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## **Meaningful Play: Applying game and play design practices to promote agency in participatory performance**

### *Abstract*

As interactive and immersive forms of performance have proliferated, performance scholars have devoted increasing attention to gaming practices in order to describe the types of agency that these forms offer to their participants. This article seeks to problematise links that have been drawn between interactive performance and games, however, arguing that discussions of gaming in relation to performance are often limited to a textual paradigm which conceives game play as the exploratory uncovering of performance texts rather than the generative creation of emergent play narratives. This argument will be advanced by making three propositions: firstly, that performance practitioners and scholars who wish to draw upon games in their work should move beyond a textual paradigm to develop an understanding of how games can be understood as systems. Secondly, the article will propose that if the enhancement of participatory agency is desired, participatory performance designs might usefully respond to the cultural particularity of those involved. Thirdly, the article will argue that although system-based design can imply connotations of top-down control, participatory performance design can be reconceived as a ‘curatorial’ practice that creates contexts for play that is co-created by participants, affirming their agency in shaping the emergent content of the work.

### *Keywords*

Performance, Participation, Play, Games, Systems, The Curatorial.

## Introduction

“*What happens when you have World of Warcraft in the real world? What happens when you have someone levelling up in a theatre production?*” These questions, posed by Felix Barrett, director of Punchdrunk, the internationally renowned purveyors of immersive theatre, serve as a stimulus for a recent article in The Guardian online which sets out apparent commonalities between Punchdrunk’s brand of participatory performance and gaming practices. The article’s author, Alysia Judge, notes that the company’s New York production of *Sleep No More* was listed as ‘game of the year’ in 2011 (by an unnamed publication) because of its similarities with video games that require the discovery of clues to ‘level up’ and progress through the game. Judge suggests that a central link between Punchdrunk’s work and gaming is the provision of non-linear narratives. She claims that “by abandoning the notion of linear plot, both Punchdrunk and games have created a new form of artistic experience where the activity of the player or spectator completes the work” (Judge 2019). This notion that player action is integral to the production is redolent of Punchdrunk’s core mission statement that, in contrast to traditional theatre that is, in their view, based on passive spectatorship, their model of theatrical production empowers audiences (Judge 2019). Clearly, then, the endeavour to link gaming practices with interactive or immersive performance forms can be seen as an attempt to advance claims that such works enhance the provision of participant agency.

The issue of agency in participatory performance has been widely discussed by theatre scholars in recent years, with many arguing that works by companies like Punchdrunk offer limited creative agency (Biggin 2017; Wilson 2016), while others have sought to outline differing degrees of agency (Breel 2015). This article contributes to this ongoing debate with

the contention that many participatory performance works constrain the agency of participants because their designs remain rooted in a textual paradigm whereby audiences are invited to discover authored performance texts rather than generating emergent performances of their own. The textual paradigm that seems to dominate discussions of games in performance ignores the fact that many game designers and game studies scholars approach games as systems in which ‘meaningful play’ (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 51) is generated as players take actions to which the system responds, leading to the creation of emergent narratives.

My methodology in carrying out the research that is presented here is practice-led research in participatory performance, with a specific focus on live action role-play (larp) and non-digital games. The limited scope of this article will not allow for extended descriptions of my practical projects, but I will outline the formal approaches that I have employed with the aim of offering new ideas to participatory performance makers and scholars in this field. In addition to descriptions of my own work, I will discuss recent participatory performance works from Coney, a London-based company formed in 2006, who are known for producing playful theatrical projects and Blast Theory, a Brighton-based company formed in 1991, whose works merge performance, digital media and interactive play. I also draw on the work of art historian Grant Kester (2011) to discuss participatory works in fine art contexts from the Argentinian collective Ala Plástica and the Indian community arts group Dialogue. The range of works considered under the banner of participatory performance is clearly extremely broad, but I argue that performance scholars and practitioners can benefit from a more interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on the insights of game studies to apply systems thinking in their work and from participatory art practices that foreground the creative agency of participants.

