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ZKOUMÁNÍ HRY, JAKOŽTO DRAMATURGICKÉHO NÁSTROJE VE TŘECH
DIVADELNÍCH PROJEKTECH

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MASTER'S THESIS

**LUDIC PRINCIPLES IN PERFORMANCE
PRACTICE.**

AN EXPLORATION OF PLAY AS A DRAMATURGICAL TOOL IN THREE THEATRE
PROJECTS

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ABSTRAKT:

Tato práce se věnuje kvalitativnímu zkoumání hry a herních principů a jejich užití v rámci divadelní tvorby, nejen jako nástroje k divácké interakci ale i nosný dramaturgický přístup ke tvorbě narativu. Práce je ukotvena na podkladu teorie hry (Huizinga, Sutton-Smith, Burghardt, a další) a na zkoumání témat metodou "performance-based research" - tedy skrze vlastní uměleckou tvorbu - v projektech Sandbox, Collective Play a Cthulhucén.

ABSTRACT:

This thesis focuses on a qualitative exploration of play and ludic principles, and their use in theatre practice, not only as a tool for audience interaction but also as a valuable dramaturgical approach towards creating narrative. The text is anchored in play theory (Huizinga, Sutton-Smith, Burghardt, and others) and in the analysis of selected topics through the method of "performance-based research" - analysis through creative process and practice - in projects Sandbox, Collective Play, and Cthulhucene.

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INTRODUCTION

“Play is characterized by a vital impulse that is always new, always in movement. By acting as though we are playing, we charge our action with this impulse. We free ourselves from death. Play makes us feel alive. It gives us the excitement of life. In the other model of acting we do everything as though it were a duty, as though we ‘had’ to do it. It is in the ever new excitement of play, quite the opposite to the alienation and madness of capital, that we are able to identify joy”

(Bonanno, 1977, p.17).

This thesis is an examination of the concept of play and how it fits into performing arts both in general terms and in terms of my own practice. Before we delve any further, I would like to specify that by play, I mean the act of ‘playing’ and other ludic¹ practices covered by this field, rather than any theatrical texts or events. Although we could possibly argue that performance is already a playful act, in my mind, the phenomenon is much more elusive and has its own forms of engagement which are not necessarily synonymous with the nature of theatre or performance but carry immense potential as a method of engagement with our audience, our performance material, and even as a general creative philosophy for one’s practice. My interest in play and its involvement in my performance practice has been developing over many years through a variety of experimentation processes in different shows. As a director, I am drawn to creating non-traditional ways of involving the audience and exploring how simply having *fun* can be a dramaturgical tool. This idea is closely connected to the dynamics of audience agency and even to how different external social and political hierarchies affect the world of the performance. This particular interest is probably tied to my personal life as well as my artistic work. As a queer and trans* individual, I am accustomed to playing with my role (in terms of gender as well as socially) and other’s expectations while constantly being made aware of societal imbalances both concerning people like myself and others whose existence is also considered contrary to the cisheteronormative, white and wealthy power structures. My desire to find ways of

¹ Ludic from greek *ludos*: of, relating to, or characterised by play: PLAYFUL (Merriam-Webster)

dismantling such structures manifests in my practice as an artist, too, following closely with contemporary ideologies of social liberation, which don't prioritise just rage and aggression but also joy and community as radical acts of resistance. In his essay *Abolition of Work*, Bob Black writes that he dreams of a world that is lazy and playful and that play is the antithesis of work because work (or labour, to be more precise) only recognises activities which function for its benefit: "Leisure is nonwork for the sake of work. Leisure is time spent recovering from work and in the frenzied but hopeless attempt to forget about work," (1991, p.2). While the utopias he creates are far out of the realm of this thesis (and for many even far out of the realm of possibility), I still believe that he manages to make an important observation about ludics - that play's uniqueness and potential lie in its resistance to the everyday systems through direct emotional action and involvement with and towards each other. When we play, we create intimate connections that are not based on anything but joy for its own sake. To me, these connections are endlessly fascinating, and I am continuously striving to make space for creating bonds through performance, not just between spectator and performer but on a deeper, human level that transcends even the widest chasms of understanding.

I. FOCUS

While different forms of play are being utilised in art, most of them are still associated with pedagogy and operate on the presumption that play is a childish thing and therefore, much of the discourse is focused on children. Since my work is meant primarily for adult audiences, a large part of this thesis concerns the challenges of creating invitations and enabling the spectators to play in the first place, as adults are usually more resistant to interaction. The most memorable experience of a performance that, in my opinion, achieved this was during my first visit to Tate Modern, where Isabel Lewis exhibited her *Occasions* in a segment titled *21st Century Ritual*:

"celebratory and sensory gatherings of things, people, plants, music, and dance...a more complete, bodily experience for the visitor offering an open situation in which guests may freely enter, exit, and

revisit...Her *Occasions* investigate how the subtle introduction of a word, sound, movement, or scent can shift perception and awaken the importance of being together” (2017).

There seemingly wasn't much to the installation - some plants and a bar. However, the energy of meeting and being together in the space of an exhibition dedicated to having fun with each other was eye-opening. This installation inspired me to explore both durational shows and how space and collaboration with the audience influence both the form and content of performance and vice versa. The process led me to examine how we as audiences become complicit in the happenings onstage (or within the world and happenings of the performance) and how this complicity is created in the first place. I engaged with this topic fully for the first time in my show *Atlantis* (2018) which focused on greenwashing and Western involvement in the global ecological crisis and the ways these topics are portrayed in popular media, especially in the 'disaster movie' genre. The show was conceived as a party set in the year 2050 in an underwater city for the rich who managed to escape the global ecological crisis after the rise of the ocean levels. The audience was invited to explore the space and simply have fun while there, they were provided with drinks, snacks and entertainment. The host of the party, one of the city's residents, would occasionally chat up the audience and, when questioned, would reveal information about the world of the performance, from social divides in the city to the ecosystem collapse on the surface. The audience was free to choose and to pursue this information or ignore it and keep the party going, despite the obvious issues of its circumstance.

This piece was my first experience with the idea of fun and immersive dramaturgy as a tool for engaging with the audience and alternative narrative approaches. Since then, the exploration of this topic in my performance practice has led me to play and various ludic approaches used in different artistic disciplines and education and to strategies applied in the development of narrative and video games. During my studies at DAMU, I have been researching different ways in which play features in dramatic arts and how to engage with it not just as a dramaturgical device but as a topic in itself. This thesis aims to serve as a qualitative summary and reflection on the different findings encountered during this process in the form of

three projects I have developed during the course of my studies and the ways in which each of them approached play both as a topic, a dramaturgical strategy and a philosophy of making.

II. STRUCTURE AND RESEARCH METHOD

This text is separated into two parts, each meant to shed light on the subject matter from a different angle. The first part, which includes chapters one to three, focuses on providing a theoretical introduction to the topic of play. In my opinion, it is necessary for the understanding of play's practical engagement as a dramaturgical tool in devising and audience interaction to present it first through this scientific lens to better comprehend its history and place in human evolution and culture. Chapter 1 provides insight into the different ludic theories, the role of play in different societal contexts and types of play that elude traditional definition. To prevent confusion, I decided to split the theoretical description of play in connection to theatre and performance into two chapters. Chapter 2 specifically focuses on play's connection to theatre through fields of anthropology and education, while Chapter 3 takes a more practical approach, drawing on strategies of audience and player engagement based on approaches observed in the work of other artists and developed through my own research. The second part is dedicated to the three projects and explores how each of them tackled different aspects of using play in performance. With most of the theoretical background being confined to the first three chapters, this part of the thesis takes a more personal approach to the subject due to the nature of the research and the method through which the topic was examined.

The main challenge I am facing with this text is that the topic matter is impossible to examine entirely without bias and subjectivity, given its creative nature. For that reason, I have decided to focus on approaching the research topics in a way that acknowledges these obstacles and instead embraces discrepancies and personal experience, as Kershaw and Nicholson write in the introduction to *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*: "intuitive messiness and aesthetic ambiguity are integral to researching theatre and performance, where relationships between the researcher and the researched are often fluid, improvised and

responsive,” (2011, p.2). Arts-based research works with the creative process itself as a qualitative research strategy. While performance is our framework, the approach is further complicated by play as both topic and form. Play is even more elusive as a subject; there is no objective way to measure fun, and reflecting on it in such a way raises issues in delivery. In the *Real Player Manifesto*, a text connected to the founding of the Ludic Society, Margarete Jahrmann proposes that:

“In the nascent discipline of Ludics, an investigator of games applies poetic practices of games and play as a method of research. Ludics constitutes a certain game system as a model for an optional poetic research discipline...artistic research on uselessness needs to apply specific methodologies” (Jahrmann, 2007, p.1).

I am therefore choosing to deliver the rest of the text free from heavy theoretical backing and instead focusing on my personal experience from making each project. In Chapters 4 to 6, I will attempt to describe how I have worked with the research topics and how they manifested in the creative process as well as the actual performances. While the subject matter is subjective and, therefore, will be presented in a personal, in places even anecdotal format which covers not only dramaturgical and directorial choices but in places considers even occasions surrounding the creative process, I do not want to leave this part entirely without structure. Each project gathered its research material through similar methodologies. These strategies include:

- *Core ideas.* First, I would like to consider the core ideas behind each project and how different content provides space for the inclusion of play in creative performative works.
- *Examination of key dramaturgical approaches.* The projects vary quite strongly in the way each of them worked with the concept of play. To help analyse each process, I would like to delve deeper into the dramaturgical structure of each project in order to understand better how play interacts with different formats.

- *Creative process evaluation.* Each project will be retrospectively evaluated based on how it managed to interact with the research topics.
- *Audience feedback.* Each project went through semi-formal information gathering of audience feedback in form of moderated post-performance discussions where we received the participants'/spectators' impressions of the project and their interaction with both the show and the play approach.

These points will be our guiding beacons for each of the chapters and will be examined in connection to either the development process or the final shape of the performance. Since each of the projects is significantly different both in form and subject, I will refrain from making direct comparisons between them and rather present each one with both its successes and shortcomings for the reader to draw their own conclusion on how each approach managed to engage play in its structure.

III. QUESTIONS & GOALS

The goals of this research are set in the long term and have by no means been completed. I doubt they ever will be, nebulous as they are, and more likely than not, the discoveries I will make along the way will be very far from what I intend to achieve. Though I believe that examining one's own art in this way will yield similar results - they will be unexpected, chaotic and sometimes entirely useless in the eyes of anyone conducting any research of high academic repute. However, as Jahrman accurately points out:

“Ludic research goals are written fictitiously, presented participatively and made public processually. Ludic methods of artistic research comprise contradictions, and are found in feedback between peers and in exhibitions, between radical artistic uniqueness and the claim of universal validity.” (2021, p.320-321).

And so, while my general aim is in line with the playful excitement of exploration and discovery - play is joy for its own sake and so, in many ways, is my work - I am hoping that this paper serves as a map; a map of paths yet to be taken, those already travelled, and some which may need to be revisited (maybe even more than once). It is a summary of what I have learned and what I have yet to learn. My goal for this paper is to show my experience, in all of its messiness, successes and failures, in the hope that it will provide those reading it with at least a fraction of the revelations writing it had for me.

Before diving into the text itself, I want to include some questions I ask myself a lot in relation to playing in performance and playing in general. I cannot guarantee all, if any, of these will be answered here, but they will perhaps shed light on my thought processes when approaching the topic and each new project.

What makes play unique? What does it bring that other forms don't? Play to me is such a specific way of interacting with the world and each other, yet I still struggle defining precisely why and how that is. Through examining the concept in terms of my practice and through the theoretical background, on its own and in connection to theatre and performance, I hope to clarify this understanding.

How to encourage the audience to play? One of the struggles encountered over and over in this text and my work so far is engagement. While, in many cases, it is much less difficult than expected, the general concern is both the authenticity of the interaction and faith in my own skill and precautions put in place to ensure that any reluctance or resistance will be eventually overcome and will result in the audience's enjoyment. By describing the different approaches I have used in the projects, I hope to mark my experiences for potential future development.

How is play transformative? Without a doubt, scientific research of play in anthropology, sociology and, in recent years, gaming studies proves that play is important and has unique qualities that make it a catalyst for creativity, change and invention. Play is used in education and therapy, facilitating important discoveries about the world and ourselves through the interactions it provides. I hope to map

how my own encounters with the phenomenon have been transformative for my practice and my understanding of social, political and emotional concepts.

In the spirit of the ludic approach, I hope the reader makes their own conclusions from my work, the only one I sincerely hope they share with me is the excitement over the possibilities of playing.

PART I.

1. DEFINING THE TERM 'PLAY'

When we try to think about play, we will most likely not be able to come up with a solid definition. In theoretical terms, play is an amorphous blob, ever-changing, it is an amalgam of actions that escape meaning and purpose. Although it can be adapted for certain means and purposes (such as education), the act itself remains in the grey zone in terms of its objective and morality. The enlightenment era has created an image in our heads of play as something child-like, innocent, and beautiful. And while it can be all those things, play is also dangerous, obsessive, and dark. Therefore, before we delve into the complexities of play within the performance context, we must once and for all reject the romanticised notions of play and create a definition that will form the basis of any further arguments presented in this text. I am not an anthropologist nor a sociology scholar; therefore, in this chapter, I will borrow liberally from the collective wisdom of academics and philosophers that came before me to make my case. We will approach the topic from several different angles of study, anchoring play in understanding its broader physical manifestations across species and its place in human social structure.

When we look at the majority of the classical and modern theories of play, we can roughly divide them into two categories in terms of viewing its function. Theories, such as *Surplus Energy theory*² or *Arousal Modulation theory*³, suggest a physiological necessity for play as a way of self-regulation and as something stemming from an individual mental or physiological need. Meanwhile, theories like the *Practice theory*⁴ or *Cognitive theory*⁵ focus more on the social benefit of skill learning facilitated by play.

Where, in my opinion, these theories fall short is the insistence on some sort of intrinsic functionality or benefit that play is meant to deliver. Whether it is the

² Propagated by English philosopher Herbert Spencer (*1820- † 1903) and German poet Friedrich Schiller (*1759- † 1805). Play is the result of surplus energy not spent on survival.

³ Propagated by Canadian psychologist Daniel Berlyne (*1924- † 1976). Play is a result of a need to regulate our arousal.

⁴ Propagated by German philosopher and psychologist Karl Groos (*1861- † 1946). Play is a tactic for exercising skills necessary for survival.

