# FROM EXCAVATION TO RECONFIGURATION

*Emergent co-creation in playful performance*

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'A whistle-blower contacts you, says they have information which the public should see. But they need your help getting it out there' (Fast Familiar, 2020). This snappy call to action is the first line of the publicity material for *Smoking Gun* (2020), a recent interactive work by the UK-based company Fast Familiar. Two of the creators of this piece, Dan Barnard and Rachel Briscoe, are former theatre directors who have abandoned work requiring conventional spectatorship in favour of more participatory projects (Briscoe, 2020). As such, *Smoking Gun* may offer a useful snapshot of the current state of 'playable theatre' in the United Kingdom. The publicity text continues, stating that 'over 6 days, you receive information on your phone – you solve puzzles and put clues together to figure out what is going on' (Fast Familiar, 2020). I suggest that the use of the word 'puzzles' is salient in describing many interactive works that might be described as 'playable'. As I have argued elsewhere, interactive performances can often be understood as puzzles, in the sense that they provide a latent text which is to be decoded, and this article develops my critique of a 'textual paradigm' in participatory performance (Harper, 2019) by proposing that works which centre upon excavation of pre-existing content are fundamentally unplayful. Drawing on the work of Brian Sutton-Smith, I suggest that play is, essentially, an act of experimentally

reconfiguring prior experience to develop new agential capacities (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Consequently, since puzzle solving is an unravelling of latent text rather than a reconfiguration of textual material, this type of activity is less likely to confer the developmental benefits of play.

My theoretical propositions are concretised through discussions of Punchdrunk, the internationally renowned purveyors of immersive theatre, alongside further consideration of the previously cited piece, *Smoking Gun*. Although Punchdrunk's work may appear to be relatively unplayful in comparison with more obviously interactive works, I suggest that the agential limitations of promenade exploration are similar to other works that are restricted to exploration of pre-existing performance texts. In contrast to interactive performance forms that are based on textual excavation, I discuss the practices of live action role-play in the Nordic tradition, focusing on *SelfConference* (2020), a recent online larp produced by a team of Russian designers. This piece, which invites players to collaboratively construct a character and develop several different versions of their life story, exemplifies emergent co-creation through which players originate their own narrative material and sculpt it into new configurations.

In the latter portions of the article, I suggest that the textual paradigm of much interactive theatre tends towards a structural determinism that drives players on pre-existing narrative pathways or steers them towards the rhetorical affirmation of dominant ideologies. I subsequently engage with the theory of Jacques Rancière, who proposes that emancipation in the reception of an artwork is to be found through interpretive autonomy rather than increased (forced) participation (Rancière, 2009). Having considered the allure of autonomous independence in immersive theatre, however, I draw on the work of Lev Vygotsky to suggest that play activity must include a heteronomous plurality of participants if players are to expand

their capacities beyond what they already know (Vygotsky, 2004). In other words, whereas autonomy promotes independent interpretation of texts based on the pre-existing perceptual capacities of individuals, I argue that the collision of multiple subjectivities in heteronomous play can stimulate emergent narratives and enable players to strengthen their creative agency by absorbing the capacities of diverse others.

## BEYOND A TEXTUAL PARADIGM IN THE PLAY OF PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

In a 2014 interview with the *The Guardian* newspaper, the director of Punchdrunk, Felix Barrett, gave a neat summary of the relationship between audiences and narrative in the company's works. In discussing his production of *The Drowned Man*, he commented that 'rather than an audience member creating their own narrative, they are peeling back layers of story archeologically' (Barrett, cited in McMullen, 2014). This reference to archaeology clearly indicates that audiences are expected to excavate latent story material in much the same way that players of puzzle games uncover pre-existing content by solving clues. Although puzzles may be considered as a type of game, the fact that they are concerned with unravelling pre-existing material entails a necessary limitation in the creative agency of players. Greg Costikyan affirms this view in his comparison of puzzles and games. He describes games as 'state machines' in which the system of interrelated parts that makes up the game responds to player action to generate new game states. With puzzles, however, although the play activity of tackling problems will have experiential variability, 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, 2013, p. 14)*

This robust assessment of the agential limitations of puzzles resonates with Rose Biggin's analysis of Punchdrunk's work. Like Costikyan, she contrasts the emergent properties of games with 'static puzzles' and suggests that the designs of Punchdrunk are 'not particularly "interactive" at all' because 'audience members are not invited to influence, change or complete anything' (Biggin, 2017, p. 90).

