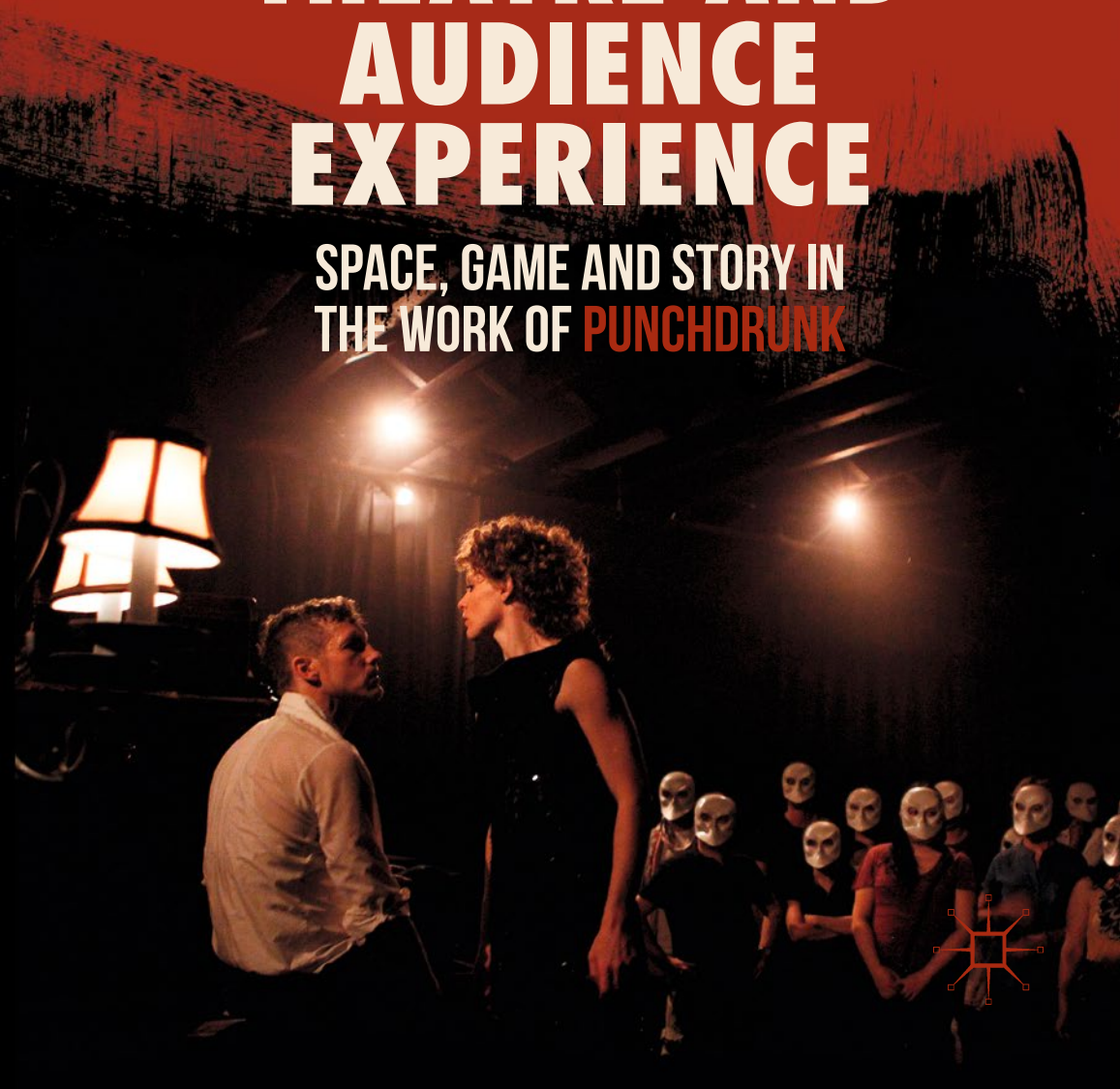


ROSE BIGGIN

IMMERSIVE THEATRE AND AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

SPACE, GAME AND STORY IN
THE WORK OF **PUNCHDRUNK**



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Follow the Story: Narrative and Immersion

The role of “story” in immersive theatre is one of continual interest. How does story work in this form of theatre; is it important anyway; what does *story*, in this context, even mean? What concept of *story* is being grappled with during a state of immersive experience—or must story be forgotten about in the moment to let the experience happen? Is emotional engagement intended to come from caring about a character’s fate, solving a mystery or some other narrative “hook”—or does emotional immersion arise from something else? And what are the underlying politics of all these options?

The following three chapters lay out some suggestions for theorising immersion and narrative. This chapter introduces key concepts from narrative theory and past and current models of the relationship between discourse and plot, story, character and causality. Drawing on Cobley (2001), Abbott (2002, 2011) and Herman (2009), and the methodology of the “fuzzy-set” definition offered by Ryan (2011), the chapter lays some theoretical ground for considering immersive experience and narrative. My main discussion is interested in how immersive experience might occur in the interplay between the physical immersion of an audience member in the performance space, her movement through the atmospheric/logistical score of the production, and the crafting of story events with this audience member in mind from the perspective of makers. Overall I argue that form and story structure have a reciprocal relationship in facilitating immersive experience. (Chapter 6 considers the common immersive theatre trait of presenting story events out

of chronological order; Chap. 7 applies a gaming model to the “role of story” question.)

This chapter considers narrative and immersive experience using Punchdrunk’s *The Crash of the Elysium* (Salford Quays 2011) as a case study. The show had a fundamentally linear structure: the audience were led throughout by guides and followed a single path. This form makes the show a useful model for considering the relationship between an audience’s journey through an immersive space and the structure of story events within that space. In *The Crash of the Elysium*, these were experienced simultaneously: in both story and spatial terms, Punchdrunk were in charge of the plot and the path through which that plot was revealed, explicitly leading the audience on the course through it. The sense of a clear trajectory from A to B, the concept of narrative as “a sequence which starts and moves inexorably to its end” (Cobley 2001: 9), is made literal in *The Crash of the Elysium*, physically embodied by audience members and performers.

One additional aspect of *The Crash of the Elysium* was vital to immersion in its story. The production was set in a well-known pre-existing fictional universe: and a very contemporary one, with a recognisable brand and extremely active and engaged fan base (as opposed to the pre-existing classic textual worlds of Shakespeare and Poe—although those canons have their superfans too, of course). The relationship between *Punchdrunk* and *Doctor Who* is a further site for investigation of the interplay between physically immersive worlds, a constructed discourse within and through that world (the plot of *Elysium* and how it was encountered by its audience) and the wider pre-established fictional universe(s) in which the story was set: a universe with recognisable aesthetics, in-world rules and dynamics, well-known characters and iconic sound effects.

AN INTRODUCTION TO NARRATIVE THEORY(S)

Defining Narrative

For a history of recent developments in narrative theory, and particularly the influence of Genette, see Fludernik (2008); for an overview of historical perspectives and current approaches, see Herman (2009: 23–36). Abbott (2002) provides a useful definition: “narrative is *the representation of an event or a series of events*” (12; original emphasis). This

definition opens up two areas for immersive experience to take place: in the event or series of events (the structure and order of scenes) themselves, and in the effectiveness of their theatrical representation.

Herman (2009) develops a definition that contextualises immersive experience and narrative: narrative is “a mode of representation that is situated in [...] a specific discourse context or occasion for telling.” The representation “focuses on a structured time-course of particularized events”: these events introduce disruption into a storyworld, and the representation (narrative) “conveys what it is like to live through this storyworld-in-flux” (189). Further to the notion of narrative as a mode of representation, Herman’s definition introduced the concepts of a “story-world” which then becomes a “storyworld-in-flux,” a model that emphasises the importance of causality and disruption (which could also be called *conflict*) into the making of a narrative and reader/audience experience of that narrative. Also key to Herman’s definition is the exploration of, and representation of, “what it’s like” (xvi) to experience the disruption of a storyworld. This experiential aspect of narrative forefronts reader/audience engagement, highly relevant to immersive experience in story.

The term *storyworld* is useful when considering immersive experience and narrative in theatrical performance. The term refers to “the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative,” but it might also refer to a pre-existing storyworld drawn on in the creation of a specific text (Herman 2009: 106). *The Crash of the Elysium* had its own internally coherent storyworld that was created, maintained and developed by the interplay between performers, text and design. But it also evoked, and worked within the perimeters of, the wider pre-existing and well-established *Doctor Who* storyworld. It did this implicitly by incorporating a science-fictional aesthetic into its design; but primarily the *Doctor Who* storyworld was explicitly evoked. The connection was of course central to the commercial positioning of *Elysium*, and the production included televised scenes with actors and sets from the show and incorporated well-known tropes and imagery into its design, musical score and text: “To the Tardis!” The opportunity to step into a beloved world and actively experience these famous aspects was an integral part of the show’s appeal. Immersive experience and narrative in the context of *The Crash of the Elysium* was facilitated by interplay between previously known elements and tropes which were there to be recognised, and unknown elements and story events which were there to be discovered. The familiarity came from *Doctor Who*; the mystery was Punchdrunk’s.

