particularly when the chosen avatar is a different gender or even species to her own.[23]

In both cases, the virtual body is imbued with meaning, and thus it 'can be used as a tool for conveying concepts, meaning, and symbolism in a way that mirrors how social actors use their physical bodies in real-world social activities'.[24] But 'being present' through one's personalized avatar doesn't entail identifying with the character. One's sense of self-presence via an avatar is neither identification nor self-representation. Being present is immersion as a virtual body within the virtual space shared with others. As virtual-world ethnographer Tom Boellstorff puts it, 'Embodiment is always emplacement'.[25]

**Embodiment and Emplacement**

The sense of place and space may even be more important than embodiment for the sense of presence, the idea that 'You are *there*'. This is no less true for virtual worlds than the physical world; 'place, above all else, makes virtual worlds what they are,' writes Boellstorff.[26] Thus along with the image of the avatar, considerable attention goes to the virtual world's visual scene, be it a fantasy realm full of caves and castles, or a post-apocalyptic city. We associate places with the activities and events that occurred there; indeed, the etymology of 'theatre' itself is 'a place for seeing'.

In short, place obtains its crucial value as a site of meaning, especially shared meanings.[27] Moreover, because physicality and mediation are subordinate issues, a person utilizing a virtual environment doesn't need to develop the illusion that there is no mediation, the feeling she is no longer immersed within her physical space. The online role-player is in fact in three different spaces: physical, virtual, and imaginal.[28]

These correspond, as noted above, to the theatre's architectural space, the set and stage as objects, and the set as the representation of a fictional setting (such as Elsinore) – parts, respectively, of the theatre's organizational structure, and the performance's extrinsic and intrinsic aspects.

Finally, the sense of presence in virtual worlds (as in the material world) is fullest when it goes beyond some form of embodiment immersed within a meaningful space, to also sharing that space in a meaningful way with others: 'The simultaneous presence of more than one person has been key to cultural understandings of virtual worlds.'[29] This is more than simply occupying the same location with someone else, without any interaction: it requires meaningful, shared activities. Psychological research based on the theory of embodied social presence has shown that under these conditions, online role-players do experience presence with other players, regardless of distance.[30]

Constructing a narrative within a shared virtual space requires players to be conscious of each other's presence and to enable each other's participation. When players enter a virtual space in order to role-play, they implicitly promise to collaborate with others. The two rules described earlier structure and promote collaboration in online role-playing: the rule of reciprocal player agency protects other players' ability to participate; the rule of objectivity helps to ensure that other players have material their characters can respond to, keeping the narrative in motion.

Thus a player recognizes that they and the other players are agents in the material world, and that their characters are agents in the fictional world. Both of these create presence in the sense of participation within a shared, meaningful space. Despite the 'lonely gamer' stereotype, MMOs and platform virtual worlds are highly social environments which create social presence in a mediated form that can be as lively and electric as physical presence.[31] In some ways the sense of presence in online role-playing can be stronger than in traditional theatre, because players always interact with other players directly, whereas in most theatre

today the spectators' interaction with the actors is indirect (whether or not there is a fourth wall), and actors respond to their sense of the audience rather than in dialogue with it.

In summary, online role-playing – despite involving players who are physically distant from one another and use avatars to serve as their bodies – involves presence, space, and embodiment, just as theatre does. It also possesses the same ontological structure as does theatre. Online role-players' game-play is play-making, in a new, digital form of theatre that makes every participant a performer. But, perhaps uniquely, this innovation originated not as an avant-garde form guided by the vision of some individual artist or movement, but as a popular entertainment pursued by people who wouldn't think to call themselves artists, just gamers out to enjoy themselves. To some degree role-playing reverses the marginalization of theatre, precisely through the digital media that seem to threaten it.[32] It is perhaps the first new performance genre with grass roots rather than elite and individualist roots.

**Definitional Boundaries**

The definition of theatre advanced here, founded on social theory, provides a number of criteria for determining what lies within its purview, what lies outside, and what might sit on a borderline (and if so, for what reason). Puppetry, musicals, and opera easily qualify as types of theatre; genres such as Theatre of the Oppressed, improvised performance, and participatory theatre are covered as well. As I've shown, online role-playing games are also theatre, and one must include their physical-world counterpart, live action role-playing games.

The definition also determines that various other activities are not theatre, even if they have some theatrical qualities. In particular, religious ritual is not theatre: its practice does not involve the doubling of society's structure/agency/discourse ontology, nor does ritual involve the dual cognitive state involved in creating a fictional universe that requires the performers to be simultaneously in-character and out-of-char-

acter and the audience to be at once in-world and out-of-world. One might contrast, for example, a table on stage, which points to both the literal and a fictional world, with the catechismal wafer, which believers never view as embodying something fictional. For the same reasons, theatre is not ritual. (There can of course be religious drama, rituals represented in plays, plays incorporated within rituals, and theatre meant to feel like a ritual.)

