The Evolution of Narrative and Spectatorial Agential Allocation in Immersive Twenty-First Century Entertainment

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THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE AND SPECTATORIAL AGENTIAL
ALLOCATION IN IMMERSIVE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ENTERTAINMENT

by

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
This project asks how the emergence of mobile technologies has affected the evolution of narrative? Tracing the way cognitive capabilities of Internet Natives have rapidly changed, this project identifies how theatre has reacted to incorporate open narratives produced by the massive shifts in culture and cognitive evolution. A multi-stage breakdown of dramatic narrative throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is presented to evaluate ways in which theatre makers attempt to embrace the trends and needs of Internet Natives within performance. Through a discussion of phenomenological perspectives regarding the allocation of agency in immersive theatre, live action game play, and socially activating multi-platform performance projects, I use the lenses of gaming and play theory to evaluate the potential open narratives establish for creating sustainable social change through interactive performance. Within my research, I analyze the ethical responsibilities of immersive theatre makers such as Punchdrunk and Third Rail Projects through an examination of agential allocation in interactive and immersive performance. Using gaming theory, I analyze live action events such as escape rooms and questing through the work of Boda Borg, Meow Wolf and 5 Wits. Finally, through the lens of play theory, I analyze the socially activating, multi-media open narrative project, World Without Oil. In conversation with Frank Rose’s The Art of Immersion and Jane McGonigal’s Reality is Broken, I argue that narrative has been re-structured in the twenty-first century due to the technological advancement of the Internet and offer possible solutions for
contemporary theatre makers in harnessing the power of co-authored narrative in future immersive and interactive multi-media performance.
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INTRODUCTION

Humans use narrative to experience, navigate, record and respond to the world around them. Through narrative, societies are given a context through which individuals analyze and organize their own lives. Cognitive scientist, Mark Turner, notes in his book, The Literary Mind, “Narrative imagining-story-is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning and of explaining” (4). Turner postulates narrative as the human’s fundamental form of predicting, evaluating and transferring knowledge.

Though the value of narrative has remained perpetually relevant throughout history, the structure of narrative is continuously shaped by technological impetus. While narrative works as a tool to transfer knowledge and navigate meaning making, technological advancements alter the way in which narrative is constructed and delivered, as well as the cognitive way in which narrative is interpreted. The correlative relationship between narrative and technology is directly reflected in the way in which story telling has been substantially inveigled through the integration of the Internet. By identifying intersections between theatre studies, popular media culture, gaming studies, neuroscience, sociology, and cultural studies, this thesis creates a framework for deeper analysis of the material, phenomenological, aesthetic and social dimensions of agency and immersion in twenty-first century theatrical narrative and spectatorship.

This project was born out of my own genuine concern surrounding the lack of contemporary theory application written for the specific benefit of twenty-first century theatre makers in reaching Internet Native spectators. The Internet Native or “digital native” is a term
coined by Marc Prensky in his 2001 book, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*. The term refers specifically to individuals born after the widespread adoption of digital technology (Prensky 4). The Internet Native distinctly refers to individuals who have grown up speaking the digital language of computers, video games, social media and mobile devices. I use the term Internet Native because my argument is based in the way narrative has evolved in direct correlation with the cultural integration of the Internet.

I believe that the role of spectatorial agency in twenty-first century performance can be determined through analyzing the growing complexity of the coalescence between fiction, reality, empathy, imagination, perception and experience within theatrical narratives. I argue that the evolution of narrative in the Internet Age lies in the determination of the spectatorial agential allocation within the varying avenues and aesthetic frameworks of twenty-first century theatrical performance. In this context, I define the spectator as a human instrument through which narrative can transfer knowledge or experience and define agency as any kind of intervention and/or action that can be utilized in order to produce a particular outcome or effect.

Spectatorship can transcend multiple levels of engagement dependent on the agency allocated. Passive spectatorship is found in what I have come to call passive entertainment, where agency is only allocated through viewing and individual, non-expressive meaning making. This sort of spectatorship can be found in passive entertainment, or low engagement activities such as pre-internet television or traditional fourth wall, realistic theatre. Humans use passive entertainment to help calibrate feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities of reality, but instead of aiding in our recovery or balancing our emotions, passive entertainment overcompensates and transforms all of our anxiety into boredom. Overindulgence in passive entertainment has the dangerous potential to lead to depression and isolation. On the other hand, active forms of
spectatorship involving the agential allocation of participation, interaction and play have positive affects on human psychology. Erik M Gregory in his media psychology review, *Understanding Video Game Engagement: Flow and its Application to Interactive Media* studied ESM results to decipher at what points in the day human subjects were most engaged. According to the ESM (Experience Sampling Method) Psychologists’ report that the highest levels of interest and positive moods both during and after an activity occurred when subjects were involved in playing games including sports, board/card games and computer/video games (Gregory 160). Because Internet Natives have been conditioned to partake in multiple forms of active spectatorship from a young age via online gaming and social media, I believe the structure of narrative has been altered to adhere to a direct increase in everyday spectatorial agency allocation.

I argue that the evolution of narrative in the Internet age reflects a cognitive distension in Internet Natives as well as a massive cultural shift surrounding the interconnected nature of the Twenty-First Century. I believe what B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore term “The Experience Economy”, or the massive increase in the retailing of experience as a commodity, forces narrative creators to reevaluate the phenomenological perceptions of artifice and authenticity framing the participant’s experience (4). The challenge for entertainment makers amidst the vastly growing Experience Economy is avoidance of what Adam Alston refers to in his book, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, as “Experience machines”. Alston defines “experience machines” as a form of commoditized escapist experiences that promote passive submission in experienced engagement as opposed to modes of encounter that seek to allocate agential freedoms of exploration, experimentation and authorship in theatrical realities (3). Ultimately I believe the major question theatre and performance makers are forced grapple with in the
twenty-first century experience economy surrounds the struggle in cohesively synthesizing spectatorial agency and narrative.

This thesis sets out to answer this complex question through an analysis of immersive theatrical events that undertake differing approaches, through multi-platform endeavors, in hopes of successfully deciphering the shifting experiences of theatricality in the Internet Age. I will use an analysis of the history of spectatorship in performance and popular entertainment through the theoretical lens of gaming and play theories to articulate the evolution of theatrical narrative in correlation with the cultural impact of the Internet. Through an analysis of immersive theatre, live action gaming experiences and socially activating projects driven by co-authored narrative online, I establish the ways in which Internet Natives have redefined the process of creating and receiving narrative that reconstructs previously established notions of agency, spectatorship and authorship.

My research is focused on theories of gaming and play and functions by applying these philosophical and psychological perspectives to immersive theatrical performance currently being produced in order to evolve the transfer of embodied knowledge through theatrical narratives to meet the needs of a rapidly technologically advancing society. The twenty-first century is proving to be an age where gameplay is advancing as the direct avenue for reacting to and investigating the world. I argue that gaming theories and design, if incorporated properly into theatrical performance through the integration of collaborative play, has the potential to create individual transcendence and widespread social change through an open-ended theatrical narrative. Play theorist, Victor Turner, defines play as a “mood, activity or spontaneous eruption of that is pervasive in nature” (From Ritual to Theatre 124). Turner discusses the social potential of play in his 1983 work, Body, Brain and Culture,
Play can be everywhere and nowhere, imitate anything or be identified with nothing...play is the supreme bricoleur of frail, transient constructions...the wheel of play reveals to us the possibility of changing our goals and therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality. (233-34)

Just as there are different forms of agency, there are multiple forms of play. Richard Schechner observes a powerful form of play he terms, “dark play”, which is play that can be confused or interlaced with reality. According to Schechner, dark play is playing that emphasizes risk, deception and thrill through subverting order, dissolving frames and breaking its own rules with hidden agendas rewarding disruption (*Performance Studies* 119).

I believe that play acts as a laboratory to try on different personas, experiment with different identities and social behaviors in order to uncover inner truths one has not accessed within the limitations of social reality. Established play theorists such as Brian Sutton Smith, Johan Huizinga, Gary Izzo and D.W. Winnicot unify in their belief that play has healing properties that fulfill the human need to activate neurological centers of the brain that promote mental health, stability and happiness. Play therapy cognitive theorists, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, indulge in the same theoretical benefits of play by using it as a tool to enhance social behavior and combat depression through psychology-based practice. Depression is a pessimistic sense of inadequacy that results in a despondent lack of activity. The emotional state of play (including virtual gameplay) promotes an optimistic sense of an individual’s capabilities by negating real-world consequences such as fear of failure through the experience of agential activity.

In this way, play functions as a valuable emotional avenue to create new experiences, transfer embodied knowledge and practice problem solving skills. Play theorist, Brian Sutton-
Smith observes in *The Ambiguity of Play*, “The opposite of play isn’t work. It’s depression” (15). Play fulfills a basic human need to interpret through experience, transferring embodied knowledge that allows players to learn truths about themselves in the real world, realized through theatrically fictitious means. This valuable insight is brought about through utilizing play as a laboratory to experiment with challenges, behaviors, and obstacles in order to create meaningful experience through positive stress, awe and communitas.

Positive stress, or eustress can be defined as a form of stress that produces adrenaline, increases blood flow to control centers of the brain and activates reward circuitry within the brain through a positive state of mind, without negative stress experiences of fear. Awe can be defined as an experience of recognition that an individual is a part of something larger than his or her own scope of reality. In Keltner’s book *Born to be Good*, awe is explained in terms of experience,

> The experience of awe is about finding your place in the larger scheme of things. It is about quieting the press of self-interest. It is about folding into social collectives. It is about feeling reverential towards participating in some expansive process that unites us all and that enables our life’s endeavors. (268)

Finally, communitas is a term coined by Victor Turner that will be frequently used throughout this thesis and is briefly defined as the spirit of community. Communitas is a powerful sense of social connection that combines shared experience with empathetic engagement. In this thesis, I will argue that Internet Natives have found ways to establish meaningful communitas through online mediums that can lead to meaningful real-world social change. My work advocates for new waves of agency and play in twenty-first century immersive theatrical events by focusing on transcendence, or the act of utilizing strengths to forge
connections to the larger universe and provide meaning for ourselves within it. Transcendence can be defined as a moment of clarity or transportation to another plane of thinking or being to create a deeper understanding of the self and others. This thesis hopes to build a framework for determining how agency can be cohesively embedded within theatrical narrative in order to impact society and individuals in sustainable ways that speak to future generations.

Throughout the thesis, I will be in conversation with three main scholars in discussing their specific contributions to the fields of theatre, gaming and popular media culture. As immersive theatrical events are evolving into an amalgamation of these three fields of study, bringing these distinct scholars in conversation with one another will concede a redefining of narrative in the twenty-first century through an integration of these fields. Campbell Edinborough’s book, *Theatrical Reality*, serves as an exploration of the connected nature of dramaturgy, scenography and performance in theatrical practice. Campbell Edinborough asks how makers must theoretically reconsider the way in which performers, spectators, and spaces come together to establish theatrical realities. Edinborough is a lecturer in Drama in the School of Drama, Music and Screen at the University of Hull. The second scholar I will be in conversation with is digital anthropologist, Frank Rose, and specifically his book, *The Art of Immersion*. Rose is a senior fellow at Columbia University School of the Arts, executive team member of Columbia’s Digital Storytelling Lab and lecturer of strategic storytelling. In *The Art of Immersion*, Rose traces the immersive expansion of narrative in popular entertainment and identifies the problematic paradox between agential allocation and narrative creation. Through his online websites, artofimmersion.com and deepmedia.com, Rose interviews entertainment makers in popular media culture in regards to creating immersive work. Finally, Jane McGonigal is a world renown game designer with a PHD in Performance Studies from UC Berkley. She
believes that gaming is a humanitarian tool that has potential for ground breaking social change. McGonigal’s book, *Reality is Broken*, acts as an invitation for a catalyst to occur in the integration of gaming theoretical techniques utilized through narrative to invigorate potential social change. McGonigal argues that gaming teaches individuals about their true selves by encouraging them to identify what motivates them and discover their core strengths by utilizing the transfer of knowledge to accomplish collaborative tasks. McGonigal believes these virtual experiences allow individuals to experiment with world-changing ways of thinking, organizing, and acting.

Like gaming, theatrical narratives have the potential to be used to fix real world problems through encouraging experimentation in a laboratory of play. McGonigal notes,

> Game developers know better than anyone else how to inspire extreme effort and reward hard work. They know how to facilitate cooperation and collaboration at previously unimaginied scaled. And they are continuously innovating new ways to motivate players to stick with harder challenges, for longer, and in much bigger groups. These crucial 21st century skills can help all of us find new ways to make a deep and lasting impact on the world around us. (13)

This is a necessary study significant to the field of theatre because contemporary technology has altered the way human beings exchange knowledge, interact, and process information. McGonigal see’s this cultural shift and uses game design to adapt video games in order to support the needs of users through integrating evolved forms of user-authored narratives. McGonigal believes, “Game design isn’t just a technological craft, it’s a 21st century way of thinking and leading. And game-play isn’t just a pastime. It’s a 21st century way of working together to accomplish real change” (13).
Immersive entertainment, like gaming, can be used as a “primary platform” for enabling the future of our society in solving real world problems that ultimately better the world. This can be done through transforming the entertainment space (live or online) into an interactive environment full of challenges and opportunities to alter the narrative and make an individual mark on the event itself. I believe twenty-first century narrative has evolved to integrate these critical aspects of play and gaming as a necessary way to meet the needs of Internet Natives by utilizing the structure of virtual realities as an avenue for authorship experimentation.

McGonigal and Rose’s combined scholarship proves that the spectators/players of today crave challenge, excel when faced with obstacles and desire social connection through the virtual realities they inhabit. I argue that the contemporary entertainment’s challenge is to find a cohesive balance between narrative and spectatorial agency within the context of interactive and immersive performance. Immersive, theatrical, co-authored narrative has the potential to create social change by equally stimulating our sense of empathy, our human desire for an active choice, personal adequacy and social responsibility. By taking advantage of the infinite possibilities of gaming and play through the reconstruction of narrative, twenty-first century performance projects are giving audiences the opportunities to discover, achieve, and conquer their own quest constructed within the alternate reality of the open narrative itself.

In the first chapter of this thesis, *The History of Spectatorial Theory and Agential Narrative Evolution in Theatrical Realities*, I construct a brief overview of the evolution of agential freedom in theatrical spectatorship. Through analysis of the work of Brecht, Artaud, Boal and Growtowski, I map out the ways in which agency has been experimented with in theatrical performance as well as identify the success achieved and challenges faced in blending narrative with spectatorial agency in discussion with Roland Barthes, *The Death of The Author*
and Jacques Rancier’s *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Throughout the analysis, I argue that spectatorial agency and narrative have historically been at odds with one another, when in fact the two must go hand in hand. By setting up the spectrum in which spectatorial agency has stretched throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, this initial chapter establishes a baseline for agential perspectives within immersive entertainment in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 2, *Twenty-first Century Cultural Entertainment Shifts in Response to Internet Native Cognitive Evolution*, I argue that technological advancement and cultural shifts impact the structure of narrative. I also advocate that agential allocation through multi-media in the twenty-first century has altered the role of the spectator within narrative. Through an analysis of Frank Rose’s *The Art of Immersion*, this chapter serves to walk the reader through a brief history of immersion and interactivity in popular media culture, while framing the evolution of narrative through the cultural and cognitive shifts affected by the integration of the Internet. By establishing a basis for which agential allocation has shifted in popular media culture of the twenty-first century, this chapter serves to distinguish the framework of internet-evolved narrative that storytellers are currently grappling with in theatrical and gaming mediums.

In chapter 3, *The Ethical Implications of Spectatorial Agency Within the Dramaturgy of Intimacy*, I explore the range of agential allocation in contemporary theatrical practices through the analysis of three immersive theatre case studies. Through the lens of liminality, communitas and play, I determine the successful and unsuccessful approaches to the incorporation of interactivity, intimacy and community in immersive theatrical projects. The case studies analyzed through this chapter reflect the work of Fureza Brueta, Punchdrunk and Third Rail Projects, in conversation with Campbell Edinborough’s *Theatrical Reality*. When narrative
becomes experiential, phenomenological perceptions become valuable resources through which deep analysis may be conducted. By describing personal recounts of experiencing the immersive pieces of *Sleep No More*, *Fureza Brueta* and *Sweet and Lucky*, I make an argument for a re-evaluation of scripted intimacy, feigned agency and dark play in immersive theatre projects.

Chapter 4 is entitled *Digital and Gaming Agency in Live-Action Immersive and Interactive Events*. Through the lens of gaming theory, I analyze four live-action, immersive, gaming experiences in which spectatorial agency is allocated similar to that of a video game. In exploring case studies on Enigma Escape Rooms, Boda Borg, 5 Wits and Meowolf, I argue that gaming techniques such as the establishment of fiero, eustress and flow encourage participants to author their own experience. By combining the scholarship of Frank Rose and Jane McGonigal, this chapter identifies key gaming components that function in live theatrical spaces to address the specific needs of the Internet Native.

In Chapter 5, *Inventing the Future Through Narrative- Awe and Authorship in Socially Activating Alternate Reality Projects*, I set out to answer the question of cohesively blending narrative and audience authorship. Through an analysis of McGonigal’s *Reality is Broken*, I focus specifically on two socially activating virtual projects that establish audience-authored narrative. Through a case study of *World Without Oil* and *Zed.to*, I argue that audience authored narrative has the most potential for social change within an Internet-immersed culture. Within the analysis of authorship and awe, I contend that stable and lasting communitas is generated via online mediums through the utilization of audience authorship.

The purpose of this project is to identify the ways in which the Internet has redefined spectatorship and narrative in the twenty-first century in hopes of offering incite for entertainment makers who wish to create meaningful experiences for Internet Natives in the
future. I argue that the evolution of narrative and spectatorial agency go hand in hand, and must be evaluated collaboratively to achieve success in theatrical media mediums of the twenty-first century. Ultimately I believe that the twenty-first century narrative acts as collaboration in action, collaboration as performance focused in shared concentration, synchronized engagement and reciprocal rewards. To achieve success in today’s entertainment industry, I argue that makers must allocate agential possibilities in support of this new form of interactive narrative.
CHAPTER I:
The History of Spectatorial Theory and Agential Narrative Evolution in Theatrical Realities

Throughout this chapter, I discuss both the relationship between the spectator and the performance/performers as well as the relationship between the spectator and the theatre maker. This discussion is in conversation with Campbell Edinborough’s work, *Theatrical Reality*. Edinborough notices an obvious, but fairly unanalyzed paradox in the relationship between a spectator and the theatrical space they inhabit when engaged in a performance: “The way in which the bodily experience of affect enables the process of signification within theatre is shown in the almost paradoxical relationship between absence and presence in the spectator’s experience of theatrical space” (53). This cohabitation of absence and presence is defined as the forces at work between a spectator’s imagination and reality as well as the dialectic pull between passive observation, active intellectual engagement, a visceral calling to actively participate and the agential allocation of having one’s own individual voice heard.

In reading this chapter, it is crucial to keep in mind the idea of an audience as an intimate community made up of individuals who have their own voice and hold their own ideas and interpretation of the work they see or participate in. Reconsidering the idea of the audience as a passive group collective will be essential to analyzing spectatorial agency in the twenty-first century. Instead, I will focus my analysis through the lens of Herbert Blau’s definition of an audience as, “not so much as a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire” (25). The impermanence of the art form of theatre as a live event is also a concept to keep in mind as we move forward through this analysis of agency in the digital age. The current hype
surrounding growing immersive events can be traced directly to a desire for unique and exclusive live experience that specifically speaks to the presence of an individual in collective conversation with the performers and performance. Richard Schechner mentions this unparalleled relationship in analysis of performing rituals. He states, “Such performances do not have an independent life: they are related to the audience that hears them, the spectators who see them. The force of the performance is in the very specific relationship between performers and those for whom the performance exists” (*Between Theatre* 5-6).

In the following section I will walk the reader through a brief history of theatre makers and theorists wrestling with identifying the role of spectatorial agency in their theatrical work. The argument surrounding the concept of agency focuses on the opposing sides of the paradox Edinborough establishes. There are theatre makers who believe wholly that spectators merely observing a performance are in no way passive as these makers believe spectators are actively, intellectually engaged in the classic fourth wall realism-style I call traditional theatre. However, others maintain an opposing ideology, working to reject passivity and encourage an integral call to action, debate and participation. This chapter in no way makes the argument that one level of engagement in a theatrical reality is more substantial than another, only that the massive cultural shifts and cognitive evolution of the twenty-first century requires a deeper analysis of spectatorial agency in order to establish meaningful and affective entertainment practice for Internet Natives.

The idea of passive spectatorship as an innately active form of intellectual engagement, can be proven through Susan Stuart’s concept of co-agency. Stuart frames the body as part of a networked perceptual field that extends beyond our bodies physical reach, showing that we are
continuously embedded with an intentional co-agency as we consciously think and work through everything we experience,

The enkinaesthetic dialogue is rarely, if ever, simply two, though with the influence that language has had on our thinking we tend to characterize it in this way…This is part of a universal dialogue that consists of an innumerable web of relations of community and reciprocity of sensing and experiencing agents and things existing in their felt, intentional co-agency. It is this which co-constitutes conscious relations and the experientially recursive temporal dynamics of the non-symbolic, non-representationally-based, pre-conceptual experiential horizon for all agents. (5)

The enkinaesthetic dialogue Stuart mentions refers to understanding the exchange of language as the processing of abstract and symbolic forms between rational and cognitive thought. The question is not whether what has come to be called passive spectatorship actually feeds off of this enkinaesthetic dialogue, it is whether this concept of co-agency can be enough to engage future generations of theatre goers, such as Internet Natives. Edinborough agrees that a primary issue arising in contemporary theatrical practice is forgetting that the dialogue, even if it is internal and enkinaesthetic, is actively a fundamental part of the performance itself: “Acting, directing, writing, scenography and dramaturgy should not be understood as processes that exist discretely, coming together in order to establish theatrical space. These practices must be considered as fundamentally shaped by the contexts in which they are met by the spectator” (159).