I have previously proposed that the tendency of interactive performance makers to approach narrative design like the composition of a puzzle can be understood as a textual paradigm because it requires participants to decode a pre-existing text, with little affordance to change the text or originate their own. The work of Punchdrunk provides an obvious example since audience action is mostly limited to spatial exploration which does not alter the pre-existing structure of the event. I suggest, however, that the textual paradigm is also in evidence in works that appear to be more interactive. In Fast Familiar's *Smoking Gun*, audience members are invited to interact with each other in a web chat as they sift through the evidence that they have been asked to investigate. These interactions may change participants' perspectives on the performance text, influencing which characters they suspect of wrongdoing, for example, but they cannot change the structure of the work or develop anything new. The only constitutive action which players can take at the conclusion of the event is to decide, by group vote, whether or not to reveal the evidence they have gathered, which gives rise to one of four pre-authored outcomes. It should be noted that, in my view, *Smoking Gun* is a work of high quality, offering a compelling experience for those who enjoy solving puzzles. In developing a more refined discourse about playable theatre, however, I suggest that it is necessary to delineate work that has the emergent properties of game play from performance works that operate within a textual paradigm.

In contrast with the process of reading a text, which involves

excavating and interpreting the content, I argue that play involves the reconfiguration of players' pre-existing experiential material. This argument is informed by Brian Sutton-Smith's theory that play functions as *adaptive variability*, enabling players to adapt to changing circumstances by experimentally repurposing existing experiential knowledge to develop new capacities (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 198). In describing the fantasy play of children, Sutton-Smith argues that the activity helps them develop labile flexibility through an exploration, and exaggerated extension, of their lived experience, dismantling the constituent parts of the world as they know it and reassembling these parts in myriad reconfigurations:

> *It takes the world apart in a way that suits their own emotional responses to it. As such, their play is a deconstruction of the world in which they live. If the world is a text, the play is a reader's response to that text. There are endless possible reader responses to the orthodox text of growing up in childhood. There is an endless play of signifiers of which children and all other players are capable. All players unravel in some way the accepted orthodoxies of the world in which they live. (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 166)*

Sutton-Smith's reference to reader response theory is useful, for my purposes, because it points to the active role of players as constructors of meaning. Rather than simply receiving the sensory stimuli of the world, as if this world were a static and unchanging text, players dismantle the elements of their sensory experience and reconstitute them. Effectively, they create a textual collage, or palimpsest, by reshaping the experiential material that they have gathered, gaining new capacities in the process.

The theory of play as adaptive variability shares similarities with theories from performance studies which suggest that all performances involve imitation and adaptation of previous performances. In much the same way that Sutton-Smith sees play as a reconfiguration of players' existing experiential material,

Richard Schechner argues that 'performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to *nth* time. Performance is "twice-behaved behaviour"' (Schechner, 1985, p. 36). Schechner's ideas on the reiterative nature of performance also resonate with Lev Vygotsky's work on the role of play in childhood learning. Vygotsky's theories of play are strongly, if indirectly, theatrical because they are focused on imitative mimicry, which is central to theatrical performance. This playful imitation is not merely a mimetic reproduction of observed behaviour, however, it is a transformative act, 'allowing the child to perform as if a head taller' (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16) so that they incrementally become other than what they are. The significance of this understanding of play is that it is based on an *excavation* of pre-existing experiential material as the basis for creative *reconfiguration*. Unlike the textual basis of puzzle activities, therefore, I contend that play is a fundamentally generative and future-oriented activity that repurposes the old to create the new.

