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COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING IN *THE PARABLE TASK*: THE DRAMATURG AS GAME DESIGNER IN PERVASIVE PERFORMANCE

A Thesis Presented

by

PERCIVAL HORNAK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Theater
Dramaturgy

COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING IN *THE PARABLE TASK*: THE DRAMATURG AS GAME DESIGNER IN PERVASIVE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING IN *THE PARABLE TASK*: THE DRAMATURG AS GAME DESIGNER IN PERVASIVE PERFORMANCE

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Proceeding from a framing of theater as collaborative storytelling, I argue for defining role-playing games as a kind of performance and for their value in structuring experiential and participatory theater. Building on the impulse at the heart of experiential and immersive theater to place the audience within the world of the performance and center their experience, I explore what it means for theater artists to cede control over how audiences make meaning of their work in favor of letting narrative emerge from the participation of the audience during the performance event. I propose a framework called pervasive performance that merges theatrical frames and methods with pervasive gaming, which expands the magic circle of play and blurs the distinction between the game and everyday life. This union of ideas puts audience members in contact with one another and allows them to be playful and co-author the overall performance experience. Further, the blurring of the performance and everyday life transforms audience members' relationship to the real world and gives them space to imagine and experiment with other worlds and ways of being in them. I devised an alternate reality game (ARG) at UMass Amherst in May 2023, and in my thesis I analyze this project and the process of creating it as a case study in pervasive performance.

Key Words: Experiential Theater, Immersive Theater, Devised Theater, Pervasive Games, Utopia, Alternate Reality Games

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"Why do we tell stories? To try to make sense of a world that can be terrifying and enormous. … I don't know that your story will long be known. I don't know who will remain to tell it. But it did happen, and it did matter. And though calamity is here, because of you, it will not be here forever."
– Brennan Lee Mulligan, *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity*

"If you can't say it, point to it."
– Ludwig Wittgenstein (by way of Anne Bogart and Tina Landau)

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

During my freshman year of college, I played in a campaign of *Humans vs Zombies*, a game in which a secret "original zombie" attempts to turn all of the humans undead, while the rest of the players attempted to complete objectives determined by the game masters and fend off zombies with nerf guns and balled-up sock grenades. Gameplay took place on my college's campus and was considered active whenever we weren't in class or sleeping. For a week, we carried out missions and attempted to stay alive, and this experience changed my relationship to spaces I interacted with every day significantly. For the rest of my time there, I felt free to act more playfully on campus, driven by memories of protecting the statue by the Center for the Arts or diving into a bush to hide from some zombies on my way out of English class. The game overlapped with our daily lives in a way that felt transformational, and the fact that it took place on a public campus, in between the demands of going to class and rehearsal, meant that we were also engaging in a kind of performance for each other and for people who weren't playing. This experience is one example of many in which bringing together games and performance had a profound impact on my artistic practice and the way I move in the world.

Related to my experience with games like *Humans vs Zombies* is a long-time love for role-playing games, particularly tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons*. In these games, players imagine a fictional world together and narrate how their characters engage with it, building on each others' contributions and creating something greater than the sum of its parts. Within the hobby, I tend to act as the Game Master (GM), who is responsible for knowing the game's rules and adjudicating them in addition to acting as the world with which the players interact. Early on in the history of TTRPGs and particularly of

D&D, there was a popular image of the GM as cruel and antagonistic toward the players, wholly in control of the experience. This image persists today but is slowly becoming less dominant, particularly in the wake of indie RPG theorizing in the 1990s and early 2000s. I understand my role as GM to be building a world in collaboration with my players and facilitating their interactions with it, which has become a cornerstone of my approach to dramaturgy and vision for the role of the dramaturg in a creative process.

I tend to define the work of the dramaturg as facilitating collaborative storytelling between artists and the audience. During a performance, we gather in a space and tell a story together that belongs not to one individual participant but to the group of people present in the room as the story was told, mediated through the actors' performances, design elements, and the reaction of the audience to what's happening as it unfolds. It is an ephemeral experience generated in real time that is shared only among the people present as it happened, all of whom are essential to its creation. Michael Chemers describes the role of the dramaturg as follows: "dramaturgs are to information what metallurgists are to ore: experts in the transformation of a raw resource into something useful to those who would create something even more useful – and more beautiful" (Chemers and Sell 144). In this vein, I am interested in viewing the dramaturg as a facilitator, as someone who understands the various systems that converge in performance events and uses that knowledge to bring artists and audiences together in the generation of narrative. Theater tends to define itself as a deeply collaborative art form and I am interested in how far we can expand that collaboration in terms of who can participate in it.

This framing of theater as collaborative storytelling and the influence of TTRPGs on my work merge with my dramaturgy practice, which is focused on devised theater, new plays, and non-hierarchical creative processes. Artistically, I am invested in exploring how we make new

work for the stage. In this thesis, I explore performance that centers the audience and invites them to collaborate in the telling of a story; my impulse to do so comes in part from Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's Viewpoints. In *The Viewpoints Book*, Bogart and Landau pose the following questions:

> Can the artistic process be collaborative? Can a group of strong-minded individuals *together* ask what the play or project *wants*, rather than depending upon the hierarchical domination of one person? Of course a project needs structure and a sense of direction but can the leader aim for discovery rather than staging a replica of what s/he has decided beforehand? Can we resist proclaiming "what it is" long enough to authentically ask: "What is it?" (18)

The Viewpoints method is centered on non-hierarchical creation and rehearsal of work among an ensemble of artists, but I argue that these questions can expand to encompass the audience as well. The main goal of Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed is "the liberation of the spectator, on whom the theater has imposed finished visions of the world" (155). His work is invested in inviting the audience, rendered passive by the conventions of the theater, to enter the space of the stage and become actors themselves. In turn, the performers take on the role of spectator. This results in a more collaborative environment in which the audience is on an equal plane with the artists, and all are able to credibly contribute to the performance event. I bring these investments and explorations together to ask: can *the audience* be included in asking the question of what the project is, or at least what it might become? What happens when we bring them into the creative process? What if the theatrical event is in and of itself the experience of creating it? How exactly do we as theater artists create work that does not present a finished vision of the world, with space for the audience to collaborate with us?

In recent years more and more precedents have emerged for bringing theater and games together, particularly in devised theater practice. Immersive, participatory, and experiential

performance have surged in popularity in recent years, and so has interest in the ways games can inform the structure and design of such performances. Gaming traditions like live-action role-playing (larp), TTRPGs, and pervasive games (a category that includes things like scavenger hunts as well as augmented reality games like *Pokémon GO*) have significant points of overlap with performance but are undertheorized *as* performance. They invite players to work collaboratively with one another, take on roles within the fiction, and guide the narrative that emerges through their interaction. I understand these games as invitations for the audience to become authors and performers alongside the games' designers and artists. Game studies and performance studies can learn a lot from one another, but developing concrete models for bringing them together in performance events requires that we recognize these games as performance structures in and of themselves. In this thesis, I am attempting to theorize a concrete way of bringing existing game and performance structures together in a form I call pervasive performance.

A major benefit of bringing games and immersive/experiential performance techniques together is creating performance experiences that invite the audience to act as co-authors and cede the construction of narrative to everyone present in the space during the performance, audience and artists alike. My investment in extending this invitation is in part an attempt to navigate the fraught relationship between theater artists and their audiences. The question of which group has more power is hotly contested within performance studies, but in most cases there seems to be an unequal relationship between them, often framed in terms of a binary of activity/passivity. I am interested in what it looks like to muddy the distinction between performer and audience, and in seeing how that changes the way we think about authorship and story in a given performance event. Further, I begin from the understanding that no matter how

hard we try, we truly cannot control what someone takes away from the work we make, which places artists in an incredibly vulnerable position. We make art to share something deeply personal, and pervasive performance is my attempt at navigating the vulnerability of that by inviting the audience to join it, rather than witness it.

Fostering this kind of shared vulnerability requires building trust and a sense of community among the people present through structures that support the audience's participation. You cannot begin with a demand for vulnerability – the performance needs to extend an invitation, and it may be accepted or refused. This process is common at TTRPG tables, where small groups of people sit down with the intention to work together to create a story and to be in some way vulnerable with one another, but I first encountered it on a larger scale and in a performance setting when I saw 600 Highwaymen's *The Fever* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in November 2018.

We entered the performance space and were seated onstage in a rectangular configuration, with no clear performance space separated by a fourth wall from where we were sitting. When the play began, a member of the company stood up and began to tell a story; occasionally, they asked a member of the audience to be a part of it somehow, by standing up or extending their arms or taking some other low-stakes action before sitting back down. As the performance progressed and trust was built among the group, the kind of participation being asked of us grew more intimate: we danced with one another, caught performers as they fell, and even lifted someone over our heads and passed them back and forth across the space on our outstretched hands. We built relationships with strangers and told a story completely in collaboration with one another. The artists came in with the seed of a story and a structure in

which we might tell it, but that story needed to be enacted by our bodies and our choice to participate as audience members in order to actually exist.

By virtue of the medium in which they work, game designers must leave gaps to be filled by players who in turn generate the end product of the game. For this reason, techniques of game design can be extremely generative for designers of performance experiences who want to experiment with the status of the audience or invite them to interact and exercise agency in their experience of the performance. Ultimately, I am most interested in theater in which the audience is invited to play, rather than to watch other people play, and in exploring what possibilities that opens up in terms of our impact on audiences and the kinds of stories we are able to tell. Immersive and experiential performance already concern themselves with changing the role the audience plays in the overall performance, but I argue that games offer artists ways to take that even further and support audiences in becoming authors and collaborators in community with the performance's designers and other participants.

Pervasive performance structures audience engagement with experiential performance through the use of game mechanics; we might think of it as the embodied experience of testing hypotheses and experimenting with other ways of being the world. One way to name the kind of relationship that it builds with its audience is play – pervasive performance invites the cultivation of a sense of playfulness that lingers after the performance has ended. Miguel Sicart argues that playfulness can make the world "less formalized, less explained, open to interpretation and wonder and manipulation. To be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity" (28). A central quality of play is its appropriative nature, the way it "takes over the context in which it exists and cannot be totally predetermined by such context" (Sicart 11). Playfulness does not usurp the purpose of an everyday space or activity, but it does encourage

people to bring the attitude of play to such purposes. Living playfully means being open to experimentation, uncertainty, and risk; it asks us to imagine otherwise, or at least accept that there are possible worlds beyond what we know. A performance that is pervasive, then, might use play to encourage its audience to bring a sense of playfulness back to their everyday lives by staging the performance itself partially in the quotidian world.

In this thesis, I propose a structure of performance that merges immersive and experiential theater practices with the structure and design principles of pervasive games. We can use theater conventions to indicate to audiences that what they are engaging in is a performance but that, for the duration of the experience, they should respond to it as though it is real. This allows us to invite audiences to experiment, take risks, and play in ways that can have lasting effects on their relationship to everyday life without getting irretrievably lost in the fictional world of the performance. I draw on TTRPG systems that are consensus-driven or define themselves as conversations between players, in which the story emerges from the collaboration of everyone at the table. I also explore performance art movements and practitioners like Fluxus and Allan Kaprow, whose works trouble strict categorization and artistic mediums in a way that converges with contemporary interest in transmedia storytelling and distributing stories between physical and digital environments.

Specifically, I explore a way of creating and analyzing Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) as performance structures, with the intention of placing the audience at the center of the performance and inviting them to co-create the overall experience alongside the designers. ARGs "take the substance of everyday life and weave it into narratives that layer additional meaning, depth, and interaction upon the real world," resulting in a blurring of everyday life and gameplay (Montola et al. 37). The form I am calling pervasive performance brings experiential theater and

ARGs together to construct an alternate world adjacent to real life and invite audiences inside the fiction as performers and authors. In the process, the audience experiences a blurriness between where the performance ends and real life begins that transforms their relationship to everyday reality. The audience generates the meaning of their experience in collaboration with other participants, rather than passively receiving a message communicated by the artists, and they emerge from the experience transformed in some way by their participation in the creation of the performance. More specifically, they approach their everyday lives with a new quality of attention and a sense of playfulness, having experienced a space to experiment in the overlap between familiar and fictional worlds.

Pervasive performance is not intended to replace immersive, experiential, or participatory performance; rather, I hope to offer one possible structure for performance experiences that invite co-authorship and collaboration with the audience, using principles of game design enacted through theatrical frames and techniques. In addition to exploring the possibilities that rise from the blurriness between performance and everyday life that pervasive performance enacts, I am interested in troubling what we define as performance and expanding that category to more explicitly include games and the experience of playing them. I draw on Dick Higgins' concept of intermedia, which enacts a broader agenda of the Fluxus art movement, which Higgins co-founded: to "transgress boundaries, decentre their own activities, and, for some, gradually lead to the elimination of the category of fine art altogether" (Smith 18).

Intermedia works defy classification and categorization by locating themselves outside of distinct artistic mediums like visual art or theater, allowing for the creation of "an art form appropriate to people who say there are no boundaries between art and life. If there cannot be a boundary between art and life, there cannot be boundaries between art forms and art forms"

(Friedman 247). In other words, I locate pervasive performance within this tradition of intermedia both because of its investment in bringing performance and everyday life together and because I am invested in expanding what can be studied as performance. In an interview with Michael Mark Chemers and Mike Sell in their book *Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age*, micha cárdenas describes narrowly defining what games are as “a tactic that’s been used by people who want to police the boundaries of games,” specifically in the name of defining what is and isn’t fun or entertaining (149). She speaks about being told that her games aren’t fun enough to count, justifying the exclusion of her work from the category. I want to resist this tactic in games and in performance through creating work that intentionally blurs the boundaries between these two categories. I am curious about what possibilities emerge when we live in the overlaps between disciplines and see what they have to say to one another.

Pervasive performance is adept at creating worlds adjacent to our own and drawing audiences into them as performers and participants with clear goals to pursue and means of achieving them. Crucially, this type of performance reveals to us that the world is transformable by changing our relationship to it, and in this way I understand it as a utopian form: it makes the world we live in strange, which both allows us to question taken-for-granted assumptions about it and to imagine alternatives. In her interview with Chemers and Sell, cárdenas narrates her work as responding to a need to acknowledge multiple realities and construct new ones in addition to dealing with the fact that in the present moment “there are multiple ideological realities, and they oftentimes seem unbridgeable” (147). Forms like pervasive performance that make use of multiple realities (both real and fictional) blurred together can equip us to make sense of incompatible worldviews and navigate the problem cárdenas identifies. Through becoming aware of more possibilities we sharpen our ability to identify and move between them.

Immersive, experiential, and participatory theater structure embodied engagement with stories and fictional worlds. Frequently such performances engage with social causes or political issues and attempt to motivate audiences to take action, and I propose doing this by immersing audiences in a world and allowing them to choose how to engage with it, which in turn gives them space to make connections and experiment on their own. Boal's Theater of the Oppressed defines itself primarily as a people's theater, in which citizens can take action and discover for themselves what to do in a particular situation. In a similar way, I am interested in creating performance spaces in which audiences are hailed as co-authors and collaborators, and in which they are invited to exercise their agency in ways they may not have access to in real life.

This requires a genuine ceding of control over the process of meaning-making to the audience because the experience of participating in the telling of a story through one's body evokes meaning from the participant's actions, communicated through something visceral and hard to articulate. This indicates to me that experiences that aim to invite the audience to co-author their experience ought to direct their efforts not towards motivating a particular action or telling a particular story, but creating a world and the rules that govern how one interacts with it, then trusting the audience to do the rest with the support of the designers and other participants. The embodied experience of interacting with the world and telling a story in community with other people will cultivate a playfulness and a heightened awareness of one's capacity for action, which will linger in the participant's life after the performance event has concluded.

Kathi Weeks argues that the value and power of utopian forms are their insistence that we imagine, desire, and demand, rather than prescribing a particular object of that imagining, desire, or demand (207). This can frame the goals and purpose of experiential theater, and more

specifically of resisting the temptation to tell our audiences what to think, lest we defeat the purpose of creating a piece of art that invites the audience to be a part of it in the first place. Allan Kaprow argued that “Value ... is taken for granted as the real goal. It is valuable just to make something. It is valuable just to point to something” (51). *This* is the aim of pervasive performance: to use alternate realities to point to something in everyday life and see what comes of it, and how we have been changed by our interaction with a fictional world.

Both the designers of the event and audience members who take on the role of co-author take part in the generation of meaning for themselves and for others present. Recognizing the audience as agents within the fictional world gives them the ability to shape that alternate reality and experiment with other ways of being. In this way I understand experiential theater, and specifically pervasive performance, as an activity of world-making and of animating the capacity to imagine and desire. Crucially, this happens collectively and in community with other people, through putting audience members in contact with one another as collaborators and giving them structures through which they can work with one another.

This structure of performance offers one possibility of many for facilitating theatrical experiences that place the audience at the center and offer them the space to risk, experiment, and physically shape the world around them in ways they might not be able to in real life. Pervasive performance and its use of game structures and principles facilitates playfulness on the part of the audience, and it teaches us to bring that play to real life. Sicart defines play as follows: “Play is finding expression; it is letting us understand the world and, through that understanding, challenging the establishment, leading for knowledge, and creating new ties or breaking old ones” (18). It mediates our relationship to the world around us and develops our

capacity to create and disrupt. Play creates new possibilities for how we move through and act upon the world, and how we make sense of what we encounter.

To experiment with pervasive performance, I staged an ARG called *The Parable Task* at UMass Amherst in May 2023, devised in collaboration with Caleb Bailey, Cameron Hoskins, Crow Traphagen, Elie Abramovich, and Luna Barros. In *The Parable Task*, players took on the roles of newspaper reporters at a fictional school called Moradna University in order to investigate the recent disappearances of five students, whose consciousnesses have been uploaded onto computer servers by a military technology corporation, Parable Ventures. In order to join the game, one visited a newspaper stand in Bartlett Hall on UMass Amherst's campus. The game's communication was mediated largely through a Discord server, although players were also prompted to visit several real-life locations on campus to find information or solve puzzles. Our process was deeply collaborative – we arrived at core design decisions like the premise of the game and its mechanics as a group, and began our live run with a general structure for how things might unfold rather than a concrete, predetermined story. As the game progressed, we incorporated and responded to player theorizing in order to make space for the players to act as co-authors.

