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Writer/Reader as performer: Creating a negotiated narrative

Anna Zaluckowska

INTRODUCTION

There has always been a close relationship between writing for drama/performance and screenwriting, as evidenced by the continued and extensive studies of Aristotle (Laurel 1991; Kallay 2010) in the digital age. However, when we come to consider new forms of media, many suggest the need for new forms of writing (Millard 2014; Murray 2012; Riggs 2019). Kathryn Millard (2014) urges us to look back at past practices, particularly experimental forms, and mine them to discover potential current applications while Stephanie Riggs (2019) asserts that immersive/interactive forms mean the end of storytelling as we know it. These scholars question our understanding of what it is to write for the moving image, that writing for visual and immersive environments is shifting and changing, and that more interesting or pertinent ways can be found to express our ideas. However, even as they decry the end of more classical dramatic forms (Koneitz 2015) most scholars can agree that performative processes are at work in all writing endeavours for digital work. This chapter takes a closer look at dramatic forms and interactive media – asking what performance studies and processes are useful in this context and how. In particular, the chapter looks at the role of the writer and their relationship to the audience by discussing the participative elements which many (see, for instance, Jenkins

2006; Bernardo 2011) say are crucial to most new media forms; it then suggests that we should expand the remit of the writer/creator in interactive work so that elements of performance are embedded in their practice.

INSERT Figure 1 HERE

Using examples from my own work and the work of other writers and performance makers (Robin MacNicholas, IOU and Blast Theory) engaged in immersive and interactive work, I suggest that writing that is informed/influenced by performance (and, therefore the writer/audience as performer) is an understudied and interesting addition to studies which have concentrated on the narrative, structure (Ryan 2012; Koenitz 2015; Pope 2020; Knoller 2019) and systems evidenced in these new forms. Much has been written about the interaction between humans and technology and, while this chapter acknowledges such scholarship and its impact on the participative process, it is my intention to concentrate more fully on the performance processes at work in interactive digital narratives rather than the systems that they engage with. However, the work acknowledges Janet Murray's assertion that interactivity 'refers to the combination of the procedural and participatory properties of the digital medium' (Murray 2012, 12). This chapter will therefore, explore performance and especially improvisational forms of performance to also suggest that these are important aspects of a writer's/creator's and reader's/user's toolkit in this digital age, especially in relation to interactive, participative or immersive forms of production.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Brenda Laurel (1991) was one of the first to draw a parallel between the humanities and interactive systems. In fact, she went further than that and suggested a direct link between

digital environments and theatrical representations. She argued for ‘computers as theatre’ basing much of her work on performance studies but in particular on the theories of Aristotle. However, she very quickly moved from that position to suggest operational designs and criteria for the evaluations of such experiences. Her ideas have been challenged, tested and often marginalised in more contemporary debates about interactive digital narratives. As Koneitz points out there is a danger of “theoretical imperialism” (Aarseth 1997, 16) because once we focus on the similarities with the ancient Greek stage play we can overlook the aspects that do not fit that particular frame of reference (2015, 91). And of course, performance studies is a wide-ranging area of concern that encompasses much more than the thinking of Aristotle and one that is as full of ideas as it is of practices. For the purposes of this chapter, it will be necessary to limit our investigations. As Richard Schechner points out: “because performance studies is so broad-ranging and open to new possibilities, no one can actually grasp its totality or press all its vastness and variety into a single book” (2020, 1). There is therefore little hope of doing so in this chapter: instead, I propose to investigate some of the ideas of Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht, Keith Johnson, Cecily O’Neill and Jerzy Grotowski, ideas that challenge the relationship between the audience and the author, to see how they can help us understand the writer/user relationship more fully and the processes that will help promote interactivity.

Grotowski suggests that theatre cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “‘live’ communion” (2002, 19). Grotowski wanted to establish the primacy of the actor and actor’s body where the audience is immersed in the performance through the liveness of the actors. The question in an interactive context becomes one of how we can replicate such a liveness in an online environment. Josephine Machon suggests that it is this liveness that characterises immersive theatre: “it is this awakening of the holistic sentence of the human body in immersive theatres that allows for an immediate and intimate connection

with the ideas as much as with the artists and other participants in that immersive world” (2013, 279).