The structure of the article breaks down into three sections. Firstly, I will set out my core argument that current discussions of games in participatory performance are limited to a textual paradigm that offers partial understandings of ludic agency. This will lead to a consideration of system-based game design which can facilitate greater player agency in generating emergent performance narratives. Beyond the question of how agency can be supported, however, I explore who and what this agency is for. Whereas most performance events often view their audience as a relatively undifferentiated bloc, I argue that participatory performance makers might usefully design their work in response to the cultural particularity of those involved, so that participants can express their agency in relation to things that matter in their lives, rather than simply responding to an artist's vision. This notion of designing in response to cultural particularity forms the primary focus of the second section of this article, and I will draw a parallel between system design in games and Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to propose a theoretical framework for responsive design that makes the cultural particulars of players the source and substance of the work. Having set out this theoretical frame, I concretise my propositions through descriptions of my practical work during a recent project at Haringey Community Hub, a community centre in the Wood Green area of North London, in which I worked with elderly service users to create games and play activity in response to their cultural dispositions.

Although this article sets out a positive valuation of a system-oriented approach to participatory performance design, the third section deals with challenges to systems thinking in participatory art. I draw upon the work of game studies scholar Ian Bogost who warns that systems can function as totalising, top-down structures that impose fixed rules and hinder agential flexibility (Bogost 2007). Rather than discounting systems altogether, however, Bogost argues usefully for a bottom-up approach to system formation. Drawing on Claude

Lévi-Strauss' concept of bricolage, Bogost argues that structures can emerge as malleable assemblages and I will subsequently link this theoretical position to 'curatorial' practices in fine art. In contrast to the textual paradigm of curation that sets out a body of artistic work to be received by audiences, the curatorial is concerned with the provision of frameworks for co-creation in which participants assemble meanings through intersubjective exchange (Martinon 2013). The concept of the curatorial shares many similarities with larp practices and I argue that, in contrast to participatory works that offer performance texts for participants to uncover, curatorial larp design enables players to apply their cultural particularity within a design framework to create their own systems of play and agentially develop emergent narratives as these systems respond to player actions.

### ***The textual paradigm in game-like participatory performance works***

The opening section of this article contextualises current discussions on applications of gaming in participatory performance, prior to articulations of alternative propositions in the subsequent two sections. In discussing the work of participatory performance practitioners, I propose that purported commonalities with games are often tenuous, and my considerations of scholarly accounts of this type of work will illustrate my argument that understandings of games are limited to a textual paradigm which conceives game play as an exploratory practice of uncovering latent content rather than a generative activity that produces emergent performance narratives.

In Alysia Judge's previously cited article on the work of Punchdrunk, Felix Barrett describes 'playable shows' that incorporate 'game mechanics' as 'the future' (Judge 2019), but discussions of the possible game-like qualities of immersive theatre have been underway

for several years. In her influential book *Immersive Theatre: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, theatre studies scholar Josephine Machon claims, in her discussions of the work of Punchdrunk, that:

Audience-participant-player interactions, although carefully staged and in many ways pre-determined, allow diverse actions to be taken and thus invite an exciting variation of interpretations to be made. As this suggests, affiliations between gaming practice and immersive theatre can clearly be drawn in Punchdrunk's work. (Machon 2013, 62)

In my view, however, the correlation of the immersive theatre of Punchdrunk and gaming practice, and the extrapolation that game-like engagement equates to creative agency, are both problematic propositions. Games are built upon the notion of quantitative uncertainty of outcomes (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 174), but since Punchdrunk performances are fixed and not susceptible to structural changes led by participant actions, there can be no uncertainty of outcome. There may be uncertainty of experience, but this does not provide the same kind of agency that games afford. In a 2014 interview with The Guardian newspaper, in an article entitled 'The immersed audience: How theatre is taking its cue from video games', Felix Barrett gives a neat summary of the extent of agency that is afforded by the company's works. In describing his production, *The Drowned Man*, Barrett comments that "rather than an audience member creating their own narrative, they are peeling back layers of story archeologically" (McMullan 2014), which clearly illustrates that although audiences are free to explore and uncover pre-prepared narratives that are architecturally embedded in the space, there is no affordance for them to influence the dramatic action that unfolds (Harper 2017). In Judge's 2019 article on Punchdrunk's work, Barrett's earlier celebration of archeological exploration is echoed by her enthusiasm for hidden 'hand-written letters and clues, that, if found, shed light on the plot' (Judge 2019) which suggests that Punchdrunk's application of

gaming practices has remained limited to the provision of latent content that is discovered through environmental exploration, or, to phrase it differently, the provision of a text that is uncovered and decoded.