Cobley (2001) emphasises the role of representation in narrative, and the way narrative functions in three dimensions: “narrative is a particular form of representation... it is necessarily bound up with sequence, space and time” (3). The concept of *sequence* is important: the organisation of events and the way those events are encountered affect how a narrative affects a reader. The notion of *sequence* becomes embodied in immersive theatre, as the audience member is invited to move through space to physically encounter story events: indeed, they must move in order to experience these events. A narrative is a representational form which presents a sequence of events (Abbott and Cobley). Sequence, space and time are necessarily bound up with the form of immersive theatre: the question then becomes one of how sequence, space and time affect immersive experience.

From Herman, the concept of *storyworld* can be added to this definition: a narrative draws on a wider storyworld to create a discourse and/or evoke a fictional storyworld as part of that discourse, representing events that occur in that storyworld in response to disruption or conflict. Cobley adds the notion of the *ending* event as a specific type of narrative event. Narrative form depends on, and adjusts in response to, its technological context (the media used to tell the story):

[Narrative] *re*-presents time, space and sequence; it facilitates the remembrance and exploration of identity; it imbues its representations with causality; it envisages an end; and it does all of these according to the specificities of the technologies in which it is embedded. (2001: 228; original emphasis)

A final model will complete the definition of narrative used throughout the following discussion. Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2011) methodology for approaching narrative resembles a model of immersive experience as a series of graded states. Ryan argues for a “fuzzy-set definition” of narrative, proposing a series of categories and questions that go towards considering how much of a narrative any given text is, and what kind of a narrative it is: the key question should not be merely whether any given text is a narrative or not. Such a prescriptive approach is not particularly fruitful, or ultimately useful. Instead, Ryan proposes that *narrative* is a more flexible category: “Because judgments of fictionality affect what the reader will or will not believe, they are much more important

than judgments of narrativity” (2011: 32). Similarly, Abbott argues it is restrictive to require narratives to contain more than one event or to suggest causality between events in order to qualify as narratives (2002: 12), suggesting instead a wider scope to allow for a greater range of texts. A definition of narrative drawn from these models must incorporate this flexibility. Narrative is a representation of a sequence of events; narrative occurs within and creates a storyworld; it exists in space and time; it is bound up with sequence and causality; and it changes its form depending on its context. My approach is (to use Ryan’s phrasing) “fuzzy-set”: less concerned with whether an immersive theatre production contain narratives per se, and more with how ideas of narrative are useful for considering immersive experience within it. *Plot*, *story* and *discourse* are useful concepts for considering what kind of invitation an immersive production offers its audiences. The various narratives of a show—whether defined as the story-as-told (performed, enacted), story-as-experienced (what “story” an audience member builds for herself), the structure of story events and how an audience member engages with this framework (the physical journey through the space) or some combination of all of these—might all be considered in relation to immersive experience, which is part of “what the reader will or will not believe.”

Ryan identifies three ways a spectator/reader might become involved with narrative: “spatial immersion, the response to setting; temporal immersion, the response to plot; and emotional immersion, the response to character” (2001: 121). *Immersion* can describe both a physical and a mental state, so it is helpful to consider immersion in narrative using these separate categories. The first concept seems particularly apt: while prose fiction and a computer game do not physically surround a reader, immersive theatre and virtual reality are able to create a space that is immediately and literally present and all-encompassing. However, for immersive experience as a *mental* state to occur within that space, merely being in the room is not enough: the audience member’s response to their environment determines whether the space facilitates immersive experience, and the level of such experience that might be reached.

A final narrative concept, highly relevant to much of Punchdrunk’s immersive theatre, and therefore worth adding to any working model of narrative that will be used to consider their work, is *suspense*. Ryan’s discussion of pace and suspense makes clear the relationship between narrative immersion and a varying of intensity:

This experience of being transported onto the narrative scene is so intense and demanding on the imagination that it cannot be sustained for a very long time; an important aspect of narrative art consists, therefore, of varying the distance, just as a sophisticated movie will vary the focal length of the camera lens. (2001: 139)

Immersive experience as a highly intense, temporary and fleeting state, that must necessarily be temporary, becomes relevant here. This definition also recognises the importance of the writer's craft in creating narrative suspense by manipulating form and structure. Immersive experience requires varying pace and intensity in order that the experience not become overwhelming (or sublime; or "revered"). Immersive experience exists as a series of graded states—of which either the author/creator or the spectator/reader (in a theorisation of the active, empowered audience member) is in control.

Ryan distinguishes four types of suspense: *what* suspense (what will happen next?); *how* suspense (how did it come to be like this? /how did this happen? the reader desires to learn what prehistory results in the present moment); *who* suspense (commonly found in the whodunnit: there is no sadness in the murder, merely interest in the puzzle); and *metasuspense*, "critical involvement with the story as verbal artefact"—such as wondering how the author is going to finish the story, what will become of all the plot threads (2001: 143–145). It is possible to feel multiple types of suspense simultaneously: to wonder what will happen as, for example, you follow a character through a door ("what suspense"), in what state your character's emotional journey might end up ("how suspense"), for the Punchdrunk fan to wonder how on earth they will top their show of the previous year ("metasuspense").

Story, Plot, Discourse

An ever-present complexity in narrative studies is the relationship between *plot*, *discourse*, *narration* and *story*. Some narratologists use terms taken from Russian Formalism, such as *fabula* and *sjuzhet* meaning story and plot, respectively (Barry 2002: 223). Abbott shows the importance of making the distinctions at all:

The distinction between plot and story, like that between narration and story, is an implicit presumption that a story is separate from its rendering.

Just as a story can be narrated in different ways, so it can be plotted in different ways. This analytically powerful distinction between story and its representation is, arguably, the founding insight of the field of narratology. (2011: 40)

This is further complicated by the fact that the discourse (the wider story) only makes itself known in the telling, as it is only through the story (reading/encountering story events) that a reader is able to deduce the discourse. The concepts can be separated, but are interrelated.

Abbott suggests a distinction between story and discourse: “The difference between events and their representation is the difference between story (the event or sequence of events) and narrative discourse (how the story is conveyed)” (13). A writer often invents the story that is going to be narrated, fictional actions gradually revealed via the organisation of the discourse. Narrative discourse—the representation of events, how the story is told—is closer to what the reader actually experiences. It is through narrative discourse that a reader comes to experience a story, and it is narrative discourse that a writer or artist is able to consciously manipulate and organise; narrative discourse is “infinitely malleable” (Abbott 2011: 15). A key approach of narratology is therefore distinguishing the difference between the story itself, and the story-as-discourse (Abbott 2011; Genette 1980; Chatman 1978). There is a difference between the story events themselves and the story-as-told. The story events have to happen chronologically, but the story-as-told might present them to its reader in any order. The way an author, artist or theatre company manipulate and design story events affects the reader or audience member’s experience of, and relationship to, the discourse.

To consider this in the context of immersive theatre is to physically embody the distinction between story and story-as-told (or story-as-encountered). Immersive productions might separate story from discourse, by creating and ordering events and inviting audience members to build their own discourse or plot. In the structural/logistical form most common Punchdrunk—large-scale, exploratory spaces with action scattered through it—the *story* is what is happening across the building, and as an audience member wanders through the space, they build their own *plot*. There is construction and craft in how these story events have been made, designed and ordered, but less a sense of deliberate design in the path an audience member takes: indeed, they are invited to “steer [their] own course” as *The Drowned Man* had it.

The wider storyworld is the building of the production and is certainly a storyworld-in-flux, with enacted conflict, emotion and drama coursing throughout it. In this theorisation, then, an audience member is in control of her own experience of the wider discourse: she is free to become her own narrator. The wider storyworld has already been made, of course: the audience member has as much control over characters' actions as she would while watching a well-made play in a proscenium arch, or reading a murder mystery paperback. But the invitation is to freely navigate—to freely *plot*—an individual journey through this presented world. The offer is to build an individual discourse.

Framing an audience member as the narrator of events within an immersive storyworld-in-flux helps explain a problematic way these story events might be navigated: one that can result in frustration or disorientation and ultimately raise of barriers to immersion. Rather than enjoying the sense of freedom to create their own plot and see whatever scenes they come across, a desire to understand the wider storyworld places the story and the plot (the events of the show and the audience member's own narrative discourse as built by their individual journey) in conflict with each other. This will adversely affect immersive experience as it raises barriers to immersion that interrupt any sense of psychological "flow." *Flow* occurs when there is a sense of matching challenge and skill in an activity: it may not be explicitly coded as a game or challenge, but the sensation of being "unable" to do something is a key barrier to immersion at the level of accessibility and in this context, a conflicting relationship between *story* and *plot* means a large immersive theatre production presents an impossible task to its audience members, demonstrating the existence of a storyworld full of events it is impossible to successfully navigate. Unable to see everything, blocked from building up an understanding of the "whole story" via the path of an individual discourse: when the sense of a wider story and an audience member's sense of her own plot come into conflict the result is a sense of missing or unclear narrative—anxiety over doing it wrong or being in the wrong place—a botched immersive experience. This problem is a greater risk when, for all the invitations to exploratory freedom in the marketing of a production, and however explicitly phrased in an opening voiceover, there *does* seem to be a proper way to do it.