Where Brecht drew our attention to the artifice of drama and the dramatic production, Grotowski saw the play as an event that was an encounter with the actor as a human being. He suggested that theatre becomes “a place of provocation” (Grotowski 1969, 21). In his Theatre Laboratory the audience was assigned a role to be judges and to support the actors. As a result, much of his practice and training was achieved through the use and application of improvisation. Brecht and Boal were perhaps more interested in the relationship between the theatre and the audience although for them this was also a political issue. Where Brecht was interested in analysing the product of productions, Boal was interested in the process of making theatre to open up the possibilities of change. As such, he has much to offer the world of interactive production, regardless of whether its intention is political. Boal’s work contains a compilation of *gamexercises* and improvisation work. For example, he uses the Joker system in both conventional play and his participative work as a way to disrupt roles of the audience and cast:

The Joker has two main functions in a conventional play: Brechtian estrangement and intercontextual translation. In line with Brecht’s theory, the Joker system destroys the individual actor’s private ownership of a character. (McLavery-Robinson 2017, n.p.)

The games aimed to help actors and what he later called “spectactors” to engage together but, in the process, they would draw on improvisation in a way similar to that suggested by Johnstone in his seminal work *Impro* (1981), with games and techniques often made available to ‘non-actors’ as an educational support and part of a development process. Such techniques have been used globally and are often known as *process work or forum theatre*, where participants are encouraged to articulate their concerns. This process theatre draws heavily on improvisational forms to achieve its ends.

Since Brenda Laurel's contribution, the debate has moved to explore structuralist and post structuralist (Landow 1997; Bolter 2001) ideas of narrative and its relationship to digital media and authorship along with semiotic (Ferri 2015) and narratological (Ryan 2005; 2006) interpretations of interactive digital narratives and the adaptations and combinations that could be useful in applying these theories. Much criticism has been levelled at such ideas, suggesting that they are based on narrow definitions of *classical* or *traditional* storytelling that does not acknowledge many alternative models, such as cyclical African oral storytelling forms, Asian structures with different tension arcs, and forms of participatory theatre as advocated by Boal. More recently, Koenitz (2015) challenges the adaptations of these classical theories, saying the "notion of what constitutes a well-formed plot... is in conflict with the concept of interaction" (Koenitz, 2015, 96). Instead he proposes that we change the artistic focus from product to process and in doing so concentrate on what he calls the "system, process and product" (2015, 96). The system being the interactive artefact which is made up of the software (programming code) and hardware (the computer, tablet, phone, plus keyboard, mice) that make up the digital interface and the process is what is created once the user starts to engage with the system (one walkthrough of the experience). This in turn creates the product/narrative of one instance of this process engagement. Therefore, different products can originate from the same system. He (among many others including Riggs) suggests a new vocabulary and terms (protostory, narrative design and narrative vectors) to describe what is happening in these narratives.

Riggs (2019, 131) separates the ideas of story and narrative (as many have done from the Russian formalists and before) suggesting that "narrative involves the human capacity for creating meaning or forming an interpretation; 'story' is the events that are interpreted to create that meaning". This is a particularly important distinction, she argues, in the interactive experience as, while story elements may remain the same, the resulting narratives are very different in each immersive or interactive experience. She therefore suggests that terms such

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as frame, director, audience, author, audio-visual, film and linear that are common to most theories relating to written and aural works be reimaged in interactive forms with terms such as worlds, creators, guests, agency, psychological experience and dynamic. She uses the concept of “storyplexing” and suggests storyplexing tools which she has distilled from observations of hundreds of projects (Riggs 2019, 151) and which she believes should be adapted to the jobs at hand in immersive projects. “The Storyplex is a dynamic network that balances the traditions of storytelling, human psychology and the affordances of computational systems to create an immersive narrative” Riggs’s toolbox consists of three sections – technology, creators and participants – her work mirroring many of the concerns of performance studies. In this way her thinking is similar to that of Koenitz, who uses terms such as protostory, narrative design and narrative vectors as terms that capture the specifics of interactive digital narratives.