Generative play is strongly evidenced by the practices of larp in the Nordic tradition. Nordic larps commonly include preparatory workshops that invite players (either directly or indirectly) to load their subjectivities into creating the contextual circumstances that provide the basis for fictional role-play (Montola, 2003; Stenros, 2014). Consequently, Nordic larp can be understood as a fundamentally co-creative activity, combining a framework offered by designers with the subjectivities of participants who play the work into actuality and without whom the work could not exist (Stenros, 2010). Marjukka Lampo describes the co-creative nature of larp as an 'ecological' approach to performance, whereby players receive a series of creative stimuli within the conceptual frame of the scenario and generate responses that construct the fabric of play (Lampo, 2016). For example, in the online larp, *SelfConference*, designed by Anna Volodina, Elena Ashmarina and Lilia Barladian, a group of seven players are invited to invent a teenage

character by proposing an array of likes, dislikes, hopes and fears, then develop four reconstructions of that character's life, which ranged (in my play experience) from a successful author with financial anxieties to a successful veterinary surgeon plagued by an obsession with dead bodies. Following Lampo's idea that larps can function as 'ecologies', I suggest that this work invited experimental reconfiguration of the fictional ecology that the players had created. Rather than simply excavating a text, they were enabled to construct (and reconstruct) a play ecology by building upon and adapting other players' contributions. As Sutton-Smith and Vygotsky both maintain, the developmental benefits of play stem from this type of selective reiteration of pre-existing experiential materials. Consequently, since larp can invite players to move beyond textual excavation towards the creation of their own ecologies of performance, I suggest that this form of creative practice is conducive to the expansion of players' powers of creative action, as the co-creative interweaving of subjectivities enables them to absorb new capacities from each other.

## BEYOND DETERMINISTIC LINEARITY IN PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

In considering the narrative design of interactive performance in the United Kingdom, I suggest that the approach of many practitioners is characterised by a linearity that harks back to the narrative theories of Aristotle, whose ideas on cause and effect yield a conception of tragic drama in which the Fate of the protagonist is pre-determined (Aristotle, 1996). In other words, Aristotelian narrative is fundamentally linear and deterministic, and I suggest that this model continues to dominate Western conceptions of story development, even in discourses of interactive performance. For example, Gareth White proposes that interactive theatre makers can be understood as 'procedural authors' who construct a sequence of interactive episodes, then

invite audience members to engage in a performative 'process' that sets the authored procedure into action (White, 2013, p. 31).

White articulates his ideas on procedural authorship by describing his work as a facilitator of an interactive theatre workshop about bullying in schools with London-based theatre in education company, Armadillo Theatre (White, 2013, pp. 65-71). His account of this workshop sets out the combination of pre-scripted scenes (performed by professional actors) alongside interactive sections in which students are cast in the basic role of children in the playground. As the 'procedure' is enacted, it becomes clear that the participatory action is carefully orchestrated to lead towards a pre-determined conclusion in the narrative, which suggests that standing up to bullies with physical aggression never solves the problem. The clearly rhetorical structure of a procedural authorship that uses audience participation to reach a pre-determined ending (which seems analogous to the narrative determinism of Aristotle) raises the fundamental question of how participatory agency may manifest in interactive forms of theatre. White's discussion of this topic is problematic, in my view, as he suggests that agency is about the *feeling* of being able to pursue an intention or goal (White, 2013, p. 64). In other worlds, according to White, if participants, like the children in the fictional playground scenario, have the impression that they can achieve something within the framework of the drama, they have agency, even if the design structure of procedural authorship precludes this.

The tension between the semblance of agency and the actual preclusion of it is common, I argue, in contemporary interactive theatre practices. In a recent article describing their acclaimed immersive work, *Hotel Medea*, Persis Jade Maravala and Jorge Lopes Ramos describe forms of 'interactive gameplay' that participants are invited to engage in, such as hide and seek, which is played by audience members while they pretend to be Medea's children. Although this play might be extremely enjoyable, it

is questionable whether it can be seen as agential play since the outcomes of the game cannot change anything within the fixed linearity of the Greek myth. Irrespective of how well the children hide, they cannot escape death, because Fate has pre-determined it. Consequently, it is apt that Maravala and Ramos share White's argument that agency is a matter of perception. They state that they are seeking to provide audiences with 'the *experience* of agency as opposed to *actual* agency…the real sensation of empowerment, even if they don't actually shape the narrative' (Maravala & Ramos, 2016, p. 167), which again presents a vision of agency in participatory performance that is limited.