In the case of dance, one would have to be specific – some forms of dance are clearly theatrical (such as when some level of characterization or narrative is involved), some are not, and some may be ambiguous (perhaps due to intentional or unintentional blurring within the performance). One would also exclude observations of passers-by as though they were actors, and actors creating a performance which the audience is unaware of as fiction. In these cases, one can only apply the word 'theatre' as a simile. Likewise in discussions of, say, a political demonstration, 'theatre' becomes simply a synonym for 'spectacle'.

There are a number of performance genres that are near-neighbours of theatre. Probably the most important today are recorded forms such as film, television, and online drama. Although they are modes of dramatic performance, they are distinct from theatre because they do not involve a space meaningfully shared by both the audience and the performers, and hence no form of mutual embodied social presence; even the audience attends more as individuals than a group. Twitter plays are another a type of drama that isn't theatre: even though 'cyberspace' is a shared social and meaningful environment, unlike the projected space of virtual worlds it is a metaphorical space.

Performance art is too varied to permit a singular assessment vis-à-vis theatre. Some performance artists abhor any connection to theatre; others seem less antagonistic. Much performance art centres on embodiment *per se*: modified, abased, tortured, embellished, choreographed, devouring, contorted, sexed, desexed, static, converted to a symbol or metaphor – more object than agent, and often

lacking narrative. The focus on embodiment as a mode of (generally image-oriented) discourse evades or circumscribes the possibility of the body being other than itself, as the bearer of a fictional being; to the contrary, fictionality is to be avoided almost at all costs, in favour of actuality. Nevertheless, sometimes performance art approaches theatre despite itself, while at the same time some theatre approaches performance art, particularly if it attempts to eliminate characters and narratives.

If these assessments are largely intuitive and unsurprising, a viable definition of theatre *should* produce easily recognizable results and provide a workable paradigm along with tools for understanding theatre generally, and – at a time of rapid changes in society and communication technology – performance genres that are innovative. It can be tempting to attribute changes in theatre to artistic technique, whether that be the *techné* of aesthetics and the sublime, or the technology of spectacle and media. But theatre, which only occurs as a social event, needs to be defined first and foremost on the basis of its social nature. It has a specific social structure that prioritizes fiction, embodiment, and presence. Analyzing theatre in terms of social ontology provides a way to develop a coherent definition of theatre – one that avoids the ethnocentrism and idealism of aesthetic definitions, and the baggy generality of the anthropological kind.

And so I return to a point I made at the start. A coherent, philosophically grounded concept of theatre is necessary for theatre studies to have a real object of study; ad hoc opinions are not sufficient. Providing theatre with a definition doesn't imply that theatre is the highest genre of performance; nor does dissolving theatre into a sea in which anything that humans do (and even things that non-humans do) is performance provide the only way to counter elitism or ethnocentrism. Rather, to use a biological analogy, it is no insult to a dolphin to say it is not a fish, nor should one equate the two merely because both are creatures of the sea. Our very ability to understand both dolphins and fish is disabled if we cannot distinguish

between them and develop working understandings of each.

If theatre/performance studies discards observational resemblance (whether as mimesis or restored behaviours) in favour of social theory (both ontology and, as I argue elsewhere, social function), it can short-circuit the entire system of concepts behind the question of whether theatre is a privileged genre or merely one of many, and place it squarely in the realm of sociocultural history. Theorizing theatre in terms of social ontology also provides a way to assess the extent that a new genre of performance, in this case online role-playing games, fits within the category of theatre. And finally, it tells us that whatever the scope of 'performance' might be, theatre is a specific genus, or perhaps a class or even a phylum. The point has further disciplinary consequences: identifying a distinguishable object of analysis for theatre studies poses a question of how in turn performance studies can best conceptualize 'performance'.

## Notes and References

1. There is more discussion of performer activities in role-playing games conducted in the physical world, but certain issues raised by the online environment are central in this article.

2. I base this claim on my Zotero database which at the time of writing includes 351 entries on online role-playing. Only four relate it specifically to theatre, with another eleven connecting it to some sense of 'performance'.

3. See Stephen J. Bottoms, 'The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpacking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy', *Theatre Topics*, XIII, No. 2 (2003), p. 173–87. Bottoms specifically refers to Baz Kershaw, but this narrow view of theatre also tinges Schechner's (in)famous 1992 ATHE talk, in which he likened theatre to a string quartet. See also Stephen J. Bottoms, 'In Defence of the String Quartet: an Open Letter to Richard Schechner', in James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, ed., *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 23–38.