Cobley's explanation of the relationship between *story*, *plot* and *narrative* allows for all three terms to be taken into account, and applied more precisely to immersive experience:

“story” consists of all the events which are to be depicted. “Plot” is the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that they are therefore to be depicted in relation to each other. “Narrative” is the showing or the telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place. (2001: 5–6)

In this model, both *plot* and *story* are concerned with what the original storyworld is and what the original events are—*narrative* is how the story and the plot are (simultaneously) conveyed to a reader. This organisational aspect is key to considering narrative and immersion: a writer (or a director, or a theatre company) has invented, crafted and ordered events which the reader/audience member encounters. The sequential element is important, as is the extent of a sense of causality between events. This model might explain why story, plot and narrative can work together in theatre to facilitate immersive experience rather than block it, as an original selection and organisation of events is experienced by an audience member as they move through the space. It becomes possible to distinguish between the creation of a wider storyworld (*story*), the design of several story events that are enacted across the space and/or embedded in its *mise-en-scene* (*plot*), and the audience member’s own experience of these events, some of which they see and some of which they miss (*narrative*).

In *The Crash of the Elysium*, *story*, *plot* and *narrative* did function together and were experienced simultaneously: a physically linear show, the audience experienced the story events in the order Punchdrunk determined they would, led throughout by actor-guides who, in the fiction of the show, were exploring this strange world at the same time as their charges. Narrative and immersive experience were closely intertwined in this production, which was built with the purpose of avoiding any chance of lost, aimless wandering, working to minimise any conflict between the events of the story and the physical events provided by moving through the space.

The Importance of Causality

If a *story* is, fundamentally, a series of events (as suggested in Abbott’s deliberately wide and all inclusive definition), then in a *plot*, one event naturally leads to another. The distinction is demonstrated neatly by Forster:

“The king died and then the queen died” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. The time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. [...] Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: “And then?” If it is in a plot we ask: “Why?” (1963: 87).

One of the most cited works on the study of narrative, Barthes’ “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” (1966), also considers causality a key component to how humans engage with narrative. Indeed, for Barthes a “confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*” (94; original emphasis), is central to narrative. Other studies of narrative suggest the importance of causality to meaning-making. To Brooks, plotting (defined as the act of shaping or crafting a narrative) is how a story is given meaning: “Plot as I conceive it is the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning” (1984: xi). Narrative is structured into plot: the reader encounters plot and follows it, creating meaning and interpretation as they go. Brooks describes plotting as “that which makes a plot ‘move forward’, and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning” (xiii). Ricoeur also suggests meaning and causality are connected: he defines following a story as “understanding the successive actions, thoughts, and feelings in question insofar as they present a certain directedness. [...] There is no story if our attention is not moved along by a thousand contingencies” ([1970] 2000: 259).

Causality allows an audience member to become immersed in a linear narrative. As demonstrated in Forster’s “Why?”, wanting to know the reason for one event following another is a strong reason for continuing a story to the end: it can even persuade a reluctant reader to finish a story they are otherwise, for whatever reason, not enjoying. If events can be experienced in any order, a certain sense of causality might be lost: or if events, embodied by a performer’s actions, are known to be on repeating loop, a sense of causality in the story they are enacting might become questionable. An internally coherent fictional world lowers barriers to (psychological, cognitive) immersion and a well-plotted story that allows the reader to deduce the fictional world as they explore. The plot need not be linear (see Pinter’s *Betrayal* or Churchill’s *Top Girls* to name two obvious examples of non-chronological scene structuring), but the story

told by the plot, the story that is *revealed* as the plot goes along, will be. Causality in the context of immersive theatre can provide a means for immersive experience (as one discovery or encounter leads seamlessly to another) or raise barriers to immersion (as a frustrating attempt at interactivity leaves an audience member wondering why something happened, or did not happen, to them). The difference between a production's storyworld and an audience member's journey through the space can become as a site of problems in terms of interpretation, of frustration or of anxiety over understanding. Narrative comes from, and is the result of, the desire to find sense and meaning:

our narrative perception stands ready to be activated in order to give us a frame or context for even the most static and uneventful scenes. And without understanding the narrative, we often feel we don't understand what we see. (Abbott 2002: 11)

Conflict between the wider story/structure of an immersive production and an audience member's journey through the space will adversely affect immersive experience; story and plot become separated to the detriment of the overall experience.

However, this separation might also lead to a different conclusion. The non-linearity of story events, and the relationship between the story events and an audience member's experience of these events (some found, some stumbled upon, some followed for a while) might be precisely what *is* immersive, rather than being what interrupts or frustrates immersive experience. The sensation of searching and finding and engaging with the story as part of the formulation of an audience member's own narrative discourse becomes a similar task to solving a puzzle or playing a game. The question then might be which lens a piece of work is inviting its audience to look through: a story formed of causality, or a game made of mystery-solving. Either can be immersive; two approaches in conflict may not be.

Character and Plot

Aristotle's *Poetics* prioritises plot over character: "plot is the course and (as it were) the soul of tragedy; character is second" (trans. 1996: 12). Characters are agents that function to further the plot:

there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be one without character. [...] the most important devices by which tragedy sways emotion are parts of the plot, i.e. reversals and recognitions. (12)

Later discussions trouble this binary: screen- and play-writing guides often emphasise that “plot is character in action” (McKee 1999; Fountain 2007); character not only creates the plot but *is* the plot, bring about story events by choices and actions.

In explicitly interactive theatre (with a presentation of choices that lead to varying outcomes) audience members resemble these Aristotelian agents. They function to further the plot and/or initiate the events of the performance. In immersive theatre, however, audience members more closely resemble the second model: by wandering freely and choosing to explore they bring about their own experience, curating their own series of events as they discover them. As discussed previously, immersive theatre and particularly the work of Punchdrunk tends not to include explicit interactivity, and could be considered not interactive at all, however much it may create a sensation of genuine interactivity. Immersive theatre productions do allow for a great amount of imaginative participation, and Punchdrunk shows facilitate participation in the wider culture of the production. In terms of performers’ characters and the wider plot, many of Punchdrunk’s larger productions tend to follow an Aristotelian model; a performer’s movements are pre-set and structured across the space of the building, and their adherence to following this prescribed course brings about the performance events. An audience member may experience a show this way too, sensing various performers’ movements in terms of a wider pattern. But in the moment of performance, the fictional story of an individual character may resemble the second model as well, as they are seen to experience emotions, make choices, perform actions and experience consequences. An audience member following an individual actor closely may experience the show’s story primarily in this mode.

A LINEAR CASE STUDY OF NARRATIVE AND IMMERSION: *THE CRASH OF THE ELYSIUM*

The Crash of the Elysium was part of 2011 Manchester International Festival at Salford Quays, transferring to Ipswich for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Primarily a children’s show (although “family” and adult-only

performances did occur, the latter by popular demand) the show was an adventure set in *Doctor Who* universe; a collaboration between Punchdrunk and the BBC, executive producer Stephen Moffat and series screenwriter Tom MacRae. Starting off as a (deliberately rather boring) lecture about a missing Victorian steamship which is quickly interrupted, the audience are informed that they are urgently needed for a special mission: and as a team they explore the wrecked *Elysium* ship, encounter footage by Matt Smith's Doctor, find the Tardis and defeat the Weeping Angels. For the purposes of considering narrative and immersion in *The Crash of the Elysium*, it is helpful to consider *story*, *plot* and *narrative* separately, even if they are experienced simultaneously in the moment of theatrical encounter. The puzzle-solving approach to piecing together information can also be enjoyed in linear storytelling, especially if the content involves solving a mystery (What happened to the *Elysium*?) or searching for a lost object (Where is the Tardis?). Just like immersive experience itself, immersion in storyworld and immersion in the structural mechanics of how one might "play" within a production are not a binary choice; rather, interplay between them facilitates immersive experience. *The Crash of the Elysium* allowed for immersion in terms of both content and form, storyworld and discourse.

Although from the beginning there was speculation about the fear factor (the Manchester International Festival website waning that: "Like any *Doctor Who* episode, children will find this event both scary and exciting"), care was taken of the audience throughout. Lyn Gardner noted that "performers have been chosen for their child friendliness, and ... parents are being advised on how to prepare their children" (2011: n.p.). The audience were led by in-character guides who spoke and engaged with them throughout, and in the fictional story of the show the audience find themselves crucial agents in restoring balance to the storyworld-in-flux. These conventions broke with the usual Punchdrunk formulation of audience members as wandering ghosts, allowing for more active engagement. The show's form did not allow the free wandering that might characterises a sense of audience choice.

Throughout the show the audience were instructed to line up, take instructions, stay together, be careful and for everybody to signal *ok* before the group moved on. These gestures and signals were effective safety precautions built into the show's performance vocabulary to continue immersion in the fictional world. The guides never left the audience completely on their own, and a medic (a real-life first aider, who is

also explained to be a medic within the fictional world of the story) travels with the group. Immersive experience and narrative worked together to ensure audience well-being, fictionalised as dynamic mission-solving teamwork. Even though there were some instances of time-travel—the audience escape the Weeping Angels by jumping to a Victorian fair-ground, and then appear to leap forward into a far-future spaceship before returning, as the performance ends, to the present—the show was fundamentally linear through the story it tells, and was physically linear throughout in terms of how the audience plotted their way through that story. Causality was maintained throughout the narrative discourse.

