

Digital Games and Theater in America

Part I: Digital Games as Theater By Dimitra Nikolaidou

Hello and welcome to our panel, Digital Games and Theater in America Theatricalizing Games, Gamifying Theater, Playing into Social Change

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The presentation is split into three parts. This is the first part, which focuses on how games borrow heavily from theatrical elements and conventions. In the second part Aikaterini will focus on what games can do for theatre, while in the third part Dan will go into the potential for social change inherent in this relationship.

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So at first glance, gaming and theater constitute two different experiences, the only thing they share in common being the notion of play. However, a closer look suggests a much deeper connection between them.

In today's post-modern environment it's easy to find examples of theater and gaming borrowing freely from each other. However, it can be argued that this is possible because the connection existed from the start. Indeed, Gina Bloom's *Gaming the Stage* (2018) suggests that although distinct, the two mediated realms have been interpenetrating for centuries. In particular, Bloom posits that theater and stage share a set of strategies of playing. Bloom boldly suggests that back then those with knowledge of gaming in settings such as sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gaming houses, gambling clubs, or blood-sport arenas worked such strategies into the action of the drama of that period in the process enabling gamers in the audience to access the meanings of drama and attracting gamers into participating in the act of playing. Bloom goes on to show how the connections between theater and gaming continue into early modern period, suggesting that these connections helped theater become established in the entertainment market.

"Audiences did not just see a play; they were encouraged to play the play, and knowledge of gaming helped them become better theatergoers," she claims (Bloom 2019).

Based on Bloom's work, in this presentation we are going to take as our basis that games can be approached and studied as theatrical media

and theatre “as an interactive gaming technology” (2019).^[1] It needs to be said that this connection is also supported by ludologists and game studies scholars including Johan Huizinga in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1938) and Sara Lynne Bowman in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (2010) who categorize both games and theater as liminal ritualistic spaces.

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Our own research however will take a step beyond Bloom, Bowman and Huizinga's argumentation, by looking at digital instead of analog gameplay and theaterplay.

The advent of the digital revolution shifted the terrains of gaming more radically than those of theatre. It certainly affected the theatre as art, craft, industry, and the sweep of applied theatre, and it also gave rise to forms of theatre native or thoroughly adapted to the digital environment that now fall under the rubric of “digital theatre.” However, generally speaking, the basics of theatre (especially mainstream theatre), namely its aesthetics, politics, and ethics, have not so far undergone any radical transformation owing to the integration of digital technology into the theatre praxis. The case is different with games. Digital games' prevalence over analog games in the last decades, and the proliferation of the former, have had a deep impact on the design, production, distribution, and reception of games as loci of sociality and socializing, as well as on their uses beyond the entertainment industry, in education, and in the intersection of games and the arts (Quandt and Kröger 2014; Dillon 2020). Digital gaming signals a dramatic change in the ontology and epistemology of gaming: what games are, what they do, and how we make meaning out of/with them. Ubiquitous and technologically forward-facing, digital gaming is not simply an intrinsic part of convergent media culture in contemporary societies, as game scholars Johannes Fromme and Alexander Unger have argued (2012); rather, it has emerged as one of the major actors therein.

This could partially explain why post-2000s theatre has turned to digital gaming, both in search of tools and to engage new audiences, a turn made more sharp by the coronavirus pandemic, perhaps in a repeat of what Bloom claims happened in the 16th and 17th century.

It may be that the unique qualities of the digital (flexibility, mutability, openness, generativity, etc.) favored a more pronounced interrelation between digital games and theatre in recent years, in theory and practice—especially as professional theatre seeks to salvage its relevance among young and young adult demographics, key gamer demographics. The pandemic of course made this need more urgent. At the same time, theater makers were themselves more likely to be in

contact with digital capabilities and consider them a part of their artistic identity.

In academic terms, the dawn of the performance studies paradigm and the advent of game studies has also foregrounded and fortified the said interrelation. Performance studies pulled the spotlight from traditional theatre/drama scholarship toward an expansive conception of performance and toward an interdisciplinary multiplicity of entry points for performance analysis. Clara Fernández-Vara has demonstrated this in an article that delivers a theatre-based performance framework for understanding digital games, and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games in particular as software and as gameplay (2009, 1). At the same time, in the nascent field of game studies too, “[d]ramatic models have been repeatedly invoked to study virtual environments, . . . in game design” (2009, 1)—although a comprehensive treatise on the matter has yet to appear.