In theorizing and creating performance, it is important to remember that the reactions evoked within each and every individual making up the audience will ultimately dictate a
performance’s success or failure. In the discussion of spectatorial agency, I believe Edward Soja’s argument in his book, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, best represents the power theatrical makers and theorists have struggled to achieve in granting their audiences the level of agency they deserve and desire, “We are first and always historical-social-spatial beings, actively participating individually and collectively in the construction/production - the ‘becoming’ of histories, geographies, societies” (64).

The paradoxical struggle surrounding spectatorial agency within theatrical narrative is by no means a newly emerging concept. Artists, directors and theorists have debated ethical issues of agency throughout the history of theatrical endeavors. An analysis of the spectator is necessary in understanding the ultimate effectiveness of the creative work being done. As Edinborough suggests, If the theatre maker is to assess the success of his work, he must be able to judge its impact on an audience. Without having a sense of the different ways in which the spectator is being invited to deploy his emotions and imagination when watching or participating in performance, the theatre maker will remain incapable of judging his work’s effectiveness. (3)

Before the rise of 19th century naturalism, theatrical spectators had the agency to engage in physically and vocally respond within the context of a live performance. However what we have come to call traditional theatre, or fourth wall realism, changed this rowdy forum of entertainment into a mirror-like reflection of reality. This mirror image was not to be touched or spoken to, so audience etiquette was revised to reflect the needs of performers. The fourth wall became a barrier, separating performer from spectator in performance. Even so, Edinborough argues that in this kind of traditional theatre: “Although the spectators sit behind an imagined
fourth wall, separated from the world of the play, they do not sit passively. They are tasked with constructing the play’s meaning through engaging with the polyphony of realities embodied within the actor’s movements onstage” (69. Though I believe this argument held weight in past cultural perspectives, I argue that passive spectatorship in traditional theatre does not allocate the necessary tools Internet Natives are trained to use in order to construct meaning or critically engage. Edinborough continues, “The actor’s naturalism allows the spectator to share in the actor’s feelings, so that he might absent himself imaginatively from his own bodily experience in order to occupy the theatrical reality presented onstage” (71).

Brecht, Artaud, Boal and Growtowski went on to prove, suspended disbelief through passive spectatorship without an active spectatorial voice actually serves in separating the social relationship between actor and spectator and weakening the connection in which bodily empathy can be felt and embodied knowledge can be transferred. Edinborough argues that naturalism relies on the spectator’s consent (87), however I argue that consent can only truly be given when the spectatorial agency has been allocated to level the power dynamics of a theatrical space. The level of agency allotted is based on audiences’ demands or needs; these demands are often paralleled by the cultural and political dynamic of the society in question. Edinborough acknowledges this parallel through a comparison of the cultural shift towards naturalistic theatre in correspondence with a later shift to alienation and forum theatres: “Just as Stanislavski and Appia responded to the articulation of subjective experience in the late nineteenth century, so the work of Brecht and Growtowski can be understood as responses to the twentieth century’s critical reappraisal of enlightenment thinking” (108).

Bertolt Brecht is questioned the passivity of spectators by critically engaging audiences through alienation, episodic action and direct address, in order to bring social conditions to the
surface of critique through a distancing effect he coined, verfremdungseffekt. Annoyed with the passivity of his Bourgeois audience, he notes, “They scarcely communicate with each other, their relations are those of a lot of sleepers…True, their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look at the stage as if in a trance…” (Brecht On Theatre 187).

Brecht believed that, “this audience hangs their brains up in the cloakroom along with its coat” (Bertolt Brecht Journals, 27). Brecht observed disconnection between the lack of intellectual engagement of passive spectators and his own desire for the theatre to evoke critical analysis and empathetic engagement. In addressing this concern, Brecht began to experiment with alienation, or estrangement techniques in his work to separate the spectator from indulging in identifying directly with the character. By emotionally detaching from the characters, Brecht’s audience was encouraged to intellectually empathize with the circumstances and dilemmas surrounding the dramatic plot, enabling deep analysis that could be drawn upon in real life dilemmas. Using alienation, Brecht asked his audiences to consider the constructed nature of reality itself alongside the imagined reality of the story being told on stage to question the social structures in place. Brecht observed,

We need a type of theatre which not only relates to the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular field of relations in which action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself…The field has to be defined in historically relevant terms. In other words we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them
different; so that they all look more or less like our own… (*Brecht On Theatre* 190)

The purpose of critical theory according to Frankfurt School philosopher, Max Horkheimer is, “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (244). This is exactly what Brecht attempted to do through alienation: free spectators from theatrical practices that force them into passivity, such as the fourth wall and the invitation to suspend disbelief as an escape from reality. Instead of inviting spectators into an imagined environment, Brecht asked spectators to realize the paradoxical relationship between stage and reality, between performer and spectator. By reminding the audience that reality is not paused when theatre entertainment begins, he hoped to inspire critical analysis of the plays performed in conjunction with a constant reminder of the reality inhabited so as to incite intellectual thought and stimulate social change. Edinborough comments on this parallel between the thoughts of Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School and Brecht,

> Just as the critical method of the Frankfurt School sought to apply dialectical thinking to the realities of lived experience in the early twentieth century, Brecht believed that a dialectical engagement with the realities of lived experience in the theatre could lead the spectator to a moment of dissonance that awakened him to the social and historical structures responsible for injustice or oppression. (97)

Brecht believed that, “Criticism is stimulated with reference to the way that empathy is generated” (*Brecht On Theatre* 81). In this way, Brecht’s alienation factors are linked to his hope for a highly cognitively stimulated, participatory audience inspired to debate over his work instead of returning to reality from a theatrical realm in a state of cathartic subjugation. In many ways, I support Brecht’s argument against the passivity he saw controlling his audience and his
belief that art should not simply reflect reality, but be utilized as a tool to shape it. Establishing theatre as a forum for the exchange and conceptualization of critical aesthetics and political debate forces spectators to take a step further in the ownership of the reality they enter the theatre with and the reality they return to.

Antonin Artaud took this refusal of audience passivity and deconstruction of the traditional theatrical devices a step further in his *Theatre of Cruelty*. He believed that focusing on the psychological within realism meant ignoring or pacifying the subconscious. Artaud argued that what lay dormant in the subconscious is the root of community aggravation or political disconnect, and as such he set out to awaken the subconscious through his work to promote social change through theatre. By breaking the barriers of traditional audience seating and “assaulting the senses” from all sides, Artaud hoped to give spectators a direct avenue to connect with one another in order to purge all their society had forced them to repress in their subconscious. Artaud believed the visceral experience could awake a community and provide an outlet for the emotional repercussions of oppression. Artaud states, “I wanted a theatre that would be like a shock treatment, galvanize, shock people into feeling” (qtd. in Shafer 64).

However Artaud’s difficulties with this visceral form of theatre were subjugated by the way in which audiences had already been programmed to react and interact to traditional live theatre of the past. As Nicholas Ridout suggests in his book, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, “The impact of naturalism on the spectator’s engagement with character and action makes it difficult for the spectator to feel comfortable when the dominant mode of spectatorship is interrupted” (71).

Grotowski also experimented with audience participation as a way of breaking down the separation between spectator and performer as he believed the fixed roles and paradoxical
distance between the two actually limited the human connection or communion created in the theatrical space. We see these first attempts at participatory agency through his giving of group roles to audience members in his production of *Faust* in 1960, where audience members were invited to sit as guests at Faust’s table and become a part of the narrative within the theatrical reality. He took this a step further in *Kordian* in 1962, where he situated audience members into the roles of psychiatric patients within a mental hospital, as well as in the memorable 1962 *Akropolis* where audiences were forced into the role of gas chamber survivors. Edinborough notes that Grotowski was one of the “first practitioners to theorize theatre as a means of constructing experiences of encounter between actor and spectator” in attempts to create a forum for shared experience (106). In his attempt to create this kind of untraditional relationship between audience and actor, Grotowski ultimately questioned the viability of the very nature of traditional, fourth wall constricting performance. In his writing, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski insists,

> The narration of the theatre is found neither in the narration of the event, nor in the discussion of a hypothesis with an audience nor in the representation of life as it appears from outside, nor even in a vision, but that the theatre is an act carried our here and now in the act of organisms, in front of other men, when we discover theatrical reality is instantaneous, not an illustration of life but something linked to life only by analogy. (86)

Grotowski found that participation within the dominant mode of theatrical spectatorship was not what he had hoped for. He found that forcing spectators to respond or actively engage in participation only created more distance in the connection between actor and spectator. In Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford’s *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, the editors quote
Grotowski’s frustration with spectator participation in scripted narrative: “One can stimulate external phenomena and make the audience sing with the actors- often out of tune, and sometimes feeling a certain rhythm as when they are listening to jazz- but it’s not a deep, authentic mode of participation. It’s only the participation of the common mask” (qtd. in Schechner and Wolford 49).

Grotowski ultimately deduced audience participation to be too coercive and manipulative in nature, leading him to develop the observer-less “Paratheatre”. By taking the spectator completely out of the equation, Grotowski hoped to avoid the risk of forced participation as an approach that “risked blocking and further inhibiting them” (De Marinis and Dwyer 106). Though it is understandably impossible to separate Grotowski entirely from his spiritual and philosophical concerns about the capacity of theatre as a tool for inciting activism, this theatrical innovator was attempting to create theatre as forum of mutual exchange, both intellectually and physically. Paratheatre was Grotowski’s way of returning to “the human core of performance through abandoning aesthetic relationships that he believed had become calcified within the conventions of theatre” (Edinborough 109). Through Paratheatre, Grotowski attempted to internalize the theatrical experience for participants to protect such experience from becoming an act of consumption as opposed to authentic, empathetic, shared response. In doing this, he discovered an imperative tension between scripted narrative and ontological engagement with theatrical experience. The paratheatrical work created by Grotowski and his company refused the idea of spectatorial passivity and instead demanded participant engagement within a larger frame of his or her own reality, breaking the paradoxical dilemma separating audiences and spectators and encouraging equal agency to be allocated for all.
The intervention of environmental theatre in 1960 influenced Augusto Boal’s own discomfort with the role of the spectator. Boal argues in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, “Spectator is a bad word. The spectator is less than a man and it is necessary to humanize him, to restore to him his capacity for action in all its fullness. He too must be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors, who must also be spectators” (154-55).

Boal emphasized a critical need for audience involvement and an avoidance of isolation between any one group (performers and spectators). Coining the term “Spect-actor”, Boal not only encouraged but expected spectators to perform in a multitude of possible exercises or games purposed to bring a spectator to action. In Boal’s forum theatre, audience members were encouraged to stop the story being told at any point where they see oppression and offer up alternative solutions with viable outcomes. With Invisible Theatre, Boal took the art of theatre to the new, unexpected avenues, creating performances in disguise that transformed the everyday, unsuspecting public into “spect-actors”. In Legislative Theatre, Boal offered a voice to citizens in order to initiate dialogue between political leaders and the people who elect them. This form of theatre hoped to ensure that equal groups were not disregarded due to political power dynamics. Though also known for techniques that have proven successful in drama therapy, Boal firmly stood for a branch of theatre that stimulates critical thought, motivates dialogue, and most importantly activates citizens to use their voice in the civic reality of their own political climate. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal admits, “Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is a rehearsal for the revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!” (122).

From the previous makers work, it becomes clear that theatrical experimentation with spectatorial agency is in no way an innovative concept. In fact in 1968, French artist/activist
Jean-Jaques Lebel called for the termination of any kind of passive spectatorial role associated with entertainment consumer culture:

No more theatre or expensive spectacles for passive audience of consumers- but a truly collective enterprise in political and artistic research. A new type of relationship between the doers and the lookers is being experimented with. Perhaps we will succeed in helping hundreds of thousands more to let go of their alienated social roles, to be free of mental Stalinism, to become the political and creative doers they dream of being. (283)

The theorizing of and about spectatorial agency has trickled through scholars and theatre makers throughout history, fascinated with the ethical implications of allocating spectatorial agency and the ultimate effect different levels of agency have had on the theatrical art form. However, a new strand of theatre makers wrestling with the allocation of agency emerged in the early twenty-first century, giving rise to a popular, innovative kind of theatrical event labeled immersive. Immersive theatre is a theatrical style that attempts to immerse the audience within the world of the play by stimulating the five senses of each individual participant within a constructed theatrical reality. The rise in popularity of this type of theatrical practice has created a movement towards activated audience behavior and disruption of the traditional structure of narrative.

I believe this current movement toward activated audience behavior through immersive events is far more than a nostalgic reach to the past immediacy of ritual or interactivity of rioting audiences. Theorists and makers obsession with spectatorial agency stems from a mutual frustration concerning the paradox continually separating audience and performer. This paradox is clearly shown through the use of the fourth wall, darkened audience seating, traditional
enforced etiquette and expectation of suspended disbelief, however the paradox does not fade simply when these elements are extradited. The question of spectatorial agency is truly the paradox in of itself. Regardless of narrative, set structure, environment or interaction, makers and performers traditionally hold more influence than the spectator/participant. The current tensions between spectator and performer that evolving forms of immersive artistic practices are attempting to work out stem from an outcry directly from the Internet Native spectator. I contend that Internet Natives’ habitual agential allocation online has transformed the traditional pacification of spectators in theatrical spaces and forced entertainment makers to reevaluate the structure of narrative in collaboration with the collective intelligence of the Internet. I argue that contemporary movements toward immersive and interactive events are a reflection of the cognitive evolution of Internet Natives and the way in which the media culture surrounding moment-to-moment functionality has altered the spectator’s expectation of agency allocation within the structure of narrative.

I argue the only way to truly break down this problematic paradox between audience and performer/performance is to truly enable the voice of the spectator/participant in regards to the narrative constructed. The agency Internet Natives call for is not only the allocation of choice in performance, but an active voice with impacting potential that can directly influence the narrative itself. If the evaluation of artistic work is truly grounded in the interpretation of the audience who evaluates it, then creators must value the individual reactions of spectators as well as their insight into the piece/narrative itself. These ideas have been numerously brought up in literary scholarship. Stanley Fish argues in his book, *Is there a text in this class?*, that the ultimate product of a text is actually found within the, “shared interpretive strategies” of the community who interprets it as opposed to qualities intrinsic to the specific text (332).
The twenty-first century theatrical spectator can be analogously compared to a reader in the context of Roland Barthes’s 1968 essay, *The Death of the Author*. Barthes argues that critics must stop analyzing literature by what is known of the author and begin focusing on individual reader’s interpretation of the text as well as the broader “intertextual” network grounded in a reader’s experience, passions, interests and overall understanding of the text within the meaning they find within it. By transposing this work from its application to the reader to spectators engaging in a theatrical event, the importance of the allocation of spectatorial agency becomes clear. To truly understand a work, and more importantly what is being done through a work, one needs a frame of reference for not only the experience of a collective audience, but for the individual meaning making brought to the work by each spectator/participant. In this way, to truly take advantage of what each individual brings to a particular piece, I argue that Internet Natives require agential allocation to alter the narrative or influence the dramaturgy of a piece in order to critically engage. This kind of agency allows a spectator to contribute to the piece in progress, while executing his or her own framework of meaning making through activated involvement. Considering this level of agency in the context of creating communitas allows spectator/participant to not only indulge in their own interpretation of a story, but also offers a platform for collaborative interaction and intellectual transfer within an assembled community to create a co-authored experience. By taking advantage of the interconnectivity of the Internet and giving individual users agential impact on the stories being told, co-authored narrative has the potential to create lasting communitas in virtual spaces. Granting this level of agency in narrative entertainment combines the efforts of the historical theatre influences we have previously discussed and forges an amalgamation of antecedent experimentation with the heightened level
of spectatorial agency allocation animated by Internet Natives, creating the age of audience
authorship.

Edinborough comments on the tension fluctuating between precedent theatrical formulas
in *Theatrical Reality*:

The effect of the tension between naturalism and alienation within this kind of
immersive or paratheatrical performance establishes a unique form of
theatricality…the participant is invited to experience a kind of self-alienation, in
which his own subjectivity is decentred by the ways in which the theatre space
encourages him to occupy his social and spatial relationships. The participant is
immersed in a seemingly natural exchange with the performer and his peers:
however, the fact that he is also forced to assess this interaction as an aesthetic or
symbolic practice forces him to question the dialectical nature of his experience as
both an embodied reality and an aesthetic construct. (118)

The key to unlocking this age of altering authorship will be found in balancing naturalistic
and alienating modes of theatre to produce participation and interaction liberated from
manipulative and oppressive means. Joining aspects of naturalistic and alienating theatre
practices collides at one specific dialectical concept- the power of catharsis. Edinborough notes
the opposing differences of these practices: “While naturalistic theatre seeks to explore the social
benefits of catharsis, the theatre of alienation seeks to use the participants’ recognition of
theatrical space as something simultaneously real and imagined to interrogate social problems
and imagine possible solutions” (95).

Naturalists believed invoking catharsis in collective audiences could engage spectator’s
empathy in a transcending and redemptive process of purging emotion through self-reflection
mirrored within the characters of the performance. This is a key component of Yi-Fu Tuan’s argument in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Tuan proposes that the process of utilizing human spatial knowledge is rooted in our ability to empathize with one another, including those we watch perform. Through empathizing, we are able to project our embodied experiences into the bodies of other individuals creating exchange of embodied knowledge. Tuan argues that this spatial knowledge actually leads to the development of mythical space (85-100).

Brecht, however, saw catharsis as an unethical tool used for pacification and manipulation of emotions. He feared catharsis purged all emotion out of the spectator, leaving nothing to motivate individuals to create real social change after leaving the theatre. Through alienation techniques, Brecht chose to rip catharsis out of the paradigm of theatrical spectatorship in an attempt to promote critical thinking about reality as opposed to emotional engagement of transcendence in fleeting fictional realities. Using alienation, Brecht asked his audiences to consider the constructed nature of reality itself, including the imagined reality of the story being told on stage to question the social structures in place. Edinborough describes the spectator’s experience of communitas in alienated theatrical environments, “The spectator’s experience of communitas within the theatre of alienation is socially galvanizing rather than cathartic” (96).

I argue that in fact it is the joining of these two seemingly opposing views that is currently finding success in creating lasting online communitas through interactive narratives and performances in the twenty-first century. Victor Turner defines communitas in his 1982 book, *From ritual to theatre: the human seriousness of play*, as “the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses” (*From Ritual* 44). Internet Natives are proving that to create stable and lasting communitas in a theatrical space (online or physically live), both
critical and emotional engagement are equally necessary and must be equally valued. Catharsis can transcend the limitations of agency a spectator is allocated in traditional performance through the barrier of the fourth wall. One question this study intends to show is whether this powerful tool can be used to not only expand internal emotional and empathetic responses, but simultaneously amplify an individual’s critical engagement in the work. I argue that historical theatre directors and makers have attempted to answer these questions by inciting an emotionally embedded form of analytical and critical engagement that I have come to coin, Critical Catharsis.

Critical catharsis combines the emotionally-charged communitas established in naturalistic approaches to theatrical performance (which successfully evoke visceral emotional responses from the spectator), with the galvanizing communitas found in alienation techniques that awakens spectators to the reality of his or her social responsibility through exposing the artifice of the work. I suggest that the combination of these two productive practices result in an awakening of critical consciousness and civic duty embedded in the powerful empathetic responses of visceral individual emotions. However, critical catharsis is being proven more effective in interactive, cross-platform infused narratives in the twenty-first century as the allocation of spectatorial agency expands in the form of immersive theatre, live action gaming events and multi-media, audience co-authored projects. The reason interactivity enhances the affects of critical catharsis can be found in phenomenologist Edmund Husserl’s argument that we can only know what we experience (186). Though Naturalism brought a mirror up to our reality and Epic theatre positioned itself as a microcosm for exploring possibilities of sustaining social change; neither theatrical approach allowed spectators to live the experience of the narrative for themselves. This requires an explicit contract of equality and trust between maker, performer and spectator and a mutual respect based in the spectator’s autonomy.
Edinborough agrees, “For the spectator to be empowered to take responsibility inside and outside the theatre, the theatre maker must value his agency and integrity” (97). By valuing the agency of the spectator as well as the embodied experience they undertake, makers can ensure knowledge transfer through a participant’s agential allocation of decision making and problem solving within the narrative embedded in a theatrical space. Phenomenological philosopher, Merleau-Ponty argued in his book, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, that a human’s entire experience of the world is actually embodied. Merleau-Ponty believed this embodiment literally frames every thought or perception a human being has because, “the theory of the body is already a theory of perception” (223). The theatre has the ability to heighten spectator engagement by enhancing conceptualization of this mythical space through the open invitation to suspend one’s disbelief. The value of the embodied experience is further argued by Susan A. J. Stuart in her contribution to the International Journal of Machine Consciousness, *Enkinaesthsia: The Fundamental Challenge*:

*Embodiment may be a nomological condition for agency, but it is the agent’s capacity to spill over into the bodily experience of others and vice versa, which establishes the community and reciprocity of felt co-engagement, and it is this felt co-engagement which is fleshed out in the expressive, meaningful and cognitive bodily dynamics which are, in themselves, the necessary precursor to effective affective social, cultural and linguistic communication in the human agent.* (146)

This valued agency can alleviate the dialectic and paradoxical tension between audience and performance, freeing a voice that has been formerly rendered passive while illuminating possibilities for critical engagement coupled with cathartic transcendence. As Edinborough notes, “It is through the development of an embodied and experiential self-image that we
develop means to conceptualize our position in the world…” (19). Thus, engaging participants in embodied experiences of critical catharsis through narrative in an interconnected, Internet-driven world is entirely hinged on the amount of spectatorial agency allocated. Edinborough goes on to describe immersive theatrical events as attempts to establish, “theatrical experience not as an object but as a mode of phenomenal engagement where the spectator becomes both the subject and maker of meaning within the work. In this way, the theatrical reality associated with such performances can be understood to actively provide a forum for self-reflection rather than a mode of representation” (118).