The concepts of barriers to immersion and the model of immersive experience as various levels of intensity and engagement lead to the challenge, for makers, of lowering these barriers in order to facilitate immersion in their audiences. Structure and craft are required in the composition and rehearsal of scenes and performances, with the aim of bringing about immersion in narrative as the audience follow a *plot* and experience a *story* that takes place in a wider *storyworld*. *The Crash of the Elysium* provides a useful approach to this challenge of form and story. The relationship between story of the show and the *plot* through that story by actors and audience, due to the show's linear structure, meant performance events could also function as narrative events. They worked together to facilitate immersive experience and lower barriers to immersion. The audience travelled through a series of atmospheric spaces and experienced different kinds of interactivity (television screens; in-character guides asking their advice; crawling, running, lining up in the space) which can allow for immersive experience in terms of exploration, discovery and excitement. (Or, should it go wrong, a breaking of immersion due to fear or confusion.) These events were also narrative events that allowed for immersion in a world and a sense of “what it's like” to experience the storyworld-in-flux (cf. Herman 2009), building to a climax of spectacle, music and narrative/character, the final scene functioning as both a performance event and a narrative ending that brought the experience of the show as well as its story and plot to a close.

A rough story outline is also an audience movement outline. The deliberately boring prologue—a professor's lecture on the history of the crashed *Elysium*—presented a world that was ready to be broken, making the call to adventure even more exciting (and even necessary): in a strong inciting incident the guides enter the lecture space, recruit the group and the real adventure begins. The narrative event was made

physical in the speedy journey out of the white-walled classroom and through the wreckage of a derelict ship. The first video communication from the Doctor set up the world ahead and hinted at its dangers (“*don’t blink*”) and in asking the audience for help finding the Tardis, the relationship between them and the guides is firmly established: the audience’s active engagement is required and they are important for restoring the fictional order. The protagonists are established (the audience, their guides), as is the conflict between the secondary characters (the Doctor, River Song) and the antagonist presence (the Weeping Angels—alien monsters that take the form of stone statues, moving at the speed of a blink). An attack by the Weeping Angels results in a trip to the Victorian age: a second act climax in which everyone is thrown off the path, and seem to be the furthest yet from their goal. This predicament within the narrative was again made physical and literal in the shape of the show: by running away from the Weeping Angels, the audience seem to go off their planned path. When the Tardis returns them to a far-future spaceship (the production’s final performance space, apart from one corridor back into the real world), everyone puts their hands on a tree to join their powers together and bring the plot to a final climax, music and lights lending to the tension and gravitas of the moment. The actor-guides and the interventions from screens add plot exposition and intensify the conflicts and what is at stake for the *Doctor Who* characters. Balance restored, the audience make a final dash through a corridor of trapped statues—making literal the successful change they members have achieved in the storyworld. The end of the story is also the end of the audience’s plot, and this is made very clear both in content and form as the guides salute and say goodbye.

Immersive experience can, of course, occur in a linear plot: in *The Crash of the Elysium*, the linear plot enabled intense engagement through a clear sense of causality, as well as making the audience appear to be the agents of change in the storyworld-in-flux. Punchdrunk manufactured the overall movement score and progression of the show and little was left to chance, just as in a linear playtext, with some deliberate spaces for improvised conversation and discussion with the guides. Audience members were free to create their own sense of change and effect upon the immediate experience of the show in the moment of performance—the show facilitated, for its young participants, high levels of imaginative participation, of cognitive interactivity.

One example illustrates a moment where narrative and immersive experience were incorporated into the rehearsal process. After the first filmed section from the Doctor, early in the show, the guides inform the audience that their mission is to find the Tardis. The guides ask if anyone can provide information about this unknown object: “we don’t know what it is; we don’t know what it looks like,” encouraging them to respond to this prompt. In a rehearsal of this scene, this line was improvised to include “we don’t know what colour it is.” Although someone outside the storyworld of the production is likely to know the Tardis is blue, within the world it was too specific a question—if you don’t know what something is, do you think to wonder what colour it is? The line was eventually rejected as overly leading: it was a line belonging to the real-life production, not to the fictional world. This decision represents a movement between levels of interactivity (a child might be more able or willing to give a definite answer to the closed question of “what colour is it”) and narrative coherence.

Elysium: An Internally Coherent Immersive World

An immersive space is physically internally coherent, existing within strongly defined spatial and temporal boundaries. Immersive experience is also a temporary sensation, all the more intense and powerful for its being finite or (in the case of peak experience or flow) fleeting. Add to that the provocation that an internally coherent world is a requirement for effectively immersive fiction. In terms of storyworld, the rules of *The Crash of the Elysium* also had to feel complete and make sense: the show needed a story the audience could follow, not just in terms of their physical route, in order to become successfully immersed in the storyworld and experience the storyworld-in-flux.

The world of *The Crash of the Elysium* had a further imperative to aim for internal coherence by way of its taking place in the well-known, pre-established universe of long-running children’s television programme *Doctor Who*. This is a universe with known characters and relationships, dynamics, boundaries and rules. The Tardis and the Weeping Angels are recognisable figures with known skills and abilities; the audience would be likely to have seen them functioning as plot elements in the television show, and now they find themselves incorporated into a plot in which these characters also feature. The show’s aesthetic elements are also recognisable, not just its characters but its sets and its soundtrack.

Within this known and recognisable universe the story of the *Crash of the Elysium* sits—its challenge was to not shift or alter the universe of the show, but to fit within it. The collaboration between Punchdrunk and *Doctor Who* was of course a foundational aspect of the show and the cornerstone of its marketing. The world of the story had to fit within this universe, and allow its audience to function as important agents whilst not upsetting the dynamics of the wider *Doctor Who* universe. For an audience member, the excitement of being involved in an adventure might go hand in hand with being aware of anything that is wrong, inaccurate or disrespectful. Drawing on a recognisable brand can be both a bonus and a challenge in terms of keeping everyone happy.

In rehearsal, the deliberately created space for off-script improvised dialogue and answers to questions were subject to scrutiny. Inconsistencies in the script were discussed at length and the rules of *The Crash of the Elysium's* universe worked out in order that any tricky questions could be answered. Whether or not these questions came up during performances, the anxiety to get this element right demonstrates the importance of story-based internal coherence and the potential dangers of a script with internal inconsistencies on an audience who might well be likely to spot them and point them out. The relationship between the actor-guides and audience relied on the exchange of information, exposition and occasionally the deliberate suggestion of ignorance or powerlessness which could only be solved by one of the audience members. The manipulation of story events and plot elements went towards creating a narrative that, in terms of content and internal dynamics, made recognisable sense, functioning logically within the *Doctor Who* universe. This was as important in the show's making as the process of creating physical immersion, tension and atmosphere. The wider cultural narrative of the television programme and its history was incorporated into how the show was structured, rehearsed and performed.

Elysium: Structural and Soundtrack Linearity

The creation of the show also involved working towards narrative linearity in terms of crafting the audience's physical journey.

The rhythm of the show was created by its soundtrack. Every beat of the audience's journey along their route was accounted for, and rehearsed to be maintained. The audience were moving along a predetermined path led by the actor-guides, but the scenes themselves were cued

by musical/sound-effect scores and lighting, which were cued (in secret) by the actors. The soundtrack functioned as a score throughout the audience's journey, adding pace and tone to the structure of the scenes. Music and sound are capable of creating highly immersive effects (Di Benedetto 2010; Radbourne et al. 2014): lowering barriers to immersion; creating an internally coherent world (drawing on the soundtrack of the television show—recognition becoming an added stimulus); creating mood and atmosphere. The soundtrack functioned as a structural aid within the scenes themselves as well as across the show as a whole. This allowed for immersion in the storyworld through which the audience were led by the actor-guides, learning the story (the Doctor's relationship to the *Elysium*, the alarming news about escaped Weeping Angels, etc.) through their own plotted course through the performance. The rhythm of the score was matched to the timing of the actors, significant story events occurring to create moments of excitement (immersive experience in the space), participation (immersive experience in the performance) and adrenaline (story experience—what will happen next?).