Janet Murray also defines interactive narratives through their affordances — the procedural, participative, spatial and encyclopaedic nature of such narratives. She talks further about agency, immersion and the transformation that the user experiences in such narratives, making an important distinction between interactivity and agency: “The appropriate design goal for interactive environments is not the degree of interactivity, but whether or not the system creates the satisfying experience of agency” (Murray 2011, 12). This, she suggests, is most effectively achieved when computer processing and human directed participation fit together well (Murray 2011, 100) and result in the pleasure of making something happen in a responsive world. It is in this context that performance processes help us to understand what that responsive world needs to offer. Once again process and participation are crucial to Murray’s understanding of the working of interactive digital narratives.

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Konetiz further suggests that the processes of interactive environments have not yet been fully investigated and that more work is necessary: “In this particular area a look at performance studies should be productive” (Konetiz 2015, 102).

I develop some of Laurel’s ideas by broadening the scope from drama to areas of performance studies such as the “liveness” of Grotowski, the questioning of the author/audience dynamic of Brecht and Boal and various improvisational forms from Johnstone and others to examine how useful they are in illuminating the process of interactive digital design. In looking at examples of interactive work I consider how the storyworld or the storyplex impact on the creation of an idea and the design or writing of that idea to discover what that means for the writer.

PROJECTS

Schechner suggests that a performance is more than the public performance we see when we go to see a play or dance, and consists of what happens both before and after that event — what he terms proto-performance, performance and aftermath. Indeed, the same notions can also be attributed to film where we see trailers, reviews and prepare ourselves for the cinematic experience. It is common to many other forms of public performance. Riggs (2019, 116) calls this the “Ritual of Story” which begins with “The Gathering” and starts when we first hear of a story, all elements that encourage us to physically or virtually come together. This is followed by “The Transition” where ritualistic signals prepare us for the performance — lights dimming, curtains opening; before “The Opening” which suggests what we may expect from the performance. Riggs says such traditions are as useful to interactive work which often features the pre-production and setting up of the world as much as the actual performance. The real world can be merged with the fictional world to prepare us to take part and, once we have taken part the performance, is followed up by a discussion, workshop or

some distribution of by-products that is central to interactive endeavour. For example, in the Royal Shakespeare Company production *Dream* (2020), an online interactive playing of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, such theatrical and filmic traditions are fused so the audience/players are introduced to the making of the work as a prelude to the performance and then the actors enter the performance and are transformed into their characters. After the show we can visit the website, live and pre-recorded content to see details of construction and performance and ask questions in the live workshops about what we have just seen. The enjoyment and agency we experience is a direct result of being able to access all areas.

Schechner further asserts that performance is not only this time and space sequence but also a dynamic relationship between players; between what he calls *sourcers* (authors, composers, dramaturges), *producers* (directors, coaches, designers, technicians), *performers* and finally *partakers* (fans, spectators, the public). In his books, Schechner applies these concepts to a range of different theatre practices from linear to montage-based productions; but they could equally be applied to a range of interactive projects where the possible combinations of these processes by players are endless. For example, in *Dream* the relationship between the players and performers is marked by a direct link whereby players influence the direction of travel for the performers. Consequently, *sourcers* and *producers* have to work very closely in the design and production of the work to ensure the performer/partaker interface works both technologically and as a performance.

It is not just the “Ritual of the Story” that is in operation here, although that certainly exists in the production, but a mix of the behind-the-story, along with the unmasking of the performance elements and relationships in the performance that appears to provide the coherence for such interactive or immersive stories. In this context showing the mechanism of production while distancing the audience in a Brechtian sense seems to create a “liveness”. This “liveness” does not detract from the performance as *The Guardian's* chief theatre critic

Arifa Akbar suggests. She maintains that the most exciting moment comes when the technology of the work is exposed to the audience and “seems more exciting than the film itself” (Akbar 2021) hitting home by giving us the impression of being let into the creation of the work. Of course, the actors in this piece are driven by the actions of the audience too. They light the way for Puck across the forest, involving some improvisation on behalf of the actors, who, clad in motion capture suits, perform a sort of human puppetry with one another in relation to a screen. Here the connection between the audience and the performer that Grotowski was so concerned to develop is being explored to a degree.