⁵ Propagated by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (*1896- † 1980). Play is an assimilation tool to match our environment to our cognitive constructs.

benefit of relieving stress or cognitive or social development, the idea that play has a social or biological purpose is usually linked to Darwinist theories⁶ of evolution, going as far as suggesting play's role as a practice tool for natural selection: "These theories often share the assumption that the existence of play depends on the beneficial function that it performs. Play exists, it would seem, because it is good for us" (Rodriguez, 2006). The function-centred view of play also leads to it being examined primarily, or sometimes even solely, as a childish activity or an activity found in children. This approach seems to stem from the theories' basis in the Western psychological and sociological vernacular and Western work ethic, which stands as an antithesis to play: "Work is obligatory, sober, serious, and not fun, and play is the opposite of these. This distinction...derives its major impetus from the urban industrial view of time and work," (Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 2001, p.202).

While these theories still offer interesting anthropological and sociological points that I would like to return to later in this text (such as the definitions of different types of play), I feel that my ideas on what play actually *is*, are much more in line with those of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* which rejects these essentialist views in favour of perceiving play's function as "not characteristically undertaken to acquire some extrinsic benefit. The essential function of play is the modulation of experience," (Rodriguez, 2006). Johan Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens* is one of the founding texts of play theory on which modern play and gaming studies are built. One of the ideas that resonate strongly with me is that play is something that we cannot, and possibly even should not attempt to constrain within a quantitative scientific framework:

"In play, there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. If we call the active principle that makes up the

⁶ Charles Darwin's (*1804- † 1882) theory of evolution proposes that "evolution is change in the heritable characteristics of biological populations over successive generations. These characteristics are the expressions of genes that are passed on from parent to offspring during reproduction. Different characteristics tend to exist within any given population as a result of mutation, genetic recombination and other sources of genetic variation. Evolution occurs when evolutionary processes such as natural selection (including sexual selection) and genetic drift act on this variation, resulting in certain characteristics becoming more common or rare within a population" (*Wikipedia*, July 23, 2022)

essence of play, “instinct”, we explain nothing; if we call it “mind” or “will” we say too much. However we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself.” (Huizinga, 1980, p.1)

It may seem paradoxical to base an academic study on something that defies categorisation. However, I believe that to understand and harness play and playfulness for our purposes means first fully embracing their ambiguity. Play is a free, unbridled, amoral act that, although eluding definition as to its essence, can be thoroughly examined through its practice in various contexts. I want to dedicate this chapter to the fields of study which form the theoretical framework of my practical research. These are the rough-hewn tools which we will use in later chapters to capture the mercurial concept of play in a way that can be utilised and replicated for future practice.

1.1. TYPES OF PLAY

In his lecture titled *Why Do Humans Play, Exploring Functions, Benefits and Meanings of (Dark) Play* (2021), Jaako Stenros calls play a “brute fact” that exists outside of human social structures and meaning-making. I find this acknowledgement to be extremely important for our understanding of the concept, as even though we are currently trying to examine it from an anthropological view, it is still beneficial to be reminded that it is an irrefutable primal act present in all mammals and, arguably, in a majority of evolved critters. It exists outside of humanity, and, no matter how much our collective ego would like, it is not a mark of higher intelligence or sophistication. We can observe play in many different animal species.

One interesting element, to which I will return in greater detail later in chapters 3. and 5., are the conditions necessary for play - or a playful mindset - to occur. In his *Surplus Theory of Play*, Gordon Burghardt outlines the necessary conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to set favourable conditions for play:

“Play is initiated when an animal is adequately fed, healthy, and free from acute or chronic stress (starvation, predator threat, harsh microclimate, social instability) and intense levels of competing behavioural systems (foraging, mating, and predator avoidance), although mild stress, including boredom and social deprivation, may facilitate play.” (2010, p.345-346)

When an organism is not in an immediate crisis regarding any of the basic needs but rather in a secure state, it has enough physical and mental energy to engage in play. We could therefore assume that the more secure this state is, the more developed and intricate play may become. This is something that we can observe, for example, in the distinctions between different types of play. There are many variations that list between four and sixteen, or even twenty, types and they change depending on the author and the field of study. For our purposes, I believe the abridged selection Stenros uses in his *Why Do Humans Play* lecture will suffice, as described in **Table 1** and **Table 2**.

BASIC TYPES OF PLAY

LOCOMOTOR	Concerns the body. We play through running, jumping, crawling, etc.
OBJECT	Concerns object interaction. We play with sticks, rocks, shapes... making sounds, building piles, etc.
SOCIAL	Concerns interaction with others. We play by chasing each other, play-fighting, etc.

Table 1

Unlike the above-mentioned basic types of play, the advanced types of play require a complex social structure and interpersonal relationships among the players and are ascribed primarily to human players.

ADVANCED TYPES OF PLAY

PRETEND PLAY	Concerns substitution on a physical level. We pretend to be a dog, the wind, etc.
RULE PLAY	Concerns codification. We play by adhering to pre-determined rules - football, chess, etc.
SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY	Concerns substitution of character/role play. We pretend to be a doctor, a knight, etc. We usually follow a more complex narrative that stems from these characters.

Table 2

Another predisposition (and simultaneously an accompanying aspect) for all types of play is the Magic Circle. The term was coined by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in the essay *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* and builds on the original idea presented by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1949):

“All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” (p.10)

In other words, play exists within its own unique boundaries that set it aside from the rest of reality and is carried out with utmost seriousness - although the play itself may be innocent and fun, the player is serious about their conduct and the play's rules. The *Magic Circle* may not be recognisable by an outside observer, but the dynamic for those consecrated is more than obvious. Whether it's the knight dealing a deadly blow to the dragon with their stick/sword at the playground, a secret language between friends or a game of football - the stakes and challenges which may not seem vital or fixed to an outside eye become a reality within the Circle's boundaries.

Thomas M. Malaby in *Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience* discusses Huizinga's understanding of play in opposition to the previously favoured distinction between work and play⁷. Although Malaby criticises both the materialist approach and Huizinga's, which focused more on distinguishing between play as an activity and the act of 'playfulness', stating that no such distinction (materialist or other) should be made, he brings forward an observation that I consider to be more than relevant for contemporary popular play: "Huizinga felt that the play-element [or playfulness] had been on the wane in Western civilisation since the eighteenth century, threatened by the drive for efficiency and the routinisation of experience it brought," (Malaby, 2009, p.210). I will return to this observation later in greater detail in relation to anti-capitalist approaches to play in my own works, but right now, I want to point out another important aspect of this statement which is the role of codification and rules in human play.

1.2. PLAY AS A PART OF CULTURE

When considering the nature of play, Stenros reminds us that it's not just a free, innocent activity; play is also repetitive, chronic, familiar, and compulsive. Through codifying play we attempt to codify our experience to be able to recreate it. This recreation of an experience or experience-based arousal may take shape through games or more nefarious forms, like gambling, and even form the basis of

⁷ "Play is an occasion of pure waste," (Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 2001, p.5)

rituals and performances (more on this in Chapter 2). The codification of experience has been especially influenced by consumerist culture. This codification is perhaps most distinctive in the impact of consumerism on play within the Eurocentric socio-cultural sphere through the broadening of involvement in play among adults. Historically, Eurocentric cultures have considered play, or at least its most common iterations, as something reserved for children. With the development of games, especially tabletop and digital games, the scope grew to encompass families and, eventually, adults on their own. Thus, behaviour that would be considered norm-defying in the past is now considered ordinary, with games and toys being developed specifically with adults in mind (games with violent and/or sexual narratives, tabletop RPGs, miniatures, etc.), since they represent a profitable marketing group. Stenros also points out the impact that standardised tools and play technologies have on the way we play, not only in public but also in private. For example, if we compare the experiences of a group of unrelated individuals who all grew up playing with Barbies, their anecdotes regarding private play will most likely be very similar. Likewise, since in recent years, play has been strongly linked with technology (esp. in the form of computer games and gadgets), we can observe certain generational trends of mainstream play, for example, in the shape of a Tamagochi or the Sims. From this point, another angle of play is presented to us, that of play as a cultural phenomenon.

If we approach play within the aforementioned dualist context propagated by Huizinga, et al., where play is both a *state of being* (or a prerequisite) and an *action*, we may see this approach manifest in the two forms in which play interacts with culture - play as a cultural basis versus a cultural product.

“The view [...] is that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning. Even those activities which aim at the immediate satisfaction of vital needs - hunting, for instance, tend, in archaic society, to take on the play-form. Social life is endued with supra-biological forms, in the shape of play, which enhance its value. [...] By this we do not mean that play turns into culture, rather that in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, that it proceeds in the shape and the mood of play.” (Huizinga, 1980, p.46)

We see play linked with innovation and creativity and presented as, if not necessarily a cause, then certainly an impulse for exploration. We can therefore imagine play as a significant societal mover in several aspects. Although there are many more, I chose to pick out four which will emerge recurrently throughout this text and which are the most relevant to this research - play as ritual, play as invention, play as a tool and play as a product.

Firstly, one of the foundation stones of what is often considered the cultural core of society - the ritual. Similarly to play, ritual is an activity taking place in the Magic Circle. And while we may consider the ritual to be an activity that has a specific meaning which in certain cases is undertaken under non-playful circumstances, we may see a link between the two in several ways. Colin Renfrew points out that “it is here that the similarities between play and ritual are at their strongest. Play is not functionally productive: in the primary sense, it is not functional. Ritual likewise does not directly transform the material world. Its transformative power lies in introducing humans to a new social reality” (2017, p.14). Much like a ritualistic gathering, Play in many of its forms, especially as *rule play*, comes hand in hand with an audience as well as performers and requires a certain level of captivation and suspension of disbelief. I will elaborate further on the links between play, ritual and performance in the following chapter; however, I felt it was important to introduce this topic early, given its significance in the (human) cultural landscape.

Secondly, as Stenros points out, play’s importance lies also in its creative ability as an “engine for invention”. According to him, play carries immense potential as a tool for discovery. In *Wonderland: How Play Made The Modern World* (2016) Steven Johnson presents a historical overview of human inventions that came from or were influenced by play, such as Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine or Girolamo Cardano’s *Liber de ludo aleae* (1663) as a first recorded instance of a rudimentary theory of probability, inspired by his gambling addiction. The invention facilitated by play, however, is not always positive. In *War as Play, War as Slaughter and the Laws of War*, Karsten Srtuhl discusses the link between war and play as originally proposed by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*:

“Once we understand that play often has a significant agonistic dimension, it should not be strange that play can involve the drawing of blood and even killing...Of course, [...] the lyrical and artistic expression of war creates a myth which may often be at odds with the reality. Still, what is important [...] is that this myth of war demonstrates the way in which human beings have historically understood war as a form of play and that, furthermore, the artistic expression of this myth is itself a form of play.” (2018, p.48-49)

Struhl draws our attention to the fact that even as an act of bloodshed and horror, war rarely leaves the Magic Circle in a wider societal perception. For example, he points out the Ancient Greek and mediaeval traditions of war held by principles and rules of ‘honest’ and ‘just’ battle. In contemporary times the Magic Circle takes on maybe an even more sinister appearance. For example, in 2020, the US military released a recruitment ad series titled *What’s Your Warrior*, aimed at Gen Z, which strongly reflects the visuals of popular shooter games, such as Call of Duty, presenting the army (and in broader terms war itself) as a gaming experience.

The third aspect of play is the one most often discussed is play as a tool. Although play, as has been previously mentioned, is considered by many theoreticians to be an act that in and of itself lacks a purpose and is of unclear usefulness, it has simultaneously been considered an exceptional tool for shaping and educating children: “Play is considered useful for the development of cognitive, social, physical, and emotional skills; it is ordered, structured, and organised for specific purposes that serve something outside of playing,” (Bulatović, 2021, p.18). This link between play and education has been present in our society since antiquity. Many contemporary approaches to play in education as a ‘character-building’ instrument (e.g. school games and sports) harken back to Plato and Aristotle:

“The playing of games and music served as a central element in religious ceremonies and social events...Plato’s suggestion for preventing social disorder by regulating the nature of children’s play is, according to the sociologist Alvin Gouldner in *Enter Plato* (1965), the

earliest recorded instance of such a connection being made,” (Armand D’Angour, 2013, p.294, p.300).

However, this approach also finds its opponents. To understand this position, it is useful to focus on the distinction between ‘play’ and ‘game’. In *Play and Education* (1972), Bruno Bettelheim makes the distinction to be that games are a type of rule play operating within pre-agreed external guidelines while play is in general free of such constraints. As insinuated above, when we talk about play and education, we almost always talk about games. In *Those Who Want to Play*, Marija Bulatović proposes that codified play in education is a tool with a singular purpose: “Today’s society is interested in youth education so that it can ensure young people are ‘ready’ for the labour market” (p.18). We see this approach implemented not only in schools but also in recent decades in workplaces, especially corporates, where leisure and play are used by employers as a tool for boosting productivity and morale. Bulatović goes on to criticise this educational trend, stating:

“The behaviour of the normed student grows into the predictable behaviour of an employee who will contribute to the reproduction of a given society. What kind of play is in play within instrumentalized education? The answer is simple – instrumentalized play that promotes growing up, ... monitoring and controlling the freedom of children/students to discover new things through play...learning focused exclusively on the modelling of forms of actions to its instrumental ends ‘would model its pupils to death’.” (2021, p.18)

In work environments this model has been further expanded by *gamification*, a phenomenon where employers and sellers include game elements, such as achievements, ‘playful’ competition and tasks in the work/shop environment to create the illusion of work as fun to boost sales and employee productivity. The fault here, clearly, isn’t with play itself but rather the way it is utilised. However, it is important to understand that in its multitude play can be equally a freeing, radical act as well as a tool for control.

Along with the power to produce, play has also been co-opted in many of its forms (especially through games) in the market as both an engagement/control tool (as discussed above) and a product facilitating entertainment. As Stenros points out, play can be repetitive and, at times, even chronic and neurotic. Especially these tendencies often get exploited by the contemporary games industry. While marketable games have great potential and are in many cases works of art (both in their video game format and other kinds, such as tabletop games, contests, sports, etc.), they in certain circumstances also open the door to much more malign realities: “The role of play as an instrument of capitalism is not limited to videogames. Because play is a type of agency that can be inscribed in media, capitalists can use the activity of playing to promote engagement with exploitative forms of technology.” (Sicart, 2021, p.4). One of the examples is the aforementioned gamification or the way the video gaming industry has been developing through the recent decades under the influence of the consumerist market - in the last ten years, we are witnessing the rise of mobile games, many of which are based on a structure of endless levels and repetitive actions (e.g. Candy Crush) or are a constant re-iteration of their own franchise (e.g. the Assassin’s Creed series) where the player rarely gets a new or challenging experience but is instead repeatedly exposed to the same mechanic. Whether it is comfort or neurosis, the player returns to the game to solve the same riddle over and over again, their engagement becoming profit since most of these games rely on micro-transactions or ads to unlock any actual player satisfaction. Similarly to being a tool, play as a product shows us its amoral nature, perhaps even more so, since as a tool, there is still a great potential for it to be wielded in a culturally positive manner, which I cannot say about profit. However, as artists, we need to be aware not only of the ways play is liberating but also of the downfalls and trappings surrounding it in order to be able to engage with it in a creative and even radical manner.