This was a well-known and easily recognisable soundtrack: music from the show and famous SFX functioned as performative intertextual references that situated the production within the universe/wider storyworld of the television show. This affected the production's internal narrative consistency, but there is also an interesting relationship to be distinguished between immersion in a fictional narrative and a fictional world, and a real-world event. Immersive experience can manifest as temporarily forgetting about outside world. As demonstrated, the production was crafted and rehearsed to ensure the audience remained in the world of *The Crash of the Elysium* throughout. However, the intertextual references drawn on in performing and attending the show came from real-world experience of fictive world exposure: the generic and aesthetic elements of *Doctor Who* narratives influenced immersive experience in the production. The real world cannot be entirely forgotten about—disassociated from—during *The Crash of the Elysium*, since it is a fictional world *from* the real world that is the setting for its story, a very famous fictional world that is referenced and drawn on all the way through. Immersive experience when watching television might appear to be more passive than experiencing a *Doctor Who* adventure in the real world, and physically it is less immediately active (even when going to hide behind the sofa); but engagement with the story elements, aesthetic and soundtrack while watching the television show might also make for a powerful

immersive experience in *narrative*, and in the enjoyment of spending time with recognisable characters in a well-known wider storyworld. The relationship between narrative and immersion in *The Crash of the Elysium* was supported by the structure of the show, internally coherent performances and rules of the storyworld-in-flux, and the relationship between the performers and the audience members—which emphasised the vital importance of the presence of the latter.

CONCLUSION: NARRATIVE AND IMMERSION, FORM AND STORY

Machon’s description of *The Crash of the Elysium* hints at an interpretation of the relationship between narrative and form:

an immersive event that exploits the action-led, mystery-solving narratives of Doctor Who via the Punchdrunk process to encourage high-paced interactivity. The format borrows from Punchdrunk’s recent explorations in pervasive game-playing [...] Rather than via Punchdrunk’s trademark complex layering in form and content, audience-participants are engaged by the dynamic clue-solving participation, involving interaction with the Doctor via a series of video messages, and sensory stimulation. (2013: 3–4)

Machon suggests the show emphasised—and facilitated—interactivity in both content and form. The mode of an audience member’s engagement with narrative was certainly more active and communal than the solitary, slow-paced exploration of Punchdrunk’s larger shows made of “complex layering.” The content and form of *Elysium* did suggest interactivity: in narrative terms, the actor-guides clearly communicated to the audience that their role in the story was important; in form terms, some moments of interactivity went beyond imaginative engagement and required real physical input. However, the production’s content was tightly controlled throughout, and this interplay between narrative score and physical show structure led to the facilitation of immersive experience.

Immersive experience came about at the moment where spontaneous reaction in audience members met the carefully rehearsed and well-crafted environment which had been specifically designed to bring about such a spontaneous response. This phenomenon lowered the barriers to immersion. The barriers were physical (to be able and willing to move through the space following the actors) and atmospheric/narrative-based (to be engaged in the story and interested in the wider storyworlds of

Elysium show and *Doctor Who* universe). The audience's journey was structured in terms of the story they were experiencing. The story and the show were one and the same, proceeding at the same time, at the same rate and through the same space. The relationship with the actors was also direct, due to the intended audience for the work. The relationship between rehearsed movements and space for interaction and dialogue between audience and actors was factored into the show, and the relationship between narrative and immersion needed to be navigated throughout the rehearsal process. The audience were invited to change the world of the story and influence the outcome of its events, while also being technically and structurally cared for; working through a pre-rehearsed and pre-cued set of events, effects and encounters.

Not all Punchdrunk shows are this linear in form, or focus so much explicit attention on their audience. The next chapter will investigate what happens to story, plot and audience experience when the form of an immersive production is quite different.

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Play the Story: An Approach to Narrative in Immersive Theatre

Immersive productions can be read as games, and the overlap between the two forms has been noted elsewhere (Dickinson 2011; Gordon 2012; Green 2013; McMullan 2014; Klich in Frieze 2017). Immersive productions can even, with the addition of individual ludus rules, effectively be turned into games. A particularly clear example of the overlap is *The Golden Amulets of Agnes*, a fan-authored *Sleep No More* points system gamifying the theatrical experience by proposing rewards for certain achievements or encounters:

May I Have This Dance? (20): Dance with any cast member.

Hail The New Thane (20): Watch Duncan get murdered.

Love you /Hate you (5): See any dance scene between characters that appears simultaneously amorous and violent.

Shut it! (-20): Get caught speaking or with your mask off.

Out Of The Moment (-5): Thinking about this point system during your stay.(Delirium Dog 2012: n.p.)

The “Out Of The Moment” anti-achievement humourously reminds any would-be players that the gaming frame is not, ultimately, the correct way to approach *Sleep No More*, however enjoyable it might be to consider in the abstract; a goal-driven ludic approach is understood to be at odds with what immersion in the production is actually supposed

to resemble. The penalty for getting caught with a removed mask also implies that any additional approaches to *Sleep No More* must not occur at the cost of disruption to the production itself. A hierarchy of form is established, with the show's own rules of engagement placed firmly above any additional goals an individual might think about giving themselves.

This final chapter on immersion and narrative draws on game studies to explore one way of theorising immersive experience, theatrical form and the question of story. The (often troubled) relationship between narrative and ludology in computer games—respectively, the story told by a game and its mechanics of play—raises questions about what, in the heat of the moment, a player is actually immersed *in*: a story, or the *game* of finding/exploring/otherwise engaging with that story? A similar model can exist for immersive theatre, and raise similar questions. This chapter outlines the history of the “vs” relationship between story and game-play before applying it to an analysis of immersive experience in *Sleep No More*, a production that made its relationship to gaming even more explicit than usual. Theories and methods from the field of game studies will continue to inform and influence makers of immersive theatre, and the narrative/ludology model provides a helpful means of approaching the consequences for audience immersion.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVE “VS” LUDOLOGY DEBATE

Early studies of computer games drew on pre-existing approaches and methods (mostly from literary studies and philosophy) in order to establish the field as a legitimate form of academic enquiry. Scholars explored parallels with other narrative forms, such as theatre (Laurel 1991) and literature (Murray 1997), to argue that games can be considered alongside these forms, and using concepts drawn from these sister fields. This approach was met with resistance from scholars who would later come to be considered ludologists (Aarseth 1997; Juul 2001; Frasca 2003a), who argued that games are worthy of study in and of themselves, rather than because of traits they happen to share with other pre-established forms. Computer games are not sub-films or not-quite-television and should not be read as such: they are a form capable of its own artistic and technical endeavours, requiring its own specialised vocabulary and expertise to study it appropriately. What makes games a medium—an art form—of their own, ludologists argued, is the existence of *gaming mechanics*:

puzzle, challenge, clear interactivity (of the explicit mode, with designed choices and procedures and quantifiable outcomes). Games' potential for immersion is concerned with cognitive/psychological immersion in the gaming mechanics and the present moment of play, not sensory immersion in detailed art design, or emotional engagement in the arrangement of narrative events. Ludology argues that games should be studied *as games*, not as a(nother) form of storytelling media. Those discussing parallels with (say) literature or theatre became "narratologists"—little more (from a ludologist perspective) than apologists for games, using narrative theory to provide a cloak of respectability and ultimately preventing the art form being considered on its own merits.

Jenkins has called the relationship between ludologists and narratologists a "blood feud" (2004: 118) and these arguments do imply a binary model to studying games, that any new researcher in the field must first pick a side. However, both approaches are attempts to answer the same question. As games are a form of media with the potential for immersion, what are players actually immersed *in*? Narratologists argue for games' abilities to tell stories and work with imagination and empathy, and that games deserve to be considered in this context (Murray 1997). Ludologists suggest the mechanics of gameplay are the most important aspect of studying games *as games*, and that this is the perspective that will best reward enquiry (Aarseth 1997; Juul 2001). Later, Frasca referred to "the non-existence of this ludological/narratological debate," and suggested that games scholars had never been hostile to the concept of studying games from a narratological perspective, in a paper called "Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes from a Debate That Never Took Place" (2003b: 3). However, Ryan suggests that, although the debate "may have been a one-sided affair, rather than a dialogue," it was never as neutral as Frasca retrospectively claims: "if these articles [by Frasca, Aareseth and Juul] don't take a stance against the idea of games telling stories, what will it take to start a polemic?" (2006: 296) she asks. Both Ryan and Jenkins situate themselves in a more neutral position, proposing that both perspectives provide useful tools for considering games. Ryan proposes a "functional ludo-narrativism" to allow both approaches to be included in reading and analysis: "By connecting the strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world, this approach should do justice to the dual nature of video games" (2006: 291). The field no longer requires newcomers to take sides in a blood feud, if it ever did, and is now open to nuanced

perspectives on games, gameplay and narrative. The ludological/narratological debate, no longer at the forefront of study, continues to provide a useful model for approaching games: such as reading gaming mechanics as creators of implicit ideological narratives (Atkins 2003). The false binary has become a tool of nuance in itself.

Whatever the relationship between these two schools of thought for games scholars, the model of narratology/ludology as a binary or debate is useful for thinking about immersive experience in theatre. It provides an approach to considering how immersive experience is created, maintained and situated through a production. To illustrate, this chapter considers immersion in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (McKittrick Hotel, New York: 2011–) in the context of this model. I discuss the production both in performance and in relation to an experiment in “remote and real world interconnected theatrical immersion” conducted between Punchdrunk and MIT Media Lab in 2012 (Higgin and Nightingale 2012). This experiment involved turning *Sleep No More* into a (primarily text-based) computer game that could be experienced at a distance from the show itself. I “played” the New York show from London. *Sleep No More* was adapted into a hybrid form of theatre and game: a process that required transferring the story, characters, aesthetic and tone (all subjects that would interest a narratologist) as well as the structural framework, logistics and practicalities of exploring the show (how you might “play” the show—the domain of ludology).