That is why Schechner suggests that interactive installations and virtual performances develop the tradition of Grotowski (from 1957–69; although it must be pointed out that Grotowski did not experiment with “audience participation”); the happenings and environmental theatre of Karpov (1995); and the performance/installation art of Marina Abramovic (among others) into the immersive tradition that is now being explored by companies such as *Blast Theory*. Steve Dixon (2007) defines “digital performance” as “performance works where computer technologies play a *key* role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics or delivery forms” (Dixon 2007, 3). In much the same way as Schechner, Dixon and Smith show even more clearly how such performances have grown out of avant-garde traditions and are a form that is both experimental and new. Although not specific about how these processes work, their study is a useful background to ideas of “liveness” and the role this plays in digital work. Auslander has written extensively on the concept of “liveness” (1999), detailing the complex relationships between concepts of “live” and “recorded” and in doing so places emphasis on the relationship between the spectator and the performer, rather than on whether the performer is live or recorded. As Dixon (2007, 70) points out, the emphasis is on the human contact rather than on the virtual or physical body. By showing us the work involved in construction through an online live performance, the

actors in *Dream* are sharing with us the ways in which they have given their audiences agency to affect the production and somehow act as a form of contact. As Popat suggests, “performance has much to offer as a way of understanding and modelling the philosophies and practices of human/technological relationships” (2011, 141). Elements of “liveness” can therefore be seen to be crucial to our enjoyment and participation.

INSERT Figure 2 IOU HERE

A good example of how this can be achieved with minimal interaction is an IOU project known as *Fulcrum*, where an intricate diorama depicts a small town and a video camera on a long robotic arm swoops around zooming in and out picking out random scenes. The pictures from this robotic arm are projected live onto a cinema screen in a separate building. We see both the diorama and the cinema screen at different times and know that they are happening live and simultaneously. We can wander back and forth between both these places and witness a different response in each. The screen shows us recorded footage that focuses on the diorama while when we visit the diorama we can see the making of the film and the larger picture of the work. This live cinema experience, although involving only spectatorship, helps us create the hidden stories of the diorama, stories we would not have imagined if the cinema was not there. “Liveness” and the experience of construction invites us to create and add our own interpretations to the work.

INSERT Figure 3 IOU two HERE

One can of course argue that audiences are never passive, as work only becomes a performance in the presence of an audience. As Popat suggests:

If the communication between artist(s) and viewers is to be two-way with mutual effect, then the focus of the artwork shifts. Instead of a completed product, the interactive artist designs the framework that contains the potential for the creative experience of the participant. (2006, 34)

In the work of **IOU**, although there is little visible action on behalf of the audience, they have nonetheless been creating meaning that contributes to the work although such work remains private and is not included in the production.

Terms like **immersion** could be used here to describe the experience. However, as **Murray** points out, there is not “much agreement on what immersion is or how to achieve it” (23). Today it is often a term used to describe technology rather than process or to refer to the degree of sensory stimulation; but immersion is a key ingredient to most forms of cultural production. **Ryan** shows us that immersion works on a number of levels:

If readers are caught up in a story, they turn the pages without paying too much attention to the letter of the text: what they want is to find out what happened next in the fictional world. (1994, n.p).

Here **Ryan** is describing the immersion into the story rather than the immersion into the medium and this applies to a whole range of narratives and not just interactive ones. Digital formats can display the story in a variety of media but, as **Ryan** suggests, at times the more interactive the text, the less immersive it can be, because the story and the media format are in conflict with each other. Her solution is to combine immersion and interactivity so that language is turned into performance whereby readers are asked to play the role of a character. **Frank Rose** (2015) points out that having audiences lose themselves in a world is not the same as asking them to engage within it. **Engagement** happens when the audience is asked to take some form of action. Fan cultures, for example, show an increasing desire to step inside artificial worlds and deepen and broaden them — often acting them out in Comic Con public events or through their own parties or gatherings. Such activities mean that the writer/creator not only needs to build

liveness into the production but also needs to provide performance opportunities for their audiences. **Murray** suggests that immersion “is the experience produced by the pleasurable exploration of a limitless, consistent, familiar yet surprising environment” (2011, 102). Here **agency** and immersion are “mutually reinforcing” (2011, 102): when we engage in the **IOU** world of the village the robotic arm responds to us as we expect it to by showing us deeper levels of content and context as it zooms in and out, thus revealing greater detail so that we become more fully immersed.

Brian Boyd (2010) maintains that such behaviour is deeply rooted in the human psyche and our immersion in stories is an adaptive process that helps alter attitudes and beliefs. The link between the story and the process of engagement is clearly an element that warrants close attention in digital storytelling. As with **Rose**: “Storytelling is key, but as with any key it only gets you in the door. What people really want is to merge their identity with something larger. They want to enter the world the story lives in” (**Rose** 2015, n.p.).