We found that, despite our choice to be open about the game's status *as* a game, players entered the fiction and role-played as Moradna students without prompting from us, justifying gaps in knowledge about the fictional school and interacting with each other in-character. Additionally, players became deeply invested in finding out what had happened to the missing students and stopping Parable Ventures' experiments. Throughout the game's live run, I observed firsthand the way game mechanics structured players' interactions with the world of Moradna University and actively create belief in the fiction in which they were immersed. Bits of lore and

new game information rewarded players who interacted with the server and other interfaces of the game.

As a dramaturg, I am most invested in facilitating the telling of story through performance, and I found in *The Parable Task* that principles of game design that help to structure interactions between audience members and fictional worlds are extremely useful dramaturgical tools. They allow us to make space for audiences to choose their mode of engagement with a work and draw connections between their experience and their real lives. Due to its merging of game structures with experiential theater, pervasive performance is rich with possibilities for moving beyond bringing audiences into the world and actually inviting them to act as co-authors. It is an experiment in ceding control over the making of meaning to the community that forms in the crucible of the performance event.

What I found in the course of this experiment, however, is that the practical experience of creating performances like this is largely one of terror. Creating works that require the participation of one's audience in order to create a narrative is an enormous leap of faith – it requires trust that what you have brought to the table is intriguing and engaging, and that audiences will accept your invitation to play. It is scary to relinquish control over the outcome of the art you make, or to begin a performance with no real sense of how it will turn out. In many ways, it is far more vulnerable than works that are not reliant on audience participation. I maintain, however, that this is worthwhile and even generative, that we should, in the words of famed improviser Del Close, "Follow the fear" (Spitznagel). Pervasive performance is in part my attempt to confront the terror of liveness and of the power to make meaning from a piece of art. In theorizing this performance form, I ask what it looks like to collaborate with one's audience in the creation of a story and how we as artists can structure that collaboration.

I will begin by defining pervasive performance and its core principles. This includes models of games and performance on which I draw to explore pervasive performance's relationship to its audience and blurring of everyday life, as well as the form's engagement with genre and its utopian aims. Then, I turn to practical considerations for creating pervasive performances, including how to reconceive their performance texts and expand the magic circle. Finally, I provide an account of the process of devising *The Parable Task* and its live run. It is my hope that pervasive performance offers a replicable method of creating gamified performance that supports its audience-participants in co-authoring their experience and transforming their relationship with everyday life through making contact with alternate realities. Specifically, I hope to expand the dramaturgical tools available to us in devising new work for the stage that experiments with what performance can be and how we think about the audience within it.

CHAPTER 2:

DEFINING PERVASIVE PERFORMANCE

In *The Parable Task*, I explore the ARG as a type of performance that makes use of immersion, interaction, and participation. I use this form to propose a more general structure called pervasive performance, which brings together pervasive gaming and experiential theater to ethically approach the blurring of life and art that characterizes pervasive games and cede control over meaning-making to its audience. Pervasive performance is an experiential intermedia encounter that expands the magic circle of performance, invites audience members to co-author their experience alongside others, and transforms participants' relationship with real life by enchanting or inviting critical reflection upon the quotidian world. This structure invites participants into fictional worlds and layers alternate realities onto everyday life, opening up the possibility for estrangement from or enchantment of the quotidian world through interacting with a fiction that persists beyond the active event of the performance. In pervasive performance, there is no distinct audience made up of spectators; rather, people in attendance are invited to become performers and participants as they navigate the experience alongside their fellow audience members. The story emerges from this collective participation, guided by a system of interaction developed by the performance's designers.

I use "designers" as a catchall term for those involved in the creation of pervasive performance because in the process of making *The Parable Task* we found that the work each of us ended up doing was not easily classifiable within particular disciplines like stage management, writing, dramaturgy, or design, although we all locate ourselves within at least one of those. Rather, we all weighed in on every aspect of the game's world and mechanics, informed by our particular backgrounds within theater and performance. Thus, when I refer to the

designers of pervasive performance, I mean the group of artists who build the world of the game and shape how audiences interact with it, both through creating puzzles and mechanics as well as by acting as facilitators and GMs during active gameplay. This comes both from a desire to reframe the work of the theater artist in making performance that invites its audience to collaborate in the creative process, as well as an explicit invocation of the language we use for people who make games. “Designer” points toward the work of building structures and frameworks with which audiences can engage; we are not writing the story, just the conditions of possibility from which a story might emerge.

Core Principles of Pervasive Performance

The type of work I am exploring falls under the umbrella of “experiential theater” as defined by William W. Lewis and Sean Bartley: “performative encounters where the spectator becomes both witness and performer with and in the totality of the event” and “encounters whose dramaturgical frame is expanded to encompass multiple senses, ideas, and actions” (2). Such encounters are interactive in that audiences are asked to directly engage with the work, but Lewis and Bartley argue that experiential works rely on multiple forms of interactivity and thus transcend the label of “interactive” theater (5). In addition, these works are frequently immersive in that they place the audience at the heart of the work and engage their senses to evoke a feeling of being submerged in the world of the play (Machon 22). Josephine Machon argues that not all immersive performances require interactivity or participation, but it does seem that most experiential performances require the kind of submersion and deep involvement that Machon attributes to immersive theater. While pervasive performance draws from immersive, interactive, experiential, and participatory theater practices, I will use “experiential theater” to refer to these

overlapping categories throughout this thesis, because experiential theater's use of immersion, interaction, and participation aligns most closely with that of pervasive performance.

Machon's *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* defines a scale of immersivity, which serves as a set of criteria for evaluating the degree to which a particular performance is immersive. One crucial element of this scale is a performance's relationship to the audience, specifically that "the direct, actual, physical insertion of an individual audience member within the world of the event, into the performance itself, is paramount and absolute" and that in wholly immersive works "the audience-immersant is *always* fundamentally complicit within the concept, content and form of the work" (98). This complicity is important – in being enveloped within the world of the performance and thus present in a way that impacts the fiction, audience members are rendered partially responsible for what happens in the performance.

600 Highwaymen's *A Thousand Ways Part Three: An Assembly*, which I saw at A.P.E. @ Hawley in Northampton, MA in November 2022, is both a major inspiration for my thesis and an excellent example of the kind of experiential theater techniques that I have drawn on in thinking about pervasive performance. In this piece, audience members entered a room with a small stage and sixteen chairs. Each seat had a small piece of paper with instructions to wait until the doors close, at which point someone present should get up and start to read from a stack of cards on the stage. These cards contained instructions as well as bits of story; the directions we were given ranged from things we needed to read aloud to everyone else to directives like moving to a particular part of the room or taking a five second pause. Throughout the 90 minute performance, we told a story together about recovering from ruin, taking turns reading from the cards and guiding each other through the experience. We were never left with the responsibility of coming

up with what happens next out of the blue, but the cards that told us what actions to take needed to be enacted by us in the space in order to create the theatrical event. There was no one in the space whose job was only to spectate, and we were complicit in both the content and form of the work because we ourselves were performing it.

I am pursuing the question of what happens when we conceptualize a performance as a transformative experience that audiences have rather than a story told by artists to spectators. We might put this into practice by placing the audience within the fiction, inviting them to interact, and acknowledging their impact on the outcome of the performance gives audiences a sense of ownership and even of co-authorship.

Relationship to Audience

Gareth White explains the relationship between audience and performer to which most are accustomed, in which "performers usually retain authority over the action, while the spectators usually retain the right to stay out of the action, and to watch and hear it" (4). In other words, the audience is relieved of the responsibility of coming up with what happens but also has no say in what action takes place. White notes further that "To change these relationships in some way asks both parties to surrender something: both give up some of the control they might expect to have over their part of the event" (4). Theater artists who craft immersive or experiential performances, the point of which is to allow for some form of co-authorship on the part of the audience, must relinquish control over the end product of the performance. They must leave a gap that the audience will fill and avoid steering audiences in a particular direction in order to stay true to the intention of making space for the audience to exercise agency.

Adrienne Mackey argues that, while it can be hard to give up control over how participants experience and make meaning from a performance, "the potential reward is that, when free to explore a world of their own volition, the viewer focuses on elements of a story most relevant to them. Similarly, if one has ownership in assembling the meaning of a theatrical experience, they may feel it more potently" (37). Many game theorists attribute a similar power to the act of playing a game; Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern note in *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* that "When engaging with an artwork, we are also invited to make decisions about how the work is operating. We must choose what is salient, explore possible metaphors and reference points, and balance our emotional and aesthetic responses with intellectual or conceptual ones" (238). This points to how much interpretive power spectators have that must be accounted for when we create experiential work, and to the potential benefits of inviting them to use that interpretive power to actively help construct the performance event.

The way many people describe the difference between participatory and non-participatory works has to do with agency, "a person's – in this case the spectator – ability to do something" (Lewis and Bartley 7). Frequently this ability to do something has an impact on the situation in which the agent is acting, in this case the environment of the performance; in order for it to qualify as agency, the world needs to be tangibly impacted by a person's interaction with it. Rather than asserting that experiential and participatory theater *gives* audiences agency, Lewis and Bartley argue that "Agency simply exists. Theatrical audience conventions are the social forces that typically restrain that agency" (7). Instead of granting audiences the ability to do something in the context of the performance, experiential and participatory works change the way actions are coded and remove constraints on what audiences feel they are allowed to do during the performance. In a non-participatory performance,

audiences might be shown to their seats by an usher, told to silence their cell phones, and asked to sit in the dark and observe something happening on a brightly lit stage. All of these conventions tell us as audience members that our job is to quietly watch; much of the work of experiential and participatory theater is finding ways to signal to audiences that their role in this particular performance has changed.

This tends to involve placing audiences *inside* the work, as opposed to watching it from beyond the fourth wall, which indicates to audience members that they are a part of what's happening and that something more than spectatorship is being asked of them. They are made complicit in what's happening in the performance. White notes that "To be inside the work, not just inside its physical and temporal space but inside it as an aesthetic, affective, phenomenological entity gives a different aspect to the idea of a point of view, and of action" (16-17). In other words, locating the audience within the work fundamentally changes their point of view and investment in the fiction. Many experiential works acknowledge the presence of the audience by inviting them to perform or interact. This presence creates an embodied experience for audience-participants, and the meaning they draw from what takes place during the performance is affected by the fact that they themselves are enacting it. Artists who construct works that place the audiences within them, then, need to find ways of leaving space to be filled in by the actions of audience members and to cede some amount of control over what audiences do when they encounter that space.

Inviting the audience inside the work is also often narrated as a way of viewing them as active rather than passive, as having something to do beyond watching and responding to the work. Murray reframes the notion of passive suspension of disbelief as the active creation of belief, arguing that:

> When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely 'suspend' a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively *create belief*. Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience. (136)

I posit that in addition to our desire for immersion, freedom to explore a world and a feeling of having authored one's experience of it motivates the audience to create further belief in the fiction of the experience. When we are encouraged to exercise our agency in the context of a performance, it deepens our investment in the world and our desire to immerse ourselves in it, which in turn gives us more opportunities to exercise our agency, which brings us in even further, and so on. Another way of framing this is as the willing activation of pretense, in which participants "pretend their way into the fictional time-space in exchange for a deeper, childlike enjoyment of its splendor" (Schrier et al. 350). In both cases, the passive suspension of disbelief is reframed as active, something the participant *does*. The important thing is clearly communicating what kind of participation is being asked of the audience and giving them a sense of their role in the overall performance, so that they have something to buy into, a clear understanding of what they can do, and how they can exercise their agency.

Beyond the immediate effect of deepening one's investment in the storyworld with which they are engaged, I argue that exercising agency in the context of performance is part of the lasting transformational effect of pervasive performance events. Avery Alder makes a case for the importance of games framed both in terms of agency and discovering new ways of being: "[Games] allow us to redefine ourselves as powerful actors. They allow us to see ourselves differently and in different roles. They invite us to sincerely believe in the fantastical, to take it seriously and consider it, even if just for an hour or two" (46). Performance forms that make space for audiences to make choices for themselves about how to exercise their agency are

creating opportunities for audience members to engage in a process of redefinition, of expanding their sense of what actions are available to within the world of the performance. I posit that this redefinition can have real effects in terms of how we understand our own capacity to impact the world in which we live and our sense of what might be possible.

To bolster her argument about the centrality of the audience to immersive works, Machon draws on Jacques Rancière's argument that "it is the receiver of the work who activates the artistic experience" (117). This implies that immersive works (and, I argue, pervasive ones as well) are fundamentally incomplete without the presence of the audience. The centering of audience experience in the creation of experiential work means that the performance is activated by the arrival and participation of the audience in a deeper way than theater that does not use immersion, participation, or interaction, because these works are more reliant on the presence and input of the audience. Further, being able to exercise one's agency and directly impact the world of the performance gives audiences a feeling of ownership over the end product of the performance and deepens their investment in the storyworld.

Designers of experiential and participatory works may feel invested in communicating a particular message or hesitant to cede control of the meaning that is made from their work. However, when such artists emphasize a particular interpretation or attempt to inspire a particular action, they risk defeating the purpose of choosing a performance form that centers the audience and invites them to be part of authoring and enacting the experience. When creating experiential works, freedom to choose how one engages with a work implies that one can also choose what meaning to make of it. I posit that this is less of a conscious shift in how we frame our intentions in making a work and more an embrace of the fact that in any kind of

performance, artists cannot truly control what audiences take away. I take this in part from Charles Ludlam, who argues that:

> Everybody in the audience sees a different play. Trying to control what they see is futile. Trying to absolutely nail it down for each person to have the same impression is impossible. What I do is create what *I* want and then let them come and judge me. The play must be what *I* want it to be, because I can't figure out how to make it what they want. (183)

We do, however, still need to be accountable for what our work evokes and make our intentions clear. I am not arguing that, if it is true that we cannot guarantee that audiences will derive our intended meaning from the work we make, we ought to do whatever we want and hope for the best, in the way that Ludlam suggests. Rather, I view this as an opportunity for exploring what happens when we create stories and make meaning of them collaboratively and non-hierarchically, by muddying the distinction between audience and performer. The artist brings a premise or provocation to the table but also remains open to seeing how the audience responds and inviting them to collaborate in whatever event results. The goal of theorizing pervasive performance is to explore what it looks like to begin from the understanding that we do not have as much control over the audience's experience as we may think and explore how to create conditions under which we can truly collaborate with them and produce meaning together.

Many interactive, immersive, and experiential theater pieces engage with political and social issues by inviting audiences to directly immerse themselves in an experience that may be different from their own. For example, Machon notes that immersive theater tends to be good at exploring issues related to the environment because of its emphasis on sensory engagement with the space in which the performance happens (89). I argue, however, that if the object of such performances is to raise awareness of a social issue within audience members or inspire them to do something about these issues in real life, a far more effective way of achieving that is to create

conditions under which audiences can draw their own conclusions and make connections between the performance and their real lives. Crucially, this would happen in a shared environment with other audience members, creating opportunities to compare notes and theorize together, to draw on our collective intelligence.

Machon turns to Umberto Eco's concept of open works to explain the way immersive theater leaves the work of interpretation largely up to the audience in a way that non-immersive, non-participatory, and non-interactive performances cannot, at least not in the same way. One implication she notes is that "each and every experience of an artistic event is 'both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it' because each situation relies on the individual's unique reception of the work," which names the work of interpretation as a kind of participation in and of itself (114-115). Eco argues that the openness of a work comes not from complete freedom but rather rigorous design and structuring, a sentiment echoed by William W. Lewis and Valerie Clayman Pye, who note that creators of experiential theater must provide enough structure that audiences don't feel lost along with room within that structure for making meaningful choices about what they want their experience to be (31). The question becomes how we can design experiences to create the desired balance of freedom and guidance in order to facilitate the desired critical reflection and construction of narrative on the part of the audience. Games are a useful model for this because they are a medium defined in part by the need to guide players toward assembling their own experience through interacting with a system.

Models for Ceding Control of Meaning-making

One way to approach ceding control over meaning-making to the audience is the incorporation of game structures and design principles. Amanda Rose Hartley Villareal defines

this as gamified performance, or "productions … designed to be informed by the decisions of individuals sharing space, whose participation via unscripted movement and interactions shape the unfolding narrative and add or alter meaning in the production" (34). Mackey describes the incorporation of game mechanics as offering actions for audience members to take out of which narrative emerges, or "building a performance in as a side effect of playing the game" (43). In gamified performance, audiences are invited to play and in turn become the producers of the performance, guided by the rules for interaction, the environment they find themselves in, and the other people present. For this reason, it is an excellent framework for performance events that invite their audiences to co-create the performance.

A challenge of leaving space for audiences to fill via gamic actions is the fact that at least some of a performance must be authored in advance: at minimum, the suggestion of a world and a system for interacting with it. TTRPGs offer an excellent model for this, because "the enacted performance of [TTRPG] play at the table is a kind of *tertiary authorship* that emerges in conjunction with the *secondary authorship* of the game master (GM) as story-builder or scenario writer who mediates the *primary authorship* of the game designer as worldbuilder and rules-maker" (White et al. 64). There is room within this framework for a designer who determines the overall world in which the game takes place and how players are intended to interact with it, a GM or facilitator who chooses a specific scenario to play out, and players who control their particular character and whose actions shape the overall narrative that emerges through play. In the case of pervasive performance, the game designer is the designer of the performance, the GM is the performers or facilitators present who guide audiences through the world and teach them to interact, and the players are the audience members.

There is no way to determine in advance what the end result of play will be in TTRPG sessions, but there are multiple layers of authorship that combine to support the players at the table in making choices and taking actions within a cohesive fictional world, ideally without restricting them or making them feel as though they do not actually have the ability to make choices about what they are doing. Crucially, the primary and secondary layers of authorship in TTRPGs are focused on creating the conditions out of which story can emerge and be enacted by the players, not on predetermining what will happen during gameplay. This kind of nested authorship is a useful model for approaching the creation of performances that involve a world and premise authored in advance by designers and a narrative that emerges through participant interaction.