NARRATIVE “VS” LUDOLOGY IN *SLEEP NO MORE*

Punchdrunk first experimented with a virtual and real-world interconnected experience in 2008's *The Last Will*, the result of three months' research and development with Hide & Seek, HP Labs and Sleeper. “Players working in pairs of two [one physically present in the performance/game space, and one via computer interface] had to collaborate in real time, linked by sensors, comms & actuation technology, to unlock the secrets and escape the house” (Hide&Seek 2008: n.p.). The rooms had communicative “rules” that, once understood, enabled meaningful play; the exploration and discovery of this grammar in itself was a subject of play. In 2011 Punchdrunk experimented with real/online interconnected immersion in a project at Rose Bruford that riffed on the story of Bluebeard. And in 2012 the MIT Media Lab project created an experience that occurred between an online player and an in-show counterpart.

Sleep No More was experienced as a text-based computer game for virtual participants, and as an experience of the show for physically present audience members with added performative moments, props and interactivity via equipment incorporated into their mask.

The project's design and implementation involved considering telic and paratelic modes of play. Fernandez defines the difference:

The telic mode tends to be more serious minded and focused on the future, while individuals in paratelic mode tend to be more playful, light hearted, orienting actions towards the present. (in Leino et al. 2008: 186)

Telic mode is when play consists of enjoying the movement towards a goal; paratelic is where satisfaction derives from play itself. Bartle's influential system divided players into four personality "types": killers, achievers, socialisers and explorers (1996). The approach to gameplay in the behaviour of each of these types grants them a different immersive experience in a game. Killers and achievers are telic; socializers and explorers are paratelic. The former are engaged in goals, know their targets and work towards them, and have specific reasons for engagement in the game; their immersion can be quite clearly linked to psychological "flow." The latter enjoy a lack of goals and pursue the activity or game for its own sake (or for its social aspects, or other outcomes that exist outside the reward remit of the game itself). The former play to win; the latter play to play. This model is useful not just for the idea of personality types and their respective approaches (Bartle's list was later expanded to eight, in reference to 3D and Virtual Reality gameplay [2003: 145]). The idea of an audience member's character and behaviour resulting in different ways of engaging with a piece of work enables us to see how immersive experience can come about in different ways, and also adds weight to the premise that immersive experience cannot be guaranteed by designers or makers and cannot be forced. It can only be allowed for, facilitated, made possible—and different "characters" or gamer/audience member "types" will respond differently to this very facilitation.

The *Sleep No More* project had three strands: an experiment to make a world as visual, ephemeral, as viscerally immersive, as the show in real life; heightening the *Sleep No More* experience in the physical world, with more interactions and extra narratives for participants; and finding a way to connect these first two goals. The project aimed to enable interaction

between the two worlds and between the experiences of the two participants.

The live experience of *Sleep No More* involves multisensory stimulus, with a soundscape and set designs drawing heavily on light, atmosphere and scent. If sensory stimulation is a key aspect of facilitating immersion, then although it would be possible to film the production doing so would remove this important aspect of immersive experience. A film depicting a route through the show would resemble watching someone go through a ghost train with a night-vision camera: allowing an idea of “what happened” but losing any of the atmosphere or excitement of actually being there. A simple playback could not be expected to provide an immersive experience within a fictional or theatrical world. A project attempting to create a sense of immersion for a remote player would need to provide more than this. Higgin wrote in the *Guardian* that the project “wasn’t about plonking a camera on a real-world participant and instructing them, drone-like, to move around the building. Instead, the challenge has been to recreate the infinite possibilities for journeys and experiences happening simultaneously across a Punchdrunk production” (2012: n.p.). The goal was for the online participants and the interconnected players to have individual experiences and form their own narrative(s), as well as experiencing some moments—and therefore to do some of their narrative-building—as a pair. The immersive experience being recreated, then, might be defined as this sense of making a singular, individual journey through a world: a setup that invites a participant to make choices about their movements and, through this, create an individual narrative.

The system was designed to be unnoticeable by other (non-playing) audience members and as unobtrusive as possible to those wearing them. The system had to work within the conventions of the production: namely, that audience members do not talk, and do wear masks. The result was a modified mask containing speakers, bone conductors and Bluetooth technology connecting the onsite audience member to Portal Objects in the production space and to the online participant. Portal Objects were items or props in the production that linked the in-show audience member to the remote participant and they included a typewriter, a mirror and Ouija board. The online participant was able to send messages to be typed up by the typewriter, appear ghostlike on the mirror or be spelled out on the Ouija board. *Operator* refers the controller of interactions between both participants.

The atmosphere of the physical setting was an important aspect of recreating *Sleep No More* virtually. This could have been attempted with a highly detailed, 3D-rendered exact copy of the rooms in the show—perhaps suffering the same limitations, described previously, as filming the show live. Instead, online participants experienced the atmosphere and setting more impressionistically. The decision to present the world of *Sleep No More* this way in virtual space helped to enable immersion more than a detailed 3D render would have. Such a more “realistic” aesthetic might have conveyed what the production looked like, representing the physical experience of wandering through its spaces. But the text-based system with its occasional imagery more accurately reflected the sensation of mystery and exploration that characterised immersive experience in the on-site production, and also the story that was created for the online participants of the project. The development from text to imagery also reflected the relationship created between the two linked players. The online player first experienced the show against a black background, with rooms and environments described with a few select details written in white across the screen. As the story progressed, the online player “looped” through several settings, returning to some spaces more than once. (Exploring and returning just as a real-life Punchdrunk participant might.) On the first loop the online player saw only black backgrounds and descriptive text, with no image content at all. From the second loop onwards some images gradually formed—these were the spaces where the online player’s “real life” partner had visited. The online player’s sensory perceptions could appear to have been provided or “granted” through the actions of their on-site partner.

As both the real-world and online experience of navigating the *Sleep No More* show featured elements of looping or scenes that were repeating-with-changes, it is useful to consider narrative/ludology in context of linearity and chronological order. One of the scriptwriters for the online experience describes the relationship between the online project’s story and the practice of negotiating a story within the world of *Sleep No More*: “the experience for the online user seemed much more linear than a ‘normal’ SNM experience. [...] The story they uncover is nonlinear, but the story they create is more linear” (Punchdrunk 2012). Jenkins proposes a model of how gaming mechanics facilitate different sorts of narratives (again troubling the notion that narrative and ludology will always be in conflict). He notes “game designers have historically been more interested in issues of level design than of plot or character

motivation”: a game’s setting or notional character dynamics may be evocative of a narrative situation but not engaged with directly in play, with the mechanics of gameplay being the most memorable for players (2007: 56). However, he adds that immersive gaming environments—virtual worlds a player can wander around in and interact with—do facilitate evoked, embedded or emergent narratives to emerge through gameplay, whether or not they were originally designed to do so. From this Jenkins suggests game designers ought to consider themselves “narrative architects” (60) who manipulate space and gaming mechanics in order to allow for engagement with story events.

Ludology/narrativity also describe how an audience member might approach “story” in environment and space. Jenkins offers a summary of how different types of storytelling are facilitated by immersive gaming environments:

environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in up to four different ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide staging ground on which narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives. (2007: 57)

These models are useful for considering immersive theatre as a form of “environmental storytelling.” Productions can evoke existing texts, that is, narrative associations in the context of adaptation—*Sleep No More* draws most explicitly on Shakespeare and Hitchcock, but may also provide associations for an audience member with other Punchdrunk or immersive productions they have experienced; film noir; ghost trains; the staging history of *Macbeth*; and so on. Performers enact narrative events, within a space that has story events embedded within its mise-en-scene and overall design. An immersive production might also evoke narrative associations in a more general storytelling context, such as (as discussed in the previous chapter) opening a door functions as a narrative event in an audience member’s individual discourse. At the same time, the structure of a production may provide gameplay/ludic elements. *Evoked* or *enacted* narratives reveal themselves as an audience member crosses the space: events in the plot become events in space, which they seek out, stumble upon or enact themselves. An *embedded* narrative implies a quest or goal that could lead to immersive gameplay experience in an audience

member/player: an embedded narrative “doesn’t require a branching story structure, but rather depends on scrambling the pieces of a linear story and allowing us to reconstruct the plot through our acts of detection, speculation, exploration and decryption” (Jenkins 2007: 59).

Although an audience member may read an immersive production as a game in these ways, the online participant in the *Sleep No More* project was provided with signifiers and tropes that explicitly suggested the form. This created potential for a problematic relationship between the gaming mechanics implied by the interface, and the story that had been written for the online participant to gradually uncover. The Portal Objects provided events of technical (ludic) achievement but were also intended to incorporate and express the rising momentum of the online participant’s narrative discourse. Reading story elements or production events as part of a wider gameplay goal has the potential to break immersion with a sense of “failure” or being unsuccessful—it risks implying a much more binary model of whether a participant has a good or a bad experience, whether they have “done” the show correctly or not. Being explicit with gaming mechanics forefronts the quest nature of the experience (it may imply a deadline, a race, competition) rather than emphasising discovery, sharing or connection. In this way gaming mechanics may overpower any sense of narrative discourse, rather than allowing a participant to find narrative elements embedded within them or evoked by them.