Engaging in process theatre/drama is an active and **collaborative** practice where participants are asked to make and shape and control significant aspects of what is taking place. They both experience the drama and organise and contribute to it, while evaluating the experience. Initially, the leader/teacher is in control of what is happening, especially the growth of dramatic tension, so that the encounter raises expectations, but as the drama progresses the participants are equally central to the **narrative drive**. Although it is most commonly associated with the teaching of drama or the use of drama in education:

Like theatre, it is possible for process drama at its best to provide a sustained, intensive, and profoundly satisfying encounter with the dramatic medium and for its participants to apprehend the world in a different way because of this encounter (**O'Neill** 1995, 13).

In this **process drama** scenario O'Neill suggests starting with a pre-text — a provocation. Such techniques utilise the concept of **liminality** — a time and space between one meaning and

another (Turner 1982). In this state, participants are on the threshold between what they have been and what they will become and are, by implication, in a process of transformation. In this state, O'Neill suggests people play with familiar situations and disarrange them (the basic activity of art) to force us to notice and to see anew (see Shklovsky, 1965). Bronwen Patrickson (2011) has already designed a preliminary poetics for computer mediated interactive process drama suggesting, when talking about Lance Weiler's *Sherlock Holmes & the Internet of Things*, that "the best practice principles imply this sort of event is not simply storytelling – but a social, playful, skilful drama with its own developing distinct poetics" (2016, n.p.).

However, often the only participation or interactivity that is available in current productions is the very basic opportunity to comment on, or react to, a set of variables that have been presented by the writer/author/producer. For example, while the *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2013) offered the opportunity to comment on the material that was presented, there was no way that audiences could determine the direction that the drama would take. Even when the direction that the drama can take is encouraged, such as in *Bandersnatch* (2018), in which the audience is actively urged to take on the role of director, all the variables are predetermined, thus limiting the audience's ability to influence the world of the drama. Of course, it is very useful to have this feedback loop in any production and from time to time the suggestions made by fans are incorporated into future storylines as was the case with BBC's *Sherlock* series (2010–2014) and the app that accompanied it *Sherlock: The Network* (2014). Such practices can promote greater contact and relationships between creators and players but are very distant from the work suggested by Schechner, Dixon and Popat, indicating that we are still in the early days of developing interactive work.

INSERT Figure 4. RBH HERE

My work *Red Branch Heroes* (*RBH*), created in association with Bellyfeel Productions¹, develops a prototype for a more extensive fictional interactive web series *The Eleven* that challenges author/audience relationships using Boal's performance techniques. A game-like scenario was developed where, through their play, the audience influenced and built character and story elements. Acting as judges, the audience elect a new hero for Northern Ireland (the project was set there as it provided an interesting test ground set as it was across divided communities)²; in the larger research project, *The Eleven*, the hero would build a utopian community in the region and set the basis for an interactive collaborative soap. Through a feedback loop (judges could speak to producers of the programme, to each other, and to interview candidates live) that challenged the conventions of reality TV, judges had to examine and interrogate the artefacts of fictional applicants to understand who these people could be.

This interrogation through a feedback loop helped build the characters for the story. The feedback loop goes one step further and offers an opportunity for the audience members to collaborate with the writer and producers to make real changes in the content of the storyworld on an ongoing basis and influence the direction that the drama takes. The aim was to give the participants a feeling of "liveness", of being there. Participation in *RBH* was in part promoted by adopting an unreliable narrator, Sky Bradford, as the central character in the story. Her lack of experience and lack of intervention left the audience unsure of their responsibilities and so they were forced to take action. As a result, they filled in the gaps and took control of the programme themselves. There is a theme and a small spine to the story that acts as an anchor to the narrative. But the research project also uses a further layer, the "inner level" of story generation — something Ryan calls "real time story generation" (Ryan 2012,

¹ Bellyfeel are an interactive production company and more information about them can be found at <https://bellyfeel.co.uk/>

² *RBH* was keen to ensure that diverse communities were engaged with the project (including those from nationalist and loyalist communities) so that the hero and the larger project could be a representation of more than one view point. The project recognises the enduring legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict that was known as the Troubles but also reflects more recent community concerns in Northern Ireland.