There are other companies that Josephine Machon includes under the immersive theatre banner who, arguably, offer greater creative volition to participants through game-like practices, such as Coney and Blast Theory, but my experience of recent works by these companies has suggested that the story worlds they present remain fixed, with little susceptibility to change through participant actions. In Blast Theory's *Operation Black Antler*, for example, participants are invited to assume the role of undercover police operatives, finding out information about the activities of a far-right political group, but although there is huge qualitative variability in the interactions which can occur, these interactions cannot change anything. The only concrete, constitutive action that players can take at the end of the event is to decide, through a group vote, whether to place the group under permanent surveillance. The recent work of Coney offers a somewhat different example, with works such as *Remote*, which employs a digitally mediated 'Twine' narrative structure in the mode of a 'Choose Your Own Adventure' story. Although the design of this work does allow for quantitative variability in outcomes, the provision of agency is limited to binary choices, again through group voting, in a bifurcating narrative tree which remains linear and fixed (Harper 2017).

Several other theatre scholars have attempted to establish links between immersive theatre and gaming practice, but many of these contributions have illustrated gaps in the understanding of games. In describing her game-like experience of Punchdrunk's *Masque of*

*the Red Death*, Rosemary Klich describes ‘hunting clues’ of the ‘hidden story’ as a form of ‘epistemic immersion’, a term coined by game studies scholar Marie-Laure Ryan which refers to the sense of being immersed in a mystery story and caught up in the desire to know (Klich 2016). Ryan’s notion of epistemic immersion is also referenced by James Frieze in his discussion of dreamthinkspeak’s promenade production, *One Step Forward, One Step Back* in which he makes the parallel between video games and promenade explorations in which “the player impersonates the detective and investigates the case...picking up tell-tale objects and extracting information” (Frieze 2017). Similarly, Lindsay Brandon Hunter cites game studies scholar Janet Murray’s description of narrative immersion in games and links this to the immersive audience experience of “looking for clues that will alert them to puzzles, which, when solved, yield information which can be assembled to form the game narrative” (Hunter 2016). The common theme that these examples share is that immersive works are described as games because they seem to have commonalities with puzzles in which latent content is excavated and revealed. This is a limited way of considering games, however, since the puzzle concept is rooted firmly in a textual paradigm of latent text that is to be decoded, in contrast to other forms of games in which agential play is generative of emergent content.

In considering the question of agency in game-like participatory performance, the distinguishing features of games that game studies scholars have sought to identify are instructive. Game theorist and designer Greg Costikyan describes games as ‘state machines’ in which the system of interrelated parts that make up the game responds to player action to generate new game states. He contrasts state machines with puzzles, such as crosswords, arguing that although the play activity of tackling problems and making choices about which

problem to solve first will have experiential variation depending on how easy or hard the player finds these challenges, the fundamental structure of the puzzle does not change:

The solution to a logic puzzle is contingent on the clues provided. The only uncertainty involved is in the solver's ability to sort through the contingencies; or to put it another way, a puzzle is static. It is not a state machine. It does not respond to input. It is not uncertain and it is not interactive. (Costikyan 2014, 14)

This robust assessment of the agential limitations of puzzles could equally be applied to many of the participatory performance works described above. In *Operation Black Antler*, for example, the only uncertainty is in the participant's ability to follow the trail of clues that the actors provide, uncovering latent story in the same way that the concealed words of a crossword are uncovered. Similarly, the bifurcating narrative trees employed by Coney are based on the release of latent narrative content based on player voting which is substantially different to the generation of new game states through player action. Viewed in these terms, to paraphrase Costikyan, these works are not state machines. They do not respond to input. They are not uncertain and they are not interactive. Essentially, the design structures that these pieces employ are not responsive in the manner of game systems and, therefore, they are best described as puzzles to be explored and unravelled rather than games of emergent possibility (Harper 2017).

In sum, this opening section has illustrated that applications of games in participatory performance and scholarly accounts of such work remain rooted in a textual paradigm that conceives game play as the exploratory uncovering of an authored text rather than the generative creation of new states of the game. It is noteworthy that the theatre studies scholars cited above all draw upon ideas from the very early days of game studies at the turn

of the millennium, when theorists were struggling to describe games and utilised a textual paradigm to discuss the narratives of play. This suggests a considerable gap in knowledge of more recent work in game studies, with a lack of recognition of works that have utilised systems thinking to describe the structural frameworks that games employ. Consequently, the next section will consider system-based game design and my endeavours to apply a system-oriented approach in designing participatory performance.