4. For example, in his textbook *Performance Studies: an Introduction* (3rd edn, New York: Routledge, 2013), Richard Schechner refers to 'Theatre, not in the limited sense of enactments of dramas on stages . . . but in the broader sense outlined in Chapter 1' (p. 36) – except there is no such discussion in Chapter 1, which introduces 'performance'. Theatre and performance thus become synonyms. Schechner also approvingly quotes

O. B. Hardison's interpretation of the medieval Mass as theatre (p. 33).

5. See, e.g., 'The 2016 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry', Entertainment Software Association <http://essentialfacts.theesa.com/Essential-Facts-2016.pdf>, p. 11; Christine Wölke, 'Most Played Core PC Games in March: Minecraft Drops Out of the Top Three for the First Time', *Newzoo*, 5 April 2017 < https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/most-played-core-pc-games-in-march-minecraft-drops-out-of-the-top-three/>; Jeremiah Paul, 'By the Numbers: Most Popular Online Games Right Now', *Now Loading*, 3 March 2017 <https://nowloading.co/posts/3916216>; Sara Reynolds, '21 Most Popular PC Games in 2016', *Gamers Decide* <http://www.gamersdecide.com/pc-game-news/21-most-popular-pc-games-2016>; 'Top 10 Popular Online Games 2016', *Sporteology* <http://sporteology.com/top-10-popular-online-games-2016/>. The data sources are seldom identified but the lists tend to be similar.

6. Second Life is produced by Linden Labs. Francogrid and InWorldz are both owned on an aggregated personal or organizational basis; like many other virtual worlds, they are based on open-source software similar to Second Life. There is no settled term for these second types of virtual world, but it's not unusual to hear them described as platforms, in the same sense that PCs and Macs are platforms for applications and activities. (They should not be confused with platform video games, such as Super Mario Bros., in which characters jump from one graphically depicted platform to a higher or lower one.) The definitions of MMOs and platform virtual worlds and the relationship between them are both topics of debate.

7. 'What is RoE?', *Remnants of Earth*, <www.remnantsofearth.com>, accessed 6 April 2017.

8. Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1979), p. 96.

9. It should be noted that the technical limitations on avatars' gestures and facial expressions are beginning to fall, for example through motion-capture devices. But how likely role-players would want to demote text is anyone's guess: text may present certain advantages, such as keeping opportunities open for casual players, and enhancing the fantasy aspect of the games.

10. Examples and illustrations of role-playing are drawn from Second Life. The role-playing occurred in public contexts, in which I observed but did not participate. Names have been changed; genders have not. Texts have been edited to remove minor technical flaws.

11. Online role-playing guides usually list a good half-dozen rules, but I believe they boil down to two major ones, though some genres of online role-playing, which I will not address here, purposely waive rules.

12. See Cormac Power, *Presence in Play: a Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008). Philip Auslander is perhaps the most outspoken critic of the idea; see his *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

13. The following analysis is elaborated in Tobin Nellhaus, 'Theatre and Collective Reflexivity', draft at <http://tobinnellhaus.com/download/718/>. This article revises my argument in *Theatre, Communication,*

*Critical Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), esp. p. 24–35, 40–51, 149–62.

14. See Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory: the Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: the Place of Culture in Social Theory* (rev. edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For various reasons my account differs somewhat from hers: see Nellhaus, *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism*, p 42–9.

15. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings and Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 128.

16. The second homology and the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction don't arise by happenstance: they are necessary to theatre's operation as a mode of embodied collective reflexivity. See my 'Theatre and Collective Reflexivity'.

17. Power, *Presence in Play*.

18. See, e.g., Brian E. Mennecke *et al.*, 'Embodied Social Presence Theory', in *Proceedings of the 2010 43rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (Los Alamitos: IEEE, 2010), p. 1–10, <www.computer.org/csdl/proceedings/hicss/2010/3869/00/07-07-01.pdf>. The concept of embodied social presence is close to Power's 'literal presence', but the latter focuses on physicality and audience interpretation, whereas the former emphasizes sociality.

19. Auslander, *Liveness*, p. 24.

20. For further discussion of this phenomenology, albeit without an understanding of its basis in a social structure, see Power, *Presence in Play*, p. 175–99.

21. This point dovetails with what cognitive science calls 'theory of mind', our innate capacity to try to infer other people's intentions and mental state.

22. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: a History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), p. 215, 218, 239.

23. Cf. Frank Biocca, 'The Cyborg's Dilemma: Progressive Embodiment in Virtual Environments', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, III, No. 2 (1997), p. 12–26 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/enhanced/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00070.x/>, accessed 3 May 2016.

24. Brian E. Mennecke *et al.*, 'An Examination of a Theory of Embodied Social Presence in Virtual Worlds', *Decision Sciences*, XLII (2011), p. 435.

25. Tom Boellstorff, 'Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg', in Frances E. Mascia-Lees, ed., *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Human Body and Embodiment* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 512.

26. Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: an Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 91.

27. Mennecke *et al.*, 'An Examination', p. 414–17; and see Mennecke *et al.*, 'Embodied Social Presence Theory'.

28. Biocca, 'Cyborg's Dilemma'.

29. Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, p. 92.

30. Mennecke *et al.*, 'An Examination', p. 428–33.

31. Diane J. Schiano *et al.*, 'The "Lonely Gamer" Revisited', *Entertainment Computing*, V, No. 1 (2014), p. 65–70.

32. Cf. Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 125.