Frasca (who was quoted at the beginning of this chapter arguing that there has never been a ludology/narrative debate) argues that “the biggest fallacy of ‘interactive narrative’ is that it pretends to give freedom to the player while maintaining narrative coherence” (2003a: 229). He proposes that traditional media (citing literature and drama as examples) are fundamentally representational, rather than simulational as a game might be. This means these forms cannot truly provide freedom for a player/reader, as the author/narrator decides in advance which events will occur and all that remains is for a reader to follow the author’s storyline. Juul (2001) also prioritises ludology over the storytelling capability of games, suggesting that games cannot be considered a narrative form due to the relationship between storytelling, gameplay and time. Gaming happens in the present, even if a scene is nominally occurring as a flashback: and therefore gaming cannot achieve a sense of narration (and therefore cannot be analysed from the perspective of narratology), since it is impossible to narrate a story that has yet to reach its fulfilment:

[a] game constructs the story time as synchronous with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story is now. Now, not just in the sense that the viewing witnesses the events now, but in the sense that the events are happening now, and that what comes next is not yet determined. (Juul 2001: n.p.)

These arguments presuppose an overly simplistic definition of the way drama and prose narratives tell stories, by assuming they deal with time and causality between events in a way that allows for no reader freedom. It is true that story events are crafted and organised in advance, but immersive experience in the moment is related to the interplay of a given event and an audience member/participant's reading of, and reaction to, that event. This is something that occurs very much in the "now," whenever the show was made or the story was written.

In the same way the sensation of immersive experience is always in the present, stories told about immersive experience—memories or retellings of immersive experience—evoke the present. Games do allow a player to influence outcomes, but only within boundaries defined and maintained by the mechanics. (How a player might beat a Super Mario level might be "not yet determined," as Juul states, but we know it won't be by buying a hotel on Park Lane.) Neither narrative nor ludology should be privileged for allowing total "freedom" in a reader/player: immersive experience is created in the moments of interplay between a reader and the text, and this can be facilitated by either approach or aspects of both. The *Sleep No More* project used the incorporation of gameplay aspects to create an experience that happened in the present. The project was designed to allow participants the sensation of uncovering events in a gaming context (Portal Objects as puzzles), a story context (Portal Objects as storyworld items) and to lower barriers to immersive experience in the sense of a fleeting, highly intense moment of engagement (interconnection and communication between the real-world and the remote participant).

Practical concerns are the first barriers to immersion in any form of media, making the use of hidden technology in the project potentially both a risk and a strength. Overly cumbersome, difficult, or faulty technology would keep both real-world and online participants away from being playing the game, never mind becoming immersed in it. It would also affect *Sleep No More's* other audience members, not involved in the project, if the technology was too visible. The modified masks functioned

as aids to gameplay and did not have any narrative importance in themselves—the speakers, bone conductors and so on were intended to deliver the sensation of experiencing story events. The online participant used a text interface to navigate spaces that paralleled the environments of the McKittrick Hotel in New York. The online participant would occasionally be informed that they had found an item or that they felt a chill in the air, and they would occasionally activate film footage from the show. These moments taken together aided in the gradual piecing together of a story, and the text-based adventure game imagery and tropes suggested solving this particular mystery was the quest or purpose of engaging in the project. The technology used in the project, then, was primarily not a narrative element but a ludic one—it had little to do with the story but was the means to allow participants to access it. For this reason it was important the technology be as fault-free as possible, ultimately becoming invisible behind the effects it delivered. Textual descriptions of space helped set the scene for the online participant; for the real-world participant, the Portal Object connections not only served to enhance ludic aspects of the game, but also served, as they were secreted within the real-world sets, to enhance the atmosphere and aesthetic of the physical show. The Portal Objects functioned as a means to enable the participants to connect with each other (a gameplay aspect) and to enhance the sensation of the storyworld they were both occupying (a narrative aspect). The design of spaces and general mise-en-scene, referential music and the atmosphere and colour palette in a show can all operate as elements of narrative. They create a wider storyworld and embed stories within them that an audience member can pick up as part of their own narrative discourse (should they wish to), just as description in prose fiction can enable narrative immersion by creating the sensation of a whole and internally coherent world. The technical details and equipment were intrinsic to manipulating barriers to immersion for the remote player and the real-life audience member, important for both story and game.

The *Sleep No More* project created three types of audience member: online, on-site and on-site but unaware of the experiment. A model of engagement with immersive theatre involves movement between different modes of experiencing the work, as suggested by these types. A more “fluid” participant might choose to connect and disconnect to other participants at different times, or begin in one mode and move to the other: such behaviour suggests a physical embodiment of “ludo-narrativism”

which allows both ludological and narratological aspects to facilitate immersive experience. Moments of explicit connection between the remote and the real-world participant (such as when the former sent messages for the latter to receive via typewriter) were concerned more with ludology than narrative, creating immersive experience in the gaming mechanics by suggesting a positive correlation between challenge and skill (and with the danger of breaking immersion if it did not work). However, should the technology be made subtle enough or the mechanics of engaging with technology be overcome, technology like Portal Objects can also facilitate narrative events.

An additional challenge for creating immersive experience in a form where narratology and ludology are both potential approaches is a theatrical question about representation, empathy and role play. Online participants in the *Sleep No More* project learned, or were informed as the story came together, that they had been playing the (important) role of Grace: a character who had been the subject of speculation and mystery until the reveal. The real-world participants were not given a fictional character in the same way, but continued to play themselves, as it were, exploring the world of the theatrical production. How these experiences could be interconnected, and allow both participants to experience immersion, becomes a question of narrative rather than gameplay, returning to the idea of empathy and suspense and requiring that *these* are the aspects that need to be manipulated to create audience engagement. In the *Sleep No More* project the online participant functioned (by the end) as a fictional character within the storyworld, while the on-site participants were free to engage with either the show or the more specific story about Grace they were building with their remote partner. This dynamic implies a desire that immersion in narrative is ultimately the most powerful or long-lasting effect of the project, story being fore-fronted rather than the ludological aspects of gameplay being the ends in itself. If gaming mechanics are intended facilitate engagement but are not the main purpose of the experience, the challenge for makers, then, might be in getting their participants to care.

GAMES AND STORIES: TWO KINDS OF TREASURE HUNT

Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* incorporated the Gold-Bug treasure hunt, an overlapping that allowed for different readings across the space of Battersea Arts Centre (BAC). Reading the BAC as a treasure

hunt site sits problematically with the slower, more exploration-oriented movement of those without specific goals in the space, making Gold-Bug chasers potentially detrimental to audience members not on the search. The two pieces—theatrical experience and treasure hunt—were at odds, reflected in contrasting behaviour between the spectators/participants operating on these different interpretive frameworks. Reading this problem from a narrative/ludology perspective, the majority of experiences of *The Masque of the Red Death* were narrative ones, characterised by the exploratory self-authored story and storyworld built up by a spectator's moving through the space. Although taking an audience member through rooms or story events in a non-chronological or fragmented order, the production is a linear narrative experience from an audience member's perspective (as discussed in Chap. 5). This approach comes into conflict with the ludology-framed challenge of playing a game, such as the Gold-Bug hunt, where the drive was to engage with the treasure hunt, moving through rooms quickly in search of clues. In a text where both interpretive frameworks are available, a production may choose to forefront one. In terms of technology design, the *Sleep No More* experiment aimed to reduce the possibility of audience members detracting from each other's experiences, manipulating elements within the production and its on-site and remote technology to allow neither narratology nor ludology to dominate at the expense of the other.

Although the MIT project resulted in a text-based computer game interface for its online participants, the project's goal was never to turn the show into a game but to somehow make an online/virtual/remote experience as exploratory and experiential as visiting the physical show, and it used computer gaming tropes to achieve this. A potentially frustrating outcome of reading a piece of immersive theatre as a game is the implied relationship to rules: a show that suggests there is no definite way, no correct method, to experience it, and yet *does* seem to reward certain actions with hidden rooms or one-on-one experiences, or simply in seeing more sights, might appear to be a game that *does* have rules that it is deliberately, and perhaps unfairly, hiding out of sight. The possibility of getting to, or reaching, a good experience or outcome contains within it the implication that it is also possible to fail to do this: winning only makes sense against losing. In an interview about *The Drowned Man*, Barrett and Doyle articulate a relationship between gaming and narrative in how the production might be experienced, emphasising audience choice:

“We’ve tried to invest in this idea from gaming that the further you unpeel the layers, the more secrets you’ll discover,” [Doyle] adds.

“The show goes vertically down as well as horizontally,” says Barrett. “You can follow the story of our Woyzeck and it will be a great night out or you can go vertically down, lift away the topsoil and get to the other, hidden narrative underneath.” (2013, n.p.)