In response to the arguable limitations in scholarly accounts of agency in interactive performance, I propose that understandings of agential play and emergent narrative potential can be expanded by a developed awareness of how games function as complex systems. Jesper Juul neatly articulates the contrast between emergent and linear play by distinguishing games of emergence from games of progression. He argues that games of progression are composed of sequences of play challenges, much like White's procedural authorship, which lead through a pre-authored play narrative towards the completion of the game. Games of emergence, by contrast, are based on rule-comprised systems that combine with player actions to generate new game states and emergent variability in how the narrative of the game unfolds (Juul, 2005). Arguably, since performance makers often wish to craft a story experience for audiences, they tend to favour a model of progression which leads from one challenge to the next, in a linear fashion, towards some narrative denouement. In contrast with this deterministic linearity, narrative design in larp focuses on the creation of story context that provides an array of fictional materials with which players can co-create emergent narratives (Pearce, 2016; Harper, 2017).

The distinction between a game of progression and emergent

play can be observed in comparing *Smoking Gun* and *SelfConference*. *Smoking Gun* delivers a sequence of pre-authored units of narrative (in the form of hacked emails and company accounts) over a five-day period. Players excavate this material during daily web chats to progressively reveal the full story, leading to the narrative denouement in which players blow the whistle on either, or both, of the dubious characters within the fiction. This marks the piece as a game of progression since it follows a linear path through a pre-determined sequence of narrative revelations, and although player choice can yield four different outcomes, all of these outcomes are pre-authored. In other words, the piece offers no emergent potential for players to reconfigure the contextual circumstances of the fiction. *SelfConference*, by contrast, can be seen as an emergent work because the players are invited to originate the elements of the play system then reconfigure these elements within the framework of participation that the designers have created. In considering the possibility that works of playable theatre might enable players to expand their agential capacities, I argue that it is necessary to move beyond the structural determinism of linear narrative progression that is evidenced by *Smoking Gun*. Given that adaptive variability, as theorised by Sutton-Smith, is based on reconfiguring existing experiential material to develop new behavioural capacities in preparation for uncertain futures (Sutton-Smith, 1997, pp. 221-224), I suggest that the inherent uncertainty of play activities like *SelfConference* is fundamental in supporting the creative agency of participants in playful performances.

## FROM AUTONOMOUS ACTION TO HETERONOMOUS CO-CREATION IN PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

In much the same way that the 'procedural rhetoric' deployed by game designers can lead players to pre-determined conclusions (Bogost, 2007), interactive and immersive theatre practices can be seen to deploy rhetoric by producing performance texts that

participants are required to activate, but which they cannot influence, either in narrative outcome or thematic meaning. Adam Alston argues that immersive works in the United Kingdom often implicitly affirm neoliberal ideology by inviting audience members to become productive consumers through their participation in the event (Alston, 2016). Alston goes on to suggest that this performative labour is, effectively, appropriated as aesthetic material by the designers of immersive events, becoming part of the scenography to be consumed by other audience members (Alston, 2016, pp. 157-158). A striking example of this can be found in *The Black Diamond*, Punchdrunk's collaboration with Stella Artois Black, in which participants were invited to playfully explore an immersive party world whilst consuming the branded beverage, effectively turning the audience of productive consumers, in Alston's view, into unpaid brand ambassadors (Alston, 2016, pp. 125-127).

Despite the fact that many immersive works may be seen to exploit the performative labour of their audiences, Alston maintains that audience-participants can preserve their autonomy and resist such exploitation by engaging in an introspective manner with the affective outcomes that occur in their bodies and embodied brains (Alston, 2016, pp. 55-56). This positive valuation of introspective autonomy is strongly influenced by the ideas of Jacques Rancière whose book *The Emancipated Spectator* offers a critical perspective on the artistic ambition to activate audiences by making them participants in an artwork (Rancière, 2009). Instead, Rancière proposes that the spectator does not need to be emancipated since she is always actively observing and interpreting the work before her (Rancière, 2009, p. 13). Central to Rancière's concept of emancipated spectatorship is interpretive autonomy. He argues that perceptual independence must be maintained in order to avoid the hierarchical ranking of differing interpretations and

maintain the *a priori* assumption of perceptual equality (Lewis, 2012, p. 61).