### *Applying systems thinking and field theory in participatory performance design*

This section sets out an argument for a system-oriented approach to participatory performance design. Drawing on the work of game studies scholar Jesper Juul, I suggest that the design of responsive systems enables participant agency in generating emergent play narratives, rather than simply uncovering latent performance texts. My interest in agency is more specific than a general desire to enable creative volition in participatory performance, however. As a practitioner, my concern is not merely to afford agency in shaping outcomes in works that I have devised, my aim is to enable participants to express their agency in co-creating the content of the work, creating opportunities for active consideration of matters of concern in their lives. In developing participatory projects in response to the cultural particularities of players, my design approach has fused system-based game design with Pierre Bourdieu's field theory as a theoretical framework. In addition to arguing for the value of a system-oriented approach to performance design, therefore, this section links system analysis with field theory to provide conceptual tools for designing participatory performance in response to cultural particularity.

Game Studies is a relatively new subject of academic enquiry, having emerged as a discrete field at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but theorists in this new area of study have sought to build upon the work of earlier scholars of games, including sociologist Roger Caillois. Caillois work has been useful in delineating games and play, coining the term *ludus* to describe games as organised, rule-bound structures and *paidia* to describe more unstructured, playful activities (Caillois 2001). This distinction between games and play has been a major concern for game studies theorists with much debate between ludologists, who argue that this new field should focus on the designed structures of games, and narratologists, who prefer to place their attention on the narratives of play experience (Juul 2005). As I have outlined in the previous section, the early development of game studies was marked by the approach of narratology, through which scholars attempted to analyse games as texts. Janet Murray's (1997) highly influential *Hamlet on the Holodeck* introduced the idea of interactive narrative exploration in the new internet age, whereby computer users could navigate flexible narrative pathways with the selective click of a mouse. Similarly, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) elaborated on the possibilities of hypertext narrative navigation in the mode of the 'Choose Your Own Adventure' story. The early years of the new millennium saw a sustained challenge to this textual paradigm in game studies, however. Ludologists such as Gonzalo Frasca (2001) discussed games as simulations that could model social scenarios and allow experimentation with them, rather than as a form of storytelling, while Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's (2003) comprehensive book on game design, *Rules of Play*, offered a detailed account of how games function as complex systems.

Building on the work of these writers, Jesper Juul, a prominent proponent of the ludological approach, draws a valuable distinction between two types of games: games of progression and games of emergence. Juul argues that games of progression are composed of a sequence of play challenges which lead through a pre-authored, or embedded, narrative

sequence towards the completion of the game. Games of emergence, by contrast, are based on a set of rules which combine in response to player actions to generate new game states and myriad varieties of emergent narrative possibility (Juul 2005). This comparison of games of progression and games of emergence is useful in relation to potential applications of game structures in participatory performance because it offers two radically different approaches to narrative design. Arguably, since performance makers often wish to craft a story experience, they will tend to create a game of progression, which leads from one challenge to the next, in a linear fashion, towards some narrative denouement. Nonetheless, although Juul's distinction between progression and emergence is useful, it is important to stress that a ludological, systems-based approach is not incompatible with flexible narrative development. Gonzalo Frasca makes precisely this point in his article 'Ludologists love stories too' in which he argues that although, in his view, the rules that compose the structure of a game are fundamental, games can indeed create valuable narratives (Frasca 2003).

In considering how system-based game design might be applied in participatory performance works to create emergent narrative potential, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory offers a useful theoretical framework that can be viewed in parallel with systems thinking. Field theory, like system-based game design, is fundamentally relational (Martin and Gregg, 2015). In system analysis, the attributes of objects in a system are influenced by their interrelation with each other and, in the same vein, field theory focuses on the subject agents in a particular arena of social experience, their internal relations and the capital affordances that these internal relations confer. An essential component of Bourdieu's wider field theory is his concept of *habitus* which refers to the capitals that each individual possesses and their ability to deploy these capitals in pursuit of their desires (Bourdieu 2010). Subsequently, just as subjects in a social field can reposition themselves by seeking out new relational

connections and thereby modifying the capital affordances of their habitus, players in games can seek to reconfigure the relational connections between themselves and other objects in play to gain new attributes as they attempt to express their agency in exerting influence on the system. By drawing on the concept of habitus in the process of system design, therefore, I argue that games can respond to the cultural particularity of their players and create responsive systems of play that can enable them to reconfigure their habitus.