n.p.). Here stories are not predetermined but “generated on the fly out of data that comes in part from the system, and in part from the user” (Ryan 2012, n.p.). The system, in this instance, is not a computer but an author or range of authors: me and the team at Bellyfeel. The challenge became one of how to produce a wide variety of stories in relation to audience actions – improvised storytelling. In *RBH*, we relied on several layers of improvisation. In the first instance I, as the author, would take the suggestions of the audiences and build those into character profiles for the performers who in turn would interpret these using their own improvisational techniques and feed these back to audiences through real live meetings. This promoted a strong communication between producers, judges and applicants but also created the impression that the judges (audience members) were involved in the programme production themselves.

INSERT Figure 5 RBH HERE

Ryan and others (Phillips 2012, Dowd 2013) ask how the interests of the user (the users’ interest to create in this way) may be reconciled with the need to produce good stories. *Red Branch Heroes* used improvisatory techniques by actors, writers, producers, audiences and directors to attempt such a task and its success was in part due to the ability of the writers to understand the performance tasks needed and orchestrate these using performance processes already well developed in theatrical scenarios. The responsibility lay with the production team, who had to weave the ideas together in what I called *negotiated narratives* in such a way that would satisfy the audience and result in a good story: but the resultant story was itself open to critique by the audience and they could change the direction if they felt it was lacking in some way. The aesthetic rules for such a production are more akin to those found in television documentary, games and world-building games such as *The Sims*, or process theatre or

montage, rather than in literature and film, as a wide range of views and actions can be built together to form the resultant narrative. Such narratives may not look like a piece of fiction, and indeed, this project resembled an activity or process with elements of game-play taking place. [Papaioannou](#) suggests that “this potential of the audience is made possible by experimenting with, and sometimes blurring the boundaries between normality and irregularity, that is, between the safety of spectatorial distance and the unpredictability of proximity” (2014, p165). I would suggest that interactive productions require creators to think about a range of techniques which include how the making of the production can be combined with the production itself, how liveness can be achieved, the processes that invite participation but also how the audience can gain the confidence to perform in the activity themselves.

One company who have fused together such techniques in their work is [Blast Theory](#). They seek to implicate audiences in the outcome by asking them to take action, make decisions and agree scenarios: as a result, flexibility and uncertainty are hallmarks of this approach. Their interest in new technologies stems from seeing the mobile phone as a social device and suggest that young people are interested in being more “active” in their engagement and that our culture needs to respond to that. However, they acknowledge that more recently there has been something of a backlash against such practices and so they wrestle with the boundaries of this work all the time. As a result, they insist that collaborative work is essential and gives them the strength to take the necessary risks associated with this form. [Alice O’Grady](#) identifies the common forms of interactive production at play in their work. She suggests that the artist is responsible for the framework or the structure and the environment. Within this she goes on to quote [Steve Dixon’s](#) (2007, 536) four categories of interaction:

- [Navigation](#), where users steer themselves through systems
- [Participation](#), where they ‘join in’

- **Conversation**, where genuine dialogue is promoted and finally
- **Collaboration**, where things can be used or altered

Blast Theory attempt to incorporate all these four categories of interaction into their work but, as **O’Grady** points out, these are the areas that develop the risk factors. However, she suggests problems associated with inviting people to play and participate can be overcome by creating rules. Many **role-playing games** (RPGs) have such a setup, where everyone understands they will be led through the procedures of the game and that rules apply. However, while simple rules are useful, they don’t necessarily ensure that the play is dynamic for the player or emphasise the meaning of the work. **Blast Theory** uses game-play and gaming models but, instead of seeking safety, they embrace the uncertainty and ask questions about those models. This results in a big difference between their work and that of role playing, although both methods have much to offer the interactive world. This type of work, **O’Grady** suggests, “offer[s] open frameworks that allow for audience intervention and collaboration, performance itself becomes a vehicle for **co-authorship**” (108).