The pursuit of autonomous participation is strongly evident in immersive theatre practices in which participants are encouraged to seek one-of-a-kind experiences, such as the exclusive and intimate one-to-one encounters in Punchdrunk productions. (Zaiontz, 2014, p. 425). Arguably, though, there is a paradox in Punchdrunk's work between the apparent freedom of autonomous spatial navigation and the collective homogeneity imposed by the company's use of masks (Wilson, 2016, p. 166). This point resonates with Daniel Schulze's claim that masked audience members 'are no longer subjects who are free to voice their thoughts…they are a silent, scenery-like, exploring mass' (Schulze, 2017, p. 162). Even in interactive works that do invite participants to voice their thoughts, however, I argue that the use of fixed performance texts anonymises audience-participants because the text does not recognise or respond to the particularity of individuals. In *Smoking Gun*, participants are invited to give themselves a codename when signing up for the event, and although substantial interaction can occur as they type messages to each other on the web chat, their particular subjectivities have no influence on the progression of the pre-authored narrative. Consequently, I suggest that although participants are able to offer personal perspectives on the latent text, the fact that the text does not respond may make them less inclined to express their subjective viewpoints or seek to engage with the subjectivity of others, with the result that cultural differences are, effectively, elided and replaced by homogeneous anonymity.

In contrast with Rancière's valorisation of autonomous engagement with artworks and the assumption of perceptual equality amongst emancipated spectators, Lev Vygotsky's theories of childhood learning through play are founded on the premise that development occurs in conditions of relational

sociality with a diverse plurality of players. Essentially, rather than operating in autonomous isolation, players learn by interacting with diverse others who possess a varied, or unequal, range of capacities. In discussing the influence of environmental factors on learning, Vygotsky argues that a child's development is necessarily enabled and constrained by the relative capacities of other individuals in their social context. With regard to parental influences, for example, he describes the presence of a fully developed adult as the 'ideal form' from which children acquire knowledge through imitative performance. In the absence of this ideal form, the child will simply fail to develop, even if they have no impediments to their physical or mental faculties (Vygotsky, 1994). In other words, the child will only develop new capabilities by imitating others with greater, or diversified, capacities, which suggests that an inherent unequalness in the capacities of players is fundamental to playful learning.

Vygotsky's ideas on the importance of a diverse heteronomy in playful learning spaces resonate with more recent studies of social play. Celia Pearce argues, drawing on the work of James Surowiecki, that 'collective intelligence emerges at a much higher level in groups that are diverse than in groups whose individuals have uniform skills and abilities' (Surowiecki, cited in Pearce, 2009, p. 48), and she claims that such homogeneity is likely to undermine emergent variability (Pearce, 2009, p. 47). To counter the stability of homogenous uniformity, Vittorio Marone proposes that asymmetry in game design can promote emergent possibility. He argues that 'dynamic asymmetry…can lead to a spontaneous evolution of roles, from peripheral to central, from reader to author and from player to designer' (Marone, 2016, p. 11). Similarly, Thomas Markussen and Eva Knutz claim that 'participation in art as in ordinary life is never symmetrical or equal; it will always rely on an asymmetrical distribution of control' (Markussen & Knutz, 2017, p. 9). Markussen and Knutz do not frame this unequalness as something negative. Instead,

they point to the capacity for asymmetrical social play 'to increase resilience in the players by reconfiguring the social relationship between them' (Markussen & Knutz, 2017, p. 3) so that they can 'play imaginatively with alternative identities, forbidden identities and even identity switching' (Markussen & Knutz, 2017, p. 7).