However, if performances continue to withhold spectatorial agency in hopes of manipulative coercion, I believe the habitual social structure of Internet Natives will rise against these norms. Marvin Carlson addresses this concern in Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance, “A frustrated reader may simply put the book aside and turn to something else. The theatre, as a social event, encourages more active resistance” (85-6). This active resistance is actually what immersive entertainment makers are currently attempting to incite. Establishing a theatrical context for spectators/participants to investigate the boundaries of reality and narrative in uncanny environments requires a value of that participant’s individual investigation, collective intelligence and embodied experience. Yi-Fu Tuan’s theories contend that embodied experience within a theatrical reality gives context to the weight and impact of sensation and experience within reality (67). Live immersive theatrical events are using this power of embodied knowledge to test the response of such agency, however this new form of theatre still struggles to designate control of narrative without limiting spectatorial agency in order to privilege the input of makers and performers. However, I believe that critical catharsis can prove a truly useful tool in maintaining the integrity of a narrative through agential co-authorship.
I argue that traditional fourth-wall spectatorship has become a passive activity in the twenty-first century as the Internet has created an interconnected manifold of multifarious avenues, luring attention to simultaneously focus on multiple modes of engagement. An Internet Native’s focus has been primed to navigate multiple narrative mediums simultaneously, most of which utilize interactive or collaborative components. Internet Natives have been culturally trained and socially obligated to maintain multiple streams of focus through mediated devices intersecting with our everyday live reality. The way technology has reconstructed everyday interaction has directly impacted the evolution of narrative and spectatorial agency within theatre and popular entertainment practices.

I contend that the technological advancements of our time have changed the way in which Internet Natives’ cognitively engage and connect in theatrical narrative practices. Even 20 years ago, what is now called passive spectatorship would have actually been considered actively engaged spectatorship— the sight/emotional response/connection, focus and critical concentration of the spectator would have been invested in the production and story without any dependence on undetermined, innovative forms of agency or active participation. This is because audiences were critically concerned without the means of active participation, exploratory functionality of spaces or agential voice due to the linear connection of physically seeing and cognitively attributing meaning to what is seen. However, technological advancements have led Internet Natives into a realm of evolved cognition in which traditional spectatorship can be argued as passive engagement. I argue that what was considered critical spectatorship becomes passive spectatorship when it falls on the unaffected conscious of Internet Natives trained to focus on multiple media avenues at once and programmed to actively contribute individual meaning making within each available platform. Through this multi-focused perspective, the act of
receiving narrative becomes passive, unless activated by the allocation of agency. This is muddled intersection of ideologies creating tension between the cognitive evolution of Internet Natives and traditional theatrical practices. The complaints of phones out in theatre spaces and chit-chat amongst audience members reflect a cultural and generational shift in habit of communication and interaction within entertainment avenues. I argue that accommodating outlets for Internet Natives in theatrical events are necessary to critically and emotionally engage individuals who have been taught to consistently have and use mobile internet devices. The most effective accommodation has been proven to be enhanced agential allocation.

Elizabeth Klaver argues in *Spectatorial Theory in the Age of Media Culture* that watching television and becoming comfortable with constant commercial interruptions has had a sincere impact on the forms of spectatorial theory previously considered in theatrical performance (315). Her claims support the fact that digital technologies have had a profound effect on entertainment and communication industries by bringing about a concurrent intersection of the two; creating interactions and agency of choice that did not previously exist.

This change in technological evolvement and achievement has a direct connect to our attention spans. This cognitive change represents a shift in the function of traditional spectatorship that support my argument for co-authored narrative. In the twenty-first century, Internet Natives are being inherently disciplined with the capacity to be intellectually engaged by a multiplicity of varying focus, at the same time, this change is proving traditional theatrical narrative and spectatorship too linear and resigned to hold their expeditious attention spans. The digital has its own attention span and spectators have adapted to its constant influx and pace, just as narrative must adapt to the cognitive consequences of technological advancement to create a structure more appurtenant to the way the Internet wants to tell stories.
French philosopher, Jacques Ranciere, argues that the concept of narrative in of itself is simply a construct in *The Politics of Aesthetics*:

The notion of 'narrative' locks us into oppositions between the real and artifice where both the positivists and the deconstructionists are lost. It is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction. It is a matter of stating that the fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction. (34-35)

Ranciere points out that the construct of ‘narrative’ is used as a way of ordering and organizing the world, and thus the very idea that narrative is real as an ordering structure locks us into the opposing tension between what is real and what is merely artifice. This constructed binary between true and false, fact and fiction, reality and theatricality hinges on the structural basis of traditional narrative. However, narrative is not an ordering structure of only fiction, it is a perspective from an age of narrative-defined linear models for presenting facts or fiction. Ranciere points out that the fact that society believes in the narrative construct has actually influenced a constructed belief that there is a relationship between fact and fiction. However, the Internet has inspired an evolution of narrative in which reality and fiction are blurred to create a living, co-authored narrative that has the potential to sustain stable and lasting communitas via virtual mediums. By restructuring the logic of what narrative is capable of and adapting the narrative structure to the cultural and technological shifts that transform it in twenty-first century interactive mediums, the Internet has recontextualized the way makers and creators construct and deliver new forms of narrative.
CHAPTER II:

Twenty-first Century Cultural Entertainment Shifts In Response to Internet Native Cognitive Evolution

Diana Taylor predicts in Acts of Transfer, “Digital technologies will further ask us to reformulate our understanding of presence, site, the ephemeral and embodiment” (4). In this chapter I show how evolved ideas of presence, site and embodiment are directly reflected in the effects interconnected networks online have had on the structure of narrative and the Internet Native as spectator in the twenty-first century.

The end of the twentieth century resulted in a significant cultural shift with the widespread availability of the internet. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this cultural shift influenced an influx in interactivity in entertainment mediums as well as a participant-generated content. Derived from a techno-savvy culture, accompanied with their own specific needs, interpretations and expectations for the amount of agency granted in entertainment, Internet natives have reformulated the concept and construct of narrative. This evolved narrative takes on a nonlinear form and equally values the voice of the audience receiving and participating within it, forcing entertainment makers to re-contextualize the idea of audience. Helen Freshwater observes that cultural studies has redefined the traditional notion of the audience through analysis of research on twenty-first century cultural shifts:

Ultimately cultural studies has come to be characterized by a rejection of the notion of ‘the audience’ as a singular or homogeneous entity, a detailed interrogation of diverse and sometimes unexpected responses, and an
ethnographic engagement with the range of cultural conditions which inform an individual’s viewing position… (28)

The cultural shift swarming technological advancement is seen in the consistent reminders of the individual nature of 21st century responses and interactions with the world via online mediums. Social media has set a platform for the voice of the individual without constraints of time, space, or energy. Social media, alone, could be attributed to many of the factors affecting the role of the spectator in entertainment industries because of the individual agency it has unlocked for collective involvement and interaction online. The expectation of this agency by spectators and integration of such agency into new mediums has embedded a “liveness” factor into every aspect of mediated reality. The cultural shift that has taken place for Internet Natives directly affects the structure of storytelling. As Frank Rose notes in his book, The Art of Immersion, “If stories themselves are universal, the way we tell them changes with the technology at hand. Every new medium has given rise to a new form of narrative” (2). In her 1997 book, Hamlet on the Holodeck, Janet Murray looks at the role of narrative in a cyberspace-immersed culture. She observes that every new medium of storytelling has “increased the transporting power of narrative” while simultaneously giving rise to fear and outright hostility for such evolution (15). Hostility surrounding the technological developments of the Internet and mobile devices has been espoused by countless academics in response to a fear of eroding engagement and decrease in specific cognitive functions directly affected by constant exposure to Internet mediums.

In 2012, Janna Anderson and Lee Raine set out to investigate what leaders in the fields of education and technology believed the impact of the growing up with Internet would have on Internet Natives. Through the Pew Research Center of Internet, Science and Tech, Anderson and
Raine submitted a report entitled, *Main findings: Teens, Technology, and human Potential in 2020*, including interviews concerning the potential cognitive capabilities of Internet-immersed generations. Within the report, Alvaro Retana, a distinguished technologist with Hewlett-Packard, expressed anxiety about the attention spans and cognitive focusing capabilities of Internet natives in relationship to the detrimental nature of quick and constant interaction and predicted stagnation in technology and literature (Anderson and Raine). Retana is not alone in his concerns. Dana Levin, a student at Drexel University College of Medicine, predicted that the expectation of immediacy the Internet generates would undoubtedly decrease patience in Internet Natives, resulting in a lack of interest in deep investigation and analysis (Anderson and Raine).

However, an entertainment maker interviewed within the report had a very different insight into the way new mediums of mediation could affect Internet Natives. Tiffany Shlain, director of the film *Connected* and founder of the Webby Awards remarks,

> We are evolving and we are going to be able to access so much knowledge and different perspectives that we will come up with new ideas and new solutions to our world’s problems…The key will be valuing when to be present and when to unplug. The core of what makes us human is to connect deeply, so this always will be valued. Just as we lost oral tradition with the written word, we will lose something big, but we will gain a new way of thinking. As Sophocles once said, “Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.” (Anderson and Raine)

The assertion that new mediums of media give way to new forms and structures of storytelling can be seen through the history of evolving forms of entertainment. For instance, the invention of the printing press in 1450 gave rise to literacy rates through the development of the novel. The Industrialization in England in the 1830s, coupled with the overcrowding
urbanization that accompanied it, led to a further rise in literacy rates and the emergence of serial fiction. These extensive narratives, released only a chapter at a time, changed the very structure of storytelling. Charles Dickens especially utilized his reader’s voice and agency within this new story structure. In their 1957 study, *Dickens at Work*, John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson argue, “Through serial publication an author could recover something of the intimate relationship between story-teller and audience which existed in the ages of the sagas and of Chaucer” (16). Through serial publication, authors and readers redeveloped a sense of immediate audience interaction that resembled Chaucer’s interaction with the fictional “internal” and “external” audiences the author refers directly to and attempts to converse with in *The Canterbury Tales* (Butterfield 96).

Public suspicion accompanied the work of serial noveling, just as any technological adjustment finds itself coupled with fears of cognitive or evolutionary downfall. Just as Socrates feared that books would encourage forgetfulness without taking into account the ways in which books could allow human kind to record more information than we could ever remember, John Phillip Sousa feared that megaphones would strip our physical capabilities to audibly communicate without taking into account how individuals would utilize and interact with this technology (Lessig 25). The fears Socrates and Sousa espoused are similar to the fears espoused today about mobile media, digital gaming, VR and interactive immersive events. There is a fear of a waning attention span, of an increase in narcissism that will lead to a decline in social engagement and civic discipline. However, I believe, much like the fear of evolution stripping away our vocal chords due to the technological advancement of the gramophone, the fears associated with the massive technological advancements of the twenty-first century may actually prove to demonstrate our potential for expanded capabilities. The same way that Dickens’ serial
noveling was treated as suspect because it was a product of mass manufacturing, the same threatened suspicion is observed about the immersive and interactive trends of the twenty first century as Internet Natives redefine the concept and structure of narrative today.

Serial novels died down toward the end of the nineteenth century, giving way to the motion picture in 1890, which led to feature films in 1910. Television arose out of these mediums in 1925. This influx of new mediums of media took similar forms of linear narration. In *The Art of Immersion*, Frank Rose explains, “As each of these media achieved production and distribution on an industrial scale, we saw the emergence of twentieth century mass media—newspapers, magazines, movies, music, TV. And with that, there was no role left for the consumer except to consume” (2).

Early 1970’s video games are a perfect example of this media consumption as video games initially separated themselves almost entirely from narrative. Early games such as *PacMan* or *Gallaga* gave no predisposition for why players were tasked with avoiding cartoon ghosts or shooting bug-shaped ships. However, in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the technological developments giving rise to popular in-home gaming devices influenced an integration of narrative into games that could be played at longer lengths of time, expanding the narrative through extended game-play. Though video and computer games were initially focused on indulging players in interactive engagement, linear narratives began to dissolve into more immersive worlds constructed by increased player agency.

Among the first of these non-linear narrative experiments in gaming was the 1989 release of *SimCity*. This is a game that allows people to simulate urban life where they may choose to cope with real scenarios, such historical natural disasters, or imaginary scenarios within a city of their own construction. Players act as governments of these cities and the game responds to their
individual decisions to raise taxes, stimulate the economy, and law making. There is no way to win this game, only endless avenues to experiment with how unique, individual decisions can effect the prosperity or decline of a society. In an interview with Rose, creator of the game, Will Wright, expresses the need to create laboratories of experience if which players can extract knowledge that becomes applicable to real world problem solving and decision making. Wright observes,

You’ve only got a limited bubble of experience in your entire life, and you’re going to perform better if you can build from a larger set of experiences that you could have personally…so we have these toy experiences, which we call play, and through storytelling we share experiences others have had. That’s why for me, play and story-telling go hand in hand as the first educational technologies that evolution tripped over. (qtd. in Art of Immersion 143)

The problematic nature of linear storytelling can be identified as the lack of play. Play is a laboratory to workshop the self and society through agential responsibility in low consequence virtual or theatrical realities. To incorporate play into narrative, the structure of narrative must be rendered flexible in order to create multiple and differing avenues for players to navigate and experiment within. By creating open narratives that can change according to a player’s decisions within the virtual reality, agency is granted for individual players to make their own mark on the story being told.

The immersitivy of gaming was amplified through rising player’s agential choices in 1993 with the launch of computer game, Myst. The goal of the game is to explore a mysterious island and decipher the story within the virtual reality without a concrete narrative explained from the beginning of the game. Puzzles dispersed throughout the game to determine whether or
not a player would progress from one level to the next. At the end of the game, players were given multiple choices that would ultimately determine the outcome of the story, based on alternate endings that had been preprogramed. However, game designers ran into financial issues concerning open-ended narratives such as Myst as the multiple versions of endings that gave players a sense of choice and agency were more expensive to build than previous linear narrative games, as each possible alternative had to be scripted and coded in advance.

As a response to the rise in audience agential possibilities seen in games like Myst, Bob Bejan created Interfilm in 1995 in hopes of combining gaming agency with narrative constructed on film. By allowing movie theatre goers to make voting decisions as to how the narrative would progress, spectators were given a form of limited agency. Combining cinema and games, Bejan believed Interfilm would be a revolutionary technological development that would create, “a new paradigm for the world of arts and entertainment” (Art of Immersion 104). The experiment was ultimately unsuccessful. In 1995 Benjan’s Mr. Payback played in 44 theatres across the US, but audiences were not impressed. Rose notes that audiences responded “by going into a frenzy, shouting for choices when none were offered” (Art of Immersion 105). Though Interfilm soon went bankrupt, an important lesson was found through Bejan’s unsuccessful experiment: Audiences craved more agency, voice and choice than linear storytelling advocates, and more importantly, the agency they seek cannot be successfully achieved if the structure in place is obviously constraining or confining.

In 2000, a new blend of agency and narrative emerged in the form of Will Wright’s game, The Sims. Rose observes that The Sims showed a shift in gaming from preprogrammed narratives with limited alternate endings to games that granted the player a sense of co-authorship. Rose notes that the game functioned by giving players,
a set of tools, laid down a few basic rules, and left you to your own devices. Instead of playing by someone else’s script, you got to write your own...user-generated narratives that would themselves be shared online, linked to and commented on by hundreds if not thousands of other users. These virtual spaces became known as open worlds. (*Art of Immersion* 125-26)

*The Sims* proved to be an ample step forward in adventure gameplay as the “open world” created countless unpredicted possibilities that allowed individual interaction and choice to navigate and create their own narrative. Individuals take pride in the unique narrative constructed through gameplay and proof of this lies in the millions of YouTube videos posted of players documenting their gaming exploits as storytelling of their own devise. Simulations such as *Grand Theft Auto* are popular for creating these active responses. This particular game allows players to roam where they want, make individual choices dictating their own gameplay. The game responds to those choices to deliver consequences for the actions, such as attempted arrests for stealing a car or shooting a police officer. This kind of game gives the opportunity for a self-propelled narrative that inspires players to upload videos online in order to share the stories they create. By supporting the player’s agential freedom to construct their own story, Twenty-first century gaming has opened narrative to the concept of user co-authorship by allocating the agency of individual navigation and decision making within virtual realities.

By granting players maximum amounts of agency over the narrative, user-generated storytelling mediums such as *The Sims* result in a higher level of critical analysis and thought for the player. For instance, Robin Burkinshaw, a game design student at Anglina Ruskin University in England, took a creative approach to the narrative he constructed within the 2009-updated version of *The Sims*. Burkinshaw created two characters, a homeless father and daughter with a
rocky relationship (Burkinshaw). As the game adjusted to the choices Burkinshaw made for his characters, an intriguing storyline developed in the actions of the homeless daughter that engaged second hand viewers online, exposing the innovative narrative powers created by a collaboration of designer and player. Finally, gaming had found a way to create unique, individualized narrative coauthored by user’s choices and agential control.

Though the marriage between narrative and games has always proved to be a tricky combination, Rose observes that play and story are two sides of the same coin, “The best stories lead to the widest variety of play, and the best play leads to the most story” (Art of Immersion 141). This can be seen in designer and creator, Peter Molyneux’s work on the Fable series. In Fable 2, released in 2008, Molyneux created a dog companion that stays by the player’s virtual character throughout the role-playing game consisting of user’s quests through the fictional land of Albion while performing human-type functions. As players encounter other virtual beings in the game, they have the choice to steal from them, kill them and even save them from the circumstances surrounding them by escorting them back to safety. The unique aspect of Molyneux’s work is the ethical dilemma he forces players to face near the end of the game as users are tasked with an intense choice. By this point in the game, the faithful dog companion, as well as the player’s “family”, have been killed. The player is given the choice to either bring back their dog and family from their heart-wrenching deaths, or bring back thousands of innocent virtual people who have been killed throughout the course of the gameplay.

This decision became such a controversial component of the game that players began picketing outside the Lionhead Studio offices. However, Molyneux found this reaction to be exactly what he hoped for. In an interview with Rose in The Art of Immersion, Molyneux argues that the issue with repetitive hero dynamics of action motion pictures are the character’s abilities
in making critical decisions an audience never has to analyze from their own perspective. Proud of the stir he raised over *Fable 2*, Molyneux notes, “It’s a personality test. It reflects on what you’re really like…the great thing about computer games is that you’re feeling involved- you’re feeling guilty yourself…if I can make you care about something, then the story will be much more meaningful” (qtd. in *Art of Immersion* 277).

Molyneux is correct in his evaluation that the interactive nature of video games indeed gives players more than empathy for digital characters, it has the capacity to create real visceral emotions to emerge from choices and meaning making throughout the gameplay. *Fable 2* also employs an expression wheel from which users can select emotions that are expressed through the virtual character being played. This was a significant advance in gaming as character communication within video games has primarily been limited to shooting or brief, scripted, conversational interactions. Molyneux opened up the possibility to express emotions to other characters in the virtual reality, yet the emotions available are still sincerely limited within the expression wheel. The unique centerpiece of *Fable 3*, which attempted to extend the emotional engagement of the player, came from Molyneux’s frustration with the trivial and obvious nature of the emotion wheel (Rose 279). *Fable 3* gave the players the ability to allow their virtual characters to touch other characters within the game with the intention to help players bond emotionally with the characters and thus be more deeply emotionally engaged in the narrative, therefor more critically stimulated and affected by the tough decisions in play. The next step in this evolution of Molyneux and Lionhead studio’s game-play connection was *Milo and Kate*, a Kinect game that has a main character of a 10 year old boy who can successfully identify a players emotions, read notes held in front of the Kinect system and respond to vocal tone in order to give players the illusion that the character can notice and interact with them as a fellow human
being. What game developers are now attempting to create is AI technology that can not only read human movements, emotions and interaction, but engage in such behaviors believably.

However, an agential issue ultimately arises with all AI in current video games that Rose observes in *The Art of Immersion*, “any system that relies on a programmer to input rules of behavior will eventually run into situations the programmer hasn’t thought of” (279). This is the same issue that occurs with any kind of pre-structured narrative, including those acted out by characters in immersive theatrical events. The paradox encompasses a need to control a narrative while simultaneously giving the spectator agential voice and freedom to contribute to the dramaturgy of the piece as well as alter the narrative itself. I argue that the answer lies in embracing the chaos and trusting a narrative to build itself through the collective intelligence offered by both creator and audience. Advancements in technology have given spectators the ability to become the main character in flexibly scripted stories via “open world” gaming, however, playing through a scripted narrative is inherently antithetic to a spectator/players ability to contribute a co-authorship to a narrative through agential choice, decision and meaning making within the story. Rose agrees that this kind of tension continues to come back to the question of ultimate control: “However convincingly they’re rendered, in-game narratives introduce familiar tension between author and audience. As with any participatory narrative, the issue is control. The designer creates the game, but the player holds the controller- so who is telling the story?” (*Art of Immersion* 130).

The most common way game designers maintain control over the narrative of the game is through cut scenes where the player’s controller is disabled and the plot is advanced without player input or choice. Rose argues, “the main thing gamers have against these interludes is the enforced passivity: deactivate the controller for too long and their fingers start to twitch” (*Art of*
The future of gameplay will most likely be dependent on designer’s ability to create a more complex narrative without taking control away from the user. The question remains, how can game designers engage players in both a sensory and emotional experience without sequences of narrative that strip agency from the player? I agree that the way to resolve narrative tension between author and audience is ultimately to grant agency to the audience in order to let the players create and direct the narrative themselves within the world the storytellers have created, however this form of narrative tension between audience and author has proven difficult in all forms of narrative media.

Avid fans of stories unwilling to sit back and have a story told linearly to them, began to take their most loved stories into their own hands to create “fan fiction”. The mass media of early video games, television, magazines and books left no avenue for audience participation, however readers/viewers/players took their impulse to have a voice implanted in the narrative constructed as avenue for themselves through fan fiction. According to Rose, Star Wars is responsible for the first substantial outbreak of fan fiction in the early 1980s, however the conflict in fan fiction writing became the unclear boundaries between avid fandom and copyright infringement (Art of Immersion 94).