1.3 NORM-DEFYING PLAY

As has already been pointed out, play is a moral grey zone. The contemporary discourse on the subject has formed a distinct field of play that defies

the rules considered 'normal' by society⁸. This bracket covers all kinds of dangerous, perverse or morally dubious play as well as play that is usually not performed in public. While certain kinds of this norm-defying play are quite common, after all, even sex falls into this category for a lot of people. According to Michael J. Apter, play and especially norm-defying play is responsive to the player's arousal⁹. He categorises two motivational sources of arousal-generation as "telic" and "paratelic":

"The telic state is defined as a state of mind in which one conceives oneself to be pursuing an important goal, the behaviour being subsidiary and chosen to achieve the goal. The paratelic state of mind is one in which the orientation is toward the behaviour itself, together with its concomitant sensations, in this case, any goal being conceived as a subsidiary and essentially an excuse for the behaviour." (1989, p.22)

The paratelic state is usually what we consider to fall under 'playfulness'; however, as he also points out, the arousal generated from paratelic states is not only pleasant but can also be the exact opposite. His *Reversal theory* of arousal focuses on the closeness of certain kinds of emotions and explains how a pleasant state of high arousal (joy, excitement or even sexual gratification) may switch to an unpleasant one (fear, anxiety) and vice versa, as shown on **Figure 1**. This generates confusion in paratelic states, which may lead to norm-defying play where the sensations the players seek, exist outside of their (or others') comfort zone. **Table 3** shows a list of inputs which increase the players' arousal in (norm-defying) play as categorised by Stenros (2021).

⁸ *Note*. It is important to note here that for example some of the points discussed above, such as war (or some aspects of it), worker exploitation and even certain addictions don't fall within this bracket, since they are still considered societally 'sound'.

⁹ *Note*. Not to be confused with Berlyne's Arousal theory. Apter is not focused on the cause of play but rather on how different emotional states and stimuli influence our behaviour while playing.

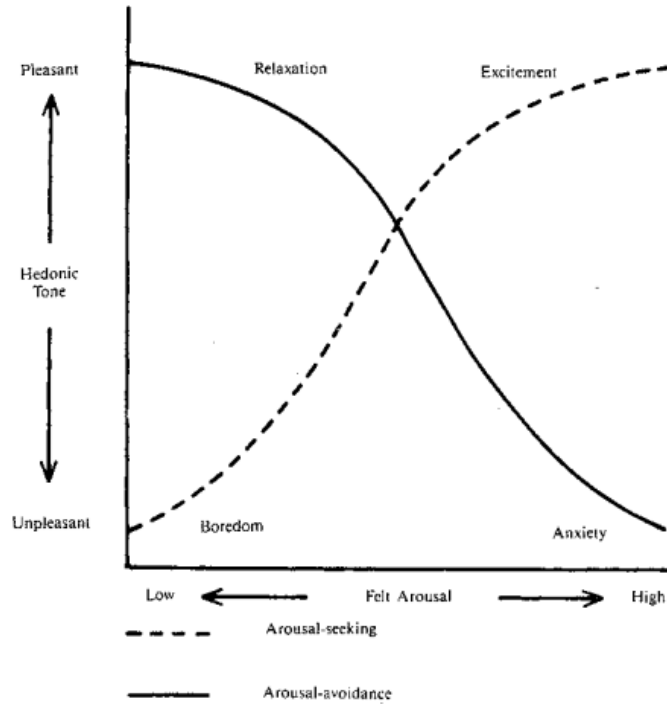


Figure 1 (Apter, 1989, p.21)

INPUTS INCREASING AROUSAL

EXPOSURE TO AROUSING STIMULI	Seeing blood, nudity
FICTION AND NARRATIVE	Empathising with character, character self-substitution
CHALLENGE	Conquering obstacles
EXPLORATION	Discovering new information
NEGATIVISM	Breaking rules and conventions
COGNITIVE SYNERGY	Jokes
FACING DANGER	Self-preservation
PHYSIOLOGICAL INTERVENTION	Drinking, taking drugs

Table 3

The dangerous arousal-seeking states manifest in a variety of forms. Diane Ackerman's *Deep Play* discusses the risk-taking present within play. According to her, when we play, we enter into a different state of consciousness which she likens to rapture. 'Deep play' requires us to commit to our game and to delve perhaps to a point where discerning between where play ends and our life begins is no longer possible: "In Indo-European, *plegan* meant to risk, chance, expose oneself to hazard. A *pledge* was integral to the act of play, as was danger (cognate words are *peril* and *plight*). Play's original purpose was to make a pledge to someone or something by risking one's life," (Ackerman, 2000). Stenros (2021) points out that all play inherently involves some level of risk - play can't be fully controlled and contains an unexpected element which is what makes it dangerous and is always at least in danger of being abandoned by the players. Ultimately, however, deep play still exists in a realm where play "needs to be maintained unbroken but at the same time needs to be challenged and put at risk in order to remain interesting," (Linderoth, Mortensen, 2015, p.6).

While 'deep play' still needs to preserve the Magic Circle, other kinds, like 'dark play', challenge and break even these fundamental rules. In *Playing*, Richard Schechner talks about 'dark play': "There are other kinds of playing, like dark play, wherein the play-frame is absent, broken, porous or twisted" (1988, p.16); he further elaborates on this statement in *The Future of Ritual*, discussing the issues with involvement in the game: "dark play may be conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark when some or even all of the players don't know they are playing. Dark play occurs when contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out, as in the double cross" (Schechner, 1993, p.36). He presents the idea that the danger of dark play lies in the fact that not all of those involved are aware of play taking place. This issue is also mentioned in Stenros's *In Defence of the Magic Circle*, where he discusses that 'dark play' disrupts the Magic Circle by blurring the preconceived notions of play and reality, "bad, dangerous, transgressive and harmful play seemingly challenges the idea of play as separate," (2012, p.11). While under normal circumstances, the observer might not be aware of play taking place, in 'dark play' they are drawn in and become an unconscious participant without their consent. For example, a bully might perceive an interaction as play, but their target does not.

A final point of interest with which I would like to close this chapter is that many norm-defying play elements are being actively used in contemporary video game design (Stenros, 2021) as stimuli to create arousal in players - for example, simulated violence or horror narratives. This phenomenological approach to play as a storytelling device is an important component which extends past gaming principles into performance practice.

2. PRINCIPLES OF PLAY IN THEATRE PRACTICE

This chapter focuses on the relationship between play and performer (rather than the spectator to whom Chapter 3 is dedicated) and the way play is connected to the base of core performance elements. When considering how play enters and intersects with performance, it might be helpful to establish a definition of these terms which most fits with our area of exploration. Since delving into the philosophy of performance is a theme complex to the point where a whole other thesis could be written analysing it, the following definition might seem a bit sweeping, but I believe it will suffice our needs. Schechner defines performance as “behaviour heightened, if ever so slightly, and publicly displayed; twice-behaved behaviour” (1993, p.1), similarly to what Peter Brook considers a baseline: ‘I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged,’ (2008, p.11). Therefore, our primary foci in linking play to performance are *intent*, *imitation* and *audience*. In other words:

1. Performance needs to be observed. To perform we need a spectator. The spectator does not need to be human or, in some cases, even real¹⁰.
2. Performance is an intentional act. In connection to the previous point, a performer needs to be aware of their audience and therefore when performing, their behaviour becomes intended¹¹.
3. Performance is an act of imitation. The imitation can be entirely obvious¹² or move “from the mimicry of outer form to the mimicry of meaning” (Lecoq, 2006, p.4) where the imitation becomes purely conceptual¹³.

¹⁰ *Note*. For example, a deity to whom a ritual is performed or an envisioned spectator when performing in front of the camera.

¹¹ For reference see the Acting/Non-Acting continuum in *On Acting and Not-Acting* (1972) by Michael Kirby.

¹² *Note*. An actor portraying the role of a character.

¹³ *Note*. A performer dropping an object - the act itself is real but in the context of the performance it is a part of the greater matrix of mimesis (Kirby, 1972).

Here we can observe a different kind of Magic Circle coming into existence where certain elements are maintained (e.g. suspension of disbelief, rules and boundaries of the play space, etc.) and some are expanded on (e.g. spectatorship, hierarchies between players and audience, etc.). Furthermore, performance also differentiates from play in the sense that when performing, we can mimic play (i.e. carry out the same actions when playing) while not being in a playful mood (Stenros, 2021). In addition, Plate and Smelik in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture* also focus on the cultural aspects of performance which we may connect to the cultural relevance of play, as described in the previous chapter:

“First, performance is playful; it is ‘in play, for fun’. Second, it has a ‘consciousness of doubleness’, as ‘performance is always performance for someone’. And third, it is a reflexive transgression of cultural traditions and transformations; this is what McKenzie calls the ‘in-between’, ‘liminal’ or ‘inherently unstable’ aspect of performance” (Schechner, Carlson, McKenzie in Plate & Smelik, 2013, p.186).

This chapter is dedicated to three areas linked to performance where its connection to play manifests in specific ways, which can be explored theoretically and, later on in this text, practically as a basis for using play as a dramaturgical tool. The first of the three areas examines the link between play, performance and ritual based on theories by Renfrew and Schechner and focuses specifically on beliefs and rules present in the three phenomena. The second area expands on the theoretical foundation of mimic and mimetic play in pretend and sociodramatic play, especially when it comes to role-play and characters. The third area then dives into a more specific field of performance and examines how play is used in connection to improvisation and the devising process.

2.1 PLAY IN RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE

In her book *Ritual*, Catherine Bell lays down what is considered by contemporary theoreticians one of the most influential definitions of rituals. She categorises six specific properties which together make up this phenomenon. When

considering these features, we might be struck by their similarity to both play and performance and how certain attributes exist across the spectrum between the three. The fluidity of this spectrum is complex and often ambiguous, as Clifford Greetz points out in *The Interpretation of Cultures*: “Of course, all cultural performances are not religious performances, and the line between those that are and artistic, or even political, ones is often not so easy to draw in practice, for, like social forms, symbolic forms can serve multiple purposes,” (1973, p.113).

RITUAL ATTRIBUTES (BELL, 1997, p.138-169)

FORMALISM	The use of formal or formalised speech and gestures that aid in creating structured roles for the participants through a restricted code of behaviour.
TRADITIONALISM	Following a previously set cultural precedent, for example, through the use of a dress code.
INVARIANCE	The use of precise, disciplined repetition, especially through physical movement and bodily restriction/control that goes beyond mere routine.
RULE-GOVERNANCE	Adherence to either formal or informal rules which define the happenings of the ritual-event and control its environment.
SACRAL SYMBOLISM	An appeal to a ‘higher power’ carried out often through objects representing said power.

(PERFORMANCE) SPECTACLE ¹⁴	An action carried out toward a spectator within a (scenographic) framework which inscribes significance to the action.
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Table 4

Ritual is reliant on its own inner rules and hierarchies that define not only the meanings inside the world of the ritual-event but also create an understanding of the outside world for the participants where “the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world, producing thus that idiosyncratic transformation in one's sense of reality” (Greetz, 1973, p.112).

We can loosely follow Schechner’s thinking about the linear progression between “play → games and sports → theatre → ritual” (in Kershaw, 2011, p.3) as advanced iterations of sociodramatic play and observe how play feeds into performance and ritual and how the growing complexity of their structure influences the way play is utilised. For example, play as a phenomenon that is uncontained and free does not need to follow most of the attributes described by Bell. Probably the only one that comes into consideration is rule-governance in the form of the Magic Circle, which signifies the agreement and understanding among the players that the reality within and outwith its boundaries are not one and the same (although, in some cases, even that is not true, i.e. dark play). If we return to the idea of seriousness in play presented in Chapter 1, we may see more precisely how play is manipulated in the varying complexities of performance and ritual. “The child is serious in [their] play efforts, and they have deep impact on [their] inner life,” (Bettleheim, 1972, p.4). While play’s seriousness is facilitated by playfulness, performance, on the other hand, facilitates its playfulness through seriousness. “The processes generating play acts can be nonplay or not playful, as in the production of many dramas, films, and sports. It is possible for spectators to be in a play mood, while the players themselves are neither in a play mood nor playing,”(Schechner, 1993, p.26). The

¹⁴ *Note.* Bell uses performance in a different way than I do, so I will substitute her use of the word with spectacle/spectatorship to prevent confusion.

performer is brought out of a playful state by either the audience (spectacle), the focus on reenactment/rehearsal process (invariance), or the focus on adhering to the rules (rule-governance). Here play becomes primarily a tool for entertainment and work with the spectator. While practice for the performance may be playful (devising, training, etc.), when the performance-event is underway, playfulness on the performer's side becomes hard to maintain. The ritual is serious in both aspects since it exists simultaneously inside the Magic circle and out, "ritual's actions are not make-believe; they are 'make belief': invariant sequences of acts and utterances not encoded by the performers' enacted by 'performers totally immersed in the proper execution of their complex tasks.' The outcome is binding." (Schechner, 2009, p.785) While play is real only while the players believe in it and performance relies on a series of predetermined rules/agreements between performer and spectator to establish its reality, the ritual is founded on the belief of everyone involved that its meaning is real both during its course and after.

The last attribute that has not yet been fully discussed is 'sacral symbolism'. In *Ritual, Play and Belief in Early Human Societies*, Renfrew criticises this particular point in Bell's list, claiming that it confines rituals into a religious sphere that goes against the reality of secular and non-human ritual encounters. However, he acknowledges the importance of an object as a symbol in play and its importance within the ludic context:

"The artefacts of play and of ritual are often very similar. Toys often take human or animal form, as do the effigies or idols of many rituals. The 'as-if' role of pretend play often requires that the toy resembles the object from real life that is simulated (the toy aeroplane for the airliner, the doll for the glamorous adult). The role of artefacts used in ritual has much the same symbolic relationship where X (the symbol) represents Y (the thing signified) in context C (the ritual)," (Renfrew, 2017, p.14).

This semiotic relationship between an object and the subject of play also extends to performance in the form of both props and scenography (in terms of theatre as well as games) as bearers of meaning. A trophy becomes the symbol of athletic

achievement, or a piece of red fabric carries the meaning of blood being spilt on stage. We could even go as far as to argue that in a playful context this meaning extends even to ephemera, such as tickets and merchandise, associated with a particular performance.