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So let us begin by focusing on the aspect of performance. Performance can be defined as a structured, regulated cluster of events in which the participants are engaged in meaning-making processes which involve objects as signs and which have social basis and implications in a specific space and according to specific time configurations. As such, the term performance accurately describes what people experience when engaged in digital gameplay (Fernández-Vara 2009, 3). There are indeed good reasons why theatre is chosen as the basic reference model to study MMORPGs. To illustrate the relationship, and highlight its potential for social change, in this presentation we are first going to focus on the narrative, open-world digital game *Fallen London (FL)*. By mapping the elements and principles of theater onto *Fallen London*, we hope to set up the framework to move on to the next part of our presentation.

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What makes theater theater has been long contested, and it is recognized that many forms of theater challenge established definitions. Still, for our purposes, it serves to clarify that theatre generally refers to a performance practice in which a combination of elements creates a (usually self-contained) *fictional world* oriented toward a *text/narrative*, which can be more or less authoritative and open depending on its content and purpose (the story and thematic material). This fictional world is (often) organized “by causality, psychological motivation, and conceptual coherence,” and spectators are invited to enter and participate live (although not necessarily physically) in it, mentally, affectually, viscerally, and sometimes kinaesthetically (Boyle, Cornish, and Woolf 2019, 2).

Fundamental among these elements are:

- *characters*, embodied by the performers/actors (although characterization can be woven into a work via absent characters, non-human agents, or even elements of the setting);
- *plot*, the action of the theatre work, basically what happens in it, which is more gripping when filled with tension;
- *setting*, the time and place of the action but also the scenery, or onstage physical elements and arrangements (although theatre stagecraft also includes lighting, costuming, and props, among others);
- and *dialogue*, speech or other forms of text usually directed by characters to other characters or to oneself within the context of the fictional world, by means of which this world comes alive, character gets revealed, action advances, and themes are introduced (Jacobus 2008, 17–22).

Fernández-Vara does not enlist the foregoing elements for the framework she composes in her attempt to show the connection between theatre and MMORPGs. However, we find that taking them into account lends credence to our attempt at further elucidating existing affinities between the two realms. Yet, in order to flesh out these affinities, we should also consider the design principles that support the development of the components of the (dramatic) theatre apparatus. Drawing on applied theatre literature, we can identify at least six: *theme*, *context*, *role(s)*, *frame*, *signs*, and *strategies* (Bowell and Heap 2013). The following table illustrates the content of each and presents key ways in which design principles relate to basic theatre elements:

Design principle	Content of the design principle	Relation to theatre elements
Theme	What is the work about? What is the focus/foci? What aspect of the human condition gets examined? (Bowell and Heap 21)	The theme is integral to the content and purpose of the text/narrative and thus of the fictional world. It drives decisions about characters, plot, setting, and dialogue.
Context	The fictional circumstances of the theatre work in which the theme gets explored. It is constituted by time, place, and event/situation. (21)	The context derives from or relates directly to the text/narrative. It is integral to the composition of the fictional world and the plot. It drives decisions about setting, characters, and dialogue.

Roles	<p>They are dynamic constellations of human characteristics, behaviors, and functions that express character. They emerge from within and around the context. (45)</p>	<p>Roles correspond to characters that (usually) evolve as the plot progresses. They are expressed mainly via the dialogue and interact with the setting. They link the text/narrative and the fictional world immediately with the human condition.</p>
Frame	<p>The frame of communication within which everything meaningful happens. The field of forces which is created by the different viewpoints and workings of characters and other agencies. It charges the work with tension. (24–25)</p>	<p>Frame relates directly to the setting as well as drives and energizes character, plot, and dialogue. It enlivens the fictional world. It turns the text/narrative into a distinctly social experience.</p>
Sign	<p>The “intricate system of signs including objects, sounds, language, gestures and images [which] combine to bring significance to the events . . . and direct attention to them” (21–22); multifunctional “information-bearing phenomena” that create meaning for the audience. (77)</p>	<p>Signs offer clues so that the audience can “read” the fictional world. They invest character and plot with meaning and allow the audience to decipher it. They make the setting and dialogue signify purposefully so that the audience can access the thematic material of the text/narrative.</p>
Strategies	<p>They are “ways of working based on performance forms that bring the drama to life” (22). Strategies allow theatre creators to adjust all the elements at their disposal so that meaning can be made “through the friction at the interface between them” (22). They are the structured, sign-encompassing means by which the theme gets</p>	<p>Strategies are purposeful combinations of the fundamental elements of theatre that allow the text/narrative to be(come) a fictional world onstage. They organize characters, plot, setting, and dialogue for significance: strategies make them happen in ways that invite the audience to engage in meaning-making processes as they experience the theatre work.</p>

explored.