Society fell into the habit of consuming linear story telling, but the integration of the Internet irrevocably altered the construction of the accepted linear narrative. As a media medium capable of acting as all media, the Internet gave way to simultaneously linking text, video, audio and unlimited interactive possibilities. As Rose observes, “The conventions of film and television don’t work in an interactive world” (Art of Immersion 187). The Internet has inspired the emergence of a new type of narrative that is non-linear, participatory and engaged in multi-media experience. This form of “deep media” narrative is designed to be more “immersive” than
previous forms of media entertainment (Deep Media). The Internet opened up new possibilities for fan fiction as an avenue that could no longer be suppressed or ignored. Rose notes,

The media industry’s loss of control extends far beyond what people watch and when. Movie studios and television networks are no longer even able to control what happens in the stories they present. People who formerly constitutes the audience are now capable of running off with the show. The same tools that enable people to spontaneously coalesce online make it easy for them to start telling the story their way if they care about it enough to do so. (*Art of Immersion* 86)

From fan forums, sites and thoroughly researched or re-imagined Wikipedia pages for favorite plots and characters, it has become obvious that viewers/readers want to dive more deeply into critical analysis and creative alternatives to their favorite stories. Rose insists, “People tell and retell stories they love because that’s what humans do. If the story is meaningful enough, a superficial encounter won’t leave them satisfied. They’ll want to go deeper. They’ll want to imagine themselves in it, retell it, make it their own” (*Art of Immersion* 97). Just as nonlinear storytelling began to emerge from “open world” advances in video game designing and fan fiction take-overs of popular stories, people began to expect to be allotted a greater level of agency in television programming. As Susan Bennet observes in her book, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*,

Television, above all, lacks the sense of public event that attaches to both theatre and cinema. It denies the audience a sense of contact with the performers that is integral to any theatrical performance, and, moreover, it denies the spectator-to-
spectator communication within the larger framework of an audience as a community. (74)

Bennet identifies a perfect example of how much agency in narrative has been changed in the cultural shift surrounding the social media age. Television has become more interactive via online social media resources such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and individual contributions to Wikipedia or fan sites. In the twenty-first century, viewers can interact with both performers/creators and other spectators via social media, creating online communities of fans who engage in direct interaction. Online social platforms have become the primary place for debate, gossip and even an avenue to obtain the agency to make significant changes directly to the story being watched on Television in the form of competitive reality shows such as American Idol. Rose interviewed the creators of Lost to identify how the television program found success through granting viewers the agency they longed for. He discovered that, “Lost was told in a deliberately obscure manner because its producers had the expectation that viewers would treat it as a vast, collective puzzle to be solved- which they did. Stories become games, and games become stories” (Art of Immersion 6). Rose mentions that, “because its narrative was so convoluted, Lost implicitly demanded that people connect online to figure it out” (artofimmersion.com). This is an ingenious marketing technique in the age of media culture, where more people are shifting between multiple screens than ever before. A new study from the Consumer Technology Association (CTA) found that more than three-quarters of Millennials are utilizing a second screen when watching video content. The report, titled 2015 Video Consumption Trends: Part 1 and Part 2, states that 88 percent of the demographic, which encompasses individuals between the ages 18 to 34, engage in second screen behaviors (Baral 2016).
Blurring lines between online interaction and television narratives established a new kind of engagement founded on extending narrative, getting the viewers actively involved and creating fandom communities. *Lost* was not alone in creating avenues for fans to dive deeper into the fandom surrounding their favorite stories. In October of 2007, creators of the globally popular mockumentary television series, *The Office*, launched an interactive gaming website associated with the series. *Dunder Mifflin Infinity* functioned as a social media site and virtual game that incorporated the narrative of the television show into a new medium of interaction. Virtual employees paid in “Shrute” bucks were delegated weekly tasks associated with the ongoing narrative of the popular show. Over 260,000 viewers took up interacting online through the medium that allowed participants to chat with each other on the site while watching episodes, and the ability to upload videos of themed parties thrown in honor of the narrative (*Dunder Mifflin Infinity*). Creator’s furthered this interaction by offering a direct line of communication with fan’s favorite character, Dwight Shrute, by extending the website to include “Dwight’s Blog”. The actor playing Dwight Shrute on the television program blogged in character daily, interacting with comments from viewers who wrote to the character directly. Through online, interactive projects like these, the Internet became a massive advertising component for building fandom in furthering an audience’s ability to interact with the characters of their favorite narratives. However, Rose argues, as the rise in the popularity of this new medium increased, writers for television became frustrated at the lack of compensation or legal rights they were being given to construct and maintain this new form of media (*Art of Immersion* 185).

In November of 2007 writers went on strike, demanding compensation and an end to the expectation that online content be created for free labor. During the strike, writers took to the Internet of their own accord, creating new forms of narrative such as webisodes where they could
generate their own content and create their own fan base without the extensive financial pressures accompanying television broadcast. Social networking became a standard for web serials, spreading the word about new narration and generating free feedback for successful storylines. The wide-spread popularity of this new, much cheaper medium forced the end of the writers strike in Feb. 2008 as writers demands were met, ensuring they were compensated and given jurisdiction over internet-based media. Rose found that the strike bought about “a new appetite for experimentation, as well as a nascent sense of what video entertainment might become in a fully interactive world” (*Art of Immersion* 188). Broadcasting episodes in one-hour slots on television could now act as a launching mechanism, thrusting viewers into other avenues for continuing narrative online, often interweaving with the active voices of viewers.

Ultimately, this led to crossover between content generated online for users and the narrative broadcast on television. One such example of this is the creation of the digi-novel in early 2009, a written narrative that uses digital devices to deliver “cyber-bridges” between chapters that interconnect short clips of video to further the plot. Anthony Zuiker, creator of CSI, created the first digi-novel titled, “*Level 26 Dark Origins*”. The debut digi-novel utilized the web to establish user forums, avenues for fan fiction and a specific function labeled “community” that put users in conversation with real live CSI’s as well as the author himself. Eventually, due to online demand, this digi-novel narrative and characters crossed over into an episode of CSI in 2010. Another important crossover of media mediums made it’s appearance in 2010 as the BBC released four episodes of a thirteen episode series of popular television hit, *Doctor Who*, as a downloadable video game. In the game, users were asked to play through the final four episodes of the season as the famous doctor themselves. Only through finishing the game could viewers experience the conclusion of the series narrative. Technological advancements of the twenty-first
century has serviced an inherent behavioral need of human beings—the need to be involved. By creating avenues for this kind of involvement, the Internet has generated a way for fans, users, and players to sculpt, shape and ultimately decide the structure of the narratives we consume.

Rose insightfully comments on the changing dynamics of interaction through media: “Not long ago we were spectators, passive consumers of mass media. Now, on YouTube and blogs and Facebook and Twitter, we are media. And we approach television shows, movies, even advertising as invitations to participate—as experiences to immerse ourselves in at will” (Art of Immersion 6). In his online blog concerned with analyzing all things immersive, Rose advocates that what we are witnessing in twenty-first century entertainment is

the emergence of a new form of narrative that’s native to the Internet. Told through many media at once in a nonlinear fashion, these new narratives encourage us not merely to watch but to participate, often engaging us in the same way that games do. This is "deep media": stories that are not just entertaining but immersive, that take you deeper than an hour-long TV drama or a two-hour movie or a 30-second spot will permit. (artofimmersion.com)

Though exciting and innovative, these cultural shifts force storytellers to operate in a world where clear distinctions of narrative are rapidly changing as they morph with media. These assimilations between author and audience, story and game, entertainment and marketing, and even fiction and reality are fusing rapidly in the twenty-first century and giving way to innovative forms of non-linear narrative. Ideas of authorship, engagement, function and distinction are suddenly being reconceived to adhere to the spectatorial needs of the habitual mediatization and online social immersion of Internet natives. As opposed to consumers of mass media, modern audiences have become active participants of social media, giving them the
platform to simultaneously act as artist, commentator, producer, editor, consumer and socialite. In a world where thoughts, feelings, pictures and reflections of individuals can be published with the click of a button and put on display for people known and unknown to agree or debate with, the active voice of the individual in every medium encountered has become commonplace. The constant influx of rapid-fire information from the collective intelligence of the Internet coupled with the now, customary, agential power of direct interaction and voiced input has created significant cognitive changes to the Internet native’s brain and behavioral tendencies.

The cognitive evolution Internet Natives have undergone is thoroughly rooted in memory, attention and focus. North American theatre director Mathew Goulish best explains through his own question and answer how a culture’s cognitive make-up actually influences agential power. His Question: “what is culture?” The Answer: “The formation of attention” (qtd. in Banes and Lepeki 3). The entertainment industries’ shifting interest towards immersive and interactive trends reflects not only a massive cultural shift in the emergence of new technologies, but also significant changes in cognitive function caused by such rapid technological advancement. Studies have specifically focused attention to attention span and multi-tasking skills in post-internet influenced generations in order to determine how a constant stream of differing media is actually altering capacity for information intake and concentration. The PEW Research Center for Internet, Science and Tech published an article in 2012 entitled, Main findings: Teens, Technology, and Human Potential in 2020 containing interviews with leaders in technological and scientific fields of study predicting the ways in which Internet Natives could both benefit and suffer due to their hyper-connected lives. William Schrader, founder of PSINet in the 1980s replied with his prediction, “The youth of 2020 will enjoy cognitive ability far beyond our estimates today based not only on their ability to embrace ADHD as a tool”
According to a 2015 study from Microsoft Corp., people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds, indicating the cognitive effects of an increasingly hyperactive digitalized lifestyle on the attention centers of the brain. Microsoft researchers surveyed 2,000 participants and studied the brain activity of 112 others using electroencephalograms (EEGs). Microsoft concluded that since the year 2000, approximately when the mobile Internet revolution began, the average attention span dropped from twelve seconds to eight seconds (McSpadden). The results concluded that, “Heavy multi-screeners find it difficult to filter out irrelevant stimuli — they’re more easily distracted by multiple streams of media” (McSpadden). Proof that brains have been adapting to the use of mobile media may seem entirely negative, however this study also reported that though average attention spans have dropped drastically, ability to multitask has exorbitantly improved in the mobile media age. This multitasking ability and dropped attention span begins to explain the appeal of more immersive and interactive entertainment in younger audience demographics. Cognitively trained to actively interact, empowered by agential choice, and stimulated by multi-tasking, Internet Natives have been taught through the connective powers of the Internet to inherently reject notions of traditional passive spectatorship.

Microsoft lead teen and young adult researcher, Danah Boyd commented on the cognitive evolution of Internet Natives,

Brains are being rewired—any shift in stimuli results in a rewiring. The techniques and mechanisms to engage in rapid-fire attention shifting will be extremely useful for the creative class whose job it is to integrate ideas; they relish opportunities to have stimuli that allow them to see things differently.
(Anderson and Raine)

Interactive entertainment such as Immersive Theatre and live action gaming experiences are thriving due to their attempts to activate multiple stimuli, keep audience members moving and exploring and allowing them to choose their own path that participants can retreat from if interest is lost or redirected. Cyberanthropologist, Amber Case, remarked on this cognitive evolution and its effect on decision-making: “The human brain is wired to adapt to what the environment around it requires for survival. Today and in the future it will not be as important to internalize information but to elastically be able to take multiple sources of information in, synthesize them, and make rapid decisions” (Anderson and Raine).

These rapid decision making skills are a blessing a curse for entertainment makers of the twenty-first century as it is attention to this detail that is directly related to the level of spectatorial agency separating successful immersive and interactive media. Craving multiple tasks and aspiring to simultaneously adjudicate and complete each one leaves spectators in a precarious position for entertainment makers. A new level of agency is being requested; agency to author or co-author one’s own narrative experience by making decisions that influence the story each individual presence has contributed to create.

Chief Digital Officer of Harvard Public Affairs, Perry Hewitt, considers the cognitive evolution of Internet immersed generations as a push forward in both collaboration skills and problem solving,

The Internet has brought forward not only education, but thinking. While we still want to cultivate in youth the intellectual rigor to solve problems both quantitatively and qualitatively, we have gotten them out of the business of memorizing facts and rules, and into the business of applying those facts and rules
to complex problems. In particular, I have hope for improved collaboration from these new differently ‘wired’ brains, for these teens and young adults are learning in online environments where working together and developing team skills allows them to advance. (Anderson and Raine)

This concept of critical thinking by doing is the primary aspect of the cognitive evolution of 21st century spectators that forces entertainment makers to widely re-evaluate the way in which they engage their audience and the amount of spectatorial agency they must grant in order to make the performance viable and meaningful for future audiences. Such agency is linked to an inevitable shuffling of past pretenses concerning the potential for narrative and structure of storytelling. Rose sees the shift occurring in opposition of spectatorial theory, “Contrary to the sort of spectatorial theory that posits an isolated spectator constructed in one viewing position, the range of looks and gazes in the media culture suggests that numerous positions exist for the viewer” (*Art of Immersion* 310).

This cultural shift is informing entertainment makers that we must value a deeper level of visceral, emotional, embodied experience and individual agency if entertainment intends to reach demographics influenced by this influx of collective Internet influence and social media experience.

The theory of spectatorial gaze operating in isolated relation to one medium cannot be fully functional in the plurality of the media culture. Thus, in uncovering a multiple positioning in viewing, the notion of the viewer a purely passive and simply acted upon by one medium can be given up and replaced by a performative modality in which agency, as an aspect of the interplay among viewing positions, is recognized. In other words, the viewer exerts agency by
performing in the viewing situation, by bringing a history of media and life experiences to whatever show she is watching. This sort of agency is born up by common sense. (*Art of Immersion* 311)

A direct reaction to the expectation of agency entertainment industries observed in Internet natives were different kinds of alternate reality games linked with existing popular narratives. These Alternate reality gaming experiences are evolving the form of storytelling through creating multiple avenues for exploring a narrative as well as active involvement within the story. Rose notes, “As the once-clear delineations between story and game become a blur, gaming’s more addictive aspects are being copied...they turn up in ad campaigns. They turn up on facebook” (*Art of Immersion* 6). The internet is not only transforming the nature of narrative in the twentyfirst century, it has also affected the nature and structure of marketing. Take for instance the incorporation of individual narrative through data collection Nike utilized to engage a community in *The Human Race*. Nike used narrative as a tool to inspire communities to participate in a running event, using Nike+ application to allow participants to connect and compete with one another across the globe. The event became known as the day that Nike united the world through a matrix of stories told through data interpreted through a brand. Rose notes that,

The Human Race transformed Nike+ into a global, 3-d, highly participatory billboard for Nike itself. Some 780,000 humans took part the first year, a million the second- 12,000 in Seoul; 9900 in Guangzhou, 7900 in Singapore; 9400 in Tel Aviv; 5100 in Berlin; 1400 in London; 4400 in Rio de Janeiro; 11000 in Buenos Aires; 3500 in New Yor; 14000 in Mexico City. (*Art of Immersion* 254)
Another prime example of expanded narrative utilized in advertising campaigns is a company named 42 Entertainment, founded by Jordan Weissman in 2003. The company began creating interactive online activities that accompanied film, television and gaming narratives. The mission statement of 42 Entertainment is, “connecting entertainment for the audience of today” (Weissman). The goal of the 42 Entertainment is to find a way to interconnect advertising, television programming and gaming with what the company calls the most “media savvy generation yet” (Weissman). To do so, 42 Entertainment insists that entertainment industries must create avenues for once passive consumers to seek meaningful connections with one another and the narrative itself in our increasingly interconnected reality. Weissman understands that, “The Internet has fostered an expectation that people will be able to delve into a story at different levels of involvement. They assume they'll be able to immerse themselves in a narrative at will” (Weissman). Susan Bonds, co-founder/CEO of 42 entertainment and former creative director at Disney theme parks observes in an interview with Frank Rose, “People want to be involved in stories… the generation today wants to be able to control what happens” (Art of Immersion 300-01).

Because 42 Entertainment treats its viewers as social curating participants, the company advocates for giving audiences the ultimate amount of agency possible through multi-platform collaboration to create interactive opportunities associated with popular narratives for Internet natives to explore. Weissman notes on the 42 Entertainment main website,

The wired generation of today are social curators, cool hunters scouring the web and the world around them for new things to share. Information is today's social currency. When you give people new things to discover, not only will they spread
it through their networks but it becomes their own. Do this and your audience will come looking for you. (Weissman)

The company has explored the evolution of narrative in the twenty-first century through multiple projects, crossing entertainment areas of video games, motion pictures and the music industry. Each project intended to find new ways to get an audience directly involved and interacting with the narrative in play. While fan fiction gave way to the prolonged extension of a narrative through the individual voices of provoked fandom, 42 Entertainment used the power of the Internet to extend a narrative in advance, getting the audience involved in the precursor to the story to promote upcoming narratives. In a project labeled, *Year Zero*, 42 Entertainment helped popular band, Nine Inch Nails prep for release of their new album in the form of a mysterious live action game that included notes and thumb drives hidden at concert venues leading fans down multiple narrative rabbit holes through websites and phone calls asking them to join the resistance for a new audio revolution. The live action game culminated in a secret Nine Inch Nails concert broken up by a staged anti-resistance SWAT team, followed by the release of the artists’ newest concept album, relaying the story. 42 Entertainment also teamed up with Warner Bros. to launch the release of the awaited motion picture, *The Dark Knight* in a alternate reality game they called, *Why So Serious*. The Interactive movie campaign played out over multiple platforms over a period of fifteen months. Over eleven million individuals in seventy-five countries were recruited to act as the Joker’s henchman, sent through an immersive real world adventure that set up the initial heist the Joker makes in the movie. Participants were tasked with calling phone numbers written in skywriting and sent on various, strange missions, including hunting down bakeries to find cakes waiting for them with phones ringing inside. The more connected these participants were online, the more clues they were able to find and the more of
the narrative they could discover before the release of the film. Subsequently, participants were invited to a premier of the first five minutes of the movie where they see for themselves the role they played in setting up the Joker’s successful heist. In this instance, participants were given the weight of responsibility in a crime that had taken place, motivating them to promote and attend the full release of the film to see what fictional consequences were attached to their actions.

These advertising opportunities of the early 2000’s worked as experiments in the future structural capabilities of narrative in the 21st century. Rose chalks these experimental avenues of re-workshopping the use of interactive media up to what he refers to as a “stark and uncomfortable fact: conventional entertainment isn’t working the way it used to” (Rose 4). Entertainment 42 opened the eyes of entertainment and advertising industries as to the way in which Internet natives needed stories to be structured in order to remain actively engaged. It became abundantly clear that some level of direct participation was necessary to achieve popularity in the twenty-first century entertainment. However, Rose warns that this is merely the beginning, “We are only at the beginning of a radical anthropological shift. The revolution brought about by the Internet is altering reality, and this trans-formed world is inventing its own language and its own codes to portray itself” (Rose, art of immersion.com). He advises that storytellers need to adjust and search for more tools at our disposal to tell stories that engage and reflect our current shifting culture. More true now that ever are the words of Richard Schechner, “Just as theatre is anthropologizing itself, so anthropology is being theatricalized” (Theatre and Anthropology 33).

What we are truly finding through this cultural shift in the age of widespread media and Internet access is a growing desire for knowledge and experience. Andre Lepeki insists that the, “processes of invention and becoming, then, are not only purely corporeal but also dialogically
tied to technological developments” (Banes and Lepeki 4). Lepeki makes the argument that technology, “as effecting a profound transformation not only on the nature of the work of art itself but on the nature of our perceptive-sensorial relation to it as well, a political transformation of what we deem to be our most natural way of relating: our senses, our perceptions” (Banes and Lepeki 4). I argue that the way our perceptive-sensorial relation is changing throughout this cultural shift has individuals seeking out a voice in every aspect of their daily lives, including but not limited to their choice of entertainment. Having every piece of information you can imagine at the fingertips touching a pocket-sized transportable computer has produced a craving for knowledge, and more than rapidly answered bits of trivia from Google, a craving for embodied knowledge only found through experience. Yi-Fu Tuan recognizes the interplay between knowledge and perception when stating, “Experience implies the ability to learn from what one has undergone. To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given. The given itself cannot be known in itself. What can be known is a reality that is a construct of experience, a creation of feeling and thought” (9).

The “experience economy”, born from media culture, has pushed Immersive and interactive theatre into the spotlight of 21st century live events (Pine and Gilmore). In a 2013 interview, co-founder of the immersive theatre company, Third Rail Projects, Tom Pearson, evaluates theatrical success in the cultural shift he has witnessed inspiring immersive practice,

I think the success that immersive theater is currently enjoying has a lot to do with the time we live in and the cultural systems at play. I see experience-based work as both a response or remedy for our digital lives, but also deeply indebted to and enabled by them. We have so much virtual experience in our daily routines, that I believe larger audiences are not content to sit passively for live events, but rather
want to participate. We seek out the tactile, the personal, the one-on-one engagement. But also, I think we are able to navigate these worlds because we understand the role-play, the labyrinthine fantasy logic of them due, in part, to our digital experiences. *(Deep Media)*

Rose brings up some interesting insight into why this kind of immersive, live narrative is emerging in this age of media culture. There are key factors supporting the fact that the immersive/interactive trend was born from technological advancements and a monumental societal shift in media usage. The obvious factors include improved technology and the rise of transmedia, however the most important fact in evolving forms of storytelling in entertainment is the focus around engagement in an experience economy. The J. Walter Thompson Intelligence report, or JWT, is a data and research department of the J. Walter Thompson Company dedicated to forecasting trends through sonar and analytics *(JWT Intelligence)*. Media users with multiple devices have surveyed through JWT reports that, in the twenty-first century, there is a distinct desire for experiences rather than things. The JWT report notes, "As experiences supersede things, they need to have more impact" *(Deep Media)*. Furthermore, the desire is not only for experience, but shared experience as the social nature of human beings has only been engorged by the possibilities of social content on digital mediums. Rose also notes that there is a generational shift that must be taken into account in the analysis of growing desire for participation: “More than Gen X-ers and far more than their Boomer parents, Millennials want—and expect—to be active participants, not passive consumers. It's not hard to figure out why. From video games to social media, they've been trained to be involved” *(Deep Media)*.