My proposal for recognising cultural particularity in the design of participatory performance arguably stands in contrast to more conventional performance forms that tend to view audiences as relatively homogeneous blocs. Helen Freshwater's *Theatre & Audience* makes precisely this point regarding the groups of spectators who view theatre works, noting that theatre-makers often see the audience as a singular unit, rather than acknowledging that it is composed of a plurality of differentiated individuals (Freshwater 2009). Similarly, certain immersive theatre practices decisively anonymise their participants, as is the case with the deployment of masks for audience members in the work of Punchdrunk. My proposition is that the homogenisation and anonymisation of audience members in participatory works undercuts participatory agency since it disregards both the subjectivities that define the desired outcomes of agential action and the capital affordances with which participants can pursue these desires. By contrast, I contend that if participatory art is to afford scope for participants to express cultural and political agency, there must be some consideration of the cultural particularity that frames what participants might want to do and the relative capital affordances, contained in the habitus, that frame how they exercise agency in pursuit of their wants.

The concept of habitus refers to the socially conditioned capitals possessed by individuals and, in the same way that habitus frames what a person may be able to do socially or professionally, so too it will frame what they may be able to do within the context of participatory performances. Gareth White's *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* elaborates on this idea by considering the 'horizon of expectation' which can be understood as the range of cultural familiarity within which a participant is able to comfortably participate (White 2013, 57). In other words, the habitus of certain individuals contains a broad horizon of expectation that confers an equally wide array of cultural competences that enable participation in performance, while others will have more narrow horizons of expectation. White's argument is that relative horizons of expectation must be considered by artists as they issue an invitation to participate, but art historian Grant Kester's analysis of participatory art practices goes further, discussing works that actively respond to the habitus, or cultural horizons, of participants. Kester's work is based on detailed case studies of projects that involve long-term engagement between artists and participant groups in the sites that are integral to their lives. For example, in his most recent book *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, he describes the work of Argentinian art collective Ala Plástica who worked with farming communities in the Rio de la Plata region to understand the ecological and social systems of the community. This project led to the development of a series of works, entitled the *AA Project*, based on stories of local agricultural practices and environmental interventions (Kester 2011, 141-144). Similarly, he describes a project run by the rural Indian company Dialogue who worked with the indigenous Adivasi population of Bastar state to discover issues of concern to local women. This project led to the creation of an installation work, entitled *Nalpar*, which involved the creation of a screen wall around the village well which functioned as a semi-private gathering space for women as they collected water (Kester 2011, 80-84). In both of

these projects, the ‘art’ was focused less on the production of material art objects and more on the creation of intersubjective exchanges between participants that enabled them to express their cultural particularity and creative agency. Kester describes this approach to art making as ‘dialogical aesthetics’ (Kester 2011), with the locus of aesthetic value being in the subjective experience of participants rather than in a material art object that is produced by the artist, which clearly sets this type of work in opposition to a textual paradigm in which the art object functions as a text for spectatorial interpretation.

An experiential approach to aesthetics is also found in practices of live action role-play or larp, as it is more commonly known. My research has focused on Nordic Larp, which can be understood as a specific sub-genre of role-play that has developed in the Nordic countries over the last twenty-five years. In the same way that dialogical aesthetics eschews a focus on the art object, larp is a form of performance that does not include the spectatorship of an audience. Unlike theatre, therefore, there is no performative art object to view or performance text to uncover; the focus is on the subjective aesthetic experience of participants as they play (Stenros 2010). Moreover, in the same way that dialogical aesthetics foregrounds engagement with the cultural particularity of participants and invites intersubjective exchanges between them, Nordic Larp has a strong emphasis on co-creation in design, frequently employing workshop exercises as preparation for the role-play activity in which participants create the content of their play and thereby load their subjectivities into the performance. In my practical research in participatory performance, I have applied this co-creative approach by undertaking play projects over extended periods of time to create play designs that respond to the habitus of those involved. In my recent project at Haringey Community Hub, an adult day care centre in Wood Green, North London, I worked with elderly service users over a six-month period to investigate their cultural horizon and create