Murray reconciles the complexity of defining authorship in interactive narrative by distinguishing between "playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself" (187). The audience of a pervasive performance event authors the experience, but designers are responsible for authoring the environment in which the experience takes place in what Murray calls procedural authorship, or "writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves" (187). In this case, the writing of the texts themselves happens in collaboration with the audience. In procedurally authored texts, designers create the world with which participants will interact and the rules that define those interactions, and co-author the actual experience of the performance alongside their audience-participants. Rather than a singular story, procedural authorship entails the design of systems of interaction and invitations for the audience to look for patterns and enact a story within the world of the performance. Procedural authors are also responsible for facilitating these experiences and creating ways for the audience to enter the world, exercise their agency, and

actively create belief in the fiction of the performance event. They create the circumstances under which participants become authors and performers, who then enact the event.

Murray also offers encyclopedic storytelling as a model for ceding control over meaning-making to the audience; this is a form in which audiences are invited to put together stories on their own from various sources in a way that deepens their engagement with a piece of media (117). This includes theorizing in fan communities and the creation of fan content like art or fanfiction, all of which are a kind of participation in the storyworld. In forms like ARGs, in which most of the action is puzzle-solving and theorizing on the part of the players, making connections and sharing our interpretations of the story with one another are part of the storyworld as a whole. Murray argues that this invitation to be part of the creation of the storyworld deepens an audience's investment in and engagement with it in the same way Mackey attributes to audiences exercising agency in how they engage with a theatrical work.

Encyclopedic storytelling also engages what Espen Aarseth calls ergodicity, in which "Nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Sharp and Thomas 84). Rather than just reading a book, readers' choices about how to engage with the text shape their experience of it, and even shape the text itself. An example of ergodic literature that has been deeply generative to me in theorizing pervasive performance is the novel *S.*, conceived by J.J. Abrams and written by Doug Dorst. This novel consists of a work by fictional author VM Straka covered in annotations between two students passing the book back and forth in their university's library; the text is both the text of the printed book and the notes scribbled in the margins. As the novel progresses, the students' notes to one another chronicle their search to uncover the author's real identity and the secret at the heart of his final book. *S.* is a story within a story that requires readers to make particular choices about what parts to pay attention to when, meaning their

experience of the work as a whole is in many ways dependent on how they chose to approach reading it.

Encyclopedic storytelling and ergodicity both offer ways of thinking about how the way we engage with a text shapes the meaning we make from it, but both are quite literary in terms of how they are defined. In thinking about what she calls agency of engagement in performance, Mackey offers a reframing of designing narrative in environments in which the audience or reader is meant to act as a co-creator, structuring it "not as plot points forming a single line a story locks onto but as a landscape of potential narrative encounters an audience might come upon" (Mackey 37). This offers us a way of bringing ergodicity and encyclopedic storytelling onstage and thinking about how one's environment and the available methods of engagement provide opportunities for story. Designing encyclopedic or ergodic narratives requires us to think spatially and to create story possibilities that are later encountered and assembled into story by audience-participants. More importantly, we must trust these audience-participants to derive meaning from the story they assemble on their own, rooted in the premise that the way we interact with a story shapes what we think it means.

All of these models offer ways to understand the audience as an author and active participant in the making of meaning from an event, and the story or narrative of the event as a body of information to be distributed and assembled by the reader or participant. Henry Jenkins defines narrative comprehension as "an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypotheses about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues" but notes that games ask players to literally test those hypotheses in the world and see what happens, rather than wait to see what is revealed later in the book or film (126). Immersive or experiential performance that cedes control of meaning-making to audiences can

use game structures to create opportunities for this kind of testing of hypotheses in a direct and embodied way, activating the process of active assembly of story that Jenkins and Murray discuss. Audience-participants then invest more deeply in the fiction of the performance and actively create belief because there are opportunities to take actions and make decisions about how they want to explore and engage with the performance. Further, they become the protagonist of the story they assemble, and their embodied experience of searching for clues and encountering things in the storyworld becomes a part of the eventual narrative they construct.

Part of Sicart's project in *Play Matters* is to challenge Johan Huizinga's model of play as "a fair contest that creates a separate world with rules that are never questioned" (3). Rather than restricting play to something that happens exclusively in games, Sicart thinks about play as the force that mediates our relationship to the world around us – it is interwoven with daily life. Drawing on Bakhtin, he identifies a carnivalesque nature in play, arguing that "Through play we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say" (5). Here, playfulness creates possibility. It works from within to make us aware of new capacities to trouble and question things we take for granted about the world, and to directly experiment with other ways of being through taking playful action.

Kaprow's Happenings were a performance practice rooted in the invitation to play. They were open-ended and fluid performance events with no particular structure, plot, or message that take this reconceptualizing of the audience to an extreme. A core rule for creating a Happening is that there cannot be an audience of spectators, and everyone present is a participant. In pervasive performance, everyone present is a participant by virtue of accepting the invitation to participate, but in the spirit of building multiple modes of engagement into the work, there is room for spectatorship once you have entered the fiction. In *The Parable Task*, all audience members

became players and *Moradna Torch* reporters by virtue of picking up a newspaper and entering the Discord server, but many chose to navigate the game's lore on their own or watch the conversations unfold between other players rather than directly contribute. Kaprow's investment in eliminating the audience altogether comes from his rejection of passivity in the theater, but pervasive performance begins with the active decision to enter the storyworld and thus has no passive spectators, just players who are engaging to different extents.

Happenings are "events that, put simply, happen" (Kaprow 16). They have no specified meaning, intention, or impact, and generally involve participants engaging in some kind of everyday action together that feels heightened because it's happening in community with other people. Participants' sense of where the performance ends and everyday life begins is purposefully blurred by recontextualizing familiar actions through the act of performing them. Kaprow specified that, during a Happening, "The action leads itself any way it wishes, and the artist controls it only to the degree that it keeps on 'shaking' right" (19). These events have no predetermined outcome and the artist creates only the premise and a direction in which the performance begins to go.

One of Kaprow's most famous Happenings was called "18 Happenings in 6 Parts," first presented in 1959 (Kirby 68). The gallery space was split into three rooms separated by translucent plastic sheeting hung on a makeshift wooden frame, with folding chairs in each of the rooms. Visitors were given a pamphlet of instructions when they arrived in the gallery that told them where to sit and when during the performance they would be asked to change seats or move to a different room. Once the Happening began with the ring of a bell, performers entered two of the rooms and executed highly choreographed movements while Kaprow showed a series of slides of his own artwork mixed in with children's artwork in the third room. The following five

parts of the Happening proceeded in a similar way, with highly choreographed movement and text interspersed with slides and other activities. For example, in one section two men stacked blocks on either side of a wooden board; in another, a woman bounced a ball for the section's duration. The performance also made use of extremely specific sound and lighting cues that signaled shifts within each part of the Happening. These works were highly structured, but made no effort to communicate a particular message to the audience, who were left to make meaning from it on their own.

Balancing structure and freedom of engagement is central to the creation of pervasive performance – the audience needs to feel supported in taking action lest they freeze up because they're afraid of doing something wrong, but in order to meaningfully make space for them to co-author the experience there needs to be room for the performance to go wherever the audience-participants take it. Jenkins describes this balance in his notion of emergent narratives, which "are not prestructured or preprogrammed, taking shape through the game play, yet they are not as unstructured, chaotic, and frustrating as life itself" (128). Emergent narratives take place in authored environments, which set up structures in which players or participants define their own goals and tell their own stories without having to start from scratch. Environments that facilitate emergent narrative are "game spaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players" (Jenkins 129). In pervasive performance, the emphasis is not on telling a particular story but rather on creating the conditions of possibility for audiences to become authors themselves by accepting an invitation into a world that puts them in contact with other people with whom they can collaborate. Designers of pervasive performances might come in with an idea of particular themes they want people to encounter, but cede the power to define the meaning and message of the experience to the audience.

Ludic Precedents

In addition to merging pervasive gaming with immersive and experiential performance, the approach I'm calling pervasive performance draws on other models of gaming that reject achievement play, or playing with the intention of winning (Nguyen 8). In pervasive performance, we engage in what Nguyen calls striving play, in which we "take up a goal for the sake of the activity of struggling for it" (9). Bernard Suits' definition of games, which is in many ways foundational in game studies, is that "we adopt unnecessary obstacles in order to make possible the activity of trying to overcome them," resulting in what Suits called the lusory attitude (Nguyen 29). Pervasive performance offers no tangible win condition or reward for engaging with it beyond the experience of play itself, meaning game structures that are focused on mediating competition or arriving at a winner are less useful as models for constructing such performances.

Instead, I am drawing on analog game structures and systems that are oriented toward collaboration, specifically collaborative storytelling. In part, this challenges common narrations of TTRPGs as descended from *Dungeons & Dragons*, which is in turn descended from strategic wargames and fantasy literature (Peterson 55). Such narrations set up antagonistic relationships between players and the GM or facilitator, and tend to assume that the game will revolve around combat and number-crunching. A major challenge to the centering of *Dungeons & Dragons* in role-playing game theory was indie theorizing developed on a forum called Hephaestus' Forge (or simply "The Forge"), led by designers like Vincent Baker and Ron Edwards (Torner 197). Emily Care Boss summarizes the key principle of what came to be known as Forge Theory as follows: "player preferences matter and that the procedures applied will affect both a player's enjoyment of a game and how the game functions" ("Key Concepts" 233). Theorists on The

Forge tended to believe that we engage in play in order to fulfill a particular creative agenda, and that the agenda we bring to a particular game affects both our personal experience of the game and how it works at the table. This stood in sharp contrast to games like *D&D* in which the GM brought their particular agenda to the table in the form of the adventure they had prepared and players would undergo the experience the GM intended for them, with little flexibility or collaboration.

Forge theorists conceptualized a game as the creation of a shared fiction between all participants that is established by consensus, mediated by rules and mechanics that enact our play and help decide what can or cannot be added to the shared fiction. More specifically, rules allocate authority and determine what is credible under particular circumstances so that the shared fiction can be created. Many games developed by designers active on The Forge, particularly Vincent and Meguey Baker's *Apocalypse World* (which inspired hundreds of Powered by the Apocalypse games that use the same core system), emphasize the conversational nature of play and make space for all players (not just the GM) to add to the shared fiction.

Forge Theory offers a model for centering participant preferences and structuring the creation of a fiction shared between everyone engaging in a particular experience at the same time that has a sense of cohesion and clear rules of engagement. It also helps us strike a balance of allowing for freedom and choice within a structure that keeps things from becoming total chaos. In *Apocalypse World* specifically, the Bakers offer the Master of Ceremonies (who acts as GM) a set of agendas that guide their facilitation of the game, the most relevant of which to the project of pervasive performance is "play to find out what happens" (108). It is a simple but effective way of saying that, rather than deciding the story's outcome in advance, we ought to figure out the end result of our endeavor through playing, experimenting, and collaborating with

the other people present in the space with us. The Master of Ceremonies needs to bring something to the table and have an investment in what happens in the fiction, but the story emerges from everyone at the table's hopes for what will happen as they come into contact with each other and resolve into something shared between the group, generated collaboratively through gameplay. Following through on the desire to make space to collaborate with other people without controlling them requires artists who make pervasive performance to embrace playing to find out what happens, and to navigate the tension of forming hopes for what will happen that you are not so attached to that you feel compelled to control the outcome.

Another useful model of establishing shared fiction is the Belonging Outside Belonging role-playing game engine, first developed in Alder's *Dream Askew* and Benjamin Rosenbaum's *Dream Apart*. This system is also known colloquially as the "No Dice, No Masters" system. This engine is "designed to tell stories about what happens when marginalized groups establish their own communities, just outside or hidden within the boundaries of a dominant culture," communities that "have a hopeful, precarious, vulnerable quality to them" ("Belonging Outside Belonging"). Part of why I find this system useful is because I think its orientation toward telling stories about marginalized communities informs a broader investment in giving those communities the resources they need to transform a world that does not recognize their humanity or offer them space in which they can flourish. In Belonging Outside Belonging games, players dream together with no predetermined outcome or external metrics that define whether or not their play is successful. In the world of the game, they are powerful actors who can author whatever stories they want to. I argue that pervasive performance offers something similar to its audience through inviting them to take part in the creation of the performance event.

Players in Belonging Outside Belonging games work together to build the world, and control of elements of the world and setting are distributed evenly around the table rather than consolidated in a single player who acts as Game Master (GM). Rather than relying on the randomness of dice rolls to determine success or failure, these games ask players to engage in idle dreaming with one another, thinking about what they would like to experience in the game's world or play out with other characters and then translating that into scenes and story. This engine provides a model for creating work that is led collaboratively and makes space for participants to co-author their own experiences.

There is no leader in a Belonging Outside Belonging game, and wherever possible, the group arrives at decisions through conversations in which everyone's opinion is weighed equally. There can be facilitators, but they are not responsible for creating an experience *for* the other players – rather, they are responsible for being most familiar with the rules and how the game works, and they ensure that everyone feels equipped to engage fully and confidently. It is likely that much of the worldbuilding will already be done before the audience-participants enter a pervasive performance experience, but thinking of the designer's role as facilitator rather than, say, storyteller, is essential for genuinely centering the participants' experience and making room for them to exercise agency. For this reason I would argue that dramaturgs, who often consider themselves facilitators of one kind or another, are particularly well-suited to create pervasive performance experiences. Further, both Belonging Outside Belonging and Powered by the Apocalypse games prioritize the desires of their participants and focus on creating opportunities for players to shape the fiction, rather than experience a predetermined story.

Another major inspiration for pervasive performance is Jeeyon Shim and Shing Yin Khor's keepsake and connected-path games. Keepsake games involve the creation of physical

artifacts that hold memories of gameplay. Connected-path games build on the creation of player-made keepsakes and “are designed for players to both enjoy their own company and imagination, and to share the fruits of that imagination with others who are moving through the same in-game world with them” (Shim). These two connected game genres facilitate artistic experiences that center the participant and help us understand the stories we imagine through play as part of a wider ecosystem.

This model points to one way we can envision the kind of play that pervasive performance facilitates, and its ability to honor individual participant experiences while situating those experiences in a broader community made up of several individual experiences entangled with one another. It points to a kind of play that Jane McGonigal calls ambient sociability, “the experience of playing alone together” (*Reality is Broken* 89). Players in games that employ ambient sociability enjoy sharing the play environment even if they aren’t actively interacting with anyone else, like members of the Moradna Torch Discord server who explored the game’s lore on their own and watched conversations between other players unfold. This opens up possibilities for pervasive performance events that do not require direct interaction between participants but still offer a feeling of connectedness or togetherness while navigating the performance experience. It also offers a model of creating multiple modes of interaction for audiences that accommodate different levels of comfort with participating or performing.

Blurring Performance With Everyday Life

In addition to a sense of co-authorship and an invitation to play, I’m interested in facilitating an experience that muddies the distinction between performance and everyday life such that one’s relationship to the quotidian world is transformed in some way. Blurring

performance with the real world cultivates the kind of ambiguity Sicart identifies and encourages audiences to approach real life more playfully. Specific performance structures like Happenings are built to evoke this blurring of art and everyday life, but I also argue that the particular framing of audiences and spectatorship in experiential and immersive work already brings the fictional world of the performance in close proximity to the real world so that they might begin to overlap and merge together.

White's definition of what an audience is relies on the premise that "we become audiences and understand what we do as audience members because of traditions that we inherit and adapt, but we also go through our lives taking the position of spectator to the world around us, our own actions in it as well as those of other people" (5). Spectatorship is something we engage in all the time; it is not a role we begin to play upon stepping into the theater. This is also true of the act of performance: drawing on Erving Goffman, Kaprow argued that "the routines of domesticity, work, education, and management of daily affairs, which because of their very ordinariness and lack of conscious expressive purpose do not seem to be art forms, nevertheless possess a distinctly performance-like character. Only the performers are not usually aware of it" (186). This lack of awareness comes from the fact that we do not frame these actions as art or performance, and Kaprow asserted that reassessing and reinventing what we do and do not consider art is the solution. From these examples I conclude that performance and everyday life are already very close together, and all that must be done is to call attention to this fact by bringing the two together. Blurring the line between them has the potential to transform the way we understand and relate to both performance and spectatorship, and to redefine our understanding of our own capacity to act in our everyday lives.

The primary form I'm drawing on to facilitate this blurriness is the pervasive game. This form diverges from broader understandings of games and play, such as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's, that regard a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (qtd. in Montola et al. 9). This definition in addition to other popular definitions used in game studies tend to focus on games as artificial, and play as something one enters voluntarily in pursuit of some kind of measurable goal. A pervasive game, instead, is "a game that has one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play spatially, temporally, or socially" (Montola et al. 12). Rather than the model Salen and Zimmerman reference, which is clearly defined and which the player understands is not real, pervasive games attempt to muddy the boundary between where the player's real life ends and the game begins. Pervasive games "bring the thrill of immediacy and tangibility of ordinary life to games and the pleasure of game to ordinary life," and applying their form to performance has a similar effect (Montola et al. 21).

Montola, Stenros, and Waern note that one of the oldest genres of pervasive game is the treasure hunt, broadly defined as "games where players try to find certain objects in an unlimited gamespace" (32). In most of these kinds of games, the treasure is not inherently valuable; instead, players are rewarded by their enjoyment of the search and the excitement of discovery – they are engaging in Nguyen's striving play. For example, in geocaching, a game in which players use GPS coordinates and clues to find containers called "caches" hidden by other players, the appeal has less to do with whatever trinkets one may find and more to do with the joy of feeling like one is part of the broader geocaching community and of successfully finding the treasure. When you search for geocaches, you are engaging in regular activities like hiking or

looking around a particular area, but your reasons for doing those activities are re-coded by the context of the game.

Blurring the game with real life can manifest in a variety of ways, all of which affect the magic circle of play, which Montola, Stenros, and Waern define as “the boundary separating the ordinary from ludic and real from playful” (7). The magic circle tends to refer to the space we designate for play, in which the ordinary rules that inform what actions we can take are suspended and the rules of the game are adopted instead. Villareal argues that we can understand the magic circle as a way of signaling that actions taken within it are playful in their intention, rather than intended to harm (44). They use boxing as an example of how the magic circle reframes our understanding of behavior in its space: normally it’s frowned upon to try to punch other people, but in the game of boxing and the magic circle of its ring, that behavior is acceptable and, in fact, encouraged. We understand that our opponent is not trying to hurt us – they’re just playing the game.