The points Rose makes about the training generations born into this cultural shift have experienced could not be more valid. With technological advancements on the rise and the
integration of social media making lasting alterations on the way in which we socially interact as well as the new etiquette that comes with such interaction, Internet Natives are proving to be subjects of a new kind of cognitive evolution that craves more impactful agency in narrative. Rose notes that this is in part due to the fact that, “In a networked world, information doesn’t just travel from author to audience, or in a closed loop from author to audience and back again; it spreads all over the place and more or less instantly” (Art of Immersion 14). The very nature of the digital is social process generating creative product from incalculable hours of collective Internet immersion and emission. Theatrical endeavors labeled Immersive Theatre, live action gaming events and socially activating multi-platform projects are currently grappling with how to narrative may be structured to better meet the needs of Internet Natives through multiple entertainment avenues.
CHAPTER III:

The Ethical Implications of Spectatorial Agency Within the Dramaturgy of Intimacy

Multiple theatre companies are currently practicing immersive theatre tactics that range in the level of spectatorial agency allocated within performance. Through a closer analysis of the work of Punchdrunk, Third Rail Project and Fureza Brueta, this chapter situates the elements of liminality, intimacy, and the conduit of agency as the basic structural foundation of most contemporary twenty-first century immersive performance. Through a breakdown of these elements, this chapter argues for a re-evaluation of the ethical implications of feigned agency, scripted intimacy, unscripted physical interaction, and the unstable power dynamics of “immersive” practices hinged on the manipulation of the spectator. In acknowledging play as a laboratory to workshop the self and society, I intend to evaluate the agency allocated by popular immersive theatre companies in order to formulate a framework in which successful narrative experimentation within such an immersive laboratory might occur. Within the technological cultural shift that has evolved the structure of narrative, theatre makers are currently reevaluating the position of the spectator as part of an internal community within the theatrical reality established. By acknowledging each spectator as an individual with their own ideas, differing levels of engagement and inherent emotional attachments, current immersive theatre is grappling the tension of control associated with interactive agency. In their 2013 book Programme Notes: Case Studies for Locating Experimental Theatre, Lois Keidan clarifies these seemingly opposing simultaneous spectatorial roles of both individual agential mechanisms of affect and conduits for community,
Watching the best theatre and performance we are together and alone. Together in the sense that we’re aware of the temporary and shifting bonds that link us both to the stage and to our fellow watchers, plugged into the group around and in front of us, the communal situation…osmore, make connections. But at the same time, even as we do so, we feel our separateness…we’re aware that our place in its emerging consensus, its temporary community, is partial and provisional- that in any case the group itself- there in the theatre, as elsewhere in our cities and streets, in the relations between nations, peoples and states- is always as much a fraught and necessary question, a longing and a problem, as it is any kind of certainty. (26)

The first steps into an unfamiliar theatrical reality are best spent acclimating to the space and wading into the world an immersive performance will soon submerge spectators within. If successfully executed, this space employs a significant transitional effect that prepares a spectator for the theatrical reality they are about to enter. In this transitional space, spectators become accustomed to the aesthetics in place and begin to discover their own role within the immersive performance. Victor Turner coined the term “liminality” in his 1982 publication, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. Turner used the term to articulate performative behavior in the context of ritual spaces as well as the term, “liminoid” in reference to acts of theatre or capitalist societal events (*From Ritual to Theatre* 28). The word “liminal” has evolved over time and is used in contemporary language to refer to any kind of reality that exists in the in between. The liminal spaces I will refer to in this chapter are spaces that function as a threshold between reality and the world of the immersive performance. This threshold is
commonly used as a metaphorical wading pool that introduces immersive participants to the figurative water they will soon be submerged under.

As Edinborough observes, “The way in which theatre space is conceived and experienced dictates its authority over our understanding of the actor, the text and the set. Theatre space is not something passively understood- it is lived” (17). Liminal spaces in a preshow environment allow immersive audiences a chance to wade into and explore, from an outside perspective, the experience they are meant to achieve, or live, through the performance. Liminal pre-shows in popular immersive theatre usually allow individuals to wander about a limited section of the playing space, socialize with a beverage and begin to explore the trappings of the world they are meant to inhabit for the remainder of the performance. The purpose of such a space is to incite the imagination of the spectator, draw out their curiosity as well as set the guidelines in place concerning the etiquette of inhabiting the theatrical space.

In Third Rail Projects’ *Sweet and Lucky*, the audience enters an elaborately decorated antique pawn shop spread over seven rooms, with a speakeasy style bar off to the side. Before the show begins, spectators are encouraged to drink, socialize and explore the pawnshop at their own pace. Some choose to sit at the bar and anticipate the performance with friends, others rush to rifle through boxes of antiques, finding hidden drawers full of long lost love letters and negatives of photographs hinting at characters and plot lines to come. Throughout the rooms are scattered and repeating clues that seem meaningless, but if noticed, will be explained thoroughly in the performance. One such object in *Sweet and Lucky* is a modish blue Christmas ornament that is later broken in a fight that ends the main character’s relationship. During the pre-show excavation, I personally noticed at least eight of these identical ornaments scattered throughout various rooms, some shattered, others in tact. If an individual spectator takes ample initiative in
this liminal preshow space, they are rewarded with inside knowledge about characters and history of the narrative they will be led through within the immersive theatrical reality.

At the beginning of the performance, an actor enters into each room of this liminal preshow space, closes the door and invites randomly grouped spectators in each specific room to prepare for a funeral. Because of the intimate nature of this liminal space, and the amount of time given for spectators to become accustomed to the aesthetics of the theatrical reality, this intimate moment with the actor sets the tone for the solemn and grief-ridden emotional state of the narrative about to begin. Edinborough observes, “It is the movement from everyday life into the liminal space of performance that establishes the performer’s body as a site for feeling and agency. The performer is framed as a subject who thinks, feels and demands empathy” (10).

Because of this, as soon as a grief-stricken performer enters the free-roaming space, spectators immediately engage emotionally and empathetically with the anticipated performance.

After crossing the liminal threshold between reality and performance, spectators in *Sweet in Lucky* are led into a larger space where each take part in the singing of a hymn at an unidentified funeral as they stand together in the indoor “pouring rain”. After this initial community-stimulating moment, the audience is randomly separated into groups who simultaneously split off, always led by a performer. Though crossroads and intersections overlap amidst the moving groups, interaction is limited. In fact, the only moments of spectator peer interaction allowed in Third Rail’s *Sweet and Lucky* occur in the liminal space via the preshow, then again mid-show as a handful of spectators are led back to the pre-show pawn shop space and given a task, and finally at the end of the show when all are led back into the pre-show space with added bar area to discuss the show before leaving the space entirely. Though this preshow pawnshop space should only be considered liminal in the moments spectators inhabit it before
and after the performance, the knowledge absorbed through a spectator’s curiosity in the initial liminal moment actually proves to activate leadership in the mid-show task conducted in the same space. After a group has accumulated in one of the preshow pawnshop rooms, a performer instructs the group to open a locked box and decipher what is found inside. This group of spectators is asked to work together to unlock the box and study the contents. In this way, a spectator who took advantage of exploration in the liminal preshow has an advantage in understanding where to find clues within the rooms to open the locked box.

Ultimately, this task delegated to a group of spectators should be a direct avenue into the establishment of communitas, as logically, a connection should be formed through the group interaction. However, I argue that the movement in the immersive performance is on such a strategic and obvious timeline that spectators are not allotted adequate time to form real connections. The lock combination proved to be a simple mystery to solve and the contents (lost letters) are immediately taken from the group of spectators. All are then led to a hallway and asked to shred the letters through vents of a door while acting as voyeurs, watching through windows as a performer dances in the shredded pieces of the letters. I believe the decision to return the spectator to an initially liminal space in order to utilize knowledge learned about the narrative through that liminal state has the potential to be incredibly successful in establishing bothspectatorial agency and connection through communitas. However, because of the structurally rigid, scripted and strictly timed atmosphere, spectators were taken out of the theatrical reality they were caught up in when asked to return to this space. The herding nature of moving specific groups to and from different spaces revealed the artifice of the theatrical reality. This, coupled with the transparent feigned agency spectators were granted, made this moment inadequate in terms of establishing even a temporary sense of communitas.
Establishing communitas is a delicate process that often includes the utilization of liminal spaces in creative ways. However, when spectatorial agency is only allocated in a superficial capacity in order to maintain narrative control, the artifice of the immersive theatrical reality is exposed. This exposure derails any true establishment of communitas, agential choice, or cathartic engagement. Edinborough comments on the ultimate affective responses possible through successful implementation of intimacy in liminal spaces within performances:

There are a number of recent examples of performances that have sought to establish liminal space as a place in which simply physical acts can be experienced with a sense of catharsis- examples that are unified by the way in which they provoke an uncanny engagement with intimacy through pushing towards seemingly unnecessary extremes of human experience. (134)

The extremes of human experience that Edinborough mentions can be seen in the way in which British Immersive Company, Punchdrunk, utilizes liminal space in their popular immersive event, *Sleep No More*. Upon entering the enormous warehouse space Punchdrunk has outfitted in Brooklyn, New York, spectators are instantly plunged into complete darkness. Through a long and harrowing hallway, spectators must cling to the walls to navigate the darkness until they finally hear the sounds of a live band and reach a neo-Victorian style speakeasy. This bar, with live entertainment, tables, chairs and drink specials acts as a liminal space between reality and the theatrical reality awaiting spectators on the five elaborately designed floors of this warehouse space. Spectators are given a card from a deck and asked to enjoy this speakeasy until their number is called. While anxiously awaiting the performance to begin, spectators mingle with one another, filled with nervous anticipation of what lies beyond the liminal space. After a spectator’s number is called, and the classic Punchdrunk mask is
donned, they are escorted via a seemingly rickety elevator and pushed out at random on each floor. In this elevator ride, spectators are encouraged to explore the space at will, separate from friends or family, remain silent with masks always on and asked to always return to the speak easy on the first floor if they ever feel uncomfortable, scared or need a break from the intensity of the immersive theatrical reality. In this way, this liminal speakeasy becomes a safe space for spectators throughout the performance. By encouraging spectators to return to this threshold between reality and the theatrical reality of Sleep No More, this space becomes not only a way in and out of the performance, but also a way to disengage from the performance without stepping entirely back into reality if a spectator is ever overwhelmed. Employing a liminal or theatrical sensibility in the sense of a space presents the space as “other”, actually encouraging spectators to ponder the extent and boundaries of reality (Edinborough 87).

As opposed to Sweet and Lucky, Sleep No More does not hide clues, distribute tasks or actively engage spectators to explore the liminal speakeasy space within their production. However, by utilizing this liminal space as a safe space for spectators to step away from the performance at their own will, and allowing spectators to remove their masks and interact with one another within the liminal space, Punchdrunk successfully establishes a liminal space that encourages social interaction and thus, a space with the potential for creating communitas. However, I argue that because etiquette allotted in this liminal space, such as social interaction and conversation, is forbidden upon entering the other levels of performance (or theatrical reality), this reduced agency in other spectrums of the performance inhibits communitas to be fully realized within the production as a whole. Edinborough observes,

The process of encouraging the participant/spectator to apply a liminal sensibility to his environment within immersive performance inverts the conventional
relationships between spectator, performer and space found within theatre. Instead of using the conventions of theatrical space to bring a sense of reality to a represented world, site-specific and participatory performance can invite spectators to reimagine the reality of the places they occupy. (117)

An interesting immersive event that uniquely establishes the entirety of the performance as a liminal environment is Fureza Brueta. This particular performance invites lived experience wholly within a liminal space. Fureza Brueta is set up very much like an underground concert venue complete with basement bar and little indulgence in design or flair. As Edinborough observes, “The experience of meaning and understanding within theatrical performance is connected profoundly to its spatiality” (17). This profound connection is reflected in the utilization of liminality within Fureza Brueta’s theatrical reality. When spectators enter the performance space, the environment reflects that of an average, affordable nightclub. The audience mingles about the wide-open space of the venue, socializing, drinking and finding areas to stand. As opposed to the previously mentioned productions, the performance begins without a given expectation of etiquette or rules requiring silence or proximity to performance elements. By doing so, spectators feel comfortable following their own rules for social interaction and engaging in sharing the experience openly as their everyday selves without the added frustration of figuring out which character they are meant to play or attempting to identify the world of the performance they inhabit. Edinborough agrees, “Theatre’s invitation to share and imagine sharing feelings establishes a liminal space that aestheticizes experience without direct reference to explicitly defined imaginary worlds” (26).

In establishing the performance space as an everyday space, spectators immediately feel comfortable and have an already achieved a sense of presence within the space as well as a
general understanding of what is expected. As the music begins, spectators instantly take advantage of the agency of movement and speech as they dance and yell together in a space that has been previously established as familiar, with an inherent set of social rules already innately grounded in place. Throughout the performance, including breathtaking and complicated designs, acrobatics, dancing and abstract narrative, spectators continue to drink, socialize and move about the space. A primary difference between this performance and the immersive events staged by Third Rail Projects or Punchdrunk is the utilization of a liminal space that consumes the entire performance instead of a set space that walks a spectator in and out of the performance. *Fureza Bruta* successfully creates an interactive social experience that is, in itself, a liminal space on the threshold of reality and another plane of existence. In doing this, communitas is effectively created through the social agency allocated within the space. This is achieved through the encouragement of consistent and voluntary social interaction, unhindered by a specific set of rules and regulations accompanying the theatrical reality. As Edinborough observes, “Theatre’s integration of sociality and spatiality forces us to recognize the medium as a dialectical construct” (25). This integration proves successful in setting up a familiar space in which spectator/participants feel comfortable indulging and socializing within as they interact with the performance and one another.

Though both liminal space and spectatorial agency was espoused by each of these performances in an altering variety of ways, *Sweet and Lucky* and *Sleep No More* firmly adhere to scripted interaction or promenade techniques that inhibit individual spectators from significantly adding to or altering the inherent dramaturgy and narrative of the performance pieces. A specific and sought after element of current immersive theatre trends, used specifically by both Punchdrunk and Third Rail Project, is the intimate one-on-one. In these seemingly
random moments within the performance, an actor situates him or herself in a confined space with a single spectator and suddenly an enlightened form of spectatorial agency is achieved through intimate interaction. Edinborough notes that one-on-one performances enhance the idea of liminoid space when, “dramaturgy invites spectator/participants to adopt a liminal sensibility that encourages the transcendence of everyday social boundaries” (137). This kind of transcendence is directly linked with the aforementioned concept of critical catharsis; combining the critical analysis stimulated by heightened levels of spectatorial agency with the emotional investment of cathartic engagement. I argue that critical catharsis can be successfully achieved through the intimate nature of one-on-one performance if such performance is ethically established through the transparency of the contract created between performer and spectator/participant.

Edinborough argues that there is an inherent dramaturgy within the concept of intimacy in theatrical practice, “Theatre is a medium where invisible works are rooted in visible objects, where the material becomes metaphor, and where the intimate and personal are made universal” (3). Intimacy has become a widely sought after commodity of current immersive performances, creating a buzz on social media and private forums dedicated to mapping out where one-on-ones occur. Relaying, comparing and contrasting unique individual experiences shared in one-on-one moments has created active communication in online communities devoted to piecing together a complete narrative through moments only the chosen few experience. Rachel Zerihan notes in a 2006 article dedicated to One-on-one immersive interactions:

One to One performance foregrounds subjective personal narratives that define-and seek to redefine- who we are, what we believe and how we act and re-act. Refused the inherent anonymity that traditionally structures the shield of mass
spectatorship, in One to One we are lifted out of the passive role of audience member and re-positioned into an activated state of witness or collaborator, or more subtly energized into “acting” voyeur. (Zerihan)

I argue that there are two primary reasons that intimacy has become such a sought after commodity within immersive experiences. The first is attributed to the cultural shift inciting the paradox between the distancing of physical socialization and the collaboration of digital connecting in the Internet age. The second reason I argue one-on-ones have generated so much attention in immersive theatre is based in the level of agency attained in one-on-one performances that widely exceeds the agency allocated throughout the majority of current immersive performances. In an age where communication rests at our fingertips, with a multiplicity of avenues in which to digitally interact, form relationships and engage in discussion with other human beings, being physically present with another human being is no longer a concrete necessity for day-to-day existence. This is not to say that one-on-one interaction between friends and colleagues no longer exists in everyday life, it is only to point out that the form of interaction we once perceived as conventional or customary is now often only utilized when obligated or truly sought after out of intimate desire. With the ever-present and convenient options of Skype, Google hangout, email and social media, digital interaction has become as familiar if not more habitual than physically present interaction. With an increasing overlap in our digital and non-digital relationships and communications, it is obvious that individual time and effort are now dispersed between real world and digital interactions. This cultural phenomenon has forced society to reevaluate the concept of “live” interaction, thus changing the way narrative is delivered in the twenty-first century.

According to an article Larry Rosen of California State University contributed in the
Wall Street Journal, “Psychologists define social capital, or the benefit we derive from social interactions, in two ways: bonding and the more superficial bridging. Research shows that virtual-world friends provide mostly bridging social capital, while real-world friends provide bonding social capital” (Rosen).

Rosen validates this point through a recent study he conducted with students at California State University in collaboration with the psychology and sociology departments. Rosen explains the results of his analysis on empathy through virtual media: “In one study we found that while empathy can be dispensed in the virtual world, it is only one-sixth as effective in making the recipient feel socially supported compared with empathy proffered in the real world. A hug feels six times more supportive than an emoji” (Rosen).

Rosen fears that attention is thriving towards the digital sphere accompanied by a significant decline in the kinds of physically present human interactions that are essential to our overall psychological and emotional health. Such fears are proven valid through Terri H. Chan’s 2014 studies entitled, Facebook and its effects on users' empathic social skills and life satisfaction: a double-edged sword effect. Chan’s surveyed studies sought to explore whether social media enhanced or suppressed users interpersonal skills. The study ultimately showed that extraversion and empathetic social skills are negatively affected by digital socialization (278). Sociology scholars have argued that the decrease in body-to-body sociability increases a desire for social isolation, creating a displacement effect that makes an individual more comfortable with digital interaction and less attuned to common social skills. However, a survey study from sociologists, Leopoldina Fortunati, Sakari Taiplae and Federico de Luca actually proved that a slight increase in sociability and social skills is a better representation of the overall affect of the Internet (Fortunati et al). The primary difference in sociability that these scholars found was that
though a rise in social behavior was obvious in the Internet age, socializing was primarily happening digitally through online mediums, in less intimate (body-to-body) encounters.

Rosen’s analysis of intimacy in the digital age supports the idea that the human desire for intimacy, not being met in the digital sphere, could potentially explain spectator/participants’ fascination with one-on-one performances in immersive events. Though in many ways I agree that the desire for deeper connection, physical human contact and socially supporting empathy weigh in to the Internet Native’s attraction to one-on-one performance, I argue that the differing way in which current immersive practices acquiesce spectatorial agency in one-on-one moments of immersive events is primarily responsible for generating avid response.

In a 2014 study conducted by a high school drama teacher, Mark Richardson set out to decipher the impact mobile devices and digital interaction had on student’s theatrical interests. Richardson found that, “the freedom of choice and control that students associate with their use of smartphones…shapes the way in which they experience and respond to live theatre” (Lengacher “Mobile Technologies”). Cyberpsychology and behavioral specialists Dr. Dominic Madell and Steven Muncer conducted a study in 2007 finding surveyed results detecting that social media users vastly prefer media communication because it affords them more control over the interaction (Madell et al 138). This control, or sense of agency, is what I suggest to be the primary factor of one-on-one performance popularity in immersive theatre. I argue that the spectatorial agency conceded in both Third Rail Project and Punchdrunk’s work is at its peak in one-on-one encounters, thus motivating Internet Natives in search of an individual voice, choice or intimate interaction to specifically seek them out.

In Third Rail Project’s *Sweet and Lucky*, each spectator encounters one specific and strictly scripted one-on-one rendezvous. At some point in the cycled progression of the
performance, each spectator is taken into a closet sized room and asked to wait until they are led out. In this room, the spectator is alone, left with no designated task but allowed to look at immovable objects in a confined, dimly lit space awaiting a turn for the one-on-one encounter. Eventually, a performer opens the door and takes the hand of the spectator, leading them across an artificial “frozen lake” beneath twinkle lights representing stars. In my personal encounter within this moment, I was moved by the intimate act of having a performer hold my hand.

Edinborough notes, “Physical contact from the performer disrupts the empathetic mode of engagement established in the conventional modes of spectatorship found in theatre” (126). However, I argue that this disruption of the traditional convention acted as a positive addition to the overall capacity for empathetic response human beings innately relate to within intimate environments.

The performer then asks the same set of questions to each spectator, such as whether or not they believe in fate or true love. The moment is incredibly short, but tender, and this one-to-one interaction is the only time a spectator is invited to speak freely to a performer. Each individual spectator is allocated this specific one-on-one moment, and led to believe they are individually immersed within an authentically unique encounter in the overall promenade piece. However, each spectator is asked the exact same scripted questions and allotted a stringent amount of time to respond. I argue that this is a feigned sense of intimacy as well as a feigned sense of agency allocated to performers as ultimately the interaction has no impact on the internal dramaturgy or inherent narrative of the performance piece. As the artifice of the theatrical reality within the one-on-one moment was exposed through the overtly scripted dialogue in the interaction and the transparent time limit allocated, it became clear that I was being manipulated into feeling important or special within the work. This is a dangerous mode of
intimacy as it leads to an inherent distrust of where the performance is leading a spectator and an awareness of not only manipulated sensory and emotional engagement, but a manipulation of agential empowerment. I argue that because scripted and strictly timed intimacy, as well as feigned agency, can detach a spectator from the theatrical reality by revealing the artifice of the theatrical reality, this kind of one-on-one performance actually works in opposition of evoking critical catharsis.