simple play activities based on matters of interest to them. The participants, all of whom were of Southern Asian heritage, told stories of childhood, school, playing with friends and their working life, all of which enabled me to build up a picture of their habitus and the various fields of social experience that they had inhabited. This process, which I termed ‘habitus mining’, subsequently, fed into the system design of a role-play game, *Islands*, about a group of young children growing up in a small village, going to school, working for their family, moving away from home and starting their adult working life. The system of the game involved the acquisition of three types of capital: money, education and popularity which seemed to be important to the participants in the stories that they had told. Consequently, the use of these capitals as game mechanics enabled players to express their subjectivity and reflect on matters of concern in their own lives. One participant, Ravi, spoke about his play experience in which his character, Antoine, had progressed from being the poorest child in the village to finish the game on the ‘big island’ with a high level of educational capital, a small amount of money and a very low level of popularity. When reflecting on this outcome, Ravi claimed that he had won the game (even though there were no specific victory conditions) saying, *‘I been in the big island and I got some money and I got education – so I’m happy’* but as he further elaborated on his feelings he became animated and appeared somewhat agitated, and it was increasingly unclear whether he was talking about the life of his character or his own life story as a migrant from Mauritius:

*It was a good game. We played success. We played also for education, money and happiness – I’m pleased. I got lot of education. Making money. My life – I got my money. I got education and I got happiness – little happiness. I got money and education. I done all the transactions to reach that point.*

I then asked him what it was like to leave his friends behind and see that another character (who had devoted more of his time to the cultural capital of popularity) had met someone special, to which he responded:

*I'm not interested in friends – the past is past. And then I go to this position – what I see – fulfilled. I don't need the others – friends or what has passed. What is past is past. What I have here is happiness – I'm happier here.*

It could be argued that the possible distress that *Islands* caused for Ravi might be less than ideal in terms of facilitating a creatively fulfilling experience, but I argue that this design, far from simply offering a comfortable play activity, challenged Ravi to exercise creative agency by charting his own pathway in the narrative of the game and reflexively comparing the play activity with his own life experiences.

To summarise this section, I argue that creative agency in participatory performance can be facilitated by investigating the cultural particularity of those involved as the source and substance of system designs that enable emergent performance narratives to unfold in response to player action. My practical work has pursued the process of habitus mining, in which I have worked with people to build a picture of how their capitals have been shaped by the various social fields they have occupied. Subsequently, research material gathered can be considered through a system analytic frame as the basis for game design, turning the capital affordances of individuals in social fields into game mechanics that can be leveraged by players in simplified simulations of social scenarios. By enacting this transition from field analysis to system analysis as the basis of game design, I argue that game systems can offer players the opportunity to actively reflect on matters of concern from their lived experience and agentially reconfigure the game system to create emergent performance narratives.

### *Bricolage & Curatorial Framework Design in Participatory Performance*

Applications of system design methods in the creation of participatory performance can offer increasing scope for creative agency as participants experience ‘meaningful play’ within design frameworks that respond to their actions, but my advocacy of systems thinking is not unproblematic. Systems are often seen as being synonymous with structures of totalising control, a charge which is frequently levelled at Pierre Bourdieu, whose theories, for many critics, appear to deterministically affirm the inevitable reproduction of social structures (Lahire 2015). In this section, I engage with challenges to a systems-oriented approach from game studies scholar, Ian Bogost, but I also draw upon fine art theories of ‘the curatorial’ to argue that systems need not be viewed as rigid structures that are imposed in a top-down manner. Rather, I propose that systems of participatory performance can be brought into resolution by cumulative player actions in a flexible assemblage that promotes ongoing player agency.

In the previous section of this article, I discussed the shift in game studies discourse from the early narratological focus on games as narratives towards the ludological focus on games as systems. Ian Bogost’s work offers a useful rejoinder to ludologists, however, by warning against totalising systems that attempt to provide comprehensive overviews of complex phenomena. Bogost’s argument is that a systems analytic approach inevitably reduces complexity in potentially reductive simplifications, running the risk of creating structures with fixed rules that are rigid and immutable (Bogost 2008). In my practical work at Haringey Community Hub, I shared these concerns as I attempted to create system-based designs in response to the cultural particularity of players. Through the ‘habitus mining’

process, it quickly became apparent that, far from occupying a unified community that could be conceived as a singular system, participants came from myriad cultural backgrounds, with a wide diversity of lived experiences. This meant that creating the *Islands* game required a reduction in the complexity of cultural particularities, creating a simplified simulation of growing up in childhood, making friends, pursuing education and finding employment. Consequently, although the game did offer opportunities for participants to express their cultural particularity, as the previously cited example from Ravi illustrates, the game was much less resonant for some individuals. For example, whereas Ravi had struggled to find the time to go to school alongside helping on his small family farm (a conflict of priorities which was represented in the game design), another player, Mr Ganguly, responded less strongly to this dilemma since he had attended an English-speaking boarding school in Northern India and did not share Ravi's concern with fighting for an education at all costs. Consequently, as the project progressed, I explored other methods of play design (which I will describe later in this section) that afforded greater scope for individual players to apply their specific cultural particularities in the development of play activities.