Montola, Stenros, and Waern also define the magic circle as “a ritualistic and contractual boundary which is most often based on a somewhat implicit agreement” (10). This converges with other common definitions, many of which interrogate how separate from real life the space within the magic circle actually is. Mia Consalvo argues that the perceived inviolability of the space of the magic circle is a fiction; there’s no way to truly cordon off a space for play that is not in some way affected by the assumptions we bring to gameplay, the context in which we’re playing, and a thousand other factors that are impossible to completely suspend for the duration of the game. She argues for an understanding of a game as “a contextual, meaning-making process,” the meaning of which emerges from a player’s encounter with it and the convergence or divergence of that with other players’ experiences, rather than viewing a game as a concrete

form that everyone experiences the same way (Consalvo 413). Of note here is the idea that, rather than one static space we all enter, the magic circle is established in relation to other people and is viewed differently by each participant.

In a similar vein, Emma Vossen discusses moments that ruin gameplay for one player, which results in what she calls a bursting of the magic circle. In these situations, "players will either re-negotiate what is and is not allowed, or one person will continue to play while the other person is taking part in the game but is left on the outside of the magic circle" (Vossen 210). This is another model of the magic circle that understands it as something more contextual – different players can have different perspectives on the magic circle, and not everyone needs to be inside of it for gameplay to proceed.

Consalvo and Vossen's accounts are just two examples of an understanding of the magic circle that is more porous than it may seem, and both raise concerns about the dangers this may pose in terms of players' physical and emotional safety. However, it's precisely the porousness of the magic circle's boundary that pervasive games explore by spatially, temporally, or socially expanding it. Since pervasive games are defined by one's inability to fully distinguish between the game and the ordinary world, there is no strict boundary to speak of. Any action taken in a pervasive game may be a game action, since there's no way of being certain of whether you're acting in the context of the game or everyday life (Montola et al. 17). The magic circle in the context of performance also works to separate the real from the playful. We might think about this iteration of the magic circle as located in the space of the theater in which the performance takes place, defined by rituals like picking up one's tickets from the box office and being shown to your seat by an usher. Within this magic circle, however, we have at least two distinct groups – the performers and the audience – rather than just one group of players. Building on Vossen and

Consalvo's understanding of the magic circle as something uniquely understood by each participant, we might conclude that the performers and the audience are both agreeing to enter the magic circle of a performance but are taking on different roles and therefore different expected actions in doing so.

Consalvo proposes an alternative concept to the magic circle to explain how we recode actions as playful in particular contexts: Goffman's frames, which structure our experiences and guide our understanding of what to expect and how to act in particular situations based on prior experience and shared resources (414). White explains that movement between frames is marked by episoding conventions, "signals or conventions through which an activity is 'marked off' from other activities, from the 'ongoing flow of surrounding events'" (37). Some examples are the opening of a curtain in the theater, or an introductory speech. These conventions tell us what activity is happening and what our designated role is within it, and can signal a transition from one mode of behavior to another; for example, if the house lights come up in the middle of the performance, we might perceive it as a signal that we are suddenly a part of what's happening onstage. White explains that these operate through shared experience and shared assumptions in most cases, given that in everyday life "we go from one kind of activity to another without constantly instructing each other or asking questions about what is going on" (39). We navigate frames in part through a shared recollection about previous courses of action in similar frames.

One major goal of pervasive performance is the expansion of the magic circle in a way that transforms the audience's relationship to everyday life, and we can use Goffman's frames and episoding conventions as a way of understanding how to teach the audience how to interact with the fictional world of the performance. Part of the work of designers of pervasive performance, then, is creating sets of constraints and expectations, as well as methods for cluing

the audience into which is active in a given moment. Then, they invite the audience to become participants and co-authors by taking actions within those constraints and expectations. Authorship of pervasive performance takes place in the generation of what White calls a horizon of participation, in which "limits and opportunities shaped by the invitation of the procedural author" are present but "arrived at individually by each participant, and within which the participant has agency to make choices about their action" (62). In this way, procedural authors of pervasive performance are able to shape the world audience-participants interact with and the voluntary obstacles that structure this interaction, but the audience can choose for themselves what to do and what those actions mean.

The structure of the magic circle enables immersive and experiential theater's placement of the audience within the fiction of the performance and pervasive games' blurring of the game and ordinary life. A major consideration of designing pervasive games is making sure the player doesn't get lost in the world of the game in a way that is harmful to their real life, for example by prompting them to act in the real world on fictional information. I argue that theatrical frames and methods of signaling them, taken from immersive and experiential performance practices, help to expand the magic circle in a way that is safe for audience members while inviting them to engage in deep critical and transformative thinking about their everyday lives. Performance must constantly navigate the blurriness of real actions that are assigned a different meaning within the context of a particular theatrical frame or fictional world.

A central critique of the concept of the magic circle is that it doesn't make the actions we take in the context of play any less real, it just re-codes their meanings based on the rules of the game or performance. Boal, for example, argues that the realness of actions taken by spect-actors is not diminished by the fact that they take place in a fictional context; rather, "Within its

fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one" (141). A large part of the work of disciplines like intimacy choreography comes from the acknowledgement that even if we know intellectually that what we're doing on stage, be it an intimate scene or an act of stage violence, isn't real, we're still physically doing it, and our bodies will respond the same way that they would if we were doing it in a different context. Boal makes a case for how powerfully this can bolster our willingness and capacity to act against real-life injustice, but there is also risk embedded in undergoing certain real experiences even when they take place in fictional contexts. This is why theatrical frames are so important – they give us a way to signal entering or exiting a fictional world and to leave whatever real embodied experiences we have had behind us.

Experiential theater extends the role of "performer" to the audience as well, inviting them to take physical actions within the fiction of the performance. The expansion of the magic circle here is predominantly social, expanding the types of roles available to everyone present. In performances in which audience members are experiencing a fictional world from a first-person perspective, "the audience member's adventure takes the place of the narrative. The audience member's exploration of a fictional world is not itself a fiction" (Camp 123). We are directly experiencing the environment of the performance with our bodies and our senses, and the narrative we piece together is what we experience firsthand based on the available interactions structured by the creators of the performance. However, no matter how much we understand this to be a narrative, it is always simultaneously something real and tangible that we have experienced, and it is important to preserve some way of signaling what is real life and what is fictional, or to clearly indicate when the performance has ended.

Beyond specific safety concerns or the practical need to make space for people to stop playing when something more important in their life takes precedence, existing in a constant

state of uncertainty about whether or not one is playing is stressful. Designers of pervasive performance experiences need to account for clear ways of unblurring the line between gameplay and real life, but the solution may in fact be facilitated by the structures of games in and of themselves. Nguyen's striving play requires one to take up what he calls disposable ends, which are not directly attached to our broader purpose of engaging in the act of play; he describes the demand of striving play as follows: "to bring myself to temporarily care about an end, and for that end to appear to me as *final*. But I also must be able to dispose of that end afterward" (11). Thus, when we engage in play, we take up goals that we do not genuinely care about for the sake of enjoying the act of pursuing them, but this only works because these goals are something we can deeply invest in emotionally and then set down when we need to or when the game has ended. In the process, we actively create belief in the value of those disposable ends while maintaining a broader awareness of the fact that we have chosen these ends for ourselves. Nguyen's framework is similar to the kind of consciousness we take on when we enter a theater to watch a play, something we know intellectually is fictional but are able to respond to as though it's real because of our broader goal of enjoying and emotionally engaging with the performance.

While performance in general must navigate the porousness of the magic circle, there are more specific examples of performance forms that make it their central mission to obscure the line between the work of art and one's everyday life. They do so as part of their political aims, rooted in the belief that a blurring of art and the quotidian world changes our perspective on real life. The Fluxus movement, an international interdisciplinary community of artists and "overtly utopian cultural space that facilitated the enactment of multiple artistic agendas," as well as Allan Kaprow, are prominent examples of makers of performance whose desire to undermine the

categorization of art results in works that overlap significantly with everyday life (Milman 155). Certain Fluxus works and Happenings embody an intermingling of art and everyday life that is carried out in part by deep interdisciplinarity and a resistance of singular definitions or classifications. These performances tend to fall into the spaces between different types of media rather than neatly fitting into a category like performance or visual art.

Higgins calls this resistance to easy classification "intermedia", associating the rise of intermedia artworks with his observation in the mid-sixties that "We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant" (25). Here he links intermedia artistic practice to his political vision for the future. Many immersive and experiential performances are also highly interdisciplinary or hybridized, drawing on multiple artistic mediums to facilitate their experiences. However, intermedia works go beyond simply combining media – they do not "denote a formal identification but rather a strategic intent or a performative" (Blom 65). The work mediates a shift from a highly categorized worldview to one in which those boundaries are irreparably disrupted, akin to the disruption of the magic circle that pervasive games facilitate. I define pervasive performance as intermedia because it encourages a similar shift in worldview that troubles taken-for-granted understandings of the world.

Related to intermedia works is transmedia storytelling, which uses multiple platforms to communicate a narrative and is becoming more and more common in immersive and experiential performance as well as pervasive games (Schrier et al. 353). Transmedia stories go beyond single narratives and instead represent what Murray calls storyworlds, which are "composed of the set of characters, events, places, objects, and rules in which an individual story takes place," essentially referring to the container for a particular narrative (262). Henry Jenkins posits that

transmedia storytelling depends “less on each individual work being self-sufficient than on each work contributing to a larger narrative economy” (124). If all iterations of a particular story across different mediums were exactly the same, we would get frustrated. Rather, we enjoy experiencing the world of a given story in different formats that are in dialogue with one another and convey unique narrative experiences. Further, akin to ergodicity, the way we go about engaging with these different works shapes our experience of the storyworld as a whole.

Montola, Stenros, and Waern describe this kind of storytelling as a distributed narrative, in which players discover and assemble fragments of an overall story; of note here is the idea that the story of a game is the reward for solving puzzles or completing challenges. The issue in immersive and experiential performance of needing to meaningfully cede control over meaning-making in experiences that welcome the audience as a co-author could be resolved by distributing narratives across platforms and mediums in a way that tasks audience members with finding pieces of story and narrating the way they flow together independently. This distribution engages transmedia and encyclopedic storytelling, and embraces the principles of intermedia as a way of resisting and defying categorization in order to encourage participants to question taken-for-granted assumptions about how performance operates. In pervasive performance, the artists are responsible for creating the conditions of possibility under which audience members can narrate the story of their journey, and for guiding their exploration. The story of such performances is not singular, and emerges from the interactions between audience members and the fictional world in which they find themselves.

Distributing story across various platforms and sources opens up the possibility to theatrically engage the kind of blurriness pervasive games facilitate, because anything in the player’s world might be a source of game information and any action they take might be a game

action. When the division between the game and real life is unclear and vital information is scattered across platforms, audiences become more open to connecting things in surprising and unexpected ways and can gain deeper insight into the game world and the real world through those worlds' proximity to each other. Blurring the performance and real life together makes it difficult for designers to impose a particular meaning on audience-participants, because the narrative emerges from the participants' experience of the world of the game and their collaboration with each other.

Alternate Realities & Alternate Reality Games

The specific type of pervasive game that I'm drawing on for this exploration of pervasive performance is the ARG, or alternate reality game. They frequently center puzzle-based gameplay, requiring players to identify something out of place as a source of game information and complete complex tasks with little guidance from facilitators. This ties into another key feature of many ARGs, collective intelligence, in which a large number of players are brought together (usually via the internet) to work together on figuring out a puzzle or mystery. Typically one enters ARGs through rabbit holes, "entrances to the fictitious world of a game hidden in ordinary environments that people can find accidentally and then enter the game" (Montola et. al 104). For example, in *The Beast*, a 2001 ARG developed by Microsoft to promote the film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, players who spotted a credit on posters and promotional materials for a "sentient machine therapist" and looked into it were quickly pulled into the fiction and prompted to continue investigating, having now entered the game.

Part of what encourages players' active creation of belief in ARGs is the use of the real world as a basis for gameplay – the alternate reality is layered on top of environments we interact

with regularly, prompting us to approach everyday life in a different way because we could be called upon to take game actions or stumble across game information at any time. This contributes to a feeling of immersion in the world of the game, which also deepens one's investment in it. Boss argues that in ARGs players "build out their own narrative, rather than passively watching things occur to others," similar to the structure facilitated by distributed and transmedia narratives ("Of Rabbit Holes" 22). Creators of ARGs cannot rely on communicating a particular message or theme because the players are themselves performing the story of the game and co-authoring the experience alongside everyone else who is playing. For this reason the ARG is an ideal structure for creating pervasive performance.

Beyond helping to structure invitations for audiences to assemble narrative in collaboration with other participants, Murray's concept of active creation of belief facilitates an important element of pervasive performance and the form of alternate reality games, which is the creation of a fiction that *feels* real. If the aim is a blurring of art and everyday life, or the placement of the audience in a liminal space between the two, the fictional world in which audience members become immersed needs to have enough in common with the real world that they feel connected and the audience doesn't get lost in attempting to understand a lot of new social structures and rules. The form of alternate reality games layers fiction on top of our everyday lives, taking advantage of our familiarity with the way the quotidian world works while at the same time asking us to question that familiarity. In order to create pervasive performances, we need to situate the performance in a fictional world that in some way feels like reality (or at least feels familiar and accessible), and create conditions under which audience members are encouraged to create belief in that world through meaningful engagement and exercising agency. A useful way to go about this is the use of genre, since genres like science fiction or fantasy use

familiar tropes that can, in Murray's words, "script the interactor" (238). Murray argues that an important part of telling stories in alternate worlds is communicating conventions for how to participate and signaling when one is and is not within the boundaries of the fictional world.

Genre conventions can be useful for giving audiences a sense of what actions make sense in the fiction without having to explicitly tell them; for example, audiences in a performance who find themselves in the lair of a dragon know that they probably will not need to find the password for a computer-based puzzle. Darko Suvin defines genre as "an implicit contract between authors, readers, and their mediators (publishers, media, commentators, etc.) as to which expectations of a text may be permissible – sometimes indeed prescribed – or impermissible," rooting his understanding of what genre does in its conventions, how they shape our relationship to a work, and how these categories have been shaped by social history (29, 30). We can also understand genre more simply as a kind of shorthand for communicating the kind of experience one wants to have. Similar to the magic circle, genre is contractual – it implies an agreement between artists and audiences about what is part of the storyworld and how we ought to interact with it.

Genre has another use beyond scripting the interactor – it ties directly into how pervasive performances can work toward political aims and disrupt or transform participants' relationship to their everyday lives. Genres like science fiction and fantasy often engage in the act of speculation, which Alexis Lothian defines as "imagining things otherwise than they are, and of creating stories from that impulse" (15). Further, Gerald Nachtwey posits that genre can fulfill "the need for mediation between the demands of everyday, socioeconomic existence and the recalcitrant desires of the imagination" (107). In other words, genre can help us access our own capacity to imagine through engagement with worlds unlike our own, to think beyond quotidian

life. The creation of alternate realities layered on top of everyday life could be a powerful form of speculation because it places the imagined world and the real world side by side, facilitating easier comparison. There are a variety of ways one's relationship to the real world can be transformed by coming into contact with an alternate reality and its invitation to imagine otherwise.

Nachtwey argues that fantasy specifically is a way of enchanting the real world, drawing on the use of allegory "to communicate to the reader a vision of some kind of transcendent reality," to illuminate a kind of hidden or neglected beauty in the reader's primary world (103). This is connected to the trope in Romantic literature in which "what most people perceive as 'the real world' - the quotidian, the economic, the political - turns out to be an illusory veil thrown over a deeper reality which can only be caught in glimpses by those (usually marginalized) people who have the gift to see it" (Nachtwey 50). Similarly, Kaprow insisted that we "become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life," and Nachtwey's use of fantasy to enchant the real world offers one way we might fulfill this project (7). Crucially, the transformation of one's relationship to reality described here is not necessarily oriented towards critiquing real life but rather toward finding something unexpectedly beautiful within it that had previously been hidden.

Many deride fantasy as escapist but Nachtwey posits that it actually might facilitate an enchantment of one's everyday reality rather than an escape from it. He draws on Baudrillard to argue that "players do *not* momentarily 'leave' a real world to escape to a fantasy one. Rather, the created simulacrum itself becomes a way of framing and viewing lived experience," citing the tendency of people who play *D&D* to apply the game's mechanics to real life by figuring out what their real-life stats or character class might be as an example of how this can manifest (38).

In practice, the fantasy world and our real world are not separate; we do not escape to it and forget entirely about real life. Rather, interaction with the fantasy world comes to bear on our experience of quotidian life and transforms our relationship to it. We begin to use frames and structures drawn from the fantastical to practice more imagination in our everyday lives.

Instead of the enchantment that Nachtwey identifies in the fantasy genre, Suvin defines science fiction (SF) through its use of what he calls cognitive estrangement, meaning that science fiction applies empirical methods to imagination. Cognitive estrangement in Suvin's terms is a "factual reporting of fictions" in which we are separated from our usual assumptions about reality through entering a world in which we can no longer take these assumptions for granted (6). He frames this as a reversal of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, which talks about familiar things as though they are unfamiliar; instead, science fiction talks about unfamiliar things as though they are familiar. The effect of cognitive estrangement is one of "confronting a set normative system ... with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms" (Suvin 6). An essential mechanism of cognitive estrangement is the existence of a novum, a new context or world of some kind, because "readers must be persuaded of the possible existence of another place, one that does not actually exist" (Nodelman 25). Since the language we have available to us to describe a novum is from our own world and its systems of knowledge, it is connected to our world but opens a door to a possible alternate reality. Suvin notes that:

> SF does not posit another superordinated and 'more real' reality but an alternative on the same ontological level as the author's empirical reality – one should say that the necessary correlate of the novum is an *alternate reality*, one that possesses a *different historical time* corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms actualized by the narration (Suvin 71)

Thus, the novum creates an alternate reality linked to the author's real world and facilitates the movement of the reader back and forth between their reality and the novum in the text,

understanding the plot within the novum and bringing those insights back to their reality in order to see it in a new way (Suvin 71). Both Nachtwey's and Suvin's models, rooted in particular genres of fiction, underline the importance of the evocation of alternate realities in pervasive performances, facilitated by genre conventions.