Third Rail Project has become widely renown for the intimate nature of their most popular immersive piece, *Then She Fell*. Allowing only fifteen audience members admittance for each performance, *Then She Fell* can be viewed as an immersive experiment in the power of one-on-one performances. In an interview with Frank Rose, co-founder of Third Rail Projects, Tom Pearson, notes that in *Then She Fell*,

> You are at times completely surrounded or directly engaged with the performers, and also in our case, engaged with the tastes, smells and textures that we provide. Immersive theater can exist anywhere on the spectrum in terms of the way it deals with audience participation, audience agency, or how the fourth wall is dealt with. In *Then She Fell*, we chose to meticulously guide our audiences through the world, so each performance/audience experience is carefully crafted for each individual… It surrounds you and gets into all your senses. Even if you don't understand one bit of the narrative, you still walk away as if from a dream. It permeates you in some way and you are affected by it even if you can't quantify it. (Deep Media)

The intimate nature of *Then She Fell* allows spectators to enter rooms alone and interact with individual performers throughout the performance, however unlike *Sleep No More*, the
experience is still executed in promenade fashion as each individual spectator is specifically led along their journey, unable to navigate at will. Though moments of intimacy are established throughout, I argue that the same issue arises with Then She Fell as noted in Sweet and Lucky. The rigid structure of the performance overrides the agency of the individual spectator, forcing the spectator to engage in timed sessions of seeming intimacy with a feigned sense of agential authority that ultimately reveals the artifice of the immersive theatrical reality. Edinborough agrees, “One-to-one performance demands the creation of a dramaturgy that focuses directly on the interaction between the performer and the spectator/participant” (129). Pearson believes the structure set in place to solidify the performed narrative is the most important aspect of Third Rail’s work:

Because it's so intimate, everything is always new (both a blessing and a curse). Every audience member has the potential to respond in a new way, and each scene can be a real collaboration to some extent. That's exciting, but it also means you have to train differently and be prepared for a wide palette of responses. It also means the structure you are working in must be very clearly defined and solid so your performance is supported. Structure is everything. (Deep Media)

I argue that the overtly apparent structure potentially prohibits spectators from engaging critically or cathartically within the work, as every navigational decision is predetermined and each interaction scripted almost identically from one spectator to the next. As Edinborough argues, “Within one-to-one performance, the spectator/participant cannot feel that he is simply watching the performer, assessing his character or persona as a representational object. Instead, the structure of performance demands a response to the performer’s presence as a subject within the work” (131).
It seems that in structuring the performance, Pearson trains his performers to continually redirect spectator’s responses back to the scripted, planned interactions. The problematic nature of this kind of spectatorial agency is that spectators are inherently aware that they have no real power or control within the theatrical reality; they are completely controlled by the structures in place to navigate the narrative accordingly. I argue that the lack of allocated agency for spectators to actually contribute to the dramaturgy of the rigidly structured narrative is what makes the intimacy of Third Rail Projects’ work feel feigned or unauthentic to Internet Natives.

Edinborough suggests, “One of the factors that diminishes a performance’s capacity for structuring intimate relationships between performer and spectator/participant is found in the asymmetrical relationships established in theatrical space” (129). With an unstable power dynamic between creator and spectator in regards to the dramaturgical composition of the work, the intimacy achieved in Third Rail’s immersive work falls into a passive dynamic closely resembling traditional theatrical spectatorship. More importantly, I argue that the promenade techniques employed by Third Rail Projects actually prohibits the potential for creating and sustaining communitas for Internet Natives within the piece, as spectators are prohibited from directly interacting with one another. Edinborough notes that, “the meta-levels of aesthetic engagement demanded by theatrical space promote a reflective distance that diminishes the intimacy found between participants” (129). This is an important point because so often scholars focus on the intimacy achieved between performer and participant in immersive work and refrain from specifically analyzing the intimacy achieved between spectator/participants and their peers. The latter is essential in creating communitas within the theatrical reality as well as sustaining communitas that continues to transcend reality itself through online mediums. By leading groups, separating individuals, and setting up an internal structural component of silent spectators, the
exploratory and social elements necessary for communitas to be achieved amongst Internet Natives are directly denied, resulting in identical individual experiences as opposed to a communally created narrative that holds potential for lasting affect. Edinborough argues,

At its best, one to one performance enables a mode of interaction that allows intimacy to be experienced within the dialectical space of theatre through providing the spectator/participant with a status equivalent to that of the performer within the dramaturgy of the work. This means that the spectator/participant’s sense of reality in theatrical space is established in dialogue with the performer. (131)

The two examples of Third Rail Project’s work previously examined offer intimate interactions with performers via one-on-one encounters, but do not explicitly allow spectators to achieve significant contribution to the dramaturgy of the piece. The argument could be made that in certain instances of Third Rail’s one-on-one encounters, the spectator is invited to engage with the theatrical conventions of characters and narrative, and in doing so is asked to occupy an undefined and vague role within the piece. The creation of this “role” and the interaction allotted with direct characters could be contested as a contribution to the piece’s dramaturgy. However I argue that if individual spectator’s differing presences within the performance yield identical results, their contribution to the finalized dramaturgy of the piece is ultimately rendered mute and disregarded in the grand scheme of the performance.

The final immersive performance I would like to analyze in terms of spectatorial agency and intimacy is Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*. *Sleep No More* has become renown for it’s vastly intricate design as well as the freedom given to spectators to roam at will, exploring the rich environment spread extensively throughout five floors of a warehouse space. In this way,
Punchdrunk differentiates their work from that of Third Rail Projects, as the piece avoids promenade techniques throughout the performance, until eventually spectators are corralled to view the final scene of the show together. Edinborough notes,

In Punchdrunk’s work, the spectator’s freedom to move through space dictates that he experiences a different narrative journey from his peers. He is given a choice with regard to his movement through space; however, the ways in which his movements and decisions might affect the actions of the performers are somewhat limited. Instead, the spectator/participant contributes to the dramaturgy of the piece by creating a collage from the pieces of drama he finds as he walks through scenic space. (125)

This is the separation between Punchdrunk’s work and the work of Third Rail Projects, as in *Sleep No More* participants are allowed to contribute to their personal interpretation of the dramaturgy of the piece through choosing their own path, but in *Sweet and Lucky*, for instance, participants are led through the space with no choice as to the direction or way in which they contribute to the dramaturgy in any way. I would argue that these two particular case studies accurately represent the differentiation between promenade theatre labeled as immersive experience and environmental theatre labeled as immersive experience. Though both companies attempt to employ immersive elements within their work, the quality of spectatorial agency allotted inhibits spectators/participants from ultimately affecting the narrative of the piece, therefore still adhering to the inherent contracts of traditional spectatorship that have proven less affective for Internet Natives. Punchdrunk claims that their performances create a, “unique theatrical experience where the lines between space, performer and spectator are constantly shifting” (*Punchdrunk.com*). However, I argue that this ambitious description of their work is
overstated as participants are left with insufficient agency in Punchdrunk’s work to contribute or experience these aforementioned shifts in “space, performer and spectator”. As Edinborough observes: “The barriers imposed by silence and the mask essentially function as a kind of fourth wall-dictating a spectatorial rather than authorial role for the participant. In this way, I contend that Punchdrunk’s work does not move as far from a conventional approach to theatrical reality as they claim” (126).

I agree with Edinborough’s claim that the masking of spectators and rules implemented to keep audience members from speaking indeed creates the same fourth-wall effect as traditional theatrical performance. The conventions that Punchdrunk sets in place with the use of the mask and the demands for absolute silence create a problematic paradigm in allowing participants/spectators to establish clear relationships with the characters performed, or distinguish their own contribution to the narrative at play. Josephine Machon argues in *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, that Punchdrunk’s work is actually a visceral form of participatory engagement that synaesthetically speaks to a spectator’s corporeality in an intricately designed performance space (68). However, I believe that focusing simply on the visceral aspects of a participants experience as opposed to the participant’s ultimate agency and voice in the overall dramaturgical schema of the narrative is an inaccurate depiction of the true potential and importance of contemporary immersive work. In each of the previous examples of current immersive work created by Third Rail Projects and Punchdrunk, there is a clear, set, aesthetic divide between spectator and performer, and just as in Third Rail Project’s work, this distinction only seems to blur when physical contact between the two occurs. Moments engaging direct contact with performers is a commodity in Punchdrunk’s performances. Such moments that have been recorded and tracked on social media forums as
audience participants literally hunt for these one-on-one bits of intimacy and direct contact. Hundreds of spectators have admitted online that they return to performances of *Sleep No More* solely in order to achieve coveted admittance into these one-on-one’s.

In my personal experience of seeing *Sleep No More* in New York City in 2016, I was unwittingly granted one of these sought after intimate encounters with a performer. Amidst a warehouse floor outfitted with an elaborate labyrinth of tree branches depicting the setting of Birnam Wood from Shakespeare’s classic, *Macbeth*, lays a hidden straw cottage. As I made my way through the woods to the cottage I noticed a group of ten avid *Sleep No More* fans sitting patiently outside the cottage awaiting the known one-on-one interaction that lay within. Upon stepping up to peak through the shining slats of straw, a woman opened the window to the hut and stared directly at me. As the other spectators around me pushed and shoved their way to the front of the window, the mysterious woman never took her eyes off of me. She opened the door to the hut, stepped outside and made her way through the swarm of eager spectators begging to be transformed into active participants of the narrative. When she reached me, she took out her hand and closed it around my own, running her other hand up and down my arm, attentively examining my visible tattoos before leading me past the other annoyed spectators and into the hut, closing the door gently behind us and shutting the window others peered through. Once inside, the woman tenderly removed my mask and touched my face. This is the first and only time throughout the entire performance I was allocated the agency to exist in this theatrical reality without anonymity.

The performer took her time examining my face, slowly placing my mask on her table as if it was a part of an elaborate ritual. She then poured a small cup of tea, stirred it with a spoon, pulled a seat up next to me and began to spoon feed me tea, continuing to examine my facial
responses with captivated attention. Halfway through the cup of tea, delivered one spoonful at a time, she began to speak to me, telling me the most terrifying and symbolic bedtime story I have ever heard, in the most calm and soothing voice. Though she never invited me to speak, nor instructed me to remain silent, her touch resonated with me throughout the remainder of the performance experience. After finishing her story, brushing my hair with her hands, and again running her fingers methodically over my tattoos, she gently placed my mask back on my face, guided me out of the hut, watching as I made my way back through the labyrinth of trees. At the edge of the “woods”, I turned back to her, expecting she would bring in another spectator to repeat the process, however instead she stood silently returning my gaze, waved to me from afar before returning to her cottage and, to the dismay of all awaiting spectators, closed the door.

This one-on-one performance is by far the most intimate and authentic moment I have ever experienced in an immersive theatrical reality. Though I was not prompted to speak, I was also not explicitly denied this agency. In that intimate moment, I was truly rendered speechless by the intimate nature of the performer’s touch and attentive gaze. For that moment, I truly felt as if I was the only individual this character wanted or needed to interact with, giving me an unidentified, but seemingly imperative role within the dramaturgical structure of the piece. Edinborough argues, “While one-to-one performance does not remove the tension of the performer’s duality within theatrical space, it does force the spectator to relate to that duality with a sense of equivalence” (130).

The authenticity of intimacy I felt in that one-on-one moment was guided by the equivalent nature of the interaction. There was no power dynamic in play, no time limit the performer revealed rushing toward, no rules delegated to me before entering or after leaving. There was only an intimate and unique connection between performer and spectator. At the end
of the show, as aforementioned, all spectators are herded by performers and crewmembers
dressed in black to attend the final scene of the play. As I watched Macbeth’s death, I felt arms
caress around my stomach as someone held me close to them. Assuming it was my partner, I
turned to tell him about my adventure in the space, but staring back at me was the woman I
encountered in the Birnam cottage. She had sought me out of the crowd and come to hold me
through the final scene. After the scene ended, she took my hand and ran, leading me back to the
liminal speakeasy area where the experience began. When we reached the bar, she turned me
towards her, gently lifted my mask once again in the same ritualistic way, this time placing it in
my hands then folding my fingers around it. She gazed into my eyes and touched my face just as
she had done in the hut before graciously kissing my cheek and leaving me in the liminal space
where I had begun my journey. I argue that this kind of intimacy and attention proved to be
anything but feigned. That specific performer chose me, connected with me in this theatrical
reality, then sought me out to reconnect and walk me back towards my own reality when the
performance was over, leaving me with an established connection I would never forget.

Though I never spoke to this performer, I felt more attached and more empathetically
invested in her seemingly insignificant character than any leading actor/actress in the piece. In
regards to the authentic intimacy and abundance of agency I felt when interacting with this
performer, I concede Edinborough’s claim, “Through giving the spectator/participant the
opportunity to relate to the performer within a clear performative context, touch simply becomes
another means of communication” (130). Though I never verbally communicated with this
individual, through her touch I felt as if she knew me personally, and desired to know me more
intimately. This intimacy was successfully achieved by highlighting the subjectivity of the
performer while stabilizing the subjective experience of the participant (me). Edinborough denotes that,

By foregrounding the subjective presence of the performer and spectator/participant in space, one to one performance is able to highlight both the material and social reality at the core of theatre in a unique way. Although the form contains considerable room for play, providing a context for performative behavior from both performer and audience, the co-dependent nature of the relationship between parties dictates that all elements of performance are, on some level, experienced as real. (131)

During the intimate one-on-one encounter I had with this performer, I was all the while fully aware that she was an actress, I a spectator, and the theatrical reality we inhabited together was a work of elaborated fiction. However, the intimacy achieved in this moment was experienced as real because of the spectatorial agency established within the co-dependent and equivalent nature of the relationship created. In this moment performer and participant shared in equal respect and fascination with one another, evoking critical catharsis for the spectator (myself). In this way, one-on-ones create a nonpareil experience through their innate form which leads to critical engagement and authentic emotional response between performer and participant. As Edinborough articulates,

During one-to-one performance, the spectator/participant imagines the way in which the performer feels while simultaneously taking an active role within the performance. In this way, the nature of catharsis is experienced as an echo within one-to-one performance. Not only is the spectator/participant encouraged to
experience catharsis by living affectively through the performer’s experience, he is also forced to consider his own position within the drama. (136)

In this way, the participant begins to question their own active impact on the presence of the performer through their idiosyncratic presence in the theatrical work. The truly transformation possibilities of intimate one-on-one performance, driven by evoking critical catharsis, is the participant’s enterprise to think more about themselves, in the reflection of the experience, than the given narrative. By bringing about an awareness of the reality of both the performer and spectator’s vulnerability in the intimate state of one-on-one encounter, the intimacy actually drives the insight of the spectator inward, evoking an intuitive state of critical, self-reflective catharsis. I believe that Edinborough senses this same powerful possibility through intimate encounters. He states, “The choice to engage in an unnecessary act of intimacy can invoke a kind of transcendence in which both the performer and the spectator/participant are able to engage imaginatively with the broader transformative potential for their actions” (134).

This encounter in the woods is not the only direct interaction I received from the immersive performance. After a staged and massively attended satanic ritual in the dance hall, a naked male “witch” forcefully grabbed my arm and dragged me to an empty shower stall where he sat and rinsed himself before pointing at his clothes and insisting I dress him while other spectators watched. This is a specific moment of intimacy that forces me to agree with Edinborough’s assessment that, “The intimacy of physical contact is placed in direct competition with the cognitive distance of spectorial empathy” (128). In this moment, I did not feel connected or comfortable; I was suddenly aware of the reality of the situation I had been forced into. I was prompted to stand inches away from a naked man’s genitals and expected to indulge in the intimate acts of drying off and dressing a stranger I had never spoken with or encountered
before. This discommodious experience pulled me out of the theatrical reality I had been completely immersed in, and instead led me to contemplate the complicated power dynamic I was being subjugated to navigate without warning. Suddenly I was ripped from the haptic engagement of my former intimate encounter and felt a problematic lack of agency as there seemed to be no way to escape the unspecified role I had found myself forced to play. Can forcing a spectator into close and discomposed proximity truly be labeled as interactive intimacy? In this moment of interaction I found myself in agreement with the problematic nature of Punchdrunk’s interactive strategies Edinborough points out in *Theatrical Reality*.

The experience of being touched places the spectator in direct contact with the literal and metaphorical barrier of the performer’s skin. While certain aspects of experience become shared, the spectator’s imagined sense of the performer’s subjectivity is replaced by the physical reality of his otherness. In this way, the corporeal immersion of Punchdrunk’s work creates a layer of engagement that highlights the physicality and liveness of performance while disrupting the coherent perception of the scenic space. (127)

Unfortunately, this is was not the only discommodious or hazardous interaction I was subjected to in experiencing *Sleep No More*. As an avid Shakespeare buff, I was determined to follow the narrative of *Macbeth* within the immersive space to determine if the story was accurately told without the use of Shakespeare’s words. After identifying the leading character, I followed the performer closely to every level of the warehouse the actor sprinted off to. As aforementioned, I have tattoos covering my arms, so even behind the forced anonymity of the trademark Punchdrunk mask, I proved to be an identifiable spectator. The actor playing Macbeth noticed me following him closely and throughout the performance continually made an effort to
brush against me, pull me with him to his next location as other spectators followed, or even force me between him and other characters in aggressive scenes. Initially, I was honored at the opportunity of being granted such specific attention at a performance where hundreds of masked spectators were aching to be noticed and utilized in interaction. However, after multiple encounters with the character, I found myself in agreement with Edinborough’s contention:

Touch should be considered as a medium for shared experience; however, the manner in which experience is shared through touch is limited to a particular kind of co-affective response. Because of this, the shared experience associated with touch precedes the complex cognitive operations necessary for recognizing a character or persona within dramatic or narrative context. (126)

Though the shared experience of touch between the performer and myself initially excited me and drew me into the narrative, the physical interaction gradually became more forceful and frightening as the narrative continued and the character of Macbeth began to lose his mind. After murdering an ally, the bloodstained Macbeth began a fitful dance in the “woods”, while spectators surrounded him in close proximity. After finishing his erratic dance, the performer forced his way through the crowd of spectators, his eyes fixated on me. Pushing his stage-blood covered hands against my chest, the performer shoved me into a nearby wall then forced me to the ground. The performer playing Macbeth then crawled on top of my body, lifted my mask and stared fiercely into my eyes before craning my neck to the side and making loud discordant whispering sounds in my ear. Finally the performer forcefully thrust my mask back over my face and ran, disappearing into the stairwell leading to another level of the space. As spectators took off anxiously after the character, I lay on the floor, tears in my eyes, stage blood covering my exposed chest and mask, feeling violated and afraid. This act of interactive,
physical “intimacy” became in no way associated with theatrical reality for me and instead encouraged my avoidance of the main character for the remainder of the performance. Suddenly I was aware of the reality of the power imbalance at play in this immersive space and shocked to find that my emotional rise of fear was in no way cathartic or connected to the narrative embedded in the character’s actions, but instead a direct reflection of my own lack of agency to defend myself against the forceful advances of a man who had just mounted me without my consent.

Edinborough notes that, “Intimacy depends on a framework in which one’s subjectivity is valued and respected in a way that is not well demonstrated in Punchdrunk’s work” (128). Based on my personal encounters with Punchdrunk’s Sleep No More, I would say this is a blanket understatement. Intimacy is directly linked to consent, which is inherently linked to agency and the power dynamics in play. A power imbalance will always force intimacy in an immersive space to become ethically problematic. This specific moment I shared with the performer playing Macbeth raises the ethical implications of what Richard Schechner refers to in his book, The Future of Ritual, as “dark play”. Schechner defines “dark play” or “deep play” as possibly conscious playing, but playing in the dark, “when some or even all of the players don’t know they are playing” (36). Schechner explains that dark play occurs when “contradictory realities coexist”, when order is subverted, rules are purposefully broken. Schechner contends that, “Dark play’s inversions are not declared or resolved; its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess and gratification” (The Future of Ritual, 36). Schechner goes on to identify dark play as a mode of play that involves intentional confusion, only demands make believe on occasion and is often “physically risky”. He insists that dark play forces players to play our alternative selves and contends, “The play frame may be so disturbed or disrupted that the player themselves are not
sure if they are playing or not— their actions become play retroactively: the events are what they are, but by telling these events, by reperforming them as narratives, they are cast as play” (The Future of Ritual 37).

After returning from the performance, I personally reached out to the company, explaining my position as a scholar and my intention to write about the specific moment of the performance I encountered and the ethical implications of such play. In my email, I asked the company to put me in contact with the actor so I could better understand the choices made in his direct physical interaction with spectators and the ethical obligations an immersive performer takes into account within the context of these interactions. Punchdrunk refused to put me in contact with the performer for an interview and insisted that it was necessary to protect the secrets of their immersive success. I was given no apology or further avenues of contact, only an increase in the amount of digital advertisements sent to my personal email account.

I argue that Punchdrunk’s resolve to endorse this kind of dark play in immersive performance is ethically irresponsible. Obviously most theatrical endeavors have an emotionally manipulative or coercive intention, but in crossing into physically forceful interaction with unknowing participants, manipulative maneuvers through unstable power dynamics create problematic psychological responses. As Rose notes in an interview on his personal website dedicated to scholarship on immersive performance, “all entertainment is about being manipulated at some level. If you're not being manipulated properly, you're not going to have a very good time” (artofimmersion.com). The ethical implications of theatrical immersion and coercive contact must be re-visited within Punchdrunk’s work in order to establish meaningful evocation of critical catharsis and sustained communitas. Edinborough suggests that, “One of the key elements of any kind of one-to-one performance is its associated risk. Because the
spectator/participant is forced to give something of himself to the performer, the choice to even take part in the performance raises the stakes of interaction in a way that is rarely seen in conventional theatre” (134).