Building on his critique of totalising systems, Ian Bogost offers an alternative proposition through his theory of *unit operations* which holds that structures emerge from small-scale interactions of objects (Bogost 2008). His most compelling example for reifying his unit operations theory is the human genome. Bogost claims that although geneticists thought they had created a comprehensive system for explaining human pathology when the human genome was decoded, researchers have subsequently discovered that interactions between individual genes are more illuminating than a macro-analysis of the overall genome structure (Bogost 2008, 3-4). In other words, the localised relational connections between genes determine their specific attributes and functions rather than being determined in a top-

down manner by the pre-existing rules of a totalising system. Bogost elaborates on ideas drawn from genetics by referencing Richard Dawkins' concept of the *meme*, which can be understood as the ideological equivalent of the gene (Bogost 2008, 46). In the same way that genes interrelate to create the operations of the wider human genome, memes interact and develop to construct the *memeplex* as a macro-cultural structure composed of micro-cultural units.

The concept of the memeplex is developed by Bogost through his discussion of *bricolage*, drawn from the theories of Lévi-Strauss, and the activities of the flâneur who combines units of experience, as he selectively navigates the city, to compose a wider cultural assemblage (Bogost 2008, 48). This notion that systems emerge through bricolage has been useful in my practical research as it has enabled me to create play designs that depart from a totalising top-down perspective. Whereas the *Islands* game arguably collapsed the complexity of individual experiences into a reductive system of children growing up and acquiring education, as the work at Haringey Community Hub progressed, I developed new play strategies that invited participants to combine units of their experience to generate an intersubjective memeplex and then playfully adapt the emerging structure. For example, in working with Ravi and Mr Ganguly, I ran a form of 'palimpsest' storytelling in which each participant would offer a story from their experience and invite their partner to renovate it, adding new layers to the existing structure so that new narrative trajectories could emerge. In a piece that we titled *Incident at King's Cross*, Mr Ganguly, who had worked as a platform manager at the station for twenty-five years, described the process for handling an emergency if someone fell onto the tracks. Subsequently, Ravi reconfigured this initial story material by creating a fictional character, Michael, (based on Mr Ganguly) and crafting a more daring story of single-handedly rescuing a woman who had fallen on the lines. Despite Mr

Ganguly's protest that '*Michael can't go on the lines*', ultimately, he yielded to Ravi's reconfiguration of the management structure at King's Cross and played along with the assemblage of a new system within the emergent fiction. Similarly, Mr Ganguly renovated Ravi's story of arriving in the UK to work at the Vauxhall car plant. In contrast to Ravi's account of spending lots of money having a good time and trying to make friends in England, Mr Ganguly applied his cultural particularity to the palimpsest story by steering a fictionalised version of Ravi towards more conservative life choices like saving money and limiting his social life to the more wholesome activity of joining a sports club. What these examples illustrate is a design approach in which participants are invited to become bricoleurs, expressing their agency in assembling the systems of play and loading their cultural particularity into the reconfiguration of these systems.

The process of play development described above proceeded from the ground-up, gathering details of the habitus of participants as a precursor to the creation of play structures, and this strategy shares many similarities with practices of Nordic Larp. Essentially, a larp design in the Nordic tradition will typically involve a workshop process through which players and the designers co-create the culture of play and its content, prior to the enactment of the actual role-play itself, which proceeds through a structured sequence of episodes in which an emergent narrative unfolds within certain spatial and temporal limitations (Stenros 2010). For example, in my larp *Neighbourhood*, which has been run at the Gateshead International Festival of Theatre, the National Student Drama Festival in Leicester and also with a rural arts organisation in Seinajoki, Finland, the design structure invites the players to design and build the houses that make up their neighbourhood, invent the characters who live there, imagine the dominant features of the local landscape and play out a year in the life of the community. The framework of the design establishes that the play will occur in the

houses that make up the neighbourhood over a set period of time, but the content of what occurs is generated by the players, with considerable divergences in the style and substance of the performance action. In the NSDF iteration, for example, the teenage participants created a neighbourhood that was mostly concerned with transgressive activities such as a drug-taking, sex and having parties, while the version in Finland was a more serious affair, focusing on the problems of a traditional agricultural community transitioning towards industrial scale farm production.