INSERT Figure 6. Blast Theory HERE

Although light on technology, **Operation Black Antler** (2019) asks audiences to become undercover police officers investigating the emergence of a dangerous Fascist movement. I took part in this performance in Manchester 2019. The audience has to infiltrate the Fascist organisation by sympathising with this cause, encouraging us to reflect on our behaviour and decisions. A police briefing room sets the scene where the **audience** are asked to build a cover story for future undercover work. Then we visit a pub where we meet with strangers to find out information. This involves agreeing to ideas that we do not

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uphold in order to gain trust and try to secure a way into the inner sanctum of the organisation. The final decision is whether to authorise an undercover operation against a Fascist group. There were no easy answers in this endeavour and slowly the audience began to cross their own moral boundaries. But what this project highlighted was that to engage fully as an audience member you had to quickly develop your performance skills using what you already knew of the world. Quick and easy solutions had been suggested in the briefing room about how to build trust and infiltrate groups but I suspect that further emphasis on this would have promoted a much fuller experience for those like myself who were inexperienced in performance techniques and nervous of such performance tasks.]

INSERT Figure 7 SSN HERE

My final point is that audiences may need to be given some form of performance preparation before being launched into new and challenging worlds if they are to participate effectively. A further project that I have co-developed through my research with Bellyfeel, Secret Story Network (SSN), tries to help audiences develop performance skills and utilises all these performance attributes described in an interactive storytelling scenario. This practice-research initiative produced a number of 60–90 minute online Role-Playing Games conducted on the social media platform WhatsApp (we are currently developing a dedicated app to play these on). These narratives involve some gameplay but they concentrate more on storytelling than game play and each playing produces a very different narrative. We worked with a simple system like WhatsApp, one a large number of people are familiar with, to identify and refine design strategies that incentivise engagement with the type of narrative collaboration that media scholars commonly call “collective storytelling” (Boje, 1991, McGonigal 2008, Woo 2010). Our study, however, explores an aspect of collective storytelling

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that is commonly overlooked. Rather than focus on activism, analysis or efficiency, we chose to examine the storytelling poetics that inspire participants to engage with such projects in the first place. Co-creators assume character roles and interact with one another in the manner of actors improvising a scene. Likavec et al. call this mode of digital creation “emergent storytelling” (2010, 94). They define it as “a style of participated narration in which the structure of the narrative emerges from the interaction between the characters instead of being defined by a predefined plot” (2010, 94). SSN uses Ryan’s suggested way of avoiding narrative conflict inherent in interactive work by asking the reader to become a character in the story. As SSN projects centre on interfaces that are familiar and intuitive, participants were able to easily articulate diverse perspectives with minimal performance or technical skill. The storytelling was aided by a story conductor whose job it is to ensure narrative cohesion, fair play and equal involvement. This is similar to the “storymaster” role in role-playing games but differs inasmuch as it relies much more on improvisation and therefore it approximates more fully to Boal’s *Joker*. Thus, we were able to collaboratively generate stories negotiated ad hoc through the process of production. Based on behaviours observed and enacted throughout our study, we have identified four primary meta-roles:

- 1) Games
- 2) Drama
- 3) Simulation
- 4) Immersion

Such terms have been identified and used by other scholars in games and role play studies such as John Kim (1997) who proposed the Threefold World Model for RPGs; games, drama and simulation. In 2003, Bockman modified Kim’s Threefold Word Model by arguing

that **LARPs** feature a different sort of role playing where simulation is not really a significant factor because people are actually performing their narratives in real-world settings. In place of simulation, therefore, **Bøckman** proposes using the word “immersion” to define the more performative aspects of LARPing.

Our work with **SSN** suggests a similar revision of **Kim’s Threefold World Model** to further explore the concepts of simulation and immersion in a “live” storytelling context. While we retain his original modes of game play, we further investigate the concept of “immersion” as part of our experiments. SSN utilises all the hallmarks of interactive theories, performance based processes and RPGs to achieve the participative elements of such designs and develops a “fourfold model” as details above. The meta-roles are not so different from those identified by **Dixon** except that they describe the processes of performance more fully. In order to promote lively engagement, this type of collective storytelling had to strike an effective balance between narrative structure, theatrical presentation, world-building and gaming design, affording opportunities for participants to put their own unique mark on the narrative action. An example will elucidate this more fully. The story structure was relatively simple for **Mr Catty**. The participants gathered on *WhatsApp* to act as cat-sitters tasked with wrangling a particularly unruly feline. We followed the cat around a house trying to keep it happy and answer its often foolish questions. In this way we were drawn into the story through a variety of games (i.e. throwing dice and suggesting other mechanics) and acted as dramatists by advancing the plot in a step-by-step fashion creating action in each room. Suddenly when the cat decided to take a nap in the middle of the game, we were able to take over the narrative and *plot* an insurrection, getting our own back. We acted as performers by creating our own characters and were tasked with sketching drawings of ourselves and composing captions which put us into a showcasing role. We created simulations when the cat finally woke up and had to experience our collaboratively agreed punishments describing our surroundings and

likely actions. In this way, the different meta-roles operated in conjunction to help construct different aspects of the evolving narrative. In a world where interactive practices are more commonly used across media this practice/method has much to offer in terms of audience participation and interaction.