The real question at hand is how can immersive practices bridge the delicate dramaturgical balance between the agency necessary to ensure the authentic intimacy constructed and boundaries protecting ethically unacceptable and unexpected eruptions of psychologically dangerous dark play? The answer to this viable question can be found in Edinborough’s evaluation of a necessary transparent contract between performers and spectators that identifies their role and agential composition within the dramaturgical structure of the performance piece, “I contend that it is only through judging the transparency of the contract between actor and spectator that the political and social values of staging reality can be measured” (98). I argue that the transparency of this contract can resolve the problematic dimensions of dark play represented in Punchdrunk’s work as well as expand the agential assessment within the work of Third Rail Project. Ultimately, I assert that the only advantageous and ethical way to employ twenty-first century spectatorial agency in immersive theatrical realities is to re-evaluate the spectator’s allotted contributions to a performance’s narrative. I believe the avenue for evoking critical catharsis and unlocking the potential for sustaining communitas lies at the intersection of intimate participatory interaction and expanded spectatorial agency converting to audience co-authorship.
CHAPTER IV:

Digital and Gaming Agency in Live-Action Immersive and Interactive Events

In *Reality is Broken*, Jane McGonigal utilizes game theory in order to unpack and identify the ways in which gaming strategies actually prove to enhance human experience and real world problem solving skills. She notes that compared to our best-designed gaming experiences, reality is disconnected, seemingly trivial, unambitious, unrewarding and unproductive (McGonigal 348). By analyzing current immersive events structured as gameplay through the lens of McGonigal’s gaming theory strategies, this chapter seeks to identify the level of agency granted in immersive gaming events. By evaluating the agential allocation and narrative construction within escape rooms, and interactive projects conducted by Boda Borg, Five Wits, and Meow Wolf this chapter sets out to determine if the agency granted in such experiences is more conducive to the needs of the 21st century spectator in comparison with the immersive theatrical performances discussed in the previous chapter. Six crucial elements for bringing critical catharsis to fruition and sustaining stable communitas within theatrical spaces are brought to light in the discussion of these events. Through identifying the factors of eustress, collaboration, fiero, flow, thirspace and transcendence correlating throughout these interactive events, this chapter breaks down the advantage of their united utilization in creating critical catharsis and thus establishing the possibility of stable communitas. McGonigal argues that,

Game developers know better than anyone else how to inspire extreme effort and reward hard work. They know how to facilitate cooperation and collaboration at previously unimagined scaled. And they are continuously innovating new ways to motivate players to stick with harder challenges, for longer, and in much bigger
groups. These crucial 21st century skills can help all of us find new ways to make a deep and lasting impact on the world around us. (13)

McGonigal remarks that gamers are desperate to know, “Where in the real world, is that gamer sense of being fully alive, focused, and engaged in every moment? Where is the gamer feeling of power, heroic purpose, and community?” (3). While our everyday, modern reality might not be engineered to maximize our human potential, virtual environments serve to expand our potential to problem solve, critically engage and test skill levels we may not have the advantage or opportunity to exercise in everyday life, while establishing powerful social bonds discovered in these virtual mediums. Through negotiating decision making and forming strategic alliances, virtual gaming opens up the possibility for heightened levels of agency as well as a sense of virtual communitas.

The proof of participant engagement lies in surveyed statistics of American virtual game usage. McGonigal notes that 183 million Americans are active gamers who inhabit virtual gaming worlds for at least 13 hours a week, “creating a massive virtual silo of cognitive effort, emotional energy, and collective attention lavished on game worlds instead of on the real world” (3-4). The Entertainment Software Association annually accumulates gaming statistics in America and identified that in 2016, that there is an average of 1.7 gamers living in each U.S. household, the average player being 35 years old. 48% of the most frequent gamers play social games and the best selling games fell under the categories of strategy and role-playing games (Gallagher 4).

The popularity of gaming is in no way unique to the digital-encompassing societal structure of the twenty-first century. As early as 425B.C. geographer and writer, Herodotus, wrote his magnum opus entitled, The Histories. Herodotus tells a story in the opening book of
The Histories of an eighteen-year famine the Lydians experienced under the reign of Atys in Asia Minor. The Lydians devised a plan in order to sustain survival by fasting while playing games for an entire day, then abstaining from games while eating the next day, switching on and off (Herodotus 182). Modern historians have quibbled over whether the stories of Herodotus were factual or mythical, however this story makes a valid point about the nature of game-play: It has the ability to engage our minds in such an exhaustive way that pain, suffering, fear, boredom and anxiety can be temporarily displaced, to the extent of becoming endurable. McGonigal notes, “We often think of immersive gameplay as ‘escapist’, a kind of passive retreat from reality. But through the lens of Herodotus’ history, we can see how games could be a purposeful escape, a thoughtful and active escape and most importantly, an extremely helpful escape” (6).

McGonigal argues that building up a wealth of virtual experience proves to teach players about their true selves, such as what motivates them or allowing exploration testing what their true strengths are. In this way, she claims that virtual games are “the most important medium of the twenty-first century” (12). Game developers have learned how to harness the power of inspiring extreme effort with formulaic psychological reward systems and determined successful ways to facilitate collaboration within the endless connective structure of the digitally interactive internet landscape. Mcgonigal notes that our everyday reality has become so convoluted with formulaic expectations, making accomplishments seem medial, “Compared with games, reality is too easy. Games challenge us with voluntary obstacles and help us put our personal strengths to better use” (22). What McGonigal is noting defines a distinction between gaming and reality that reaches beyond the obvious notions of exploring fantastic and fictitious realities in comparison with accustomed environment and habitual occurrences of reality. What truly sets
games apart from reality is the valuable insight into oneself found when one is allowed to explore, decide, socialize, create, succeed and fail for oneself without the unstable consequences of reality. In *Reality is Broken*, McGonigal sets out to prove that gaming is fulfilling in a way that reality is not, thus harnessing the power of game design in reality has the potential for enhancing human cognitive ability, social interactions and overall happiness,

The truth is this: in today’s society, computer and video games are fulfilling genuine human needs that the real world is currently unable to satisfy. Games are providing rewards that reality is not. They are teaching and inspiring and engaging us in ways that reality is not. They are bringing us together in ways that reality is not. And unless something dramatic happens to reverse the resulting exodus, we’re fast on our way to becoming a society in which a substantial portion of our population devotes its greatest efforts to playing games, creates its best memories in game environments, and experiences its biggest successes in game worlds. (4)

Gaming is a step beyond common forms of passive entertainment that can still be enjoyed leisurely within a player’s own home. Passive entertainment refers to low engagement such as watching television. According to McGonigal, humans use passive entertainment to help us calibrate feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities of reality, but instead of aiding in our recovery or balancing our emotions, passive entertainment overcompensates and transforms all of our anxiety into boredom, leading to depression. Though attending a movie at a movie theater or going to see a live performance enhance both activity and socialization through the moments of interaction dispersed throughout, passive engagement is still present because there is no active agency at play in these forms of narrative. Psychologists report that the highest levels of interest
and positive moods both during and after an activity occurred when subjects were involved in playing interactive video games (Gregory 160). Though adequate fears have been established concerning the associated risks of the effects virtual gaming have on both human cognition and sociability, the potential benefits of immersing oneself in a social, cognitive and emotional virtual experience have proven substantial. Virtual gaming demands cognitive engagement, offers motivational assistance teaching resilience when confronted with failure, opens up the possibility for prosocial behavior through connecting virtual presences and gives players a laboratory to explore mood management through evoking emotions. The combination of these factors foster the development of real-world skillsets while providing an outlet for real-world frustrations. In this way, virtual gaming experiences can be compared with the benefits Benjamin Franklin observed in *The Morals of Chess*,

> The game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement. Several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired or strengthened by it, so as to become habits, ready on all occasions . . . we learn by Chess the habit of not being discouraged by present bad appearances in the state of our affairs, the habit of hoping for a favorable change, and that of persevering in the search of resources. (Franklin 154)

Engaging in play promotes cognitive stimulation by demanding active decision-making that essentially reflects the results determining the outcome of the game. It is the agency allotted to contribute to the determination of the result of one’s own success or failure that ultimately drives the player’s energy and effort within the structure of a game. As play theorist Brian Sutton Smith argues, this exercising of power in play is even observed in solitary play, “In modern times, however, the concept of power has also been applied in play theory to solitary play: the
child plays because he enjoys the power of being the cause, or because he doesn’t have power
and in play is seeking empowerment as a kind of compensation or wish fulfillment” (The
Ambiguity of Play 75). We live in a digital age where individuals are encouraged to be the cause
in online avenues and digitally social mediums, however “reality” continues to treat individuals
as a cog within an intricate system. The duality of these two existences is something each
individual faces daily in the twenty-first century and the agency obtained in playing within
virtual spaces is becoming more and more attractive to a digitally native culture than popular
passive entertainment practices of the past. McGonigal argues, “within the limits of our own
endurance, we would rather work hard than be entertained” (33).

This assessment is proving true as the majority of Internet Natives are already gamers
who innately know and understand the structure of virtual gameplay and interaction via our
cultural obligation to be involved online. These generations have been groomed to be players, as
opposed to passive or even active observers. The virtual experience twenty-first century players
have been immersed within has utilized gaming design tools to teach individuals about their true
self through allowing a medium through which to reflect or even design a desired true self. By
encouraging players to utilize their individual strengths, gaming teaches players what motivates
them and what has the potential to make them happy through cooperative and competitive
immersive experiences. Bavelier notes, “Video games are controlled training regimens delivered
in highly motivating behavioral contexts . . . because behavioral changes arise from brain
changes, it is also no surprise that performance improvements are paralleled by enduring
physical and functional neurological remodeling” (Bavelier et al. 763).

The interactive nature of this media is allowing players to experience world-altering ways
of thinking, acting and organizing while systems react to individual player’s agential choices and
behaviors. In addition to spatial skills, scholars have speculated that digital gaming is successful in developing reasoning and problem solving skills necessary for real world success. Marc Prensky argues that playing games with open-ended problems has influenced “digital natives” and altered the way individuals embedded in digital culture problem solve (Brain Gain 28). Instead of processing information through explicit linear instruction, “digital natives” are actively problem-solving by collecting their own evidence and testing through experimentation by multitudes of trial and error (Brain Gain 32). Evidence also emerged in 2012 finding that playing any kind of video game enhances creative capacity. Using a sample of 500 twelve year old student, Jackson found that digital gaming was positively associated with creativity, while other forms of technological engagement such as cellular devices, social media and internet usage did not show any relation with enhanced creativity (Jackson et al. 212).

Another positive benefit found in the playing of video games lies in conversation with educational and behavioral studies and the classic argument between the entity theory of intelligence and the incremental theory of intelligence. The entity theory of intelligence is a form of praising students for their accomplishments by indicating that the achievement was based on their innate skill or intelligence. An example of such praise would be, “You are such a smart lady” or “Wow, athletic talent really runs in your family”. These forms of praise have been argued as counter-intuitive to an educator’s intentions because by praising a quality as if it is innate, students feel as if they have no power over their own achievements or ability to improve. I was personally encouraged through my educational certification program to promote the incremental theory of intelligence in my classroom as this form of praise establishes a belief in one’s own capacity to continuously expand one’s intelligence. In the incremental theory of intelligence, instead of praising the student directly, the educator praises the work they are doing
as they work to accomplish their goals. Isabella Granic proposes in *The Benefits of Playing Video Games*, “video games are an ideal training ground for acquiring an incremental theory of intelligence because they provide players concrete, immediate feedback regarding specific efforts players have made” (Granic et al. 71). Research by Dweck and Molden in 2005 establishes that the extent to which individuals promote these two theories of intelligences accurately predicts the level of persistence or resilience individuals exhibit in challenging situations (128). Feedback in video games is immediate and acts as a reward system to promote engagement and effort sustaining players in the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky 206). Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal engagement” refers to a motivational zone of engagement an individual operates at their fullest potential within. The ZPE is sustained by structuring tasks that balances challenge/frustration with creativity/accomplishment while adjusting feedback based on the needs and abilities of the individual. The ZPE is the gap between actual development and potential development and is often best explored through collaborative activities that utilize each individual’s strengths and test weaknesses (Cohen et al. 499). Digital Gaming services individuals in their ZPE’s while offering collaborative opportunities, both cooperative and competitive, that shape social behavior and this level of social interaction is what differentiates contemporary gaming experiences with video games of the 1990’s and early 2000’s. As of 2012, more than 70% of individuals play games socially (Gallagher).

The benefits of digital gaming have also been found in relation to mood management in cognitive and behavioral studies. Granic establishes that “research has shown on the function of traditional play, the pretend context of video games may be real enough to make the accomplishment of goals matter but also safe enough to practice controlling, or modulating, negative emotions in the service of those goals” (72). Social skills associated with digital gaming
benefits have also materialized in the form of civic engagement in social causes. Multiple studies have analyzed the link between digital gaming and civic engagement, including Amanda Lenhart’s large scale, MacArthur foundation supported U.S. study, *Teens, Video Games and Civics*, conducted for the PEW Internet and American Life project in 2008. Lenhart discovered data throughout the study showing a direct correlation with adolescents playing games such as *Guild Wars 2*, a massive multiplayer online role playing game that addresses issues of racial discrimination, cultural evolution and xenophobia, were more likely to be engaged in social movements in everyday life (Lenhart). This study shows the potential digital gaming has acquired through the techniques identified above to harness and expand not only the cognitive engagement of players, but activate civic responsibility and leadership through emotional engagement and meaningful interaction through agential choice. Digital gaming is not designed to be easy; accomplishments are not quickly attainable and require investigative critical analysis, rehearsed skill and engaged effort. However, regardless of the structure of the narrative or the amount of participants, the rise of virtual gaming proves Harvard professor, Tal Ben-Shahar’s observation that innately in human nature, “*We’re much happier enlivening time rather than killing time*” (Ben-Shahar 77).

The amount of agency experienced in video game entertainment differentiates itself from immersive theatrical performance in the way it turns traditional spectatorship on its head. When playing a video game, instead of passively spectating or participating on the fringes of a narrative, the player becomes the performer and experiences the agency of decision-maker and skill used to ultimately determine the outcome of the performance. Games are psychologically structured to activate critical cognition, adrenaline, and reward centers of the human brain, with the intention to not only entertain but immerse a player into the story they are actively helping to
create. McGonigal identifies four defining traits of a game: A goal, a feedback system, rules and voluntary participation (21). The goal establishes a sense of purpose within the game being played. Many video games begin by asking the player to first tackle the obstacle of determining what this goal is for themself by learning as they explore the virtual reality. The feedback system acts as a direct motivational response, verifying successful accomplishments, rewarding with points or responding to individual decisions made within the game by opening previously barred pathways or tasks. The rules serve within a virtual game to foster strategic thought by setting a structured reality in place that the player must navigate. Voluntary participation establishes a common ground for safe and ethical activity as well as agential social interaction.

Though I have argued in defense of the cognitive and social benefits of digital gaming in the twenty-first century, it is important to note that research has also been conducted over the past two decades to illustrate the negative psychological and behavioral effects digital gaming has the potential to produce. Studies have shown that indulgence in digital gaming can promote addiction, depression and aggression (Anderson et al. 161). For example, a large-scale survey study has found that 8% of U.S. youth (Gentile et al. 758) who play video games exhibit pathological symptoms of addiction (including damage to family, school, or psychological functioning) (Granic et al. 74). The isolated nature of digital gaming, even amidst vast online presences, has the potential to cause depression, just as the freedom of a virtual reality without sustainable consequences can create an addictive escape for players unhappy with their everyday lives. The term, Transitory public sociality, refers to positive relationships that we create with strangers. Research shows that TPS makes humans more optimistic, improves self esteem, feelings of safety and connection with our environment (Morrill, et al.231). This sounds like a positive benefit of digital gaming because connections to strangers can be made within the
virtual world, however, because these relationships between strangers often only correlate in the virtual reality, these benefits are not put forward into real life, only in the digital sphere. Meanwhile, positive interactions in the real world are plummeting. Dacher Keltner identifies a way to compare total positive and negative interactions between strangers in a given period of time within a set space called the Jen Ratio (3). Through his research, Keltner noticed that, “Signs of a loss of jen in the US are incontrovertible with a jen ratio trending towards zero”(28). This unnerving report solidifies the need for creation and stimulation of TPS through engaging events outside the virtual realm that can benefit real-world, everyday interactions. McGonigal argues, “More likely it would take a crowd, and not a single person, to effectively bump up the jen ratio. But there simply aren’t any well-established social traditions for going out and expressing gratitude or being kind to strangers together” (191).

These problematic possibilities have forced game designers and performance makers to reevaluate the way in which we utilize the beneficial factors of digital gaming while attempting to counteract the negative effects of isolation, avoidance of real-world social interaction and addiction. The results of such attempts can be seen in the rise in popularity of escape rooms as well as the work of Boda Borg, 5 Wits and Meow Wolf. These specific immersive events take advantage of the benefits realized in digital gaming and transfer the structure to live action, physically present experiences. Each of the case studies discussed below make use of two distinct elements of digital gaming; wholehearted participation and collaboration. McGonigal observes, “To participate wholeheartedly in something means to be self-motivated, self-directed, intensely interested and genuinely enthusiastic” (124). This self-directed leadership and genuine enthusiasm is granted by the agency allotted in these game-designed live experiences. Collaboration is utilized in these events through the joining of groups working together to
accomplish a common goal. McGonigal takes the concept of collaboration a step further, arguing that collaboration, “Isn’t just about achieving a goal or joining forces, its about creating something together that it would be impossible to create alone” (255). The following examples display a range of interactive possibilities, game-play and collaboration, however what is important to note about each immersive experience discussed is the way in which the events utilize gamer agency, setting them apart from the immersive performance pieces already evaluated.

The first immersive experience I would like to bring into the conversation has become widely popular in a growing experience-based economy and has multiple variations spanning throughout the country. Escape rooms have become a sought after live action, immersive experience over the past ten years. Originating in Japan in 2007, and established within the United States in 2014, Escape Rooms were designed to reflect popular online and mobile app games, such as the 2004 hit, *Crimson Room* created by Tashimitsu Takagi, that ask players to solve puzzles and crack complex codes in order to escape a room. Escape room companies have since emerged and transformed everyday spaces all over the country into mad scientist laboratories, prison cells and haunted houses that give the participant/player the agency to actively find and critically analyze hidden clues, sometimes leading to physical tasks that ultimately determine whether or not a participant/player finds their way out. Boulder escape room company, Enigma, advertises their events as,

Enigma Escape Rooms are live-action, interactive puzzles that take place inside a locked room. For 60 minutes you will be literally locked inside and challenged to escape. Find the hidden clues, uncover the secret mystery of the room, and unlock
the door. The clues are all around you, so think hard and be quick. *(Enigma Escape Rooms)*

The agency experienced by the participant/player in escape rooms is vastly different than that of previously mentioned immersive performances as the creators leave it entirely up to the player/participant as to what route they take, what information they find, and what tactics they use to solve the puzzle. The outcome of the event is entirely dependent on the actions and analysis of the players. In this way, Escape Rooms act against the dominant modes of participatory spectatorship found Punchdrunk or Third Rail Project’s work because escape rooms ask the participant to step into a specific role, tasked with solving these live-action, interactive puzzles. As Schechner observes, “play can take place anywhere at any tie engaging any number of players who may abide by or unexpectedly change the rules” *(Performance Studies 92).* The interactive play of escape rooms has a set structure of rules and game-play, however the player/participants within the experience are granted the agency to determine decision making and problem solving in whatever manner they wish within the room.

Escape rooms often operate on a strict timer, meaning participant/players have a limited amount of time to solve the intricate puzzles barricading their escape. Players are welcome to participate in groups of one to eight members, either chosen prior by the players or randomly assigned together via walk up capacity. Escape rooms offer an avenue for collaboration, however because the event is structured to allow varying numbers of participants (including solitary players), collaboration is not necessarily critical to unlocking the escape. The gaming element that escape rooms utilize most adequately is *eustress.* Eustress can be defined as a positive stress that produces adrenaline, increases blood flow to control centers of the brain, and activates reward circuitry without the force of experiencing fear or pessimism. In these ways eustress
creates an almost identical reaction within the human body as stress, however because fear does not play a factor in this kind of stress (due to the low consequence structure of the experience), eustress causes mood-boosting and invigorating surges throughout the body that add to the heightened level of experience. McGonigal notes that the fundamental difference between these two types of stress is our frame of mind (32). Eustress is created through escape rooms via the timer on the experiment determining whether successful escape is achieved or not within the constraints of the allotted time. This pressure produces adrenaline spikes in participants/players through a sense of urgency dependent on the execution of the chosen group’s collective abilities.

The interactive adventure company, Boda Borg, takes the utilization of eustress to a new level in risky, physical live action adventures. Boda Borg was founded in Sweden in the 1996, becoming one of the pioneering groups conceptualizing immersive adventures in the reality-gaming business industry. Creators tell the story of their conceptualization on their booking website, “The ingenious idea was that in an era of video games, reality television, and action movies, people would flock to a concept where they indeed participate in such activity themselves, instead of passively observing. The result is Boda Borg” (Boda Borg). Wanting to strive above the traditional expectation of spectatorial passivity, Boda Borg sets out to transport its participants/players to constructed real-world gaming environments. The company refers to the experience throughout the multiple adventures they offer as “questing”. By mimicking life-like adventuring, Boda Borg warns its audiences that they will be subjected to physically strenuous tasks and there is significant risk of injury (though most reported are minor cuts, scrapes and bruises). Participants choose their own teams of 2-5 “questers” as well as the adventure they want to begin at. Each “quest” is unaccompanied by explicit directions, so participants must quickly adapt the story they have been thrust into and the tasks they are meant
to accomplish to move forward. Through a variety of adventure scenarios such as prison escapes, haunted houses and spaceship construction, participants are forced to, “crawl, climb, jump, bounce, and think their way through cunning traps, intricate riddles, and hidden passages that try to stop their progress” (Boda Borg). Tasked with tackling a variety of physical and mental challenges, Boda Borg structures their adventure events identically to a video game. If players do not succeed in meeting certain checkpoints at levels or accomplish specific tasks, they are sent back to the beginning of the quest to try again. This fail and repeat structural system is common in video gaming design and, like the timer established in escape rooms, is essential in utilizing the pro-active associative powers of eustress.