These notions of estrangement or enchantment are particularly interesting in the context of pervasive games, which place players in a liminal space between gameplay and real life rather than encouraging them to move between the real world and the novum. Many pervasive games, particularly alternate reality games, embrace what's called the This Is Not a Game principle in that they "explicitly deny and purposefully obscure [their] nature as a game," as opposed to knowing with certainty when you pick up a fantasy novel that it isn't an account of something real (McGonigal, "This is Not a Game" 4). Jane McGonigal identifies a kind of double consciousness that this requires on the part of the player, who must engage in the belief that this isn't a game in order to enjoy immersion into the world, but must also be able to understand that it is a game so that darker plots or actions don't take an emotional toll because, after all, they aren't real ("This is Not a Game" 4). Theatrical framing is particularly useful here because theatrical performance must navigate this kind of double consciousness all the time – audiences enter the theater knowing what they're about to see is not real, but respond as though it is through a willing suspension of disbelief.

As we play pervasive games, the possibility that any information we find or any action we take may be game information or a game action forces us to experience the real world through the filter of the game. Similar to cognitive estrangement, we are no longer able to rely on taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world works or what particular things mean because suddenly they might be part of the game, and we are motivated to treat the game as real

in order to experience the pleasure of immersion in a world unlike our own. After the game concludes, the real world may retain some of the ways the game has enchanted it, changing our relationship to it and adjusting our taken-for-granted assumptions. Genre operates in pervasive performance both as a way of guiding participants towards actions that make sense in the game world and as a way of making empirical reality strange in order to transform one's relationship to the quotidian world. Thus, genre is an essential element of constructing alternate realities in which pervasive performance takes place, and genre conventions offer artists a useful way of helping participants to learn the rules of an interactive experience and consent to their role in it.

Utopian Aims

The purpose of both Suvin's cognitive estrangement and Nachtwey's notion of the enchantment of everyday life through engagement with fantasy is encouraging the reader to in some way begin to question or develop further their understanding of the "real" world. This kind of questioning, often named as utopia, is intended to spur readers to work toward some kind of social change or imagine ways in which the world could be better than it currently is. Weeks identifies two functions of utopian thought:

> … as a force of negation, utopian forms can promote critical perspectives on and disinvestment in the status quo; as a mode of affirmation, they can function as provocations toward alternatives. One function is to alter our connection to the present, while the other is to shift our relationship to the future; one is productive of estrangement, the other of hope. (205)

One function of utopian forms, then, is to make the world we live in strange in a way that enables us to critique it and imagine otherwise. Pervasive performances take on utopian aims by using the unique relationship they build between real life and their fictions to provoke this

estrangement or enchantment and to encourage participants toward alternatives, toward thinking about what else might be possible.

Lewis and Pye argue along this line, positing that in alternate reality games, “Meaning made within the performance structure becomes interlinked with [players’] life experiences outside the game structure and offers promise for developing experiences around social causes” (32). Many immersive and experiential performances explore social issues or attempt to spur their audiences to social action because of how powerful the “somatic experience of telling stories using one's own body” is (Mackey 42). These practices are often rooted in the premise that physically doing something is more transformative and teaches us more than watching something, and they exploit the fact that even though audience participants take actions that are coded differently in their fictional context, they’re still physically doing something and that has a particular concrete effect. Lewis and Pye conclude that “When a performance maker builds game structures around social or political issues from outside the game world, players gain an ability to critically connect the game world to the real world” (32). In other words, akin to the use of genre conventions, designers of experiential performance might draw on players’ familiarity with real life social issues that also manifest in the game world to facilitate the kind of critical reflection at work in mechanisms like cognitive estrangement.

I argue, however, that invocation of specific social causes that appear in the real world is unnecessary, nor should artists create pervasive or experiential performance with the intention of motivating a particular action on the part of audiences after the conclusion of the experience. An important element of Weeks’ approach to utopia is that “the value of a utopian form lies less in its prescription for *what* to want, imagine, or will than in its insistence *that* we want, imagine, and will” (207). The reader is hailed as a *participant* rather than a *recipient*, and the intention is

not to prescribe a particular utopian demand but rather to incite political will and "animate the desire for the possible" (Weeks 207). In pervasive performance, in which the audience is a co-author of the overall experience, Weeks' concept of the utopian demand offers a way of understanding the tangible work these kinds of performances aim to do. The aim is to generate energy to act through critical reflection or enchantment of the real world, not to direct that energy in a particular direction.

Drawing on Karl Mannheim, Suvin defines utopia as it manifests in science fiction as "an Other World immanent in the world of human endeavor, dominion, and hypothetic possibility" and "a non-existent country on the map of *this* globe, a 'this-worldly other world'" (42). Utopia is not a place we escape to but rather manifest by taking actions that engagement with a novum can reveal to us. This notion of a this-worldly other world also describes the relation between the real world and the fictional worlds of pervasive games, which is intentionally quite blurry. Suvin notes further that utopia is a method rather than a state and "it cannot be realized or not realized – it can only be applied" (52). This is similar to Weeks' discussion of critical utopia, which rejects the idea of utopia as a goal to be achieved and instead "is conceived more as an ongoing process than a solution, more a project than an outcome" (211). In both cases, utopia is a tool and an aspiration that shapes the way we perceive the quotidian world. From this, I claim that pervasive performance uses alternate realities to participate in the project of utopia by inviting players to engage in utopian imagining and to pay attention to how their experience pervades their everyday lives after the performance event has concluded.

Pervasive games and performance, then, are not an end product or "a conduit through which an author speaks to an audience" but something more ephemeral that is inhabited and explored and iterated upon over and over (Lantz 246). Lantz argues that "A good pervasive game

is not an attempt to seamlessly integrate a game into everyday life; it is a confrontation between game and life, an intrusion that causes players to reexamine their ideas about game, life, and the relationship between them" (248). In the same way that Weeks describes utopia as an invitation for critical reflection, Lantz here emphasizes that pervasive games are an invitation to use the blurriness between the game's fiction and the real world to critically examine both. The dissonance is essential – the aim, similarly to Suvin's cognitive estrangement, is to cultivate an awareness that the world does not necessarily have to be the way it is and a demand to make it better. I would argue that critique is not the only possible relationship one might build with the real world through engaging with pervasive performance; Nachtwey's notion that we may find something previously hidden in our everyday lives through engaging with a fantasy world is another viable possibility.

Pervasive performance stages a similar confrontation between itself and real life. The embodied experience of making decisions and rediscovering familiar spaces and ideas in unfamiliar contexts or framings can be transformative. This transformation can take place either through critical reflection via Suvin's cognitive estrangement or Nachtwey's argument that fantasy worlds enchant and reframe our relationship to real life. Not all pervasive performances need to spur political action or invite critique of the world; rather, the goal is to deepen the audience-participants' investment in everyday life or in some way transform it, which may in turn lead to the kind of critical reflection Suvin posits. Nachtwey identifies "the creation of purpose and meaning in the day-to-day lives of players, fully outside of their identities as citizens and economic producers" as the appeal of the hobby of playing fantasy TTRPGs (94). Rather than taking on goals and aspirations dictated to us by the world in which we live, these games offer us opportunities to practice choosing them for ourselves. Pervasive performance shares a

similar goal: an expansion of possibilities via changing one's perception of and relationship to their everyday lives. Crucially, audiences are given the power to choose what possibilities are most appealing to explore, because they have the power to construct the performance's narrative and meaning for themselves.

CHAPTER 2:

PRACTICING PERVASIVE PERFORMANCE

Bringing together pervasive gaming and immersive and experiential theater practice in what I'm calling pervasive performance requires reconceptualizing and expanding the magic circle in order to invite audiences into the fictional world as a co-creator. I define the work of a designer of pervasive performance as building a world with narrative possibilities scattered across it and inviting audiences to interact with it. This work begins with expanding the magic circle of performance to bring audiences within the world and blur the line between the performance and their everyday reality, and continues with the construction of a system for interaction that the audience learns as they move through the experience. In this section I build on pervasive gaming's frameworks for expanding the magic circle and explore things one needs to take into account when creating these kinds of experiences.

Pervasive Performance Texts

The nature of experiential, immersive, and pervasive performance requires reconceptualizing performance texts beyond a playscript, in part because authorship is so complicated and the text cannot be complete until the audience arrives. If the text from which the performance springs is less a particular story and more a system that structures how participants interact with the world of the performance, a traditional playscript is insufficient to effectively facilitate the experience without foreclosing some narrative possibilities. Robert Quillen Camp offers maps as an alternative that also emphasizes the pivotal role space and architecture play in determining the nature of experiential performance. He notes that "every map is necessarily

incomplete (being an abstraction) and out-of-date (being a record of the moment in time in which they were created)," meaning space opens up for exploration and adventure (123). Ina Blom offers another reframing of maps that thinks of them not as scale models of reality but "an experimentation in contact with the real" that is "open and connectible in all of its dimensions. It is detachable, reversible, and open to the constant modifications that are the hallmarks of performance" (72). A focus on space and mapping in our conceptualization of the performance text makes particular sense for pervasive performance, which transforms our relationship to quotidian space by inviting us to play within it.

Henry Jenkins also emphasizes space and its impact on how we interact with narrative, specifically arguing that "choices about the design and organization of game spaces have narratological consequences" (129). He offers a variety of ways space can do the work of storytelling, or create the conditions of possibility for those interacting with it to produce a narrative experience based on their perception of the fictional world in which they are immersed, all of which fall under the heading of environmental storytelling. Jenkins argues, "Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives" (123).

Of these options, the one most useful in understanding the way a pervasive performance functions is Jenkins' enacted narrative, in which "the story itself may be structured around the character's movement through space and the features of the environment may retard or accelerate that plot trajectory" (129). The "story" of a pervasive performance is in fact the first-hand experience of the audience-participant as shaped by the environment in which they find

themselves, both the real spaces they interact with regularly and the alternate reality layered on top that recontextualizes them. The narrative is enacted by audience-participants who accept the invitation to enter the performance's world and become an actor rather than a passive spectator. This draws in part on Boal's concept of the spect-actor, a spectator who enters the performance and "assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change - in short, trains himself for real action" (122). This marks a shift from passive spectator to active participant with the capacity to change the outcome of the performance, albeit within parameters defined by the Forum Theater scenario and the facilitation of the Joker figure. Enacted narrative also invites the spectator to act, but the spectator is free to choose their mode of engagement and navigate the space of the performance in a less structured way. Thinking spatially in pervasive performance texts also accommodates the use of transmedia storytelling and distributed narrative, since it allows us to think of the performance not as a script to be performed but an array of encounters the audience will come into contact with, arranged with particular spatial relationships to one another.

Another factor to consider is to what extent the "script" of a pervasive performance resembles a game, since it is a type of gamified performance. There are many competing definitions of what a game is, but Eric Zimmerman's covers many of the common elements: "a voluntary interactive activity in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome" (160). Most definitions of games emphasize the playing out of a conflict or pursuit of a goal, governed by rules or obstacles that players take on voluntarily. Adrienne Mackey defines games as they manifest in experiential theater as "systems that can help organize interaction, defining parameters for participant action and incentivizing them to focus on particular things" (36). She

emphasizes that games are inert without players present, that they “require continuous engagement by their participants,” as opposed to plays which can be rehearsed without their audiences (36). In a similar vein, if a key principle of pervasive performance is that the audience co-authors the experience and steps into the role of performer, it might be useful to think of the performance text not as a script to be enacted but as the system that invites the audience to play and guides their interaction with the world, or in other words, as a game or game module.

The performance text of *The Parable Task* is a combination of a game module, a map, and a calendar – we had a trove of information and a map of where to find it, an outline of the general story beats available for players to encounter, and a calendar of things that might happen and what would prompt them. This modular approach allowed us to be flexible in terms of responding to what players were actually doing during gameplay and to incorporate the players’ theories into the narrative as it unfolded.

Expanding the Magic Circle

Spatial expansion of the magic circle asks us to treat spaces and objects we encounter in everyday life playfully and encourages us to recontextualize those things for the purposes of the game we’re playing, rather than staging a game exclusively in spaces designated for play like a basketball court or game board. For example, spatially expanding the magic circle of a game of tag might mean letting players go anywhere they want in their efforts to avoid being tagged, perhaps even getting into a car and driving to a completely different location. This preserves the central premise and mechanics of tag while offering players more possibilities in terms of the space in which the game is played and transforming how they think about those spaces. In addition, it invites players to begin to engage in the game of tag in a space that is not necessarily

designed for play, like an office building or a food court. Montola, Stenros, and Waern note that spatially expanded pervasive games "venture into undefined and unlimited areas, sometimes incidentally or on the spontaneous initiative of the players," and in doing so appropriate space, architecture, and objects into the space of the game (77).

If any action could plausibly be a game action in a pervasive game, the act of playing the game asks us to think about our spaces differently and in doing so permanently transforms how we think about spaces we engage with on a regular basis. We navigate these spaces with closer attention because we must be on the lookout for clues or rabbit holes that can help us progress in the game, and in the process can deepen our relationship with and appreciation for spaces we take for granted. In *The Parable Task*, players entered the game via a newspaper stand in Bartlett Hall – they could pick up a physical copy of the *Moradna Torch* and fill out a Google Form that led to the Moradna Torch Discord server, through which most in-game communication was mediated. This spatially expands the magic circle by placing the entry point for the game in public space. *The Parable Task* also spatially expanded into digital spaces, particularly social media sites like Tumblr and Instagram; players navigated to fictional accounts on these sites in search of clues using their real-life social media accounts, and for the most part joined the Discord as themselves rather than making a new Discord account or coming up with a character to play.

Beyond changing individual players' relationships to space, spatially expanded pervasive games also challenge what is considered permissible in public space by inviting people to take playful actions in places that were most likely not created with that in mind. Montola, Stenros, and Waern place this in the lineage of activities like parkour, flash mobs, and geocaching, all of which also appropriate public space for play. They argue that "spatially expanded games are

inherently about *discovery* and *changing perception*" and that "approaching a decidedly nonludic space with a playful mindset exposes the unseen and makes the familiar strange" (Montola et al. 89). By inviting players into a game in which any action they take in real life could be a game action, and by expanding the space they play in such that it overlaps with their everyday life, designers of spatially expanded games estrange the players from their regular environment in a way that allows them to see it in a new light and discover things they otherwise may not have.

When we think about space in "traditional" performances, one might expect a stage that is designated as the performance area, with a separate space for the audience to sit in that is separate from the performers (although perhaps there are brief and significant moments where the performers move into or through the audience's space). Spatially expanding a performance event might involve choosing a space that is not a traditional theater venue or giving the audience freedom to wander through scenes as they wish. In both cases, space becomes a more central element of the performance because it's different from what we would expect, and audiences are invited to think about the role of the space in a new way. Further, nontheatrical space is appropriated and recontextualized through becoming the site of a performance. In experiential and immersive work, the magic circle of the performance often expands beyond the space allotted to the performers and encircles the audience as well, bringing them within the world. Many performances that brand themselves as immersive, site-specific, or experiential are spatially expanded in some way. For example, many of these kinds of performances intentionally choose nontheatrical spaces in order to signal to audiences that "traditional" expectations of audience behavior might not apply – when I saw it, *A Thousand Ways Part 3* took place in a large gallery, rather than a theater space.

Temporal expansion of the magic circle involves expanding a play session, defined by Jussi Holopainen and Staffan Björk as "the uninterrupted stretch of time when one player is actively playing a game" (qtd. in Montola et al. 14). Montola, Stenros, and Waern argue that this definition of a play session is moot in temporally expanded pervasive games because gameplay and everyday life are blurred together for the duration of the game and there is no way to distinguish discrete sessions of play. Thus, designers of pervasive games can employ temporal expansion by "making the game available for play at all times while decreasing players' ability to control *when* they are playing" (97). Frequently, players in pervasive games are in a constant state of being ready to play at any time, even if they are not actively playing at that moment, and sometimes they cannot control when play begins once more. In *Humans vs Zombies*, for example, players needed to have their nerf guns on hand at all times and keep an eye out for zombies prowling across campus, since play could commence at any moment. The "play session" of that game, then, begins when the game starts and ends when it ends, but within those boundaries it's hard to pick out particular moments in which we are or are not playing.

Temporally expanding a performance event would require introducing some blurriness into what is part of the performance and what isn't, or when the performance is happening. One particular consideration for applying temporal expansion to performance is theater's preoccupation with liveness and presence, and with its frequent insistence that an individual performance is not reproducible because it emerges from the encounter between performers and audience that is unique to the people in a particular place at a particular time. Liveness and presence can be defined as "the immediate embodied, sensual and material experience of things and people, the emotional charging of interacting in bodily co-presence with others," and is something we experience in both gameplay and performance experiences (Hoover et al. 222). In

this way performance and games are very similar: the same set of ingredients (rules/mechanics, story, performers, design elements, etc) can generate very different experiences across different iterations because theater artists and game designers must build in a gap for the audience or player to fill, and because the action is enacted live and from scratch every time (rather than being recorded and re-played). Then, once the performance or play session has ended, there is nothing tangible to preserve that experience – it exists only as it's happening, and then in the memories of those who were there to witness it. We might play another session of the game or hold another performance of that particular theatrical production, but each iteration will necessarily be at least a little different.

In temporally expanded performance, if we are put into a state of being constantly ready to spectate, act, or perform, liveness becomes even more central to our experience because our attention to what's happening moment to moment is heightened. A prominent debate in theater and performance studies that has become even more pressing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic revolves around the role of digital technology in theater, which we tend to think about as necessarily live and in-person, something experienced physically in a space with other people that happens in the same moment we see it. Chemers and Sell examine this conundrum in-depth, concluding that rather than eschewing digital technology entirely we must incorporate an expanded definition of liveness and presence into our approach to performance, one that has room for digital or pre-recorded elements, because "the advent and proliferation of digital technology that has inarguably changed the way we experience *presence*" (237).