The idea that larp design can provide a framework for play, within which players develop the style and substance of their play experience, shares similarities with contemporary notions of ‘the curatorial’ in fine art practice. In *The Curatorial: The Philosophy of Curating*, fine art scholar Jean-Paul Martinon delineates the curatorial from curating by suggesting that whereas curating involves the presentation of knowledge that is embodied in the artistic texts of selected artworks, the curatorial is focused on creating contexts in which new knowledge can be co-created (Martinon 2013, 27-28). Stefan Nowotny’s article in Martinon’s edited collection goes further in establishing this distinction by claiming that, in contrast to the co-creative agency conferred by the curatorial, curation, as the singular, authored presentation of knowledge, is fundamentally narcissistic. Nowotny’s argument is based on the mythical story of Cura, the Roman goddess who created the first human and whose name is the source of the words: ‘caretaker’, and ‘curator’. In Cura’s narrative, she crosses a river then uses the mud from the opposite bank to sculpt an image of herself which is subsequently given the animation of life. This story is then extrapolated by Nowotny to suggest that curators continue to operate in a manner that is self-indulgent and self-absorbed, since they present the world through the artworks that they exhibit in a way that mirrors their own interests from a singular perceptual vantage point (Nowotny 2013, 59-

63). By contrast, the curatorial approach is to create spaces in which multiple subjectivities can combine and interrelate to co-create new knowledge, so that the experience of art is something that results from intersubjective agency rather than the texts that are displayed by the curator. Curatorial framework design should not be seen as the complete disavowal of artistic agency, but it does promote, I suggest, a useful conceptual basis for the facilitation of participant agency in performance works. The designer retains significant power and responsibility in defining the parameters of action, but the elements of curatorial structure can be seen as prompts for participant creativity rather than constraints of artistic curation that drive action along qualitatively pre-determined pathways towards outcomes that are also quantitatively pre-determined.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, in this article I have argued that contemporary applications and theorisations of games in participatory performance remain limited to a textual paradigm which, in turn, limits conceptions of participatory agency to the uncovering of latent content in the form of pre-prepared performance texts. I have proposed that practitioners and scholars in this field can usefully expand their understanding of games by engaging with systems thinking so that they can reconceive participant action as a generative activity that creates emergent narratives rather than a navigation of narrative content provided by the artist. The ability to generate emergent narratives in games lies at the heart of my understanding of ‘meaningful play’ and I contend that the ‘meaningfulness’ of participatory performance is substantially enhanced by designing systems that respond to participant agency. My arguments for agency have not solely focused on the design of interactive systems, however. I have suggested that if creative agency matters, there must also be a consideration of whose agency is at stake and what

agents might wish to do with their volitional affordances. Consequently, I have argued for designing participatory performance in response to the cultural particularity of those involved. Drawing on my own practice-led research, I have described processes by which the designer can gather contextual information on the habitus of participants and apply this investigation of the capitals that individuals possess to create system-based games.

Despite my positive assessment of the emergent potential of responsive systems, I have recognised that a system-oriented design approach can impose reductive simplifications on complex phenomena, and I have drawn upon the concept of bricolage to develop alternative play design approaches in which players, as bricoleurs, bring systems into formation for themselves. Subsequently, by linking bricolage and the concept of the curatorial I have presented a model of play design in which the artist creates frameworks for co-creative activity that brings structures into formation rather than imposing them in a top-down fashion. The practices of Nordic Larp have been central to the development of my design methods and I argue that participatory performance makers who wish to enhance the creative agency offered to participants can greatly benefit from exposure to this form of creative practice, in addition to an expanded understanding of games. Within the curatorial framework provided by play designers who utilise the tools of larp, participants can apply their cultural particularity in developing the content of the work. The co-creative process of intersubjective exchange that occurs subsequently brings the structures of play into resolution to create socially responsive systems that enable participants to express their creative agency in shaping an emergent narrative, generating meaningful play as they take action, then witness the impact of their action, on the systems at play.

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