INSERT Figure 8 SSN HERE

CONCLUSION

Riggs sees participation as a central element to her storyplexing and urges us to use psychology and look within ourselves so that we are *inside* the experience. She suggests building a world rather than telling a story and to go beyond the frame and reach where the guest choses to interact. However, her solutions to how one does this involve new technological suggestions despite her insistence that we understand “*why* we do things, *what* constraints we have, and *how* we overcome them” (2019,189). She is clear that we need new thinking and “that those who make the cognitive shift into immersive thinking... lead the charge in changing the world – and the craft of narrative – as we know it” (204). I would suggest that some of that thinking has already been expounded in a performance context and could be applied to emerging interactive narratives in new contexts. The goal of performance techniques used by Boal, Grotowski and others was indeed to transcend pre-existing assumptions and contribute to emancipation.

What implications does such thinking have for the creators and writers of such work? Screenplay writers, it could be argued, are as much improvisors as actors. As Leonard argues, “just as the actor must be his own playwright when he is improvising without a script, so the playwright must be his own actors when he is devising their language” (1963, 35). In screenwriting, I argue, it is as apposite to suggest that the

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screenwriter needs to be their own director too (possibly in some circumstances their own producer) given the visual nature of the endeavour. In that context the practice of improvisation is central to the task of writing. There are times when writers are in a state of “flow”, where the characters seem to have a life of their own and tell the writer what their stories are (Bell and Magrs 2019). Improvisation is also a key tool in the teaching of writing and indeed in the process of script development. It has been extended to the collaborative or collective writing or devising of film scripts as in the work of Mike Leigh (Clements, 1983). In such a group, a writer or director can take responsibility for supplying the basic information that can be improvised around and later written up by transcribing the actions and dialogue and polishing it into a final form. Collaborative writing techniques are also very much in evidence in forms of writing for television. Writers’ rooms, series bible building and many forms of soap practices (storylining etc) involve large teams of writers and producers working closely together. Such processes open up the narrative, prising it open and offering an alternative to predictability and closure “thus offering the possibility of imaginative engagement in the production of a new story of the world” (Frost and Yarrow 2016, 240).

The chapter contends that that the re-enactment or performative aspects of writing and more specifically the participatory practices, where writers work more closely with audiences, needs further development. Performance studies investigations into writer/reader and performer/spectator dynamics offer us some really useful tools in this respect. Writers could study performance as has been done to some success in many institutions that I have taught in, but some recognition of the broader concerns of author/reader dynamics are crucial to the process. This chapter therefore suggests that writing practices for interactive stories are best served by the concept of a negotiated narrative. The term implies that the work has been a negotiation between collaborators and makers and

is a negotiation between audience and authors. The narrative produced as a result of such negotiations is multi-layered and **polymorphic** and the stories produced shapeshift across different platforms. It also suggests that ethical considerations have been given due thought in the construction and development of the project and have been publicly debated. This is new territory for the screenwriter.

It goes without saying that such techniques and processes must work with the procedural nature of the systems they will work within. To date they have been tested outside conventional dramatic settings in relation to technological applications by theatre practitioners wanting to extend their practice in new areas. However, we are still very much influenced by silo thinking, calling this practice **interactive theatre** as if the origin of the makers is what is at issue here. Its true contribution is arguably towards interactive or immersive practices. This is perhaps an area of research that requires investment. How can such practices ensure diversity and be married into the design so that the build can address many audiences? This will necessitate much experimentation with rather than for audiences in the manner that has been suggested in the above examples relating to **Blast Theory, IOU Theatre, The Royal Shakespeare Company, SSN and Red Branch Heroes** and offers new challenges to writers of all formats.

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