This description shows the influence of gaming mechanics on how the show was put together and how audience members might be invited (or choose) to experience it. The non-linear structure and sheer size of large-scale immersive productions means it is impossible to see everything. Here it is suggested that there are different paths through *The Drowned Man*, literally of course in terms of which parts of the production to look at—but also metaphorically, and in terms of how far “vertically down” an audience member is able and/or willing to go. Coding these different layers of the production as narratives makes the relationship between ludology and narrativism a useful tool to approaching how immersive experience may function in the space. Not being able to see everything becomes an integral part of experiencing the show from a ludological perspective, as opposed to a problem that might arise by attempting to form a coherent narrative discourse that captures all of the production’s wider story and storyworld. Paratelic gaming is *meaningful* play, play for its own sake rather than for the goal of winning, and *The Drowned Man* and *Sleep No More* can be read for their use of gaming mechanics without necessarily evoking competitive notions of right or wrong, win or lose. Deciding on, or making the assumption that there are, specific goals within a production will influence an audience member’s experience; whether that goal is to find all the scenes, follow a specific character, wander aimlessly, wander with purpose, spend all the time in the bar or some combination of these: the experience will be(come) immersive if the show seems to reward the chosen means of engagement.

The disorientating effect of both content (scenes out of order, mystifying one-on-ones) and form (darkness, maze-like spaces, getting lost) might mean it is difficult to remember, in retrospect, what order moments happened in (with the possible exception of finale scenes). An audience member’s story, when considered as a linear journey with its own events and structure, is formed in the meeting place between their decisions (what door to go through, etc.), and the production’s own

choreography, direction and layout. These events might be remembered merged together into a single three-hour “block” of immersive experience, with particular high points of specific scenes or “peak” immersive activity. This is similar to how immersion in gaming can be described: being engaged in the activity of play for a long time with a few intense, climactic moments of peak experience. The state of mind in those who have been intensely immersed in an activity for a long period might be one that cannot, in retrospect, describe every event in the order they happened. Ryan comments on the relationship between gaming and memory:

For a game to inspire *specific* retellings, to be *narratively designed*, it must involve actions whose purpose is not just winning or losing, but fulfilling a concrete goal. [...]The greater our urge to tell stories about games, the stronger the suggestion that we *experienced the game narratively*. (2006: 284; original emphasis)

As discussed in Chap. 4, immersive productions can create the urge to tell stories, the communication a means to share and claim ownership of experience. These stories may be more about the audience member as an individual (the crafting of their own narrative score, their enjoyment or frustration with the mechanics and logistics) than an objective description of the storyworld or story the production created. Immersive experience happens in the meeting place between the perspective of the individual and the sense of a larger production design at work. Considering shows like *Sleep No More* or *The Drowned Man* as systems that invite ludo-narrativism allows for a more nuanced perspective on analysis than if the two approaches are modelled as a binary, destined to be ever at odds with each other during a performance. Barriers to immersive experience may be raised if ludology and narrative appear to be at odds: if (for example) following a specific quest is contradicted by an invitation to freely wander.

A ludo-narrativist approach to immersive theatre allows gaming mechanics and story elements to be considered separately, but not taken as mutually exclusive. Answering the question of what an audience member is immersed *in* becomes a means explore how craft and structure facilitate immersive experience. Gordon’s discussion of audience behaviour in *Sleep No More* makes an interesting connection to the kind of

game the production resembles, and the notion of linking two participants (real-world and long-distance):

the classic adventure/quest games that are the closest model for Punchdrunk's immersive environments are typically not played as networked multiple player games. The behavior of other players in these frameworks is distracting and incongruous (unlike in first person shoot 'em ups) precisely because, unless the game is simulating a search-and-ransack, the behavior of players (trying every door and drawer) clearly denies immersion. Modeled on this type of game, Punchdrunk's website reinforces an immersion in task, rather than environment. (2012: n.p.)

The physical *Sleep No More* environment and the virtual game world created as part of the MIT project suggest different types of games, each with different gaming mechanics and the potential to immerse in different—possible contradictory—ways. “Trying every door and drawer” might be precisely what creates (or at least facilitates) immersion in a first-person exploratory adventure or quest game, a game style the physical structure of the production does resemble. If this model jars with another reading of the shows as a site of connected or networked multiplayer gaming, the behaviour of other “players” (audience members) becomes the cause of a potential barrier to immersion, if their way of “playing” the show results in them treating it a story instead of a treasure hunt, or vice versa. The *Sleep No More* project sought to replicate visiting the production for the remote player in the (re)creation, not just of the exploratory structure and the multi-sensory, visceral atmosphere, but the sensation of having an apparently *individual* experience. Successful interactions via the Portal Objects appeared to be happening just for the participants, in the same way successful one-on-one scenes feel bespoke rather than tightly scripted. Whether it is narratology or ludology that engages an audience member in play, the illusion of individuality (for both players) and the sensation of presence in a space (for the long-distance player) are even more important aspects of what is deemed a “successful” immersive experience. Connection between players becomes the site for immersive experience, instead of the solitary journey implied by the production's physical environment.

CONCLUSION: “LEVEL DESIGN IS MORE LIKE THEATRE DESIGN THAN ANYTHING”

We’re experimenting with technology, with wearables, with how you can almost make a theatre *playable*...

(Barrett 2014: talk at “Experience Economy” Remix Summit)

This chapter focused on the *Sleep No More* project between Punchdrunk and MIT Media Lab to consider immersion, gameplay and story in an explicit site of overlap between immersive theatre and computer game forms, but the project is one event in a longer history of interaction between theatre and game for the company. *The Masque of the Red Death* contained gaming aspects explicitly in the Gold-Bug treasure hunt as well as implicitly, with its exploratory/sandbox design and audience invitation being reminiscent of adventure and quest games. Punchdrunk’s later productions continued to open themselves up to readings as games (Green 2013 draws a comparison between Punchdrunk shows and *Myst*) with consequences for theorising how immersion is created, facilitated and maintained throughout performance. The narratology/ludology model offers a way of thinking about the relationship between the immersive potential of theatre and games. It is a relationship that will repay further investigation, and a recent interview with a game designer shows influence going both ways. *Gone Home* is “directly influenced by *Sleep No More*”:

Just as in a Punchdrunk production, players in *Gone Home* are let loose in a beautifully-realised world—in this case, a suburban family home in the mid-1990s—and tasked with discovering its stories and secrets for themselves. And, just as in a Punchdrunk production, players are unable to influence the story, but are instead given a great deal of freedom over how they choose to unearth it. “Level design is more like theatre design than anything,” notes [its designer] Steve Gaynor. “Because when you’re designing a space to be playable, you have to design it in the same way that someone designs a stage, where there could be someone on the balcony, there could be someone up front on the left, or on the right. Especially something like [*The Drowned Man*]. I mean, this entire experience is level design. Lighting directs you to stuff that’s important, there are main thoroughfares, etc. This is a videogame level, period.” (Jakob-Hoff 2014: n.p.)

Punchdrunk's future plans also suggest this trajectory of enquiry might continue:

Barrett and his team are currently looking closely at how they can exploit more explicit game mechanics in future productions. Earlier shows like *The Masque of the Red Death* and *Sleep No More* experimented with puzzle solving and treasure hunts, but Barrett feels these game-like elements disturbed the balance of the show too much. "I think we've learned that one discipline has to be your lead—so with *The Drowned Man*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, it's theatre. We started putting game mechanics into it, putting a square peg into a round hole, and it didn't quite fit. So I think if we were to do a project using game mechanics now, it would be a game primarily.

"Now we're aware of games, and the similarities, and the similar aspirations, we've literally started to break down game mechanics and just take them out." He is interested in how casual games like *Clash of Clans* or *Candy Crush Saga* balance accessibility with a "level of difficulty that stays just attainable. How do you do that theatrically? [...] What I'm fascinated by is: what happens when you level up? What happens when you know that you can only access this room and this one-on-one when you're a level five player?" (Jakob-Hoff 2014: n.p.)

The narrative/ludology model will enable further explorations into the relationship, between gaming mechanics and immersive experience in theatrical performance, that is being hinted at here. Gaming concepts such as "levelling up" and gradually increasing levels of difficulty can potentially facilitate immersion or raise barriers to it. They are evocative of the psychological state of mental immersion or "flow," partly defined by experiencing a positive correlation between a player's sense of challenge and her sense that she has the skills to match it. These aspects are the domain of ludology and might deny immersion to other "players" in a theatrical space, who (for whatever reason) have not reached "level five." The relationship between ludic and narrative elements is not one of straightforward opposition, although the previous quote implies this dynamic. The approaches to structure and forms of gaming in *The Masque of the Red Death*, *Sleep No More* and *The Drowned Man* overlap with theatrical elements. The results could be interpreted as unequal, the elements off-balance: treasure hunters or puzzle solvers jostling with paratelic wanderers who are trying to enjoy a space's atmospheric

worldbuilding, raising barriers to immersion for everyone (in Gordon's terminology: a player's immersion in task becoming detrimental to a spectator's immersion in environment). However, ludology and narrative are not mutually exclusive. As interplaying approaches, the ludo-narrativist approach to immersive theatre proposed here provides a useful and more nuanced consideration of how future productions might be crafted to allow both gaming elements and narrative elements, without throwing themselves out of balance.

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