The fluidity of identity in the social play that Markussen and Knutz describe is evident In *SelfConference* as players draw upon a wide range of experiential material (related to their different nationalities, ages, sexualities and countless other cultural particulars) in the co-creation of a gestalt character who subsequently becomes several radically different characters. In undertaking these character transformations, players are invited to observe, creatively imitate, and adapt the performances of others, and I suggest that this playful imitation is conducive to the development of new perspectives and creative capacities, in line with Sutton-Smith's theory of play as adaptive variability. The potential of role-play to generate emergent transformation in the capacities of players can be further explicated with reference to the work of George Herbert Mead, who suggests that adopting alternative roles enables people to develop reflexive awareness of their potential for developmental change. According to Mead, as described by Nick Crossley, individuals become aware of their own 'self' by 'adopting the role of another in relation towards their "self"' (Mead, cited in Crossley, 2016, p. 28). Subsequently, the ongoing absorption of the perspectives of others enables role-players to reflexively alter their habitual dispositions:

> *Perspectives are constantly coming into contact, affording agents a new viewpoint upon their self and generating new synthetic and hybrid cultural forms which can never achieve taken-for-grantedness. We are creatures of habit, for Mead, but we are equally conversational agents and our conversational tendencies, whilst rooted in habit, tend to disturb at least some of our sedimented repertoires of action, bringing them into view for*

> *us. Tradition and culture lose some of their grip upon us by virtue of our experientially-rooted awareness of their relativity. (Crossley, 2016, p. 30)*

In other words, by creatively imitating others in play communities that are characterised by diverse heteronomy, role-players are able to absorb the perspectives and behaviours of others and thereby shift beyond deterministic repetition of their existing repertoires of behavioural action. Rather than being seen as autonomous readers of fixed performance texts, therefore, I suggest that heteronomous role-play creates emergent systems in which the contexts and narratives of play can be collectively authored (and reauthored) by the players themselves.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have argued in this article that in order for playable performance works to support adaptive variability, they must do more than invite players to excavate latent narrative content in the mode of decoding a puzzle. Instead, as Brian Sutton-Smith suggests, the developmental potential of play is based on the ability of players to reconfigure the substance of their lived experience to experimentally develop new affordances in preparation for uncertain futures. By extension, if players are to achieve an emergent transformation in their capacities, I argue that play designs must function as emergent systems rather than linear structures that deliver pre-authored content and pre-determined narrative outcomes. Alongside these arguments, I have noted that performance scholars often suggest that autonomy is key to participatory agency in interactive theatre works. I have argued, however, drawing on the work of Lev Vygotsky, that autonomy undermines the developmental potential of play, since playful learning is founded upon creative imitation of others. Consequently, if players are to have a broad range of behavioural material to imitate and learn from, playful performance must be understood as a

heteronomous activity based on the relational sociality of intersubjective exchange.

In a recently published piece entitled 'The post-immersive manifesto', Jorge Lopes Ramos and Persis Jade Maravala reflect on their previously cited immersive theatre work, *Hotel Medea*, and conclude that despite the acclaim that the production received, they had to accept that they were 'working with the wrong model and had inadvertently been co-opted into a problematic trend' of using the word 'immersive' as a marketing buzz word for boosting commercial success (Ramos, Dunne-Howrie, Maravala & Simon, 2020, p. 199). Subsequently, their new manifesto, co-authored with Joseph Dunne-Howrie and Bart Simon, asserts that 'post-immersive participation emerges when the individual becomes a part of a temporary community'. They go on to state that membership of this community 'is determined by an individual's capacity to influence the construction of the social codes underlying these communities, not by the unfree choices they make over the course of a performance' (Ramos, Dunne-Howrie, Maravala & Simon, 2020, p. 202). Drawing on these excerpts from the post-immersive manifesto, I argue that play designs which recognise and respond to the subjectivities of players can empower them to co-construct the system of play and contribute to its ongoing reconfiguration, in contrast with interactive works based on textual excavation, in which player choices may hardly be choices at all, since the text has already been written. In sum, I argue that playful performance, far from simply being an artistic text that autonomous players explore, interact with, and interpret, is created by heteronomous communities of players who apply their subjectivities in constructing the system of play, reconstructing it in myriad reconfigurations, and gaining new capacities from each other in the process.

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