This more expansive understanding of liveness and presence also serves us in thinking about these things in temporally and/or spatially expanded performance, since it is not guaranteed that every element of the performance will be generated in the same moment it's

experienced by the audience, nor is it guaranteed that the audience will all be in the same place at the same time for the entire experience. In general, I view the performance event as something generated in real time as people experience it, and understand the actual substance of the event to be the audience's perception of what's happening and the narrative they assemble from that. Pervasive performance in particular requires a more expansive definition of liveness and presence that makes space for pre-recorded elements, digital media, and other contested technologies, since its expansion of the magic circle already troubles narrower conceptions of what it means to perform live or to be present at a performance event. It also troubles ephemerality by allowing artifacts of play to linger after the active event has concluded; for example, the Discord server in which *The Parable Task* took place remains live, and players can revisit their gameplay at any point.

A consequence of temporal or spatial expansion of the magic circle is that frequently outsiders, passersby, or bystanders tend to be involved with pervasive games in a variety of modes that can range from spectatorship to full participation. Montola, Stenros, and Waern call this phenomenon social expansion of the magic circle and compare it to Boal's invisible theater, which they define as "prescripted political drama that is performed in a public space without any visible labels of being drama, thus luring outsiders to participate," and Richard Schechner's concept of dark play, describing situations in which some players are unaware that they are in fact playing a game, or are engaging with play in a way that's thrilling because it's dangerous (15). Both of these kinds of encounters omit "the metacommunicative message declaring them nonordinary" and exclude those bystanders from the frame of playfulness or the context of the magic circle that defines whatever they're witnessing as playful (Montola et al. 15).

For this reason, designers of pervasive games (and of pervasive performance) must take care to create explicit invitations to start playing and plan for multiple modes of participation so that nonparticipants don't experience harm from interpreting something fictional as real. In the creation of *The Parable Task*, the plot of which centers on finding and freeing five missing students trapped in cyberspace, we knew that we needed to avoid putting up missing person posters or otherwise publicly referencing that element of the story because it could be distressing to nonparticipants who don't have the context of the game or access to the safety tools we offer to players. Instead, we buried this plot point beneath a few layers of fiction so that anyone who learns this information has accepted the invitation to play and bought into the world of the game, and would thus know that it isn't real.

Montola, Stenros, and Waern identify three levels of awareness that bystanders can have when pervasive games take place in public spaces: the unaware state, in which participants "do not notice anything strange going on, even though they are witnessing play or unknowingly even have a role in a game", and as a result will treat everything they encounter as real, the ambiguous state, in which participants "notice that something is going on but fail to realize that the weird occurrences constitute a game", perhaps prompting them to investigate further, and the aware state, in which participants "understand that there is a game going on and can usually tell who are playing and who are not" (118). Movement through these various layers is prompted by invitations to buy further into the fiction and enter the space of the game on the part of the game's designers.

Beyond staging a performance in a public space where passersby might witness it, we might apply social expansion to performance by putting the audience in touch with one another in a way that goes beyond mingling in the lobby at intermission or after the show. A model of

this that I find useful is Shim and Khor's interconnected form of the keepsake game and the connected-path game. The form emerged in part from the separation and emphasis on virtual presence during COVID-19 pandemic. Connected-path games tend to be solo experiences in which you generate a scrapbook or notebook or journal of some kind that persists after the game has ended as a keepsake of your play. Throughout the game, you are encouraged to share your progress with other players via social media, like Discord communities or Twitter hashtags. Shim describes these interconnected forms as follows: "If keepsake games are the fruiting bodies that sprout up for players to hold on to as tangible heirlooms of their experience, connected path games are the mycelium network that connects them not only to each other but to everything else in the land around them." In sharing your progress through the game on public platforms like Twitter, you make contact with other players and expose outsiders to the game in a way that socially expands the magic circle.

Also of note is what Montola, Stenros, and Waern call performative play. They note that the presence of spectators necessarily changes the way playing a game feels, since you are no longer just playing but now also attempting to entertain or engage an audience. In experiential or participatory performance, even if there are no outsiders witnessing the performance event, when we accept the invitation to participate and take on a role beyond that of audience member, we begin to perform for the other people present and that feeling changes the nature of the actions we take. In the context of pervasive games, Montola, Stenros, and Waern argue that "Many players feel comfortable with the fact that they are not really *doing* a weird thing, but *performing* it" (127). This is often inverted in performance contexts in which audiences might feel uncomfortable performing when there are people they perceive as "real" performers in the room.

In both cases, however, the presence of spectators changes the way we perform given actions in socially expanded games or performances.

One of the benefits of experiential performance that people often cite is that it builds stronger community between members of the audience because we are encouraged to regard them not as individuals having experiences parallel to ours but rather as fellow members of a broader group who is undergoing an experience together, and whose presence has a significant effect on the performance as a whole. Because our capacity to navigate the performance or directly affect what's happening is heightened in immersive or experiential performance, so too is our individual capacity to make our own meaning from what's happening, and thus the community built through the performance is all the stronger because we are able to compare notes and come together around our various interpretations of the experience. The story emerges from our collective participation.

Montola, Stenros, and Waern argue that the weakening of the magic circle in pervasive games "provides players with an excuse and an alibi to do things that break social norms," drawing on Cindy Poremba's concept of brink games, which "recognize and expose the conflict between ordinary life and game" (124). An example Poremba uses is the game *Twister*, where players must place their hands and feet on colored spots in a way that frequently tangles them up with each other; during this game, players may feel more comfortable coming into physical contact with their friends than they otherwise would, since they can shrug it off as "just a game." This breaking of social norms is one major reason pervasive games are adept at disrupting our assumptions about ordinary life and teaching us to live more playfully: they show us that actions we take for granted may merit closer examination in light of being recontextualized by play. In both participatory performance and pervasive games, we are entering a temporary community

with a group of other people and encouraged to question the norms governing our behavior and act playfully in contexts we normally wouldn't.

In sum, pervasive performance expands the magic circle and invites audiences to participate as authors and performers by layering a fictional world on top of everyday reality in a way that makes it difficult to fully distinguish performance from real life. This happens spatially, temporally, socially, or through a mix of the three, and challenges traditional notions of performance venues and the role of liveness and physical presence. The effect of this expansion is the building of community among audience-participants and the transformation of audiences' relationship to the quotidian world through interfacing with an alternate reality. In the Moradna Torch Discord server, where the majority of gameplay in *The Parable Task* took place, players collaborated with one another to make sense of what was happening and theorize about the broader Parable Ventures conspiracy. In the process, they navigated the UMass Amherst campus and digital spaces like Instagram and Tumblr with a different quality of attention due to their awareness of the fiction of the game world that brought them into contact with these environments.

Designing Pervasive Performance Ethically & Effectively

I have argued that bringing together theatrical frames and pervasive games can create performance experiences that cede control over the construction of narrative and meaning to their audiences in a way that keeps audiences safe. Montola, Stenros, and Waern spend much of the design section of their book suggesting strategies for inviting non-participants to spectate or play and preventing players and nonparticipants from harming themselves or others due to confusion about what is and is not real. Consent frameworks are essential to designing pervasive

performances, in addition to accounting for the possibility that players may refuse your invitation to participate.

When designing pervasive performance, it is essential to account for its differences in intention and tactics from what audiences might expect from a theatrical event, and to be responsive to what the audience actually wants and needs. It is essential that audiences understand what they are being asked to do and have the ability to agree to it. A defining element of play is that it is "consensually entered and conducted," meaning that asking audiences to play requires giving them the option of saying no, or allowing them to interact on terms they choose (Villareal 42). Mackey cautions that "Interactive [theater] fails when an audience's volition is removed, transforming an activity that could have been playful into obligatory work" (36). This is a major reason experiential and pervasive performance cannot adhere to a single predetermined storyline – if the audience senses that no matter what they do, the narrative result will be the same, they will not feel as though they are meaningfully exercising agency and the nature of their interaction with the performance will feel forced. Offering false choices or not meaningfully following through on the intention to invite audiences to co-author their experience defeats the purpose of devising a pervasive performance at all.

Mackey's recommendation in this vein is to "focus on building a cohesive world, one whose sum-total conveys your message consistently rather than getting attached to the witnesses of any specific moment within it" (39). The shift from regular authorship to the kind of procedural authorship that designing pervasive performance requires involves making space for the audience to produce rather than experience the event and focusing on the environment and the structure of interactions with it rather than narrative content. Mackey also recommends accounting for the difference in status between the designers and the audience. In her view, the

audience experiences an unfamiliar environment and social pressure to perform, which can make meaningful consent difficult. The kind of transformation that pervasive performance makes possible will not take effect if audiences feel forced to participate instead of opting in on their own, for example if it is clear that an ongoing performance cannot continue unless someone stands up and agrees to do whatever is being asked of an audience volunteer. ARGs navigate this issue through being structured in such a way that the choice to participate is what brings players in contact with the game in the first place, and all continued engagement with the game is something the player chooses to do for themselves.

Some tangible ways to foster consent in these performance environments include clarity about the nature of the performance in marketing materials and in the way the event is promoted, so audiences arrive knowing they will be asked to participate. In performance structures like ARGs, which tend to not use traditional marketing materials like posters or press releases, entering the space of the performance requires active exploration on the part of the audience and thus an implicit acceptance of the invitation to play. In the case of *The Parable Task*, we relied in part on the audience's curiosity about the appearance of a fictional university's newspaper on the UMass Amherst campus to draw them in while at the same time communicating that they are interacting with a fictional world. However, we decided not to apply the This is Not a Game principle to our game. We put up flyers and marketed the game publicly as an ARG, trusting our audience to pick up on cues that indicated when to be "in-character" as a reporter for *The Moradna Torch*. The players readily played into the fiction of being Moradna students and newspaper reporters, justifying gaps in knowledge about non-player characters or the Moradna campus in order to stay in-character.

This also allowed us to make space in the Discord server for players who were having a problem to ask the game's facilitators about it directly, since we did not have to deny the reality that we were all playing a game. At any point, players could rescind their acceptance of our invitation to play by leaving the Discord server or just stopping their participation. In the game's live run, players mostly used this #fourth-wall-break channel to ask logistical questions and see if they were on the right track when they got stuck with something. They also used this channel to check in about whether their discoveries would pose continuity problems for the game, because players seized on clues we had printed in the newspaper far more quickly than we had anticipated. Having an explicitly out-of-character space in which to talk to the players proved essential for building trust with them, since it meant we could tell them when something was going wrong or a thread they were pursuing wasn't going to lead anywhere, and players seemed to feel they could rely on us to facilitate a good experience for them. In turn, they became invested in doing their part to make the experience enjoyable for everyone present in the server.

In this way the division between the game's facilitators and players seemed to blur over time; players took on some of the responsibility for keeping the game's structure intact and helping to onboard new players, and we felt welcome to role-play and participate in theorizing too. It felt like we were all a part of the game because the community of the Discord server had such a specific dynamic and we were all to some extent role-playing with each other in addition to attempting to find information and solve puzzles. However, at any time, players could step out of the fiction and raise issues they were having or stop playing altogether.

This is all part of the social expansion of the magic circle. Designers can and should build invitations for bystanders to move between levels of awareness and join in the act of gameplay; they must also, however, build invitations to refuse, through which designers offer bystanders a

way to exit the game no matter what level of game awareness they currently occupy. Consent to play or participate in a pervasive performance can be revoked at any time, and creators should include ways to exit the game or change one's mode of participation (for example from direct participation to observing) during the performance. In addition, game facilitators need to stay actively involved in the event as it unfolds, both to ensure that players feel supported and to ensure that no one is causing any kind of harm. In *The Parable Task*, we acted as moderators and watched Discord attentively to make sure that we could step in if any kind of interpersonal conflict arose and to help conversations continue smoothly.

Another significant ethical consideration of pervasive games and by extension pervasive performance is their intentional obfuscation of what is and is not real. A major appeal of games, theatrical performance, and other environments that make use of the magic circle is that they "liberate the activities of those who participate in them through offering a context where the outcomes of their actions do not influence their daily life," but in games that expand the magic circle to include people who may not be aware of it, this gets more complicated (Montola et al. 197). Some participants are abiding by the rules established within the magic circle, but others do not share that ludic space and are engaging with the world as if it is ordinary. Establishing consent and inviting people to play is good for protecting players, but designers of pervasive performance need to account for keeping bystanders safe or cloaking things that might cause panic or distress behind layers of fiction so that everyone who encounters them can understand on some level that what's happening isn't actually real because it's taking place within the magic circle.

Despite the protection of the magic circle, there is still risk for players in ARGs regarding their ability to discern what is and isn't real. A stark example of this danger as it plays out in real

life is the QAnon conspiracy, which bears a striking resemblance to how ARGs operate: rabbit holes in real life lead people to mysterious messages that they then work to decipher, uncovering what they believe to be a hidden conspiracy at work in the real world (Berkowitz). Participants in QAnon act in real life on the information they discover in conversation with other followers of Q, and this inability to distinguish between real life and fiction is incredibly dangerous. Berkowitz argues that QAnon inverts the design intention of an ARG but the similarity between the way this conspiracy and ARGs both operate requires attention when designing these games and other pervasive performance experiences.

In *The Parable Task*, we mitigated the risk of players falling too deeply into the fiction by rejecting the This is Not a Game principle and openly acknowledging the work's status as fictional at multiple points both in advertising the game and in the Discord server. Theater audiences are adept at watching something they know isn't real and responding to it as though it is, and the use of theatrical frames and conventions can help with designing pervasive performance experiences that build in safety nets for players and bystanders. For example, we used language like "fourth wall break" to evoke these kinds of theater conventions for our players. The blurring of everyday life with an alternate reality is useful for inviting critical reflection or changing participants' relationships with the real world, but the kind of experimentation and exploration that prompts this transformation requires designers to center care for their audiences in the construction and framing of the work.

A related consideration when designing pervasive performances is the effect of the deeply embodied nature of participating in them. A useful concept we can borrow from LARP is bleed, or the "direct transference of emotions between player and character, such as two characters falling in love and their players developing feelings in real life as a result" (Beltrán

95). Part of the purpose of pervasive performance is to invite audiences into worlds that feel in some way different from their everyday reality, but these performances also rely on shared resources and cues for interaction provided by our familiarity with the quotidian world. Encountering something that seems strange or that doesn't respond to our interaction with it the way we might expect is a signal that we have entered a rabbit hole of some kind. The question of how real these kinds of performances should feel gets complicated, and some bleed is inevitable when the magic circle is expanded and the distinction between performance and reality is blurred. It is, however, worth considering when designing these experiences that negative feelings like anger or distress can bleed over into participants' real lives just as easily as their sense of enchantment or a motivation to take some kind of action or enact change.

The way to mitigate risk of emotional harm or falling into the fiction too deeply is holding audiences in care and fostering a collaborative environment in which all participants feel invested in keeping each other safe. In order to do this, I drew heavily on models like Avery Alder's *Dream Askew* and the Belonging Outside Belonging game engine, which create exactly the kind of non-hierarchical creative space I wanted to foster in *The Parable Task*. Some specific practices we instituted included building the world and game system collaboratively between a group of designers, honoring and building on player theorizing, and leaving the game's ending open-ended.

Throughout the game's live run, we held each other in care and tried to be there for each other emotionally as new information came to light about the extent of what Parable Ventures had done to the five missing characters. After solving Katrina's set of Instagram puzzles, one player deduced that they needed to reach out to Katrina's girlfriend Raven to let her know what Katrina was missing. Sending this message, even when you know it's not going to a real person,

is really difficult, and the community on the server comforted and supported that player through sending the message and talking more with Raven. Creating works that operate through conversation and consensus without predetermined outcomes can be messy and difficult, but I view such works as opportunities for experimentation and collaboration that might equip us to do that more effectively in real life. We can only navigate the messiness and difficulty, however, by creating spaces that foster trust and care for one another. During *The Parable Task*'s live run, we were all invested in making the experience of playing the game enjoyable and engaging for everyone, players and facilitators alike.

CHAPTER 3:

CASE STUDY: *THE PARABLE TASK*

The Devising Process

I knew from the beginning of this project that I wanted to devise the game in collaboration with other people, both because more input was going to be beneficial to the process but also because I wanted to experiment with using devised theater techniques for collaboratively designing an ARG. I started assembling my team at the end of the Fall 2022 semester by holding information sessions where I explained the project and some of the initial things I had found in my research that I wanted to put into practice. The final devising team was myself, Caleb Bailey, Cameron Hoskins, Crow Traphagen, Luna Barros, and Elie Abramovich. All of us share a background in theater, although we each specialize differently within it and brought experiences with a variety of theater sub-disciplines including dramaturgy, performance, stage management, and design. There was also a varied level of familiarity with ARGs across the devising team, ranging from people who were completely unfamiliar to folks who had participated in several and were well-versed in the form.

We met as a team in late January 2023 to work out the logistics of when and how frequently we wanted to meet, what the devising process might look like, and, most importantly, to create a palette of ideas that we could draw from when beginning to design the game. We were starting almost completely from scratch, and none of us had ever made an ARG before, so it felt important to set an exploratory and process-oriented tone for our devising process. In terms of timing and structuring our work, we decided to spend February on coming up with the premise of the game and generating lore, pivot to designing game mechanics and structures for player interaction in March, and then spend April executing everything and actually making the game.

The palette is a tool I borrowed from my work in TTRPGs; it's a commonly used safety tool that allows players to note content they are enthusiastic about exploring as well as content they want to avoid for whatever reason. The specific version of this tool I used is adapted from Ben Robbins' game *Microscope*, which is an RPG in which players collaboratively build an epic fictional history. In our process, we took turns naming something we definitely wanted to include or banning something from the game. One might ban something for personal reasons related to its content, but this was also an avenue for naming types of stories we weren't interested in or didn't want to explore. Our "Yes" column included things like queer stories (specifically queer joy), cryptozoology, mixtapes or cassette tapes, tarot imagery, handwritten letters, having different possible endings, and the use of social media. Of note is that our "Yes" items included bigger-picture ideas about what we wanted the game to focus on thematically as well as hyper-specific types of puzzles or actions players might need to take during the course of the game. We also agreed that we were interested in exploring specific characters in-depth. Our "No" column was much sparser, but we agreed that we were not interested in a world that was focused on history or time travel, or about tracking a single character's life or a romantic relationship between two characters through time.