When we undertake the task of performance or ritual-making, we put ourselves to the task of organising these elements of play in order to create meaning or entertainment for the spectator-participant. Schechner likens the role of a theatre director to being a 'manipulator of playing' whose task is "learning how to shut out some of the multiplicity of converging, connecting actualities in order to "make sense," (Schechner, 1993, p.26).

2.2 ROLE PLAY

Role-play appears in various forms depending on the complexity of its context, however, in simplest terms, it can be described as a way of playing by becoming (an)other. We can observe the development of role-play from a child playing house or an actor performing their part on stage as play is moulded by increasingly detailed rules. Here again, there is, of course, a difference between play in the traditional sense and performance in terms of playfulness; however, it is the understanding of the former that will allow us to engage with the latter in ways other than the rule structure imposed through years of performance (and specifically theatre) formalisation.

Roger Caillois's taxonomy of play recognises four categories of play which define the basic principles on which a particular kind of play is based. *Agôn* represents what is perhaps best described as a game of skill. This category includes especially sports and games like chess which rely heavily on the player's mastery of the play's physical and mental requirements. *Aléa*, on the other hand, represents a game of chance where play is dictated not by rules but by luck, for example, gambling. *Linx* describes a kind of vertigo-inducing locomotor play, for example, the rush of riding a roller-coaster. The last category, which is of most interest to us, is *mimicry* which forms the basis of role-play:

“All play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: in-lusio), then at least of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe. Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one’s fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, ... he forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another,” (Caillois, 1961, p.19).

The idea of mimicry and imitation as a genre of play in connection to artistic performance can be traced as far back as Plato, who introduced the concept of *mimesis*, an artistic attempt to imitate reality. Role-play and sociodramatic play, in general, are often categorised as types of mimetic play, calling back to this term. While unusable in a contemporary context, the definition certainly seems familiar:

“The discussion of mimesis in connection with performance, in fact, is inevitable insofar as the very word μίμησις in Ancient Greek denotes an action, a performance. The substantive μίμησις is an action noun formed from the verb μιμεῖσθαι ‘to represent’, ‘imitate’... Μίμησις originally does not denote a relation between a text... and its referent, but between an action (i.e. a process) and its model. Μίμησις is used here for the notion of impersonation, ‘becoming another’,” (Bakker, 2005, p.105).

Although theatre in its essence is inherently mimetic and character portrayal is based on role-play, due to its constriction by inner rulings and formal boundaries, we may struggle to introduce the actual playful nature into performance. In a theatrical portrayal of a character, we return back to a point made previously regarding play and rule-governance in performance. The act, through its repetition and through the framework of performance, becomes significantly less and less playful. However, its origins are. An interesting recent field of study has opened in the past forty or so years with the rise of role-playing games. Both in terms of their video and tabletop format, they exist at an intersection of play and performance in a new (or at least

academically unexplored) way. The core of this type of game is the character/avatar the player embodies or projects onto and through whom the narrative is created. In *Psychology and Role-Playing Games*, Sarah Bowman discusses the unique element of identity freedom that role-brings through character immersion:

“The participant must accept a new set of precepts about reality, personal goals, and identity to play an active part in the unfolding of the narrative...Players’ primary sense of self or identity remains present while a new self emerges and acts within the fiction of the game world. This alterego represents the identity and the goals of the character,” (Bowman, 2018).

While in theatre and other performing arts occurrences of this phenomenon is not completely unusual, for example, in the form of character and method acting, it is rarely undertaken by the entire cast and often lacks the playful dualism of identity where awareness of one’s actions as a player and as character hold similar power.

Role-play offers a different way in which to approach this intersection through the crafting of a character/avatar. There seems to be a lot of divergent understandings of the difference between the two in the video game discourse. Even though Bayliss’s views of these dynamics are bound by his focus on video games and, therefore, there is a limitation imposed on the terms by their utility within virtual play, he points out a useful distinction which I would like to elaborate on: “the terms avatar and character are often used interchangeably to describe the player’s locus of manipulation, each term, in fact, describes a different type of relationship between the player and their locus of manipulation that arises from the interplay between embodiment as a state of being and embodying as an act,” (2007, p.2). Approaching the term from a performance angle, rather than video games, I propose we understand the distinction as such: when playing a character, we play a predefined and pre-meditated role whose involvement in the narrative is already set, we follow a predetermined structure and our projection into the character is a sympathetic one since a character “is both mimetic, a (re)presentation of a possible person, and synthetic, a textual construct constituted of signs,” (Phlean, 1989; in Vella, 2016, p.83). On the other hand, as an avatar, much like the term’s original meaning of ‘an

embodied deity', we project ourselves into a 'tabula rasa', which we craft to our image or needs and create an empathetic emotional bond through that process. The avatar is directly shaped through play, and the play is in turn shaped by our relationship to the avatar. As Banks and Bowman point out, "related to emotional intimacy is the notion of perceived agency or the degree to which the player sees herself or the avatar as being "in charge" of gameplay experience" (2013, p.1). This empathetic bonding is, in my opinion, one of the core foundations of role-play and allows the player to approach and form their play in new and unique ways worthy of being explored in greater complexity in performance/theatre practice.

2.3 PLAY IN IMPROVISATION

Improvisation and improvisation games are an established theatre genre as well as a commonly used method during the devising process. In contemporary performance, we even see improvisation become an independent form of entertainment, for example, in the 'Chicago style' improvisation tournaments that inspired popular TV shows like *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow define improvisation as "the skill of using bodies, space, all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character (even, perhaps, a text); to do this spontaneously, in response to the immediate stimuli of one's environment," (1989, p.1). In their book *Improvisation in Drama, Theatre and Performance*, they journey through the history of improvisation in various theatre forms and bring a spotlight on practitioners who have cemented this approach in the contemporary performance canon. Both in and outside of performance, improvisation is inherently a playful act, and indeed, if we examine the play types discussed in Chapter I., we will discover that most rely on skills where one has to come up with solutions, ideas or narratives that drive their play forward - whether it is finding new physical forms for pretend play, quick thinking to adjust to a game's rules, or making up stories and characters during sociodramatic play.

According to Frost & Yarrow, improvisation is a fundamental part of any performance and can be dated as far in history as the development of ritual practices. However, they view the key point in the development of improvisation as a

form of performance to be clownery. The role of the clown as an adviser or satirist has been present in society since Ancient Egypt and reached a key point in its development into the clown we know today in Western canon during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance with the separation of theatre from religious events and subsequently the emergence of forms such as *commedia dell'arte*¹⁵. This form has been brought back to popularity by theatre makers like Dario Fo, who also recognised the political potential of improvisation and clowning's ability to create an immediate and unexpected response, allowing the creator to avoid censorship or work with the given political material that engages the audience in more intimate ways (rather than pure spectatorship). Another important figure of contemporary clowning whom we cannot omit is Jacques Lecoq. Frost and Yarrow describe Lecoq's ideas on how play enters his approach to improvisation:

“Lecoq uses the term to signify the energy that is shared between performers on stage and in rehearsal... 'Play' also means the inter-play of this activity, emphasising the relationships which spark off or create new combinations: people, movements, moods or styles meet and collide, giving rise to different possibilities... All of these usages are underpinned by the sense that 'play' is a salient feature of mankind's capacity for the production of symbolic form, signalled primarily in Schiller's Aesthetic Letters and in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Thus it also implies playfulness, the pleasure derived from discoveries in the moment of creativity,” (1989, p.64-65).

While Lecoq's view of improvisation and performance is more of a game played with the performer's body and with the audience, contemporary theatre education also sees value in games and improvisation as methods for teaching performance. We see these tendencies in the likes of Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing, whose “notion of a new 'naturalism' was premised on helping the actor relearn simple skills of playfulness in order to respond directly and imaginatively to the dramatic circumstances” (Seton, 2007). Improvisation games also carry a potential of a strong political dimension. The use of this type of performance in connection to leftist

¹⁵ Note. With characters like Zanni.

politics and social justice can be found in the works of Augusto Boal and his *Theatre of the Oppressed* or the founder of the 'Chicago style' improvisation Viola Spolin who developed this method when working with excluded (primarily Black and Latinx) diaspora in the city, utilising audience suggestions and improv games in order to create dialogue across classes and to enable silenced voices to be heard under their own terms.

Including improvisation games and creating space for improvisation within performances gives the actors space to explore the material in a playful way and come up with their own input into the process, as well as keeping the performance 'fresh' in the final stages through unexpected permutations. Simultaneously, by embracing the unexpected, it can be a powerful tool for politically charged content.

3. PLAY PRINCIPLES IN AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

In this chapter, I want to focus on how participatory and interactive art uses strategies of play and playfulness to engage their audiences, from objects to human-on-human interaction and audience-as-actors. Audience participation is often viewed negatively among theatre-goers since it requires the spectator to leave their comfort zone. This poses a great challenge for performance-makers since their work has to predict and adjust to their audiences to prevent unintentional awkwardness or even outright failure of the show/art piece when faced with unresponsive or resistant participants.

Erika Fischer-Lichte describes a relationship between performer and audience using the term 'autopoetic feedback loop', where through their emotional engagement and reactions to the performance and performance space, meaning is generated based on the spectators' personal experience (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Play gives us a unique opportunity to give the audience space to be in charge of the way they interact with the material without the pressure of feeling exposed. Since we are approaching the audience as participants who are free to inscribe their meaning and actions onto the performance material outside of the structure of traditional theatre dynamics, we need to consider how space aids them in creating meaning.

I want to introduce three aspects of how to create the right circumstances to encourage the audience to participate in play. Firstly, what already explored forms of theatre and performance engage with concepts of play, and how can we draw from and build upon them to create engaging play dynamics? Secondly, we need a space for play to take place. How does a play space vary from a traditional performance space? What are the requirements for a play space? Thirdly, we need the audience to feel encouraged and safe to partake in play. What are the approaches to setting boundaries so our play doesn't get out of hand?

3.1 PLAY IN PARTICIPATORY THEATRE

In the past hundred or so years, theatre and performance have returned to examining alternative ways of audience engagement and participation, which go back to the times of the ritual and have later been abandoned by 'classical' theatre forms in favour of an audience of spectators. Some makers of participatory performance, such as Punchdrunk, who consider themselves to be the pioneers of immersive theatre, believe that participation breaks the audience out of their passivity. I am more inclined to agree with Rancière and his ideas in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011), where he proposes that the spectator is never passive since they still retain agency over their perception (rather than simply consuming whatever and however the artist intends). In this sense, audience participation isn't revolutionary but rather brings a new set of challenges to both the artist and the audience and allows them to approach the performance material from a new angle: "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. 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" (White, 2013, p.4).

Participatory theatre focuses on including audience interaction within its structure, whether it's one-on-one performance, traditional-style panto, immersive theatre, etc. While each style approaches its audiences in a different way, the main challenge they all face is how actually to invite the audience into the interaction. The most common challenge we will face when attempting any sort of audience participation is overcoming the spectators' fear and resistance to being involved. The process is often awkward, putting the audience on the spot, "a heightened awareness for one's *own presence* develops: for the sounds one gives off, for one's position in relation to the other people present, etc.," (Lehmann, 1999, p.123). One approach is to accept the strangeness of the situation, hoping that there is somebody in the audience receptive enough to the prompt to engage. However, this strategy is highly risky in both the high chance of failure and a lack of control over the audiences' behaviour once they engage in the participatory act - for example, a participant might refuse to perform certain tasks or become too enthusiastic about

being placed in the spotlight that they attempt to derail the performance. Therefore, to both allow for reluctance and keep some sort of control so the performance doesn't completely fall apart from unexpected circumstances, we need to create a framework of interaction that accounts for all such possibilities.

Some performers, like Ron Athey, embrace and centre discomfort in their work. In *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* (2014), Athey lies naked, stretched on a table with hooks in his eyelids and a baseball bat in his anus while the audience is asked to use surgical gloves and oil to take part in a kind of 'embalming ritual'. In this kind of show, the challenge of overcoming our own discomfort is key and is used as a tool for exploring the relationship society (aka the audience) has towards queer, unconventional, and in Athey's case, HIV-positive bodies. Since there is not much more happening in terms of interaction within the performance, our actions and feelings take centre stage. However, in situations that do not work explicitly with discomfort in such a way, we likely have to aim rather at providing aid for the audience to cross their unease. I have found that introducing the element of play is one such way in which to approach this problem successfully. Presenting the audience with tasks and boundaries within which they can freely interact with the performance removes the intimidating element of 'having to perform' and lowers the stakes that come along with this type of work. Instead, play becomes the focus. In my experience, there is a palpable relaxation when both the audience and the performers feel removed from their responsibilities and can engage with each other on equal ground with no expectation other than enjoyment. Punchdrunk, a London-based theatre company, attempts to cross this boundary through 'immersive theatre' - their shows are usually set in specific locations, and the audiences are allowed to move through and interact with the set and even talk with the performers, rather than simply observe the happenings. Sometimes, the participants are even given masks and costumes of their own to feel even more part of the show in the artists' attempt to break the fourth wall. However, in my opinion, when it comes to working with play and audiences, the fourth wall should not just be broken, it needs to be destroyed altogether. By this, I don't necessarily mean that we get rid of our story or our characters, but that the audience is made aware that they are on an equal level with the artist and that they have the power to create along the performers, rather than being given an illusion of agency, as is the case with many

participatory and immersive performance makers, like Punchdrunk who, in my opinion, transformed their idea into a commercial theatre Disneyland which prioritises spectacle gimmicks over genuine engagement. As Lehmann says: “what is important is the *shared space*: it is experienced, used and, in this sense, shared equally by performers and visitors. A ritual space without a rite develops through palpable concentration. It remains open, no one is excluded...” (1999, p.122).

Non-hierarchical approaches to performance-making are certainly difficult to pull off; after all, there always has to be someone who has the final word when making a show. But approaching our work as facilitators of an experience, rather than some grand masters of entertainment, can certainly prove helpful. When working with performers, we should therefore aim to create play structures that are also enjoyable for them. During my undergraduate studies, I took part in two shows by Lars Neupert, who indulged their actors not to perform but rather to create tasks and frameworks that were enjoyable and fun for them; in other words, their performance task was to play - either alone or with each other or with the audience. In their feedback, an overwhelming part of the participants (both from the audience and performers) reflected positively on this approach, claiming that witnessing others playing gave the performance an interesting dynamic and how enjoyable it was to simply observe others having fun. In a sense, we arrive back to the Magic Circle, but instead of containing it to the stage or setting different rules for some and others, we should aim for a game that works for everyone.