Tied to the aforementioned elements and principles are theatre conventions. The three conventions that Fernández-Vara isolates are present even in works that involve spectators in live theatre-making processes or that move “away from drama” toward theatre that “foregrounds its own conditions of production and reception” (Boyle, Cornish, and Woolf 2019, 4): (1) the *text* that, in dramatic theatre, involves dialogue and stage directions, and that constitutes a narrative (at the heart of which lies a story), although it is not necessarily pre-set or fixed; (2) but the text is actualized by the *performance*, by “the ensemble of stage systems used [in a production]” (Pavis 1982, 160), or by what the performers and other onstage elements do to concretize the text. (1982, 3); and the link between text and performance is the *mise-en-scene*, which here means the interrelationship of the systems of performance received by the audience (1982, 160).

Together, these operative conventions, design principles, and fundamental elements help effectuate theatre’s sociocultural uses not only as artform, but also as medium of entertainment and learning. Next, we argue that they also apply to digital games and gameplay and that they enable MMORPGs to have similar uses. The following paragraphs illustrate these affinities through the example of *FL*. *FL* constitutes a liminal case among MMORPGs.

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Though categorically defined as an MMORPG, in the sense that thousands of players create custom characters which they role-play in a common server, it can also be described as a narrative, storytelling game, since the emphasis is placed on the discovery and production of text and story. For this reason, the theatre elements identified above are of primary importance in it. In *FL*, the visual elements (graphics) are not promoted as the main selling point or prioritized in game design. The focus is on the performative, narrative-centric creation of the fictional world. Visuals are purposefully treated as components of a theatre-like stagecraft; characters, plot, setting, and dialogue become central in multiple ways; game mechanics are curated so as to promote immersion. Notably, this immersion is extended beyond the game, in the official forums, where players voluntarily continue the act of performing to generate more narrative/text and expand the fictional world. Such a deep level of immersion is one of the factors that makes this, and similar games, uniquely positioned to promote social change.

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An effort to map the elements of theater onto *FL* must begin from the aim of the game, stated in the introductory webpage: explore in depth the fictional world of "Fallen London." The premise is that in 1862, London sunk into the depths of the Earth. Forty years later, the residents have adapted into a sunless existence, while society and culture have been partially restructured. The setting draws inspiration from a diverse body of literature, including Gothic pulps as well as the works of writers such as T. S. Eliot, Shakespeare, Borges, or Ishiguro. As such, the setting is not only constructed via a combination of primarily textual means (and occasional abstract/evocative illustrations) but is also heavily metatextual in nature.

In order to explore this setting, players create customizable characters who have recently arrived in London to achieve a personal goal (chosen among four thematically diverse goals at the beginning of the game). Their avatars consist of "silhouette art," which allows players to project their chosen characteristic unto the shadow, similar to how costuming and scenography are employed in the theatre. They are also requested to write a short text concerning the rumors surrounding their character, thus rendering characterization more social and more nuanced. As they progress in the game, their story generates a shifting description under their name. Character creation, then, is not entirely dependent upon the player but is achieved through a constant dialogical relationship with the game's software.

Following character creation, players are required to perform these characters by making certain choices, which in turn unravel larger segments of plot, and thus text. Their performance will simultaneously uncover the setting as well as occasionally alter it, since many of the offered choices cause shifts in *FL*. The game also offers two types of dialogue choices: pre-programmed dialogue, in which the player chooses one out of several given options, and intra-player dialogue, in which two players engage in communication. Communication can take the form of letter-writing, conversations around a game of chess, dinners, sparring, and so on. These interactions fulfill two functions: they promote the unfolding of the plot, by producing qualities that help player characters achieve their goals, and they reveal and generate part of the setting. For these functions to be fulfilled, the player is required to perform their character not only in a gamist manner (i.e., choosing actions and optimizing gear), but also in a theatrical manner, by obeying the rules and observing the etiquette of the fictional Victorian culture. Notably, the subculture created around *FL* promotes and rewards the option of offering text-driven, in-role performances when players communicate in action. The importance of performative dialogue and the extent of player immersion is reinforced when we

consider *FL* online forums, where players create textual adventures for other forum-goers to participate in or discuss in-game events in character. Even in sections of the forum where role-playing is not required, most players continue to produce text in line with Victorian decorum while discussing game issues of a technical nature. This evinces how central dialogue-based drama and characterization are to the game; it also showcases how players continue to generate plot, expand the setting, and thus co-create the text outside the confines of the pre-programmed game, or the game as code and mechanics.