We began meeting regularly in February 2023. At our first rehearsal, I brought a large trifold poster board and wrote everything from the "Yes" column on our palette on a post-it note. First, we sorted those post-its into themes, story/plot ideas, and mechanics. Then, we started to identify connections between "Yes" items, which led us to conclude that the game would be set in the present day on a college campus, and that it would be somewhere in the science fiction genre. We chose this setting largely because we knew that that was the kind of space players would be physically interacting with, but decided that it could not be set on the UMass Amherst

campus. The game needed to be set at a fictional university both to signal the presence of an alternate reality on the UMass campus and to ensure that we didn't cause a panic by making posts about missing students at our real-life university. Some central "Yes" items that shaped what would eventually become the game's premise and inspire the world of Moradna University were the cyberpunk genre and the inclusion of cryptids and cryptozoology. Trying to figure out how to make those two things work together was a generative starting point for figuring out what the game would be.

We chose cyberpunk both because we were interested in the genre's tropes and relationship to capitalism and because a lot of our early conversations revolved around the impact of digital technology on physical embodiment. Of particular interest to us was the troubled if not outright traumatizing relationship many cyberpunk protagonists feel to their physical body, which often motivates their engagement with digital worlds like cyberspace. We were also interested in what digital worlds might look like when we're physically inside them. One final element of our palette that ended up shaping many of our decisions, particularly when creating characters and populating the world of Moradna University, was that we wanted to tell a queer story with elements of love and joy. As a group of queer designers, the majority of whom are also trans, we ended up gravitating toward creating queer characters and a game premise that is deeply rooted in anxieties around structures of power in relation to bodies and minds, mediating between digital and material worlds, and the disruptive power of glitches and errors.

While we did not necessarily have a specific audience for the game in mind, we knew that our choice of Discord as the platform on which the game would take place would resonate most with a particular age group and with folks who are particularly interested in games and internet culture. This did turn out to be true, and manifested perhaps most strongly in the plethora

of memes that our players created and shared with the server in response to gameplay. We chose Discord primarily because it offers an infrastructure in which many conversations can happen at once, but it also made a lot of sense in fiction as a platform that a group of college students might use to organize their school club. It also allowed us to insulate active gameplay to some extent from the outside world and from non-players, rather than making play more public via Twitter or some other social media site, as some ARGs do.

After identifying some connections and starting points, we started to try to figure out a one-sentence version of the game's premise that we could ask questions of and build out further. The goal was to identify a starting point for the game's story and clearly define the role of the players within the story in this one-sentence version of the game. This was a point where we stalled a little bit, since all we had was a vague setting and genre to work from. Working from science fiction and cyberpunk, we started listing tropes and genre conventions that were interesting to us and sharing references to TV shows and podcasts that might be useful as inspiration. Some significant inspirations to the project were the SCP Foundation, occult ritual stories on /r/nosleep (a subreddit dedicated to horror stories presented as though they are real experiences), the *Doctor Who* episode "The Idiot's Lantern", and the podcasts *The Magnus Archives*, *The Adventure Zone: Amnesty*, and *Fun City*.

We found that we were collectively really interested in stories about people doing something in real life that in some way traps them in a supernatural or digital world. From here, we were reminded of a particular episode of *The Magnus Archives* (episode #65: Binary) in which an entity trapped inside a computer experiences acute pain from living in a digitized state. This led us to the question of what it feels like to be in cyberspace, and what would happen if being there was really painful or dangerous. Another idea we were drawn to early on was the

idea of what cyberspace looks like to the people inside it, drawing on stories about cryptids and environments like the Upside Down from the show *Stranger Things* as major touchstones to begin thinking about cyberspace as some kind of forest or dangerous natural landscape filled with monsters.

From there, we arrived at our one sentence premise: there are characters trapped in cyberspace, and the players need to rescue them. Further, those characters' identities (their voices, their consciousnesses) are somehow being stolen from them by some kind of evil organization or entity. This premise had a kind of urgency that we hoped would motivate players to want to investigate, and engaged the themes we were interested in as a design team. The various mechanics we had added to our palette, including things like audio logs, playlists, geocaching, and special orders at cafés that act as a code phrase, could serve as ways for the characters to attempt to communicate with the players from inside of cyberspace. The cryptids might be some kind of glitch or computer virus that some people believe exist but are not recognized by science. This premise begged some significant questions that we could use as a jumping-off point to develop the game's lore: who trapped these people in cyberspace, and why? Who are the players in the fiction and what role are they performing? How do players enter the game and why should they care about the characters who are trapped? What are the cryptids in this world? How do we stop the entity trapping people in cyberspace?

We concluded that there needed to be some kind of faction who was recruiting the players, which would offer us a premise for asking players to join the game and support them in learning about the world. As facilitators, we could play members of this faction and help players in-character by directly supporting gameplay and clarifying anything that was confusing. Further, we needed an enemy faction; working in the cyberpunk genre suggested that some kind of evil

megacorporation would make the most sense. Inspired by campus protests against Raytheon and their relationship to the University of Massachusetts, we decided the enemy faction who was trapping characters in cyberspace would be some kind of military technology company, and that they would have a significant relationship with the university. Finally, although we still weren't exactly sure what cryptids look like in a cyberpunk world, we figured there should be some kind of faction organized around them.

After this first day of brainstorming, we each chose an element of the world to flesh out further: the enemy organization, the faction recruiting the players, the cryptids, and cyberspace itself. We met and shared our initial impulses about the lore of these elements of the world, then did our best to put them together and make connections. From this we were able to figure out more details about the dynamics between factions in the game, particularly that the enemy organization and the recruiting organization would be fighting one another and that the cryptids would be some kind of wild card interfering with both groups' agendas. We repeated this process for the fictional university at which the game would take place, the campus Cryptid Club, and the two main organizations at the heart of the game, which we decided would be the college newspaper, *The Moradna Torch*, and a cybersecurity corporation called Parable Ventures. Throughout this process of worldbuilding, we updated the post-it notes on our trifold board to reflect conclusions we had reached and questions that had arisen from our worldbuilding process.

The next major step was making the game's central characters, who would be trapped in cyberspace. Each of us came up with a character's name, major and year, their hobbies and extracurriculars, and a bond, flaw, and ideal that gave us a sense of what they cared about the most, what they aspired to, and what might be keeping them from achieving it. We shared our characters with one another and I led us through some relationship-building questions from the

TTRPG *Kids on Bikes*, which we answered for one another as the character we created. These questions, usually used to flesh out existing relationships and connections between members of an adventuring party in the game, functioned here as specific prompts for adding detail to the characters. We also got a strong sense of how the characters felt about each other and who knew each other well, which ended up being really useful later on in terms of making the world feel more fleshed-out and creating opportunities to connect the puzzles to one another. This initial phase of the devising process was focused on ideating as much as possible and finding the connections between different parts of the world, and we proceeded with the knowledge that we could always let things go later if it felt like they didn't fit into what we were doing.

At this point, we had determined the basic structure of the game: five branches of puzzles, one per main character. These would converge into an ending that all players would experience, which would change based on how many characters' puzzle tracks had been completed. This allowed for different possible endings, which had been on our palette as something we were interested in implementing in the game. We had also decided at this point that rather than writing a concrete conclusion to the game or guiding players to a particular stopping point, we would turn the question of what to do with all the information gathered through the course of the game to the players at some kind of closing game event. We figured that at the end of the game, they would have enough context about what was going on in the world of the game to have some kind of stake in what *The Moradna Torch* did next. The question of what to do with the information collected over the course of gameplay would be framed differently based on how successful the players had been at freeing the characters trapped by Parable and how much they had theorized about the process of what Parable was doing on the Moradna campus.

We started the next phase of devising by writing a big list of logistical and story questions that we needed to answer, largely revolving around how players would learn about all the lore that we spent February generating. Particularly crucial at this point was figuring out how to get players really invested in the game's premise as early as possible. This led us into the process of designing puzzles through which players would carry out the mission of helping to rescue the trapped characters. Solving the puzzles would involve learning some kind of information about the character and taking actions like leaving something in a mailbox or sending a message to a social media account.

We had several types of puzzles available to us from our palette; we eventually decided to focus on ciphers, playlists, sigils (which later became Instagram photos), audio logs, and geocaches. It was important to us to include a mix of analog and digital puzzles, with solutions that ranged from sending messages or uncovering information to physically visiting particular locations and doing something. Our other priority in designing the game was accessibility: all audio elements needed to be transcribed, and all physical locations that players needed to visit needed to be accessible to people who use mobility aids.

For each group of puzzles, we determined how it would work mechanically, how we anticipated players would interact with it, what players would learn about each character, and how we would signal that players had successfully solved the puzzle in fiction. We started by prototyping a variety of puzzles within the broad categories we had chosen. In some cases, like the cipher, we just needed to settle on which cipher to use and how we wanted to structure the messages we used it for. For others, particularly the playlists and the Instagram-based puzzles, we needed to build the mechanics from the ground up and spent a lot of time brainstorming and tinkering with how to turn specific features of platforms like Spotify and Instagram into puzzles.

This process was also guided by the work we had done to develop and get to know the characters, and we attempted to build the puzzles in a way that felt authentic to what that character would do. For example, the ABBA-coded message in one of Andre's playlists was constructed to be very true to his voice as a character in its encouragement of the players who decoded it. After some initial playtests, we firmly defined the mechanics of each puzzle, including the information players would learn about each character, what each set of puzzles would reveal in terms of game lore, and how players would know they had completed them.

From this point, we had filled in almost all of the necessary story information – we just needed to build the puzzles and the various interfaces through which players would interact with the world. This included the print issue of *The Moradna Torch*, the Discord server, and all of the various social media accounts players would come into contact with. One significant choice we made as we constructed the Discord server that went hand in hand with our decision to openly acknowledge *The Parable Task* as a game was the creation of a channel we called #fourth-wall-break. In this channel, players who were having technical issues or were feeling distressed or stuck in the game could post and talk to one of the facilitators about the problem. We felt it was important to have some kind of reminder within the Discord server that this was a game and that it wasn't real, and to create clear avenues through which people could raise issues and talk to game facilitators out of character.

In terms of publicity, we agreed that we wanted to do some advertising about the game in advance, rather than hoping curiosity and interest in the sudden appearance of a fictional university's newspaper would prompt player engagement. We made flyers and wrote chalk messages on campus walkways about a week prior to the game's launch, announcing *The Parable Task*'s run from May 1-9 and instructing prospective players to "Go to Bartlett Hall and

Follow the Torch." We kept adding and tweaking things in the Discord and Daisy's Google Drive until the game's first day, which is also when we hid Hadrian's geocaches. It was particularly important to us for the Discord server to feel a bit lived-in, so there was no pressure on players to be the first person to post somewhere in it.

We did not create our newspaper staff characters together, nor did we plan to create any particular dynamic among the facilitators' characters in the Discord, but we ended up establishing some friendly rivalries and a feeling on the Discord that we were all friends. The characters we ended up playing when we were talking to players on Discord were based both on our real-life roles on the team (in that I played the Editor in Chief of *The Moradna Torch*) and on inside jokes we had made throughout the process; in some ways the dynamic of our devising process carried over into the fiction as we role-played as the newspaper staff. Throughout the game's live run we were working in a hidden facilitator channel on the server to keep track of player progress and adjust what we had planned to better suit what was actually happening in the game.

Game Summary

Our ARG, *The Parable Task*, explores a rising conflict between a tech megacorporation called Parable Ventures and the college newspaper at Moradna University, to which Parable Ventures is a major donor. The staff of *The Moradna Torch* have uncovered information about some less than savory projects underway at Parable Ventures and have been threatened with legal action if they don't stop printing stories about the company's projects and practices. Players enter the game as investigative journalists, joining the paper's efforts to find the truth about the corporation's projects and agenda. It is quickly revealed that a new Parable Ventures project

called the Smith-Waite Initiative has been conducting playtests with Moradna students, all of whom went missing after interacting with the software.

The Smith-Waite Initiative tests a method for digitizing human consciousness and storing it on a computer server in an attempt to find ways of extending human life through separating the mind from the body. The major problem is that Parable Ventures has had a serious issue with rogue defective code that corrupts data stored on their servers. This code, called defective armo-code, threatens the consciousnesses of Moradna students who participate in the company's playtests when they enter Parable's data storage system and effectively erases any sense of who they are. This code is regarded as a kind of digital cryptid by Parable's cyberspace team, in that there is no hard evidence of it but many programmers believe it exists. A week prior to the beginning of *The Parable Task*, five Moradna students (the game's main non-player characters) have been digitized and are attempting to break out. These five students are Daisy Stone, Hadrian Dellos, Andre Baker, Eliza Montgomery, and Katrina Knight. At the beginning of the game, Daisy swaps an ad for her tutoring services to be printed in the May 1st edition of *The Moradna Torch* with a message encoded in a cipher, which calls the newspaper's attention to the five missing students.

Motivated by their existing desire to find the truth about Parable Ventures and aided by the players who have joined the paper's staff Discord server, *The Moradna Torch* commits to attempting to save the five people trapped in Parable Ventures' servers before the defective armo-code erases them. The game is structured into four branches after players solve Daisy's initial cipher, one for each remaining character. Solving Daisy's initial puzzle unlocks a Google Drive folder with entry points for the remaining storylines, all of which converge into a broader

question of what to do to stop Parable Ventures before their next playtest, scheduled for the day after the game ends.

Major Mechanics/Puzzles

The way players join the game is via a newspaper stand in Bartlett Hall with print editions of *The Moradna Torch* (a newspaper containing clues and leads that will be useful for later puzzles) and a QR code that leads to a Google Form players fill out to access the Moradna Torch Discord server. *The Parable Task* mediates player interactions with the game's world through this server, which allows players to theorize about what's happening and work together to solve puzzles. The major mechanics of the game revolve around five sets of puzzles that release the characters from the clutches of Parable Ventures when solved by anchoring them to the world outside of cyberspace in some way. These puzzles had a few core functions; specifically, they made up the bulk of actual gameplay and communicated important bits of lore about Moradna University and Parable Ventures. Rather than directly freeing the character, we decided that solving these puzzles would be oriented towards learning more information about them and facilitating some kind of communication between the character and someone or something they care about deeply. Since the threat to each character was defective code erasing the data that made up their consciousness, we thought that learning about each character and facilitating a connection of some kind between the character and the outside world might make sense as a way to defeat the code, rather than digitally simulating the freeing of each character.

Each branch of puzzles consists of its basic mechanics, what players learn about the character as they solve it, the action players must take to complete the puzzle, and how we know the character has been saved.These are the central puzzles as we originally conceived them; in

the section documenting the game's live run, I will note points where the puzzles' execution diverged from what we had initially planned.

Daisy

On the first day of the game, the newspaper staff discover that an ad for Daisy's computer science tutoring services has gone to print encoded in a modified pigpen cipher. The paper's marketing and advertising editor, Randy, posts the printed ad and a screenshot of the original text in the Discord server, asking players to help figure out what the symbols could mean. A series of extra letters spelling out "help me" and Daisy's Discord username is hidden within the encoded message. To solve the puzzle, players must decipher the encoded message, find the additional letters, and put them together to add Daisy to the Discord server.

After gaining access to the server, Daisy posts a longer message that explains what's happening to the five missing characters, as well as a link to a Google Drive folder with leads for the other puzzles and information about what's going on at Parable Ventures. When Daisy's consciousness is restored through rescuing the other trapped students, she can communicate more easily with everyone in the Discord server.

Katrina

Katrina is attempting to reach out via her Instagram, which is mentioned in the print issue of *The Moradna Torch* that players use to enter the game. Her goal is to get someone to send her girlfriend, Raven Hoyt, a message explaining what happened to Katrina and why she's missing. Katrina's Instagram grid photos feature pictures of campus that slowly get darker and more heavily edited as you scroll through, signaling that something might be amiss in later posts. The

captions of most grid posts feature a random letter, and the most recent grid post features a series of empty boxes, grouped as follows: 4, 3, 2, 4. All of the letters arranged in order and grouped the way the boxes suggest will spell out "Tell Her I'm Gone."

There are two story highlights saved on her page – one for an anniversary post with screenshots of the first text messages she and her girlfriend Raven exchanged, and one for a series of photos of various locations on campus with their names tagged. The first letter of each location name, when unscrambled, spells out "RAVEN." The highlight that documents the beginning of Katrina and Raven's relationship gives players some context about who Raven is and why Katrina wants to contact her in addition to giving players a link to Raven's Tumblr page, where they can send her a message.

When Katrina's consciousness is restored through making contact with Raven, she will post an official resignation from her position as a Parable Ventures edfluencer (a social media influencer who works exclusively on supporting Parable's work on branding themselves as supporters of educational institutions).

Andre

Andre's efforts to connect to the real world consist of three Spotify playlists, all hidden within a maze of folders in Daisy's Google Drive. His ultimate goal is to communicate that he is lost in cyberspace and under attack by the defective armo-code, and to direct players to draw the cryptids he's contending with in cyberspace and bring the drawings to the Moradna University Cryptid Club.

The first looks like a fairly standard playlist of pop rock classics, but players who look at a post about Andre on the Moradna Cryptid Club Instagram (mentioned in the print issue of *The*

Moradna Torch) will note that Andre's favorite band is ABBA. Scrolling through this first playlist and paying attention exclusively to the ABBA songs reveals the following message: "So Long," "On and On and On," "Under Attack," "I Still Have Faith In You," "No Doubt About It." The second playlist spells out a message in song titles: "Create me an image of the beast and send it to the cryptid club south college floor four." The third playlist describes the cryptids Andre is facing using the first letter of each song: "distorted owl bleeding eyes broken neck inky."

When Andre's consciousness is restored through sharing information about the armo-code with the Cryptid Club, he will lead the club in announcing an official pivot from their previous cryptid investigations to figuring out what's going on with Parable Ventures.