3.2 CREATING A PHYSICAL SPACE FOR PLAY

When it comes to the play space, we first need to specify for ourselves what kind of engagement with the audience we seek. These approaches have been explored especially in contemporary game design and can be driven by the players themselves or, for example, product marketability. Going back to Chapter I. and the different utilisations of play as a tool for engagement and play as a product, we can observe how certain forms of play exist in varying spaces. For example, in games intended for market value rather than player satisfaction, such as the popular mobile game Candy Crush, the (virtual) play space is created in a way that prioritises

familiarity and repetitiveness, encouraging the player to engage with the same patterns over and over again with little to no freedom given to stepping outside of the set structure and play 'on their own terms', urging the player to return to the play space through creating intense but short-lasting satisfaction. Meanwhile, game design that focuses more on the player experience tends to be often set in loose structures and encourages exploration. A good example of that is narrative and role-playing games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*¹⁶, which provide the player only with formal rules, such as character stats and obstacles, but the content of the game is entirely up to the players to create through improvised group storytelling. Our main focus for this text will be primarily on the second relaxed approach, and we will explore theoretically how different ways generate player engagement and satisfaction.

In *Toward a Ludic Architecture*, Steffen Walz presents a model of "eight primary functions in the construction of ludic architecture":

Constraints and boundaries. In a very concrete sense, boundaries are representations of the demarcation concept of the magic circle.

Concealment and protection. As the player's ally, the gamespace can protect or support the player in performing an activity.

Opposition. The gamespace or a spatial property thereof opposes the player in a problem situation for which a solution exists.

Orientation. Orient player; help player understand gamespace; in mazes: disorient player

Objective. A clearly defined goal.

Symbol. The symbolic function architecture can have in gameplay... construction simulations in which functionalities are symbolised by architecture.

Reward. Real representations of achieving goal objectives - trophies, awards.

Player creation. Players create their own gameplay and gameplay world within the constraints of the game's design.

(2010, p.90-94).

¹⁶ D&D is a fantasy role-playing game centred on collaborative storytelling influenced by *alea* principles. The game was originally created by Gary Gygax in 1974 and since then has been enjoying global popularity.

While this model is aimed primarily at video game design, we can imagine all of these functions applied in a real setting as well. While not every play space necessarily requires to have all of the functions, they form a good framework of basic points to consider. For example, a football pitch presents us with a different set of boundaries than an escape room, and we, therefore, need to adjust our play accordingly to the physical requirements of the space. Similarly, certain kinds of sociodramatic play thrive without the constraints of opposition and clear reward, while in some cases of rigidly structured games, player creation can become a hindrance.

If we focus on performance and theatre directly, we can see these functions as direct prompts for our dramaturgical engagement with the space (and even the narrative). I will illustrate this with two examples, using Michał Sztepiuk's performance *Fragged* (2016) and an installation performance/intervention by Mamoru Iriguchi *Tallest* (2017) for reference. For both shows, the concept of play and playful interaction is central, yet they have a strikingly diverging approaches to space.

In *Fragged*, Sztepiuk deals with how we as players of video games become desensitised towards virtual violence. The show was set in two spaces, one real - the Gilmorehill Theatre in Glasgow - and one virtual - a shooter video game map modelled exactly after the real theatre space. The audience was split into two teams; each team's objective was to send a player to sit at a computer at the centre of the stage, where they would enter into the virtual shooter game space. There the two teams' representatives would fight against each other, and when a player was killed, they were led by the performers/facilitators to the exact spot in the theatre where they died, and their outline was drawn out in chalk. Meanwhile, the loser was replaced by another player from their team, and the game started again. At the end of the show, the audience was led into the centre of the stage from where they could see the mass of 'dead bodies' created during the course of the game. Sztepiuk's dramaturgical design followed the functions of a ludic space closely, utilising the boundaries of the real space and crafting the virtual in order to facilitate engagement through elements of competition. Similarly, since he was dealing with a combat

dynamic, elements such as concealment, opposition, orientation and a clear objective (of killing the other team) were utilised for the purpose of the virtual game but simultaneously in full awareness of how these dynamics manifest in relation to video game violence. This intention finally came through in the symbolic form of the bodies, which transported the audience's awareness back into the theatre space.

Iriguchi faced limitations in his performance since the play space was already set and no adjustments could be made. *Tallest* was set inside the Tate Gallery and was conceived as a participatory way for parents and children to view the exhibit. The children were encouraged to sit on their parents' shoulders and were given a long cape to wear, which made them seem like strange, extremely tall characters. This way, the parents walked through the exhibition, guiding the 'creature' while the children could observe and interact with the exhibited art from a new angle. Instead of creating a new space for play, Iriguchi instead adjusted the play design to it, relying primarily on player inventiveness when interacting with the costume, art and other visitors. Given the fixed environment, Iriguchi's approach to ludic space design was focused on the rules of the play, prioritising player creation (or creativity). At the same time, the costume acted as a concealment element for the children's social interaction, giving them an advantage in the usually adult space.

In these two examples, we can see the different ways how to approach the play space in order to facilitate play. Each approach poses different challenges while offering creative solutions for audience engagement. Of course, neither should be taken as a template nor should this imply that there are only two correct ways of working with space in terms of play in performance. This is rather meant to illustrate the vastness of the spectrum we are dealing with and to serve as a reminder that the setting of our play-ground is as important for our dramaturgy as the content of the play itself.

3.3. CREATING AN EMOTIONAL SPACE FOR PLAY

It has already been mentioned that one possible way to view the Magic Circle is as a contract between the players about the safety of their play. This does not

necessarily mean that the play in itself has to be safe. Quite the opposite. However, in most cases, we still prefer to know that the play can end, that we have an out, a metaphorical safety break we can pull when the train gets out of control. In this way, theatre is the same. We are fine to witness unspeakable horrors happen on stage, like Tinker's torture of Carl in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*, knowing that outside of the Magic Circle of the stage, everything is OK. The challenge before us when facilitating any sort of performance or play as a director, performer or player is also similar. Ultimately, we want our audiences-participants to feel safe and to enjoy themselves, even while exploring difficult material. 'Safer space' is a term that goes back to the feminist, POC and LGBTQIA+ movements of the 60s and 70s and has reached peak popularity in recent decades, especially in the nightlife scene it serves both as a disclaimer and as a code of conduct for the visitors that the space/event advertises itself as somewhere people can enter without being harassed for their gender/sexuality/ethnicity/etc. Usually, a 'safer space' policy aims to predict possible dangers we may face, like unwanted sexual advances or aggression, and mitigate them by avoiding any unfavourable or triggering encounters and providing sufficient care to those who have experienced something unpleasant. This may include bouncers and event staff present in the space, education on various social issues, safe transport for vulnerable attendants, rooms with low audiovisual stimulation, etc. When creating a space for play, it is good to approach this task in a similar way since we want to ensure that our audiences-participants can engage and not be left mentally or physically scarred by their experience. In this sense, preparing for potential triggers and conflicts becomes a part of our job as artists and players.

It may be surprising, but I want to start the conversation about 'safer space' by focusing on its opponents. Especially in recent decades, many academics, as well as performers and social and cultural organisers, have spoken up against the concept. The first, most commonly discussed issue is that there is no 'safe space' since there is no way to predict what harm we may encounter, not all harm can be prevented and also that there is no way to account for each individual's triggers, hence, promising anywhere to be a 'safer space' is misleading. Secondly, an issue that has been brought up in relation to safer spaces in education is that at a certain point, 'safer spaces' can become unproductive because, according to some, they prevent

students from coming into contact with ideas that are divergent from their own and widen the ideological chasm between various social groups (Byron, 2017, p.1), or are prone to wilfully overlooking social hierarchies and therefore are safe only for the privileged (white, cis, straight, etc.) while simultaneously excluding, silencing or even endangering minority groups (POC, trans, queer, disabled, etc.) (Wise, 2004)¹⁷. As a reaction to these concerns, Aaro and Clemens propose the idea of a 'brave space': "to emphasise the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety" (2013, p.141), positing the idea that rather than trying to omit the dangers of conflict altogether, we create a framework that allows us to experience potential dangers and triggers in a controlled environment. When it comes to such situations, Stenros (2021) suggests looking for guidance with communities which have formed around certain kinds of norm-defying or dangerous play, like extreme sports or BDSM, which commonly operate with ground rules and notions of 'safer space' to allow for engagement in an unsafe action.

Based on these ideas, I have created several general prompts that I like to go over during each new project that I would like to share here:

What is the material? When approaching play, as well as any other creative process, it is important to initially consider the material we are working with. Is the content, the author, or the execution problematic? Are there any dangers and triggers that could be faced by certain participants?

Who are the participants? While it is a common practice in the performing arts to think about potential audiences, it is much rarer that such considerations extend beyond our work's marketability and engagement. Less focus is given to ways to accommodate different needs of the visitors, whether they are in the realm of accessibility, social experience or engagement.

¹⁷ *Note.* Wise talks only about the struggles of facing White ignorance and fragility when faced with discussions on anti-racism and dismissal of POC, especially Black & Indigenous folk's, safety and opinions, however, this issue also appears in many other intersections which I felt were worthy of inclusion into the argument.

Who are the performers? As has been pointed out by initiatives such as DAMU's *Nemusíš to vydržet* (You Don't Have To Endure It), even less thought is given to the needs and limits of the performers themselves. The idea that 'an artist needs to suffer for their art' is surprisingly still present in many cultural scenes, and the art workers are thus often overlooked in favour of the final product. While going beyond our comfort zone is a part of our work, I firmly believe that it should never come at the cost of anyone's health, safety or dignity and that clear communication and precautions must be put in place both during the creative process and during the project's presentation to reduce potential harm.

What are the circumstances? This pertains both to the space within the Magic Circle of our play/performance as well as outwith. Going back to Fischer-Lichte's auto-poetic feedback loop, we bring external factors into the space, which in turn influence the way we create meaning from what and how we experience the performance or play. How do the contents and themes of our work interact with current happenings both locally and globally? How do major events influence our work?

What is our space? I mean this both in terms of the actual physical space and the challenges associated with it. For example, working independently in a low-budget venue presents very different limitations than working for an institution. Some of the previous points may be thus influenced by pre-existent hierarchies, bureaucracy or by a lack of resources.

I would like to return to these points in the following chapters and examine how each project attempted to approach these prompts and what challenges we were faced with in the varying circumstances. However, right now, I will just conclude this chapter with the acknowledgement that securing emotional safety is a constantly evolving process where we as artists are tasked with learning, unlearning and constantly relearning in order to be able to create work that is both conscious and inviting to all.

PART II.

4. SANDBOX

In relation to games, the word sandbox describes a (video) game that provides its players with a great amount of freedom and interactivity and, in many cases, even power over the construction or alteration of their environment. Such games also often lack a specific goal and focus instead on exploration and creativity inside the game world. We have chosen this term as a working title for a project currently in development in collaboration with Katharina Joy Book, which started as a part of our residency in Alta, Invalidovna, in the summer of 2021. The idea was to create an interactive installation that explored how a space can tell a story. We weren't interested in creating an entirely new "theatrical" space nor tried to take a purist approach to site-specific performance but rather create aesthetic interventions that would prompt the viewer to perceive the place from a new angle while also being given the option to engage in whichever capacity felt comfortable to them, either join in, spectate or ignore us altogether.

4.1 DRAMATURGY OF 'OPEN WORLD' GAMES

Our main inspiration was open-world-style computer games, which to us, presented a curious way how to deliver a story. Rather than following a single linear tale, open-world games present the player with a plethora of quests, puzzles and locations which are spread over the entire world of the game in an attempt to portray the space as a 'living' environment. Such areas referred to as 'points of interest' often take the shape of a question mark on the map, which is unveiled as the player approaches and 'reveals' the location. Through this, they gather bits of information wherever they go, piecing them together to understand the game and its world better. There are hardly ever any restrictions in terms of access; you are free to wander into areas that are way too difficult for your level, which may result in having to flee or being killed in one blow during an unexpected enemy encounter. The driving force here is not narrative as we know it but rather curiosity and exploration. An open-world game is a rhizomatic assemblage, as described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "The rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" (2013, p.21). A

setting of such a kind requires specific dramaturgical approaches that manage to capture the attention of the player while still seeming cohesive. The main critique of this genre of video games is that they usually fall back on substituting actual narrative for quickly changing landscapes filled with menial, repetitive tasks to simulate action. Ulrich Götz discusses this approach, pointing out that “once [all the tasks are completed], a game world continues to exist, but only as a shell of empty game space, in which no further specific action can be expected” (2021, p.171). He suggests that a possible solution could be introducing “agents that are not stationary, but move throughout the entire game world in order to ally, exchange, persuade or attack when they randomly encounter each other” (2021, p.173); in other words, creating a functioning system of interactions whose purpose is not to be a checkpoint for the ‘main character’ (aka player) but to create a narrative independent of the player’s actions and agency. This is obviously an entirely different ordeal for game developers than for theatre-makers since living performers already come fully sentient. However, it provides us with an important prompt to consider when thinking about the dramaturgy of performance based on the dynamics of an open-world game. We have to ask ourselves, how does space alone drive a narrative? How do we encourage the audience to interact with the world of the performance without falling into the same traps that await most games of this genre? What alternatives are there to simply following and fulfilling tasks? And finally, how do we approach all of this in a public space, used by others than just the audience?

4.2 SPACE AND NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE

We were interested in trying to tackle this approach, but at the same time, we tried to stay away from contemporary immersive performance trends that could lead us to make a work that was a self-contained spectacle. We decided to approach the Invalidovna space as the main actor whose specific features we would be simply enhancing. Our idea was to create a sort of ‘double reality’ where the space would be fully operational in its original capacity, but simultaneously, we could create our own world within. One of our main interests was audience interaction since their engagement in our ‘show reality’ seemed difficult to sustain while they were also present in the world outside of it. We decided to take the play approach exactly for

that reason since we felt it would allow us to create an invitation for the audience without a sense of pressure. The aim then became to create a sort of 'backdrop' of a Magic Circle that the participants could enter and exit at will and which they would, for most parts, also be able to spectate.