A close examination of *FL* also reveals that theatre design principles are manifest in the game, further highlighting its connection with theater and theatreplay. To follow *Bowell and Heap's* typology, the game has a clear theme, summed up in the formulation: *in the matters of the Bazaar, always look to love*. This constitutes a *leit-motif* encountered in various instances throughout the game. All plot lines, conflicts, and events are constitutive of an exploration of Love. The context is also clearly defined: an emotionally restrained society suddenly plunged into eldritch darkness must find ways to adapt, evolve, and thrive. The most obvious iteration of the roles principle in the game is the roles taken up by the players themselves. The frame of in-game communication is permeated by Victorian formality and defined by the dynamics of the players' interaction among themselves (as they embody allying or antagonistic forces) and of the interaction between players and inbuilt game agencies (as players are requested to communicate through letter-writing, invitations, dinners, etc.). Observing the etiquette by design maximizes enjoyment, immersive capability, as well as the game's communicative potential. Several signs are also used to invoke and convey meaning. For instance, the deck of cards at the players' disposal has different colored frames according to the type of plot they unlock; the change in game locations is signified by silhouette art banners; and equipped instruments signify different plot-related professions. Finally, *FL* clearly utilizes as well as encourages players to develop a variety of strategies to integrate character, setting, dialogue, and plot. The gameplay they perform is contingent on their strategies, especially how they choose to maneuver through the game's rules to achieve goals and maximize enjoyment, which, in turn, depends on the game's runtime behavior (how its mechanics unfold). This is the quintessential *modus operandi* of the immersive game experience, grounded in the players' customizing processes of meaning-making as they co-create its fictional world, whether in- or out-of-role.

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It follows from all the above that there is merit in Fernández-Vara's argument that there is some measure of correspondence between the

theatre convention of text and the digital game components of code and mechanics (2009, 5). Nevertheless, the player's input and their workings vis-à-vis the game's workings, point to the fact that text creation within the game spills over these two components and becomes integral to the game as art-inflected, social platform. Similarly, the theatre convention of performance, defined earlier, involves far more than a game's runtime and runtime behavior, which Fernández-Vara parallels to it (5–6). It entails strategies of gameplay but also kinds of in-role and out-of-role engagement with the text of the game that truly “concretize” the latter in ways akin to how theatre performance operates and that demand significant exercise of agency on the part of the players. At the same time, when applied to the game, the *mise-en-scene* is not simply evoked by the latter's aesthetics and the interactions that constitute it (5–6); it goes beyond those elements to the kinds of generative play that mark *FL*'s reception by its own internal audiences, the gameplaying communities.

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It becomes evident from our discussion so far that the sociocultural import of games like *FL* precludes their dismissal as mere light entertainment. The play of open-culture games like this “occur[s] on a cultural level” and involves the exchange of meanings “with their surrounding contexts” (Salen and Zimmerman 668). As such and as a vital part of popular culture, they are thus uniquely positioned to reflect the negotiations of this culture. The highly participatory nature of gaming subcultures accentuates this quality, and *FL* is a great example of this. Initially, the game included very few non-playable characters of color, instantiations of Victorian patriarchal structures, and references to problematic Victorian attitudes (i.e. the term “Orientals” and dismissal of homosexuality). However, as the game evolved, and as similar issues were addressed in forum discourse, the designers decided to sacrifice historical authenticity for a more socioculturally inclusive and empowering experience. These changes attract commentary in the forums which, given their performative nature, remains civil. Partly because of these liminally performative discussions, which, it should be noted entail many important intercultural learning experiences for the participants, all components of *FL* play shifted to promote visibility and justice. In a very real sense, then, the high level of immersion generated during and around *FL* gameplay ensured that the *FL* audience would learn more about cultural shifts from one another, respond to these shifts, and demand that the drama(s) in which they participate reflect their own shifting values, priorities, and concerns. Thus, *FL* actively “re-equips” rehearsals of social change within and beyond the digital environment.

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Games like *FL* may not be theatre, but they borrow productively from its equipment. In so doing, they generate a level of immersion that inevitably brings to the forefront issues of sociocultural resonance that concern its player base. When proximity to theater ensures that the discourse remains bound to art-prescribed civility, as in the case of *FL*, change with significant social implications can be enabled with minimal friction. That many instances of the current “culture war” originated not in “high art” but within gaming culture suggests that building on the intersection of theater and digital games can facilitate social transformation in the worlds of entertainment, art, and learning; a topic that we also take up in the next section.