Eliza

More than anything, Eliza wants people to sign up to audition for the show she is planning to direct, *Fly By Night*. Her puzzle consists of an audio file that jumps back and forth between Eliza's diary entries and a phone call between Eliza and Daisy, in which Eliza tries to warn Daisy about Parable Ventures and Daisy gets angry with her, all interspersed with static and other creepy distortion. In her diary, she recounts a previous attempt to direct this show that was foiled because no one signed up to audition. Players can listen to the audio log and use the transcript to fill in more information about the world. To free Eliza, players need to use the QR code in the print edition of *The Moradna Torch* or the link in Eliza's audition folder to sign up for an audition slot.

When Eliza's consciousness is restored, a flyer and press release confirming that the musical will move forward will be released for *Fly By Night* in the Discord.

Hadrian

Hadrian's journey has to do with coming to terms with his relationship to his family and how his college experience has gone over the past four years. Players will encounter a series of geocaches beginning with a set of coordinates and a clue hidden in Daisy's Google Drive. Each cache contains a diary entry, a letter between Hadrian's parents, a logbook, and coordinates for the next cache. The diary entries span Hadrian's entire college career and chronicle his conflicted feelings about not wanting to be in the military despite it being a family tradition and his frustration that he hasn't had a college relationship. The caches eventually lead to the Campus Center roof, which is where his parents first met, and Hadrian asks players to fold an origami heart and leave it in the cache as a tribute to his parents' love. He also directs players to the graffiti wall on the way to the dorms up by Orchard Hill, where players can find his initials as well as his boyfriend's. Leaving an origami heart in the cache will free Hadrian.

The Game's Live Run

Players entered *The Parable Task* via a real-life newspaper stand in Bartlett Hall with printed editions of our fictional university's newspaper, *The Moradna Torch*. Players were able to grab a newspaper and scan a QR code that led to a Google Form and link to join the Moradna Torch Discord server. Most in-game communication happened through this Discord server, and the game designers were all present and acting in-character as members of the newspaper staff who could help onboard people into the world and guide players' navigation through the puzzles and lore. Throughout the live run of the game, we gave hints and reworked puzzle solutions behind the scenes to better follow the players' impulses in addition to interacting with them

in-character as staff on *The Moradna Torch*. In these player-facing conversations, we tried to let them lead the process of finding information and solving puzzles, but occasionally offered theories or suggestions to keep conversation going.

The point of the physical newspaper to provide plot hooks and resources that would be necessary for solving puzzles later; it included links to several Instagram accounts, the Moradna Torch Discord, Eliza's audition sign-ups, and mentions of other characters who would appear later in the game so that their names would be familiar to players who read the newspaper. Most importantly, there was an image with a message encoded in a cipher that would become the first puzzle for players to solve. At the end of the first day, one of the designers (in-character as Randy, the *Torch*'s ads and marketing person) posted a message in Discord that called attention to the strange cipher and placed it alongside the original ad copy, which would allow players to translate the cipher and find a hidden message encoded within.

Before we had a chance to post this message, however, several enterprising players had already combed through the newspaper and compiled all of the available information from the various accounts they had found, and had begun pursuing all of the leads they found in it, including visiting the Cryptid Club's real-life mailbox and starting to work on the puzzle hidden in Katrina's Instagram. Without the information locked behind this first cipher, though, no one got very far or had much context for what any of it meant. After Randy posted about the encoded ad, players who had joined the server began working independently on attempting to crack the cipher. I sent a message the following morning, checking in to see if any folks had figured anything out and encouraging them to share their work with one another. It quickly became clear that there were some errors in the way we encoded the message and that players weren't sure what to do with the extra letters added in or couldn't tell which errors were clues and which were

mistakes. Throughout the second day, they continued working on the cipher and sharing theories about what it might mean.

The morning of the third day, I sent another message that pointed players back toward the additional letters. After some conversation, I realized that the solution probably wasn't going to work the way we had intended and that it would be best to pivot from what we had planned. This is an excellent example of the need to play to find out what happens when facilitating pervasive performance – had we doggedly continued to wait for the players to solve the cipher as planned, they probably would have lost interest and stopped playing altogether. Our goal was to tell a story collaboratively with the players, which requires meeting them where they are and being responsive to their impulses in terms of what to do next. The previous day, one player had emailed Daisy via the address in her ad and the designers decided to reply to that email with a similar "help me" message and Daisy's discord username, translated into binary code. We proceeded to email back and forth a couple of times with that player, all in binary, and he added Daisy on Discord. Our messages to this player were all short and cryptic, about how Daisy was lost and needed help. Our hope was that eventually the player would regroup with other players on the server and that would lead us to adding Daisy to our Discord.

This player also combed through the newspaper and his communications with Daisy and came up with a theory that guessed a lot of the game's premise based on the limited information available. Specifically, this player concluded that Parable Ventures was using some of their technology to upload students' consciousnesses into data. The general feeling in the server at this point was that folks were uncertain whether Daisy needed actual help or was just messing with the newspaper staff, and there were some suspicions (fed by one of the facilitators posting in-character) that it might be dangerous to give Daisy access to the Discord. That evening, we

ran a poll and players voted on whether to let her in, which ended with a unanimous vote to allow her onto the server. As Daisy, we joined the server and posted our planned second message, translated into binary code, in a channel to which only Daisy had access.

The players quickly seized on the translated message and the Google Drive link. They began to explore the folders and come up with theories about what was going on, focusing on the Smith-Waite Initiative and the potential meaning of the tarot cards we had assigned to each of our five characters in combination with the previous test groups documented in the Drive folder. At this point, the players had a sense of the stakes of the situation and a general understanding of what Parable Ventures was doing. Throughout the game, more players joined the server and periodically myself or one of the other designers would offer a brief message of welcome that could point new players to where the action was currently focused. Later in the game, players took initiative and began to do this as well. We also monitored ongoing discussions among players and identified places we could offer clues to help them along, or where we needed to clarify or fix something in the Google Drive. Finally, in our private channel, we kept track of player theories, worked on finding ways to further incorporate them into the world, and coordinated the timing of in-game events and communications with players. When it was clear we needed to introduce a new in-game event or make something new, a facilitator would draft whatever it was we needed to make and post it in this private channel for approval by the group.

On the fourth day, we decided to trigger one of our planned mid-game events: an email to players (using email addresses collected via our Google Form) from Parable Ventures' Campus Outreach Coordinator with an announcement of another playtest on May 10, the day after the game's conclusion. One player began tracking down Hadrian's geocaches, although we had to replace one of them on the morning of Day 5 because it had been disturbed by a non-player. We

also concluded that Katrina's Instagram puzzle was too difficult – players had figured out what they needed to do, but the anagram they needed to solve required a ton of guesswork without any sort of hint to guide them. I posted a new version of the empty grid of letters with the first letter of three of the words filled in, which gave players what they needed in order to figure out what the letters spelled out and that Katrina wanted them to send a message to Raven via her Tumblr.

Meanwhile, a player found all of Hadrian's geocaches and posted photos of their contents to the Discord. Progress had also been made on Andre's playlist puzzles, and a plan was hatched in which one player would draw the cryptid described by one of the playlists and another would deliver it to the Cryptid Club's mailbox. One player sent a message to Raven on Tumblr and we messaged back and forth with them a little bit. While we had hoped multiple players would send a message to Raven, because of time constraints it seemed best to see what would happen if we posted our planned return for Katrina. In the middle of Day 7, I posted a Notes app screenshot from Katrina explaining that she had come back with the help of Raven and the staff of the *Torch*, and that she was quitting her job as Parable Ventures edfluencer. Later that night, a player posted a screenshot of this Instagram post to the Discord and it was met with much suspicion that the person who had returned wasn't the real Katrina.

We decided we wanted to lean into this theory and experiment with posting the other planned returns for Eliza and Andre, in addition to sending players another email from Parable Ventures, this time with a call for hiring more edfluencers. While none of the puzzles had been solved in exactly the way we had anticipated, the players had interacted with each character's track significantly enough that made sense, particularly if we pivoted to align more with the player theory that the "returned" characters were somehow compromised.

At the beginning of the final day, we posted Andre and Daisy's return messages and players continued searching for clues and attempting to find more information in Daisy's Google Drive folder. At 4:30pm on May 9, the ninth day of the game, the facilitators gathered on the steps of the Bromery Center for the Arts with several players. We conducted the first part of the meeting in-character as *The Moradna Torch* staff, beginning with asking players to take stock of where we were at in the game's story and what we suspected was going on. Then, we talked about what the staff of *The Moradna Torch* ought to do next, although it was quickly apparent that we had not arrived at a concrete enough ending for that conversation to be particularly generative. Then, I announced the official ending of the game and introduced myself as one of the game's creators. We held space for the players to ask questions and talk to one another about their experience. Folks recounted favorite moments and parts of gameplay that they enjoyed the most. At the gathering's conclusion, several players joined me and a few of the other designers as we went to Bartlett Hall to remove the newspaper stand, officially bringing *The Parable Task* to a close.

Reflections

The thing that stands out to me most about the live run of our game was that, while we only had 10 or so players who were very heavily involved in discussing clues and solving puzzles, those players were extremely dedicated. They took on their implied roles as Moradna University students and *Torch* reporters quickly and without explicit prompting, and seemed very invested in the game and its story. When Daisy's Google Drive was made available to the players, many of them stayed up late that night and started trying to follow various leads immediately. Throughout the game's live run several players made memes about what was

happening at particular moments, and we started to build friendships and relationships with one another even though many of us had never met before and/or had taken on a character or alternate persona.

One player remarked at our closing gathering that he loved the culture of the Discord server and the way folks worked together there. Another told me that the ARG was more role-play heavy than others they had experienced, and that they felt more invested in engaging in theorizing with the other players because the environment in the Discord felt a bit like a larp. I think this emphasis on role-play came in part from the strong dynamic between the characters we were playing as facilitators. For example, Crow played a character named Justin Crawford, the newspaper's treasurer, and started doing a bit where he called the newspaper the "M Torch", much to my character Oscar's chagrin. The players picked up on this inside joke and became a part of it in a way that I think brought us closer together as a group. Being able to joke around and role-play with each other seemed to make the Discord server a fun place to be, and it gave players an investment in the game beyond the very task-oriented motivation to solve the puzzles and find the missing characters.

Other players talked about their relationship to the UMass Amherst campus changing; they had new memories of searching for Hadrian's geocaches or checking out the Cryptid Club's mailbox in South College that will be evoked whenever they interact with those spaces from now on. It seems like we were successful in creating a game world that felt true to what it feels like to be in college, and players seemed to connect to the game and its story really easily because they could lean on their own experiences of, for example, doing college theater or being an academic tutor. Finally, at our closing gathering, many players made connections between the themes of the game and particularly the information they had unearthed about Parable Ventures and broader

real-life issues of universities and their entanglements with corporations. We also talked at length about digital technology, artificial intelligence, and cultural anxieties about the ethics of testing these kinds of new developments.

Something that struck me while the game was still unfolding was how suspicious players were of any characters who had "returned" from being trapped by Parable Ventures, which we as designers had not anticipated. I would not necessarily say that players of *The Parable Task* got direct practice in investigative journalism or navigating the ethics of new technologies and the corporations that develop them, but I do think the enthusiasm with which players discussed what Parable Ventures was doing points to a transformation in their thinking about these issues in the real world, facilitated by playing our game.

We ended up with 33 players total who joined the Discord server. I am curious about the experience of those who were not as actively involved and mostly spectated (or joined the Discord and never engaged with it again, which I suspect is likely for many folks). The server itself will remain an artifact of play that those folks can read even now that the game is over, but that experience is obviously quite different from the experience of actually playing. In future explorations of this kind of performance, I want to think through strategies for balancing players who are extremely dedicated with players who may feel more hesitant to dive in or have less time, so that the latter group doesn't end up feeling like they might as well not bother at all since other people are more active. At the same time, a core principle of creating pervasive performance is building in multiple modes of engagement or participation that the audience can choose between, and in *The Parable Task* spectatorship was a perfectly acceptable mode of participation that players could take after joining the server.

One surprise that I encountered when I went to collect the geocaches was that players who were not actively talking in the Discord had found the caches and written in the logbooks; one player even wrote a letter to one of Hadrian's parents and left it with the other papers in the cache. This leads me to believe that even folks who did not participate as actively or talk much in the Discord server still engaged with parts of the game and found them meaningful. While I had envisioned this ARG as a very collaborative experience, there were clearly avenues for experiencing it independently (perhaps informed by the collective theorizing in the server) and those avenues were evidently still narratively satisfying.

One of my biggest takeaways from this experience was that the players/audience will interpret everything as purposeful, and as facilitators it's important to be present and attentive in order to find ways to justify mistakes or things we hadn't accounted for that players have begun to theorize about. In general, whenever we changed things about the story, it was to honor a player theory we thought was really cool or that seemed to be something everyone agreed was plausible. In other cases, we had made some kind of oversight and needed to account for what it meant in the fiction. There were some moments where players posted in the #fourth-wall-break channel to ask whether a particular thread was worth pursuing or to clarify something about a puzzle. In those cases we were always honest about when someone would be wasting their time by attempting to, for example, run our audio log through a spectrometer.

As I mentioned earlier, the ending of this game was far less concrete than we had planned, nor did we conclude on any kind of positive note (although a happy ending was by no means something we felt was necessary). The game ended at a point where the players felt suspicious of the characters who were returning and the threat posed by Parable Ventures felt like it had only gotten worse. We talked about this a little bit with players who came to our closing

gathering, and none of them seemed to feel unsatisfied with leaving the game at this point. This approach felt more true to the principle of inviting the audience to co-create the narrative with us, but it also surfaces broader questions for me about how these kinds of experiences end and how to navigate finding a solid stopping point. If we had kept the ending date ambiguous rather than planning to stop at a predetermined time and date, we may have arrived at a more satisfying conclusion, but that approach has its own drawbacks and was not the best choice for this particular game's context.

The game's live run was much more terrifying than I had anticipated. It's all well and good to theorize about the value of work that's almost entirely participatory and that must be enacted by its audience, but actually doing it is an enormous leap of faith. In particular, because this game was mediated digitally and players could step away at any time, we had to trust that we had created something interesting enough for them to want to keep exploring the world and digging into the lore. The end of the first day and beginning of the second day were particularly hard in terms of not stepping in too much – as facilitators we had agreed in advance that we could offer hints and nudge people in the right direction, but the actual work of solving puzzles and putting information together needed to be done by the players. It was extremely challenging to sit tight and wait for people to figure things out on their own, but our players collaborated well together and eventually all we needed to do was trust them and occasionally pick up story threads they had dropped. Most importantly, players picked up on what we were doing as facilitators and began to participate in that work of welcoming new people in and helping to cultivate a collaborative environment. In some ways we genuinely became the kind of student organization with particular dynamics and friendships at play that we were role-playing as.

CHAPTER 4:

Conclusion

The Parable Task is a pervasive game that we created using techniques for devising theater supplemented by mechanics drawn from role-playing games, and it demonstrates the core principles of pervasive performance outlined above. Beyond the decision to create an ARG, which I made before the team had been assembled, all of the worldbuilding and mechanics were devised collaboratively, rather than being the individual vision of one artist. We also committed to extending this collaborative spirit to our players, who engaged with the framework and world we invited them into and constructed the game's story through interacting with us and with one another. While we began the game's live run with seeds of story and a general structure in mind, throughout the process the facilitators incorporated player theorizing and followed whatever narratives were emerging as players solved puzzles and found new information. Although we did not arrive at a concrete ending, our closing event confirmed the deep investment many players felt in the game's fiction and how it reshaped their relationship to the UMass Amherst campus and community. In future explorations of how to create pervasive performance and what possibilities it opens up, I will bring with me the process of coming up with the premise for *The Parable Task* and the deeply collaborative nature of both the devising process and the game itself. Most significantly, I am hopeful that I can replicate the kind of community we built within the Discord and emerge from this experience particularly affirmed in the power of making art in environments that are fun to be in.

In this thesis, I am attempting to explore the question of how we can tell stories collaboratively in the theater, and specifically how role-playing games can give us a structure for doing so. Embedded in my proposal of pervasive performance as a form is my strong belief in

the power of storytelling for helping us understand the world and imagine new possibilities for acting within it. Making contact with alternate realities and fictional worlds and experimenting with ways of being in them reveals to us the ways in which our everyday reality is constructed, malleable, transformable. It also proves to us that we have the capacity to change it, which holds immense value in a world in which marginalized people are systemically disempowered, and in which it is so easy to feel like there's nothing we can do. I posit that inviting people to play in community with one another doubles as an invitation to speculate and to imagine otherwise.

I am less interested in proposing alternative futures than in exploring what it looks like to create conditions in which we might do that work together, with no hierarchy of artist/performer/audience to limit whose contributions are considered credible and whose are not. Boal famously described his poetics of the oppressed as "not revolutionary in itself, but ... surely a rehearsal for the revolution" (122). In a similar vein, I understand pervasive performance as a form that gives audiences space to experiment with creating other worlds, and to do so in collaboration with other people. In my insistence that artists cede control of meaning-making, I am not attempting to champion our individual right to decide what something means or why it's important but rather to point toward the value of creating stories in collaboration with one another.

I believe that pervasive performance offers us a container in which we can collaborate with one another in experimenting with other ways of being in the world, or constructing entirely new realities. In a collaborative storytelling practice, we must shift our understanding of the role of the artist to someone who points in a direction and invites the audience to follow them. As I discovered in *The Parable Task*, this is a terrifying leap of faith to take as a designer, but the community we formed on our Discord server produced a narrative that felt more special and

powerful by virtue of emerging from our collaboration with one another. Together, we told a story, but more importantly, we experimented, imagined, and built friendships and connections that persist beyond the game's conclusion.

APPENDIX:

DOCUMENTATION OF *THE PARABLE TASK*

Links

- Moradna Torch Discord (invite link)
- *The Moradna Torch* newspaper
- Daisy's Google Drive folder
- Katrina's Instagram account
- the Moradna Cryptid Club Instagram account
- Raven's Tumblr account

Discord Channels

The best way to get a feel for how gameplay went is to read through the server; the most important channels to look at are:

- # daisy-translations
- # ads
- # clues
- # the-hermit (player photos of all geocache contents)

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