We spent the first several days of the residency wandering about the building and the surrounding garden, finding spots which would become our "points of interest". While placing the metaphorical question marks was relatively easy - the Invalidovna space is full of wondrous corners that invite to be explored - we spent considerably more time coming up with events that would fill them. The main struggle was to pinpoint a way in which to structure individual happenings for them to be both present and non-disruptive. While many games, as has been pointed out, struggle with making tasks and Points of Interest seem repetitive and leave the player with a feeling they are just checking items off a list, there were some that, in our minds, succeeded in presenting the right kind of motivation for the players. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild is one such game, using the element of exploration and discovery as its key mechanic. Rather than using the traditional 'point of interest' to let the player know where to go and what to see (resulting in them not paying attention to their surroundings and simply trying to complete all the tasks on the map), the game map remains blank, only filling in important locations once they have been discovered. Different locations are visible from different vantage points in different parts of the map, and some are hidden completely, being closer to 'Easter Eggs'¹⁸ than actual narrative points. The idea of a variation of a treasure hunt was appealing to us since it gave the audience a purpose in their exploration. However, in our aim to still resist linearity, we have decided that instead of maintaining the rules of treasure hunt games where you work towards a singular goal (aka the treasure), we wanted to present something that was more like a mixture of many treasure hunts altogether. Each station for us represented a sort of 'mini game' that could be engaged in or observed. As the space itself was our primary focus, we were less concerned about cohesiveness between the individual points and instead aimed to devise them in accordance with their surroundings. The decision to create a number of small, seemingly disconnected interactive encounters

¹⁸ Explain easter eggs

posed another challenge. Since the beginning of the project, we debated whether or not we should involve performers in the work. In our minds, actors who walked talked and performed could endanger the agency of the audience to explore the space on their own terms. Our primary intention was to work mostly with objects since they felt less intrusive to the space. However, with the introduction of encounters to the devising process, we decided we needed live performers to maintain control over certain interactive aspects. In the end, we developed several ideas for each point we wanted to include.

The communal garden boxes at one end of the garden drew the eye of anyone arriving into the space. During the residency, we spent several days walking around the entire area, writing stories for different spaces in speculation of what fictional worlds each of them held. The bulbous cabbages and ripening tomatoes and their proximity to the compost heap in the height of the summer heat conjured up images of carnage and tragedy. We saw the remains of an ancient battleground with only a few heroes left standing. In the final presentation of the residency, this took the form of a human-sized carrot which hid among the greenery, mourning its fallen comrades, perhaps waiting for revenge or an opportune window to escape to safety. Another interesting feature to us was the facade of the building itself, drawing us because of the windows and its tall verticality. We constructed several fixed elements onto the building itself - a large centipede caught in the middle of climbing from one window to the next, an eye of a giant creature (maybe a dragon?) watching the movement of anyone who passed down below and a long snout climbing its way down the wall trying to sniff those on the ground. We envisioned rivers running through the gaps between the tiles and a portal to hell in the toilets, guarded by a goblin who haggled over toilet paper. As the residency drew closer and closer to its end, however, we became strongly aware that there were too few of us with too few resources to carry the idea out in full, so a majority of the performance had to remain in our own heads. We had to devise a plan which would allow us to get our meaning across and offer the audience the engagement we were aiming for, even without the physical representations of a large part of the installation elements.

4.3 ENGAGING THE PLAYERS' IMAGINATION

We decided to look for a solution in one aspect of the game genre that we have not yet explored. While we have examined how player-environment interaction functions within the actual gameplay, we omitted the potential that maps bring to the space. We have mapped the space in our devising process through different means, like drawing and text, but haven't considered offering these resources to the audience. Simultaneously, it proved not only to be a useful approach in describing our process but, more importantly, helped us solidify the idea of a double reality. We could create a lens through which the spectators were able to perceive the space while engaging their imagination and desire to explore. At the same time, we became aware of how maps engage space in non-linear narrative building. Going back to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic structures:

“The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. Make a map, not a tracing... The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious... It is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (2013, p.12).

Using a map-making tool, we created a floorplan of the Alta garden with all the elements we have devised during the residency, whether or not they were present in the space physically. Before the presentation, the audience was given these maps and encouraged to explore the space according to what they saw both in real life and in the world depicted on paper.

During the feedback session that followed the presentation, we were pleasantly surprised by how many audience members actually took to the task. Although many expressed regret over a lack of physical representation of the points of interest, the fact that many were able to play with our world even without visual stimuli brings forward an interesting point for future consideration for the project and perhaps my performance practice in general. From my experience with narrative games, I am aware that not all games rely on visualisation. This specific kind of

imagining in storytelling games is described by the fitting term 'Theatre of the Mind'; however, it is still reliant on verbal descriptors like we would find in literature. This experience raised new questions regarding different prompts and materials that it is possible to interact with playfully and how much freedom it is possible to give to our players and still keep them engaged.

As of now, the Sandbox project still remains unfinished for both a lack of time and resources to carry it out in its full scope. Although there are many parts of this show which need to be reimagined in order to move on, for me, it has opened many new ways of thinking about play already, some of which I will be taking along into future work. Hopefully, we will one day be able to bring the ideas in this project to life, whether in their original form or some new reiteration. For me certainly, nonlinear narrative in games remains firmly at the top of the list of topics I wish to explore.

5. THE MANUAL FOR COLLECTIVE PLAY

The Manual was a project created by members of the Prague-based Trigger collective under the commission from Y Events and the Montag Modus series. Inspired by Pauline Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations*¹⁹ (1974), our aim was to create a performance event that invited the audience to engage and play with music regardless of any previous knowledge or training. As an electronic music collective, Trigger attempts to make the Prague music scene more accessible to excluded and underrepresented groups. The Manual for Collective Play was a reaction to and an attempt to overcome the challenges faced by a majority of these groups when faced with inequality based on gender, age, race or even equipment, based on our own experience. The Manual itself was created during the height of Covid lockdown and existed online, originally as a virtual booklet and later as a workshop on Zoom. A year later, we developed a live version, called *Collective Play*, that was presented at Divadlo X10 in Prague.

The Manual was inspired by folkloric storytelling practices and choose-your-own-adventure books we recalled from our childhoods. We were drawn to this kind of non-linear storytelling and tried to emulate the playfulness of that experience through the Manual's structure which was conceived as a branching path between individual exercises. At the end of each exercise, the reader could choose between two or three paths to continue, all eventually leading them back to the beginning. Through this cycle, the Manual could be explored indefinitely through new ways and exercise variation. The exercises themselves were a mix of *deep listening*²⁰ and performative tasks that could be carried out individually or together with friends, depending on the lockdown situation.

¹⁹ A series of listening exercises created by experimental composer and electronic music pioneer Pauline Oliveros for ♀ Ensemble, a feminist collective practising listening as an activist method

²⁰ "Deep Listening, as developed by Pauline Oliveros, explores the difference between the involuntary nature of hearing and the voluntary, selective nature of listening. The practice includes bodywork, sonic meditations, and interactive performance, as well as listening to the sounds of daily life, nature, one's own thoughts, imagination, and dreams. It cultivates a heightened awareness of the sonic environment, both external and internal, and promotes experimentation, improvisation, collaboration, playfulness, and other creative skills vital to personal and community growth" (from deeplisting.rpi.edu).

5.1 INTRODUCING THE AUDIENCE TO PLAY

In the performance, we hoped to emulate this strategy with a live audience for the first time. The performance was split into three smaller segments that took place between other shows on the programme. In each segment, we looked at a particular aspect of *The Manual* we saw as important and ways that would help us engage the audience. We were concerned that simply performing the *Manual* would not be enough to cross the performer-spectator barrier. In Chapter 3, I have discussed the importance of creating an invitation for the spectators to leave their comfort zone and engage with the show. Our aim was to explore different engagement strategies in order to successfully transition our work from its online form into real life. We hoped to create an arch through the three sections which would help us encourage the audience to take an active part.

Orchestra

The challenge we faced in the first section was how to even open the audience to the idea of playing. We felt that in order to let our participants loose later, we needed to create an introduction to the concept that still relied on some rules of the performer-spectator agency and hierarchy. The audience was split into groups or 'voices' and given non-traditional instruments. Each voice received the same instruments, so nobody felt singled out. At the same time, the performer-spectator divide was maintained by the seating arrangement where the audience sat in a circle around the performers who took on the role of musical conductors. Each conductor was in charge of their voice, giving them directions on when and how to play. We intentionally selected instruments that were not just unusual but also quite silly and nonsensical (for example, instruments made out of vegetables, large sheets of PVC, lollipop whistles, or, to mirror one of the exercises from the *Manual*, their bums) to lower the stakes of the performance. Since playing an unplayable instrument lowers the chance of error or 'doing it wrong', we hoped to get rid of any remaining awkwardness or resistance in this way, "laughter disposes of emotional tension which has become pointless, is denied by reason, and has to be somehow worked off along physiological channels of least resistance," (Koestler, 1967, p.187). Under

the conductor's instruction, the audience performed a 15-minute noise piece, with different voices taking turns or playing together in a humorous disharmony.

In the informal reflection discussion, the participants pointed out that they felt the most comfortable during the first section since they received clear and easy-to-follow instructions and, at the same time, felt safe observing and interacting with others because of their roles as spectators were still in place.

Playground

The second segment was intended to push the audience out of their comfort zone and further into exploratory play. Using both the instruments from the Orchestra and new ones, like a toy golf course or a cutlery wind chime, we built a 'sonic playground', with each object sounded by a regular or contact microphone. Interacting with these objects triggered various sounds, which were amplified through speakers, mixing together into a soundscape. The audience was given fewer direct instructions, except for prompts left near some stations - for example, a card that said 'hugs' next to a suit made of rubber chickens which squawked when squeezed. They were instead encouraged to freely interact with the playground and devise their own ways of playing the instruments. While these objects remained similarly 'unplayable', there was no score provided, and instead, the space was open to free improvisation. The only rule was to listen to each other.

While most participants seemed to be initially awkward and shy, they soon started to explore the space and its sonic dispositions, some coming and going throughout the segment's duration, some staying the entire time. The few audience members who didn't want to 'perform' were offered an option to become listeners instead. They were given recording devices and asked to move through the space, capturing any sounds they found interesting. Their recordings were then played back during the break between the performances and archived with consent to be later edited into samples for a Trigger sample pack²¹. We tried to encourage a playful approach even when manipulating the listening devices by encasing the recorders in

²¹ *Note.* This was a second sample pack in question, the first was created during an online residency with DGTL FMNSM (<http://www.digitalfeminism.net>).

objects that required a specific way of being used - one was inside a giant ear, while another was attached to a helmet by a long antenna.

The audience response to this segment varied; some enjoyed the playful exploration and the opportunity to be silly, inspired by their orchestra experience. Others, many of whom missed the first section, felt intimidated by the lack of rules and felt lost. The absence of instructions was also reflected by the soundscape itself, which at times left the ambient spheres and turned into a wall of noise when the participants became too engaged in their play and forgot to listen to each other. Even though the chaos during these moments was borderline uncomfortable, we decided that it wouldn't be beneficial for the participants' exploration process if we were to intervene and retroactively impose rules.

Dinner

We finalised the third segment only days before the actual performance, after other approaches we tried during our devising process didn't create a satisfactory outcome or seemed too similar to either of the previous actions. We felt that while we did approach the audience as a group during the orchestra, the playground, because of its fractured set-up in separate small stations, made the participants retreat back into their individualities again. For that reason, we decided to abandon our ideas of intentional play and instead focused on finding connections and collectivity. The remains of the playground were replaced by a 'relaxation zone' with blankets and pillows. To the side of this area, a small cooking station was set up, wired with microphones. Along with the audience, we ended up cooking the vegetable instruments used in the Orchestra, which were then eaten to the soundscape of knives rhythmically striking the cutting board as we chopped carrot flutes and the bubbling of frying oil.

Since this section was the last performance of the evening, it unintentionally became a bridge between the main programme and an afterparty which started when the audience and performers felt the desire to end the night with dancing. While the audience didn't reflect on this last segment as particularly outstanding in comparison to the orchestra or the playground, many felt it was an important part of

the performance arc and that without it, the show wouldn't feel complete. While, like us, many were also surprised by the spontaneous evolution into dance, some have pointed out that this unexpected turn of events felt like a natural continuation of the performance's playful spirit.

5.2 HORIZONTAL ORGANISING IN PLAY AND COLLABORATION

Although primarily a music collective, Trigger has a strong political core that is reflected in its structure. The group doesn't have a leader and instead aims to spread power and responsibility horizontally among its members. We try to embody this spirit of collectivity not just in the organisation but in our projects as well, this being no different. Although Trigger is a much larger collective, in the end, only three members were available to work on the performance for an extended period of time. Of the three of us, I was the only one with extensive performance-making experience; however, we decided to resist the pressure to defer to a hierarchy based on knowledge since this was one of the things we were fighting against in both the music scene and the show itself. Instead, we tried to take an exploratory, playful approach to the whole creative process. Since we knew each other quite closely, we gathered on several occasions in our homes and held informal devising workshops during which we read Pauline Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations* and created our own tasks and prompts for each other to follow. Outside of the process, some of us even tried to include certain tasks into our daily routine as forms of meditation and grounding. The entire process was regularly consulted via Zoom with the production and dramaturgical teams from the Montag Modus and Y Events platforms, and while we felt confident in our approach, there certainly was pressure placed on us by the organisers who were less certain in our ability to create an engaging performance. The whole situation was further complicated by the introduction of severe Covid lockdown restrictions and a sudden shift into virtual space.

Since we were unable to travel to Berlin, where the performance was originally supposed to be shown, we had to adapt to the online environment. We felt at that point that trying to come up with a Zoom call alternative to the performance would be too complicated, so we decided to venture down a different path and

instead create an interactive document which would engage with the idea of play and sound and could be later adapted into a collective live experience. Prioritising play led us to having to create and transform already existing prompts and exercises to be able to operate on an individual level since we assumed most of us would interact with them on our own. We were still concerned, however, that a manual went directly against our attempts at creating exploratory play and that the exercises could become too constricted by rules and guidelines. For that reason, we then also decided to explore possible forms the document could take and arrived at choose-your-own-adventure books. This type of children's literature appealed to us because of its openness to non-linear narrative, which to us felt like a possible way to 'hack' the traditional idea of a manual. The reader would be able to choose their own path and interact with the document as they saw fit. Introducing this form seemed to pay off in several ways; firstly, the element of a game format was much more appealing to the readers and secondly, since we gave the readers the option of choice, along with intentionally framing the exercises as prompts, rather than rules or steps, we also felt like we were rid of absolute authority over the text and the readers' experience. We were very conscious of the danger of becoming prescriptive or didactic as this hierarchy in our minds threatened the play The Manual was meant to facilitate. In the end, we created an interactive website where the visitors could roam through the maze of pathways, always returning back to the beginning, offering an endless loop of exploration. The website was launched in advance on the Berlin performance event web portal and social media, and the audience was encouraged to 'play the Manual' before attending the show. The organisers and performers also gathered over Zoom for a private long-distance dinner and celebration where they played the Manual together. While we were sadly not able to attend, we were glad to hear that our intentions with the document managed to transfer to reality and that the visitors felt compelled to take part and play along.

The actual show took place almost a year later in July 2021, in Prague in the X10 theatre. The organisers arranged a week-long residency for us to find ways to transfer the Manual into physical form. While we strived to maintain our exploration process, the distrust from the organisers towards our approach started to drive tension into the group. We noticed certain hierarchies starting to appear, such as me becoming a mouthpiece for the group while others were not addressed by the

organisers at all. The sudden appearance of these hierarchies became one of the main obstacles in our creative process. This imbalance primarily influenced interpersonal dynamics and, in turn, our ability to play with each other to devise the show. We struggled to maintain control, both of the project and sometimes even over each other, which resulted in a failure to create a dramaturgy for the third section of the performance. We had to consciously step out of the situation and re-examine the dynamics within the group and the performance. In the end, after a long series of discussions, we agreed to create rules for our interactions in the creative process and with the organisers as a way to maintain our playfulness with the subject material and to stay true to our intent of horizontal distribution of agency. Interestingly, this conscious attempt at regaining our footing resulted in the idea of the third act of the show. The dinner was, in a way, a peace offering we made to each other and an attempt to seek communal understanding with our audiences and the organisers.

This process was an excellent learning experience for both performance devising and horizontal organising. We became aware of how external pressures affect groups that are unprepared for certain eventualities and lose cohesiveness in the face of distortive elements present in the industry as well as the society at large. To be able to maintain the playful nature within our performance's Magic Circle, both in the devising process and the actual show, we had to create boundaries and be mindful of disruptions and our own vulnerabilities.

5.3 PLAY METHODS AS AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

While understanding play as a solely educational method is, in my opinion, a great disservice imposed on ludic practices, I also believe that it can be a great resource for learning. Our goal for this performance was to open up the possibilities of sound making to people who might be unfamiliar or intimidated by the process and to create a non-judgmental space where such exploration is possible. Frost & Yarrow make an excellent point about failure in improvisation: "The hardest thing to learn is that failure doesn't matter. It doesn't have to be brilliant every time - it can't be. What happens is what happens; is what you have created; is what you have to work with"

(2016, p.2). This mindset, in my opinion, stretches to play as well. Although certain kinds of rule play operate specifically on the win-lose binary, most play treats failure as another opportunity. My favourite example of this is storytelling tabletop RPGs, like the aforementioned Dungeons & Dragons, where critical failure, i.e. rolling a 1 on a die, doesn't equal losing the game but instead is understood to be a prompt for narrative development. In environments like music, where certain knowledge or skill is required of the players, the stakes can seem very high when it comes to taking part in an activity. For that reason, we wanted to create a space which allowed the players to fail without repercussions and to even present failure as something fun, for example, through the use of dysfunctional vegetable instruments. And while we lack the resources to use the same method to teach more complicated musical concepts and skills, we hoped at least to facilitate the first step in the journey of discovery.

Although the project has been completed in this form as commissioned by Montag Modus, we have been exploring its potential individually through various iterations. We have found that certain elements of The Manual and Collective play can be well adapted into workshops aimed at beginners and young people who are trying to explore sound and experimental music for the first time. For example, with my collaborators' knowledge and consent, I have recently adapted some of the exercises into a workshop that was part of a series *Krajina zvuků* organised together with Jana Nunčič, which took place in July 2022 at The Synth Library Prague, which is coincidentally the home of the Trigger collective. I was tasked with creating an introductory workshop to the series which would allow the participants to get in the headspace to explore more complicated musical concepts in later lessons. Reiterating the Manual turned out to be an enjoyable activity for the participants, and they reflected favourably on the learning process facilitated by this particular playful approach.

6. CTHULHUCENE

Cthulhucene was an exploration of dark play and the use of play as a tool in capitalist marketing. This show has probably changed the most out of the three examples during its development. Although originally imagined as a kind of participatory installation performance that was meant to double as a summoning ritual for the dark gods of consumerism, Cthulhucene ended up confined to a much more traditional format of a theatre show. However, the spirit remained and eventually managed to return to the project despite many diversions and detours. In its final form, Cthulhucene took the shape of a TV-style game show which completely fell apart and crumpled on itself under the weight of the need to win, revealing a nefarious otherness lurking beneath. Three character types - a working-class mother, a would-be influencer and a sports instructor competed against each other to win the game under the supervision of a charismatic moderator and his team of assistants. As the game went on and tensions started to rise, the true purpose of the game started to come to light - the negative energy and greed of the contestants unlocked a portal through which a dark god's presence leaked onto the stage, possessing the moderator and his assistants until everything fell apart in the same twisted spectacular fashion as is advertised on multiple occasions during the show: "tonight we will be no more".

6.1 DARK RITUAL

The show's primary goal was to tackle the topic of consumerism. We felt that there was a certain horror element to advertising and popular culture in general, where we are urged to buy more and more stuff through various means, standing in direct contrast with social inequality, war and global ecological collapse. Our intention was to go deeper than just vaguely stating "capitalism = bad"; we wanted to grasp what was hidden underneath the gilded surface of ads and commercials and the consumerist dream. The feeling that Western society worships material possession like a deity reminded us of H.P. Lovecraft's horror stories, specifically those concerning the Elder Gods - a family of beings from outer space that are vastly

more powerful than the human mind can comprehend. Encountering these creatures often results in the protagonists of the story becoming momentarily possessed by madness. One of these gods is Cthulhu, a being locked in eternal sleep under the sea that connects to its worshippers through dreams. Once it amasses enough power from its cult, it will wake up and destroy the world. To us, the ecstatic seizures of the worshippers of Cthulhu were reminiscent of shoppers on Black Friday who scramble over each other, sometimes even clashing violently, chasing after their idols and forgetting in the throes of passion that the thing they worship is also their doom. Our aim was to create a performance that cracks open the gate to Cthulhu's chambers so we get to feel its presence which will hopefully stay with the audience even after leaving the show. What they do with that feeling was of less interest to us than this revelation taking place.

We have decided to split the show into two dramaturgical levels running simultaneously: the game, or the main narrative happening onstage and the ritual, which was built as a sequence of singular interventions into the game, each completed step bringing us closer to Cthulhu. As more and more of the ritual was completed, the reality onstage began to warp as well, resulting in the game's rules being changed randomly, the moderator losing agency over his body and speech, the assistants turning into Cthulhu's tentacles, or disembodied voices speaking mystical enchantments. When constructing our ritual, we loosely followed the theories of Arnold van Gennep regarding transitional rituals or, as he refers to them, 'rites of passage'. In *Rites of Passage*, van Gennep describes three phases of such rituals, which we tried to harness in our show to create this ritual arc: separation, liminality and incorporation (2019, p.21).

Separation

Victor Turner elaborates on van Gennep's theory in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*: "The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both," (2008, p.94-95). Theatre already has its own separation stage when we enter the performance space, which we tried to build on. Each step in the ritual is marked

by a disembodied AI-programmed voice which acts as a guide. The voice itself is inspired by Lana, an AI emotional guru from the popular reality series *Too Hot to Handle*, where she acts as the chief advisor in matters of love to the show's residents. We felt there was something sinister in letting technology be in charge of our emotions, so giving a disembodied synthetic voice agency in the ritual felt like a move in the right direction. It first appears before the show even starts in the foyer, advising the audience to turn off their phones and prepare for the performance to start. In this way, the voice takes charge of the traditional separation stage we encounter in a show - tearing tickets, putting phones on silent, entering. After the audience is seated, the real separation stage begins. The spectators are instructed to close their eyes, and with the aid of an 'Artefact', a breast-shaped relaxation ball they were given at the door, the voice guides them through a 15-minute meditation sequence. The sequence itself was crafted based on popular commercial wellness apps, like Headspace, which offer vague guided meditation and mental health advice, usually with little spiritual or psychological basis as part of a subscription service. The meditation at the beginning was meant to both separate the audience from their thoughts before entering the space and also create a false sense of security, so the start of the gameshow felt like a more significant change.

Liminality

“During the intervening "liminal " period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state,” (Turner, 1969, p.94-95).

The game show, which took up the rest of the performance, contained a series of ritual steps which were meant to unlock the metaphorical gate to Cthulhu. These steps can be separated into two groups - ritual rites completed by the performers and ritual rites completed by the audience. During the different rounds of the game, the three contestants were asked to complete special 'challenges' which represent the physical components/sacral symbols of the ritual: dagger, tear and sweat. Each time a challenge was won by a contestant, another part of the gate was metaphorically unlocked, and the show would move further into absurdity. Each such

moment was signified by the reappearance of the voice which quoted a fragment of mystical enchantment, through the movement of the moderator and assistants whose limbs began to move like a skydancer²², and a change of lighting which would flash green-blue to represent Cthulhu's underwater abode.

The rites completed by the audience were much more subtle and only happened in direct communication with either the voice or the moderator. One type of these rites was repeated contact with the Artefact when the audience was asked to channel their energy into the object either during the meditation sequence or at several other points in the show when they were supposed to broadcast their sympathies towards their favourite contestant. The second type was a magic formula: "ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn" taken directly from Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, which the audience was asked to repeat several times in order to start the final sequence of the show.

With each of the rites completed, more disruptive elements of the show started to appear until even the game structure fell apart. Our aim was to create a sense of unease both through the uncanny onstage and through constantly adding new foci to distract and overwhelm the spectator. One such moment was the competition round titled 'Arena', where the contestants had to exercise to both appeal to the audience and to get as sweaty as possible to complete the ritual rite. Their attempts to draw attention to themselves were constantly disrupted by a grating club soundtrack accompanied by the voice quoting brand slogans and by the assistants who strutted around the stage in an approximation of a fashion catwalk, constantly appearing in more and more bizarre costumes, such as a large breast or a furry spirit wearing a mask made of packing polystyrene foam. The deconstruction of the performance reality was also signified through the repetitive game show jingle, which was played before and after every round. As everything started to fall apart, even the jingle became warped, lasting twice as long, ending prematurely and finally becoming a jumble of noise that only distantly resembled the original tune.

²² *Note.* A skydancer is an inflatable tube vaguely resembling a human used in advertising. These structures can be usually found near car dealerships or gas stations and are known for their specific, uncanny movement.

The building of confusion, unease and overwhelm led to a catharsis moment of the ritual's liminal stage which was the final round. The stage was in ruins, covered in grime and boxes of prizes, among which the assistants strolled or lounged, drinking and eating. Meanwhile, the three contestants clamoured over each other, debasing themselves in their last chance to sway the audience's favour. Finally, the moderator regained enough lucidity in his possessed state to call out the audience vote (the final rite) and to announce the winner. The winner was then led towards the gate at the end of the stage through a double row of inflating skydancers, the assistants mimicking their movements underneath. As the voice read the final part of the enchantment, the winning contestant disappeared from sight behind the door, only to reappear a moment later dressed as an assistant and joining in the skydancer dance, marking the end of the show.

Incorporation

“In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-a-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.” (Turner, 1969, p.94-95)

The final part of the ritual took place after the bow when the audience was led out from the space. Unlike their arrival, they were asked by the assistants to walk across the stage and through the same gate the winner exited through moments before. They got to observe the mess and the still-inflated skydancers up close. They were then led out of the theatre space through the backstage, seeing the discarded costumes and props and had to pass by a ‘gift shop’ selling Cthulhucene merchandise. Through the shedding of the layers of the performance and showing its bare bones, we hoped to return the spectator back to their ‘self’, the objects and costumes reminding them that, after all, this was just a show. Simultaneously, passing through the gate and encountering the gift shop was intended to solidify the

message that the evil being whose presence we witnessed doesn't dwell within but out in the real world.

6.2 PLAYING AND LOSING IN THE CONTEXT OF CAPITALISM

While the dramaturgical level of the ritual attempted to tackle the metaphysical side of the topic, the game show became a manifestation of the societal struggle to stay on top. We were drawn to the gaming format because of its exploitation by popular media and the capitalist market. During the devising period, the directing team watched every game show we came across, trying to single out what makes television contests so alluring. We concluded that there are several elements that correlate across different shows and on which we wanted to build our contest. Firstly, there was an element of a double-game - while the contestants often competed earnestly for their prize, that in itself wasn't what made their struggle exciting to watch; it was also that each cast had a plethora of personalities and tensions which added to the excitement of the spectacle. Especially in reality TV shows, the characters are often unlikeable, and we, as the viewer, are invited to take part in a private game of mockery that the contestants have no idea about. The second element was simultaneously a moral quandary - how far or low are we willing to go in order to win? We felt that whatever the show would become, we needed to focus on these two things specifically to be able to reveal the horrors of the ritual successfully.

The game show's form took us the longest time out of the whole performance to pin down. Our main struggle was finding the correct format in which to anchor the performance. Initially, we were drawn toward a completely improvised structure. This interest was spiked during the rehearsals when we conducted actual games with the actors. We felt that the raw excitement and energy that they exuded were extremely addictive to watch. However, we soon discovered that without a fixed structure, it was impossible to maintain both the tempo of the show and weave in the ritual in a way that made sense. Conversely, a rigid form completely destroyed the game's liveness, and playfulness and the experience became dull for both the audience and the actors. Eventually, we arrived at a functioning format where the show's structure

and timing remained precise, but each round of the actual game was open enough that the actors were able to play around both in their improvisation and in the real game. Part of this meant there was never a set script for any of the three contestants, and the actors were free not just to improvise but also to adjust and play around with their characters, resulting in new, unexpected variations happening during each show. Our main strategy was to keep the actors engaged and having fun which we tried to maintain by routinely changing the game questions or preparing small surprise happenings during each performance.

The core motivation for the three actors was the final round, during which one of them would win the game. The winner was decided by the audience (meaning each show could end differently), and while the characters played for their sympathy, we played against them using the two elements that appealed to us in reality show culture. When devising the characters, we aimed to create types rather than real well-rounded human beings. Each of these types was more flawed than not, allowing us to easily create tension among them and also for them to stoop very low in the final moments of the show. The blind desire to win was a way to directly show the effects of societal greed and the cult of things. While the ritual invited one evil onto the stage, the other one was already present in the players.

One of the ideas we discussed extensively was how in theatre and the creative arts in general, loss or failure is not necessarily considered a bad thing and how alienating it was to use such a playful approach on the subject of capitalism, where winning and losing mean everything. We attempted to grapple with this notion of play through the show's final moments when the losers, exhausted after their excessive attempts to sway the audience's opinion, fall to the ground while the winner is led through the gate to receive their prize. However, the prize is as sinister as its benefactor, and instead of being free from the perpetual cycle and finally coming up on top, the winner is made into yet another servant.

6.3 MANIPULATING THE AUDIENCE THROUGH PLAY AS A DRAMATURGICAL APPROACH

One of our main concerns was building interactions with the audience that weren't didactic and didn't feel too forceful. We got the idea of engaging the spectators by playing from a mediaeval morality play, *Mankind* (c.1470). The text describes humanity's fall from grace in several short scenes between allegorical characters. One moment in the play that struck our interest was right before the devil is meant to appear onstage when the performers stop and refuse to continue unless they are paid. After the audience pays for the show, they are instructed to sing a song to summon the devil, who then appears and causes the fall of Mankind; thus, the spectators are made directly complicit in the failure of humanity. The idea of having fun or participation inadvertently becoming the cause of harm or bad events taking place onstage formed one of the core dramaturgical approaches in the show.

One of the items that helped us subconsciously lead the audience to become complicit in the show's events was the Artefact. Throughout the performance, the audience was encouraged to hold it in their hands and use it as a focus to channel their energy into the contestants (and unknowingly into the ritual). Although there wasn't a reason why we chose this object specifically, it seemed to have proven useful in facilitating such interaction. During informal feedback gatherings, some audience members pointed out that the 'obscene' shape of the item added to their feelings of unease and made them feel like voyeurs, while others enjoyed its humorous and pointless nature, especially when the costume of a large breast appeared onstage. The number of strong reactions we have received enforced for us the idea that using haptic prompts for the audience to play with is a functional approach to facilitating emotional involvement. It seemed helpful that the bond between the spectators and their Artefacts was established from the start during the meditation sequence, where it was used as a focus in a breathing exercise. The Artefact was also a tool through which the audience showed their sympathies towards the contestants. In several instances during the show, they were asked to squeeze the Artefact and think of their favourite player and even use it as a voting device during the final vote. Since the winner is directly decided by this action, it is

implied that they are thus being made complicit in sealing the fates of the contestants and completing the ritual.

One such moment took place a few scenes earlier in the show, right before the Arena (exercise) round and the big finale. During a short intermission between games, as the contestants left the stage, the moderator let the audience know that they had become the players for that round. Ten lucky winners had a chance to receive a prize from a lottery draw. After the moderator called out the winning number, he addressed the audience members who won to open their envelopes to read one by one what was inside. The contents, as he explained, were a discount code for the game show's gift shop. In reality, however, the code was Lovecraft's magic formula: "ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn". The moderator would egg the audience on until everyone chanted the phrase over and over again. During the chant, as the ritual progressed, he also became possessed by the spirit of Cthulhu, losing his charismatic mask and revealing his real twisted personality. At this point, the audience became aware that their actions led to this transformation. During a showing, one of the winners refused to read his code. He later explained that he had seen the performance before and therefore knew what followed the chant and felt terrified of being responsible for continuing the ritual.

Cthulhucene was my first experience of exploring play in its darker aspects. While it proved to be a handy dramaturgical tool, it raised certain ethical questions for me as a creator. Since these kinds of play often blur the line between fantasy and reality, we have encountered several instances when the actors felt uncomfortable because the game went too far. While we had more agency in preventing such things from happening with the actors - for example, the team had set up safewords to use if a situation got out of hand during rehearsals - toeing that line with the audience is a much more complex task to be fully explored in just one show.

CONCLUSION: KEEPING THE GAME GOING

I am continuously fascinated by play, and its many forms and I feel that the experiences I have had so far, as informative as they were, are by no means enough to exhaust the topic. Through adapting different play strategies into performative formats, I have learned one thing for certain, and that is that it is an extremely creative way to explore the dynamic of the actor-spectator agency. Both as a director and a performer, I have always felt resistant to traditionalist hierarchies within the theatre industry, among the performers and creators as well as the audience. As I grow older, I feel the urge to poke holes and dismantle these unequal structures intensify, but I am also learning that anger only gets you so far. Embracing play in my performative practice (and everyday life) is teaching me again how radical and necessary empathy is in our society. Play isn't perfect, it is messy and bloody and sometimes embarrassing. But that is also what's so exciting about it. Ultimately, it is a universal language, a way of connecting. We play together, regardless of language, race, gender, age, or species, reaching out - the original meaning of the word *Ctuhulhucene* (which for the show I borrowed for more nefarious means), to be making-with, a "sympoesis [that] enlarges and displaces autopoiesis and all other self-forming and self-sustaining system fantasies" (Haraway, 2016, p.125).

I am not sure to what extent I am entitled to draw any definite conclusions; however, I would like to compile the observations I have gathered over the past years of research. Using play as a tool in performance creates unique obstacles for the creator because they are not only taking up the role of the player but are also burdened with the responsibility to oversee the play of others and to make sure they are comfortable (or uncomfortable if the situation calls for it) and safe. In other words, to ensure that the real world and the worlds inside of the Magic Circle intersect without causing lasting damage and pain. It is a fine balance to give your players the space to explore, fail and succeed, to hurt and not to harm, without either letting the play run rampant and out of control or stifling it under too much worry, like a helicopter parent preventing their child from having fun outside, for fear of germs.

Play has also taught me to embrace the unpredictable and give space and not be afraid to go off the beaten path. In both performance and the creative process, I have always been a perfectionist, dreading any sort of deviance from form or stalling of productiveness, but I am learning that playing also means being playful not just in the sense of romantic, childlike wonder but also in being bored or screwing up or getting lost. A lot of these ideas have been brought forward by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led a lot of us to re-examine the way we relate to the world. While my exploration of play in performance began prior to these events, the majority of my studies and this research as well as all three performances described in this text, have taken place during or, in some cases, even as a direct reaction to the pandemic. We live in times of unknowing, facing an ecological and most likely social and cultural collapse. To survive both as humans and artists, we need to (re)shape ourselves constantly to be able to adapt. For myself, the future lies in playing - both in the sense of radical resistance to capitalism (as I discussed in Chapter I. in terms of play being seen as the antithesis of the Western work ethic) and as a creative engine for inventing new worlds and new selves in order to connect with other people and understandings.

The challenge always comes in accessing that playfulness. As adults, we are discouraged from it by our education, by our work, our responsibilities, and even by capitalism which only sees value in play when it can be exploited for other means, whether those are workplace productivity strategies, mass-produced toys and games or dark play in entertainment media. We are taught to see play as a reward, a frivolity, a childish thing rather than a conscious practice of shaping our experience. As artists, to be able to bring others to play with us means, first and foremost, to bare ourselves, not in the sense of physical or emotional nudity, but rather in our own uncertainty. To reach across the barriers in between until we stand on equal ground and all become players in our own right. To me, it also means finding the courage to give up my agency and to place it in the hands of others because as much as we like to think theatre puts us on a level with the audience, in the end, we always perform on our own terms.

I want to end this text by setting these goals for myself, knowing that this journey is far from over. I have started exploring play due to my own fatigue with the

hierarchies and imbalances in theatre and society in general. In a world filled with power struggles, holding any sort of power in creative projects felt wrong and counterproductive to my politics as a creator. Ultimately, there is always going to be an imbalance, but I am excited by the possibilities of ludic engagement as a force to shift these power structures in my practice. Thinking back on Viola Spolin's improvisation games, I am drawn to types of play and games which are open to imagining and speculative fabulation²³ through the unexpected:

"Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with reality, and see it, explore it and act accordingly." (Spolin, 1999, 4)

I hope to build on these ideas and findings to continue developing my ludic performance approach. I see a lot of potential, especially in improvised storytelling and narrative games, which give us precisely the kind of freedom and safety to explore even the darker sides of ourselves, to fail and play dirty as a social and philosophical experiment. This research remains open and, as with most artistic endeavours, will never reach a concrete conclusion. In the meantime, I am keeping the game going, and although I can't predict what will happen next, I'm sure it will be interesting and, most importantly, *fun*.

²³ A philosophical term coined by Donna Haraway, describing (collective) narrative practices that use imaginative world-building to create possible ideas for both the future and the present, a "mode of attention, a theory of history and a practice of worlding" (Haraway, 2016).

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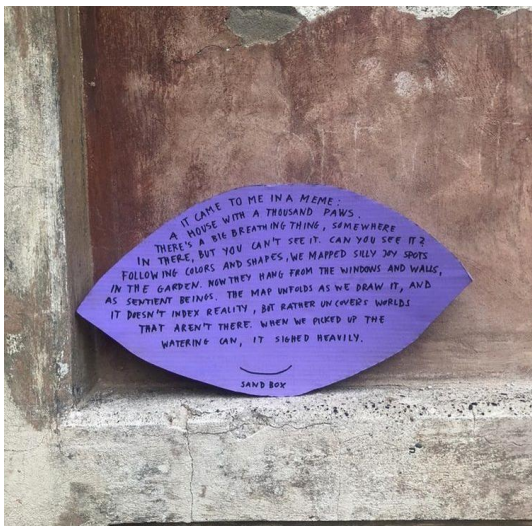
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APPENDIX 1. - SANDBOX



Alternative Map of Alta



“It came to me in a meme:
A house with a thousand paws.
There is a big breathing thing, somewhere in there,
but you can't see it. Can you see it?
Following colours and shapes, we mapped silly joy
spots in the garden. Now they hang from the windows
and walls as sentient beings. The map unfolds as we
draw it, and it doesn't index reality, but rather
uncovers worlds that aren't there.
When we picked up the watering can
it sighed heavily
- Sandbox



Images from the *Sandbox* presentation.
ALTA, 15.8.2021.
Courtesy of Vojtěch Brtnický and Faolán McGowan

APPENDIX 2. - THE MANUAL FOR COLLECTIVE PLAY

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND LISTEN TO THE SOUNDS AROUND YOU. WITHOUT LOOKING, DRAW WHAT YOU HEAR.

USE YOUR BUM AS A DRUM

**YOUR BUM IS A DRUM
YOUR ARM IS AN ALARM
YOUR FOOT IS A FLUTE
YOUR TOES ARE OBOES
YOUR NECK IS A DJ DECK
AND YOUR NOSE IS A HARP...**

LAY DOWN ON THE FLOOR AND PUT YOUR EAR TO THE GROUND. CAN YOU HEAR WHAT'S GOING ON UNDERNEATH?

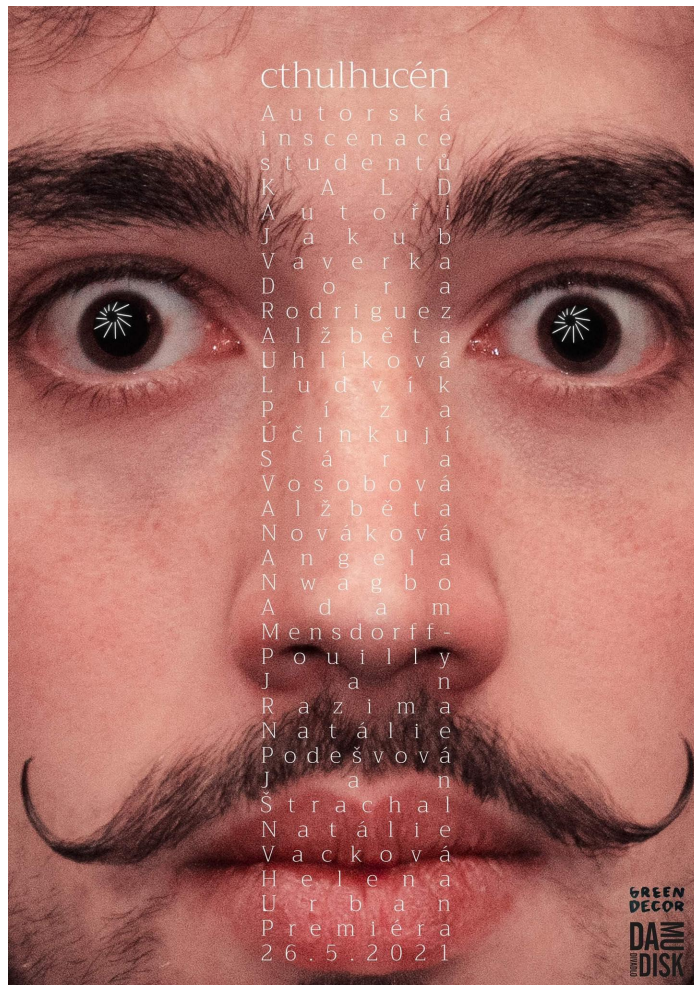
HAVE YOU ASKED THE GREEN FRIENDS IN YOUR ROOM HOW THEY HAVE BEEN LATELY? HAVE A CHAT WITH YOUR PLANTS. (IF YOU DON'T HAVE A PLANT AROUND AT THE MOMENT, YOU CAN TALK TO THE NEXT ONE YOU MEET).

Tasks from the original Manual for Collective Play website.

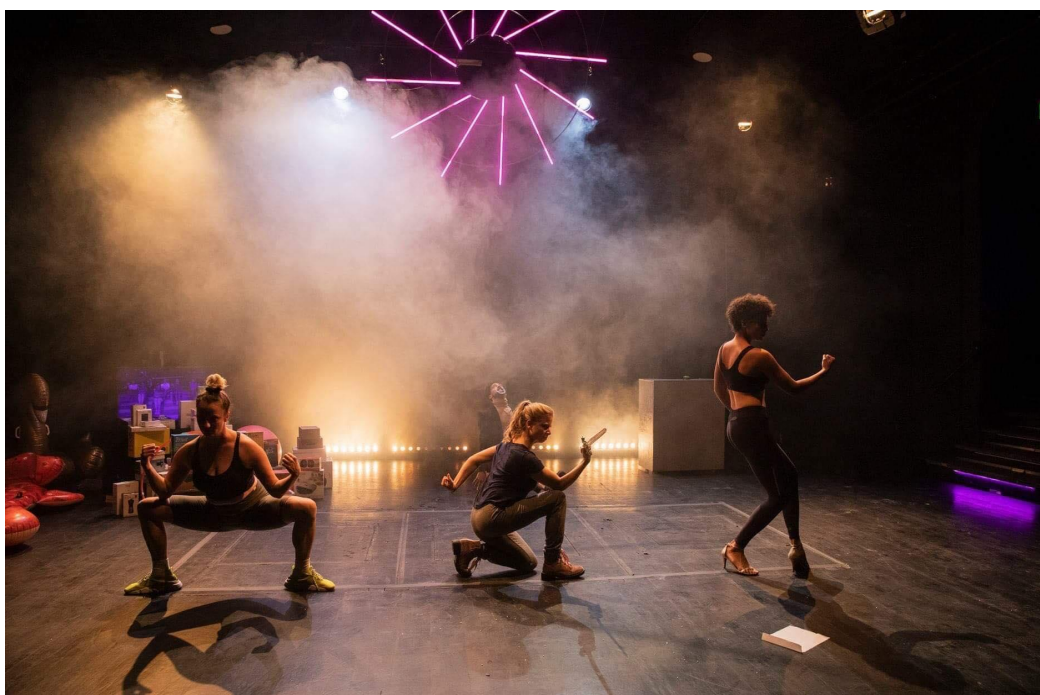


Images from *Collective Play*
Y Events: Ecology of Attention
Divadlo X10, 12.7.2021.
Courtesy of Y Events and
MMPraxis

APPENDIX 3 - CTHULHUCENE



Cthulhucene - poster.





Images from *Cthulucene*
Divadlo DISK, 2021-2022.
Courtesy of Divadlo Disk and cast.