Though eustress is maintained through questing via the consequences associated with failing a task, Boda Borg ingeniously equips the live action experience with another factor commonly utilized in digital game-design, fiero. Fiero is the Italian word for pride that game designers use to describe one of the most powerful neurochemical highs humans can experience that craves for challenges to conquer. Fiero involves firings within the reward circuitry of the brain, “including the mesocorticolimbic center, which is typically associate with reward and addiction” which creates “a craving for challenges that we can overcome, battles we can win, and dangers we can vanquish” (McGonigal 33). The more challenging an obstacle is to overcome within a digital or live-action adventure experience, the more intensely fiero is experienced by the immersant. Fiero is known as one of the most intense, primal and positive emotional experiences triggered in digital game-play and is actively sought after by playing consumers. The risk involved in Boda Borg’s questing adventures combined with the agency of decision making, consequences for failed attempts and reward of moving to corresponding levels upon successful completion create an interactive environment in which a participant/player can
obtain the complex emotional experience of fiero in a live action context. Boda Borg advertises their adventures as, “No video games, no virtual reality, no special clothing or equipment....real people, real Questing, real adrenaline and heart-pumping excitement” (Boda Borg). By simply sending participants into a “quest” without debriefing them on the specific character they are stepping into, what tasks they should be prepared for or how to ascend to the next level, Boda Borg successfully establishes a playground in which immersed participants can actively engage and play in their own created adventure. Schechner identifies the factors necessary for playing to occur from an ethnological perspective, “playing happens when there is sufficient metabolic energy, low stress, a need for stimulation, and the intelligence to support complex sequences of somewhat improvised behavior” (Performance Studies 99). In this way, play proves to be a reliable source of fiero that is eloquently utilized in Boda Borg’s questing structure.

McGonigal argues that, “Compared with games, reality is unambitious. Games help us define awe-inspiring goals and tackle seemingly impossible social missions together” (252). Boda Borg makes use of this game-design tactic of active collaboration, ensuring that the tasks at hand cannot be accomplished by an individual, but need a group collective both in solving complex mental challenges and physically demanding tasks. Questing brings the collaborative interactivity of multi-user online role playing games to life in live action adventure settings with structured game-play similar to digital gaming. Like escape rooms, failure or success is up to the collective team effort, however questing differentiates itself from the escape room structure as teams have more than one attempt to “beat” each individual level and have the ability to unlock corresponding levels. Though the utilization of both collaboration and fiero in Boda Borg’s work is innovative in a live action setting, the rigid structure of the events has a dictatorial affect on the agency of the “questers”. By structuring the adventures like classic video games, with
checkpoints and levels that must be re-started if failed, the agency of the player is limited to the structurally predetermined outcomes of the game. Though “questers” acquire a heightened level of agency in Boda Borg’s adventures than previously discussed in the works of current immersive theatre practice, the agential choices and decisions made within the live action game can only lead a player to success in beating the level and moving on to beat the adventure, or failure in need of repeating levels to ultimately beat the game. Like escape rooms, “questers” are ultimately granted the agency to determine their own fate within the game, yet they are given the same two options as any other participant taking part in the event; success or failure. I argue that twenty-first audiences are hungry for a new avocation of agential choice that allows one to shape and shift the events of a story or adventure through their own unique presence within the space. I believe this lack of co-authoring agency results in a distinct demographical shift between the work of Boda Borg and the company discussed below.

Five Wits is a company created in 2004 that invites player/participants to engage in a similar experience as the “questing” of Boda Borg with subtle shifts in the agency granted through their structured game-play. Five Wits advertises that they,

Give our guests a live-action, immersive adventure experience within a realistic, hands-on setting. Rather than watching an action movie or playing a video game, customers get the chance to BE the action hero and get inside that movie or video game. Each adventure is in a realistic physical space that requires your hands-on interaction and decision making to progress through multiple rooms, with unique puzzles to discover and solve all along the way to success… or failure. 5 Wits adventures are similar to an escape room in that guests use teamwork to solve challenges, but 5 Wits adventures also have higher quality environments, special
effects, and compelling storytelling. Your adventure awaits! (5 Wits Adventures)

The interactive adventuring that Five Wits employs is a narrative based structure that utilizes an adventurer’s fantasy of stepping into a similar role as heroines from their favorite stories. Tomb is a specific adventure that places participants/players in a role similar to Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Arc, where participant/players step into the role of archeologists who have discovered a 3000-year-old tomb. The only way out is to solve complex riddles, dodge traps and uncover clues to escape the tomb before the evil spirit of a pharaoh traps the participants forever. Though this particular adventure is formulated similarly to the structure of escape rooms, more elaborate projects have followed. In Deep Space, Five Wits “teleports” adventurers to an abandoned space ship that is not operating properly. Guided by an A.I. over the loudspeaker of the ship, player/participants are informed of every danger threatening the ship or every part of the ship that is malfunctioning and in need of repair. Dependent on how the ship is rewired by participants and whether or not they defeat the enemies attacking through a digital game within the adventure, players either crash the ship or get to the end of the narrative. In the final leg of the narrative, when the ship has become fully operational, the A.I. turns against the participants, threatening to take over all cellular devices upon returning to earth in order to obtain control over human inhabitants. The adventurers then have to make the agential decision whether or not to attempt to stop the A.I., as they are given no more instructions or clues on how to do so with their A.I. guide against them. In Deep Space, participant/players have a level of agency unattainable in the contemporary immersive theatre productions, questing, or escape rooms we have previously discussed. What Five Wits does to differentiate themselves is grant a limited form of co-authorship agential decision-making that ultimately alters the outcome of the adventure experienced. I refer to the co-authorship obtained by participants in 5 Wits work as
limited because though multiple endings/outcomes are possible, these outcomes are still formulated and limited, however there is more spectatorial agency allotted in this work than the other interactive events analyzed. Take for instance Five Wits advertisement for their adventure, *Espionage*,

> Come spy with us! Time is ticking and everything is on the line when an evil corporation threatens the world. Do you have what it takes to save the day? Your mission? Break into enemy headquarters, dodge security lasers, hack the computer system, unravel the clues, diffuse the threat, and get out alive! Every challenge you conquer and mistake you make will change the outcome, so stay sharp, move fast and don’t get caught! (5 Wits Adventures)

In *Espionage*, Five Wits ensures the participant a level of agential co-authorship as the narrative can be altered through the actions of the player in the space. This is the only adventure they offer with this kind of guarantee, however co-authorship is an attractive component to immersive adventure events for digital natives who have become accustomed to this level of agency in contemporary role-playing and strategic digital game-play. Five Wits also emphasizes the collaborative effort of teamwork in their challenging adventures, as success cannot be reached without the cooperation of multiple minds and physical presence of multiple bodies. McGonigal elaborates the importance of this cooperative collaboration in *Reality is Broken*, “social participation games are innovating human potential. They are augmenting and expanding our capabilities to do good and revealing our power to help each other, in the moment, wherever we are” (255).

However, the most crucial game-design element that Five Wits utilizes in their immersive adventure events is *flow*. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term *flow* in his book *Beyond*
Boredom and Anxiety, defining it as an “autotelic experience” an individual feels when their consciousness of the outside world disappears and they amalgamate within the activity they are engaged in (35-6). Schechner describes flow in performance study scholarship as,

Players in flow may be aware of their actions, but not of the awareness itself. What they feel is close to being in a trance. Flow occurs when the player becomes one with the playing…at the same time, flow can be an extreme self-awareness where the player has total control over the play act. These two aspects of flow apparently contrasting, are essentially the same. In each case, the boundary between the interior psychological self and the performed activity dissolves (Performance Studies 97).

In Csikszentmihalyi’s 1990 book, Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience, Csikszentmihalyi redefines flow more specifically as a psychological optimal experience,

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy, or attention, is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunity for action. Flow is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake. (4-6)

Flow is experienced when an individual is pushed to work at the edge of their abilities, pushing their own limits. The motivating factor of flow often found in video game design works through keeping players on the brink of failure which has been proven to stimulate resilience in the face of failure. In psychological studies recorded in The Roots of Success and Failure, flow has proven to be repeatedly linked to positive outcomes involving commitment and achievement as well as lowering anxiety and uplifting self-esteem (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 72). McGonigal
notes that, “When you are in a state of flow, you want to stay there: both quitting and winning are equally unsatisfying outcomes.” (24). In this way, Five Wits utilizes flow to not only absorb their participants/players into the immersive environment, but to merge with the narrative through agential decision making creating a co-authoring collaborative engagement with the piece. The realistic, but continuous and challenging goals participant/players set out to accomplish in the immersive adventure keep the participants engaged in an active role within the context of the adventure, sustaining that they achieve and remain in a state of flow until the story has ended and the result of their actions revealed. By harnessing elements of digital game design a collaborative social structure, Five Wits successfully imbues its participant/players with eustress, fiero, flow and limited agential co-authorship.

The final immersive event I would like to analyze in this chapter wildly differs from the work of escape rooms, Boda Borg and Five Wits in the context of digital and gaming agency. Meow Wolf is an arts production company that creates immersive, interactive, multimedia experiences through artistic instillations. Meow Wolf describes their work as, “a combination of jungle gym, haunted house, children’s museum, and immersive art exhibit. This unique fusion of art and entertainment gives audiences fictional worlds to explore” (Events at Meow Wolf). These fully operational fictional worlds created through Meow Wolf’s detailed and unique art exhibits have interactive elements that participants explore and find for themselves. Meow Wolf’s most recent and first permanent project/event is called The House of Eternal Return and is established within a refitted bowling alley in Sante Fe, New Mexico. The House of Eternal Return is an immersive, self-directed adventure through a fictitious world that participants enter into without explanation or a structured set of rules.
Upon entering the house, participants explore the fictitious reality at will, unguided by performers or directions of any capacity. Through exploring the house, participants can unlock avenues into various “portals” to other realms and realities in other spaces and time frames. These portals, accessed through the kitchen refrigerator, living room fireplace, fish tank in a bedroom etc…. take participants through an interactive art exhibit on a fantastical self-led adventure that participants may or may not associate with the detailed narrative presented only through vague hidden clues within the house. The narrative portions of the piece are scattered throughout diary entries, voice recordings and notes snugly tucked between books on random bookshelves. The majority of Meow Wolf’s audience demographics ignore the narrative entirely or do not realize it exists as social media posts, reviews and blog posts are filled with participants admittance that they did not notice a narrative as they were absorbed in playing with the incredibly ornate, detailed and wildly original aesthetics of the interactive exhibits within the hidden portals. Most participants experience the ideal environment of play that Edinborough suggests in *Theatrical Reality*, “theatrical space is a realm of limitless possibility. It is a space in which to live out utopian dreams” (161). What Meow Wolf achieves in this interactive, immersive exhibit (separated or in cohesion with the narrative) is an establishment of thirddspace.

Postmodernist geographer, Edward Soja coined the term thirddspace to define a heterotopian space where, “all places are capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood” (Soja 56). Edinborough argues that, “thirddspace exist when reflection and metaphor seem to occupy the materiality of the architecture” (115). Through this thirddspace, the audience/participants are forced to adapt and change their perception, point of view or role to adhere to unusual
circumstances surrounding them. Meow Wolf utilizes this thirdspace through the portals made up of artistic installations leading participants into multiple alternate realities throughout The House of Eternal Return.

For those particular participants who choose to spend their time within the fictitious reality pursuing clues within the house itself, a detailed mystery of a missing family and explanation of the origins of the various portals awaits. The differentiation between the interactive artistic installations of Meow Wolf and questing adventures previously discussed in this chapter lies in the agential freedom of unguided navigation and the ability to interact with or without engagement in a cohesive narrative. Participants are not given an active role to play or specific tasks to carry out. There are no established goals to achieve or challenges to conquer.

What Meow Wolf establishes in The House of Eternal Return is a unique thirdspace playground that breaks the rules of traditional gameplay by simply allowing participants to indulge in the act of play. Contrary to popular belief, competitive collaboration, winning and losing, success and failure are not actually defining traits of games, and thus need not be defining traits of play. McGonigal notes that, “the state of being intensely engaged may ultimately be more pleasurable than even the satisfaction of winning” (25). Meow Wolf successfully uses play as a laboratory to workshop the self through a completely self-directed and self-navigated exploration of multiple fictitious realities where one can define their own role and author their own experience without consequence. Schechner suggests,

Both child play and adult play involve exploration, learning and risk with a payoff in the pleasurable experience of ‘flow’ or total involvement in the activity for its own sake. Playing creates it’s own multiple realities with porous boundaries. Playing is full of creative world making as well as lying, illusion, and deceit. Play
is performance (when it is done openly in public) and play is performative when it is more private, even secret- a strategy or reverie rather than a display. This interiority separates play from ritual, which is always being enacted.

*(Performance Studies 92)*

This private, performative play is exactly what Meow Wolf gives it’s participants unlimited access to through their permanent installation of The House of Eternal Return. The fact that there are no guiding rules or limitations allows for an avenue of meaning making within the participant’s own experience within the work. As Edinborough argues, “our embodied perceptual experience becomes a conduit for a broader imaginative experience of the world” (51). Through this lens, the thirddspace Meow Wolf establishes becomes a conduit for meaning making, leading to the final factor of critical catharsis and stable communitas I will identify in this chapter—transcendence. Transcendence is the act of utilizing individual strengths, interpretations and perceptions to forge connections between the thirddspace theatrical reality and the larger universe in order to provide meaning. Edinborough insists that a liminal space can “encourage spectators to question their habitual engagements with reality” (16). This is exactly what Meow Wolf’s The House of Eternal Return succeeds in encouraging through an atmosphere of pure and unbridled play. In this way, Meow Wolf’s work falls directly under the category James P. Carse describes as “playful” in his 1986 book, *Finite and Infinite Games*,

To be serious is to press for a specified conclusion. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself…Since culture is itself a poises, all of its participants are poietal- inventors, makers, artists, storytellers, mythologists. They are not however, makers of actualities, but makers of possibilities. The creativity of culture has no outcome, no conclusion. It does not result in any works,
artifacts, productions. Creativity is a continuity that engenders itself in others.

Meow Wolf’s essence of pure play creates a conduit of creativity that evolves throughout the exploration of the space but, according to Carse’s theory, has the potential to affect an individual participant in a lasting way. I argue that this form of transcendence through play has the potential to act as a conduit for creating critical catharsis within immersive work as well as stabilizing communitas, sustaining ultimate social change. Victor Turner warns fellow scholars of the dangers associated with playfulness while agreeing with Csikszentmihalyi’s initial argument for the potential social change associated with acts of play in *Body, Brain and Culture*:

Playfullness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance and strength, in modes of simulation such as theatre, and in controlled disorientation, from roller coasters to dervish dancing…Most definitions of play involve notions of disengagement, of free-wheeling of being out of mesh with the serious…Play can be everywhere and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing…Play is the supreme bricoleur of frail transient constructions…Yet, although ‘spinning loose’ as it were, the wheel of play reveals to us (as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued (1975) the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality. (Turner 233-4).

As previously discussed in the ethical dilemmas concerning intimacy and limited agential freedom in Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, play can be a dangerous ethical avenue to navigate in immersive events. However, the key to ethical play is exposed through the work of Meow Wolf in their gracious offering of unlimited agential freedom for the participant exploring the
thirdspace. The participant may choose whether or not they wish to engage in the narrative, with fellow explorers, or which portals they would like to explore. Without rules, expectations, barriers or navigation systems, Meow Wolf utilizes pure play, transcendence and agential freedom to create an immersive and interactive event that places the participant/player in complete control of their own experience.

In the next chapter I will explore the final factors that make up the theory of stable communitas through an analysis of fused works combining the performative elements of theatre, virtual reality and digital gaming.
CHAPTER V:

Inventing the Future Through Narrative- Awe and Authorship in Socially Activating Alternate Reality Projects

Alternative reality games are changing the way narrative is structured and authored in the twenty-first century. Rose describes ARG’s (Alternate Reality games) as,

Alternate reality games, as these experiences are known, are a hybrid of game and story. The story is told in fragments; the game comes in piecing the fragments together. The task is too complicated for any one person. But through the connective power of the web, a group intelligence emerges to assemble the pieces, solve the mysteries, and, in the process, tell and retell the story online. Ultimately, the audience comes to own the story, in ways that movies themselves can’t match. (Art of Immersion 14)

Though the previous case studies analyzing agency in Immersive theatre and gaming events correlate with a cultural shift in the entertainment industry, specific projects have emerged over the past ten years attempting to create avenues for interactive play. These collaborative social spaces have the potential to activate social change within ARGs through player agential authorship in fictitious narratives. The primary difference between previously discussed projects and the upcoming case studies I label as “socially activating projects” can be determined through the way in which these socially activating projects create communitas via multi-platform performance throughout different media mediums. This sense of communitas is hinged on the amount of spectatorial agency given to the players in the form of audience authorship. Zed.to and World Without Oil utilize both game design strategies and theatrical play to not only engage, but activate audiences in a narrative that is left largely to their own devise. Through utilizing
technological advancement and the natural cognitive evolution of Internet Natives as a tool, these two socially activating projects create active involvement in the exploration of current social issues through a fictional narrative, while stimulating lasting civic duty in the real world. As McGonigal notes in *Reality is Broken*, “Reality is stuck in the present, games help us imagine and invent the future together” (302). By expanding a narrative to accommodate the use of common digital devices, which encourages online collaboration, and simultaneously offering different avenues for exploration with opportunities to directly contribute to the dramaturgy of the collective piece, I argue that these socially activating projects cohesively marry the collective power of the internet with the spectatorial agency expected of the Internet Native.

Play theorist, Roger Caillois argues in his book, *Man, Play and Games*, that a society truly reflects the games people inhabiting that society choose to play.

There is a truly reciprocal relationship between a society and the games it likes to play. There is indeed an increasing affinity between their rules and the common characteristics and deficiencies of the members of the groups. These preferred as widely different games reflect, on the one hand, the tendencies, tastes and ways of though that are prevalent, while, at the same time, in educating and training the players in these very virtues or eccentricities, they subtly confirm that in their habits and preferences. Thus, a game that is esteemed by a people may at the same time be utilized to define the society’s moral or intellectual character, provide proof of its precise meaning, and contribute to its popular acceptance by accentuating the relevant qualities. (82-3)

I argue that an influx in the integration of newer technologies affects the agency players expect to be given in their entertainment, just as the economic and political climate of a society is
reflected in the games a society chooses to play. As Albert Einstein once asserted, “Games are the most elevated form of investigation” (qtd. in McGonigal 313). The following projects use game design elements to create an open world of investigation through real world scenarios in which players/participants can not only contribute to the dramaturgy of the piece, but in doing so also construct a unique narrative of their own devise.

*World Without Oil* is a massive multiplayer, foresight driven thought experiment conceived by Ken Eklund, rooted in the innovative concept, “If you want to change the future, play with it first” (*World Without Oil*). McGonigal, who served as participation architect on the project called the game, “the first massively scaled effort to engage ordinary individuals in creating an immersive forecast of the future” (303). Blogger Sue, from *Very Spatial, Discussions on Geography and Geospatial Technologies*, described *World Without Oil* as, “an online project that is a little hard to describe… part serious game, part collaborative storytelling, part social network, part multimedia experience” (*Very Spatial*). The collaborative simulation, part fiction and part investigative process, spanned over a six-week experiment that thrust participants into a world that has run out of enough oil to sustain living conditions across the globe. With the simulated onset of an unforeseen global oil shock, ordinary people all over the world contributed hypothetical stories reflecting aspects of their real lives, offering unique and individual viewpoints through images, emails, comic creations, blog posts, as well as voice and video recordings. Through harnessing the interconnected power of the collective knowledge of the Internet, *World Without Oil* promoted civic activism by giving players an unbridled voice in a real-world issue while encouraging social discourse by offering a different kind of role-playing game that Eklund refers to as “real play” (*World Without Oil*). “Real play” allows a player to
perform, narrate and collaborate in order to tell individualized stories and imagine plausible solutions for a real social issue too complicated for any individual to solve alone.

The project was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and approved through Eklund’s proposal to the ITVS (Independent Television Service). The goal of the project was to incite ordinary citizens to track their own lived events in the simulated reality mirroring potential problems they could face in a world without oil, while offering an online medium to share personal struggles and brainstorm real solutions. McGonigal served on the ITVS committee that selected Eklund’s project and recounts his impassioned proposal in which he wrote,

> No one today has a clear picture of oil availability or what will happen when demand inevitably outstrips supply. That will largely depend on how well ordinary people respond to the crisis. Until now, no one has ever thought to ask them what they might do. WWO will evoke the wisdom of crowds in advance, as players work together to gain grassroots insights into the forces that will rule at street level in a crisis- and figure out the best ways to prepare, cooperate, and collectively create solutions if and when a real peak-oil shortage happens (qtd. in McGonigal 304).

In the thirty two days that the game took place, players were not only asked to share their personal responses to the crisis via social media blogs, videos and testimonies, they were also encouraged to bring the simulation into their everyday lives, living out the changes they would be forced to make in real time while testing their own creative, “adaptive solutions” (McGonigal 305). The game was free to play and updated daily with a new problematic effect the oil shortage had brought to the communities surrounding the players. Such problems designated took the form of food shortages, flight cancellations, and outrageous peaks in prices of everyday items
and intentional drops in voltages of electrical power supply systems. The game supplied players with an “alternate reality dashboard” depicting a daily updated map with individual “power meters” reflecting the “local rise and fall in quality of life, economic strength, and social stability” fluctuating in response to player’s direct activity (McGonigal 307). These meters were used to create direct feedback between daily scenario updates and the stories players were feeding into the simulation. McGonigal notes, “For every active forecaster, we had an additional twenty-five people watching the game and writing about it. This amplification of their ideas helped make player’s efforts feel more meaningful” (308).

Over 1900 players were actively, voluntarily involved in the project from all fifty states of the U.S. and twelve countries abroad, culminating in more than a hundred thousand online media artifacts and immersing over 110,000 viewers by the end of the year (Simon). In The Art of Immersion, Frank Rose observes, “So far, games have tried to tell a story either by taking away the game element…or by providing a setting in which players generate their own stories…if games themselves are ever to tell a satisfying story, they need to engage us emotionally” (275-76).

Emotional engagement in civic duty was the primary outcome of World Without Oil and the project found its success through handing the responsibility of authorship directly to the players. Individuals used their own lives as living characters in this simulation, utilizing their own unique talents to offer solutions or insight to the devastating circumstances at play. McGonigal highlights three particular users who utilized the strengths of their real-life jobs to add to the simulated crisis. One of these was “Peakprophet”, a Tennessee farmer who predicted a collapse in fresh-food supply within the simulated crisis and trained other players online via web videos on how to grow sustainable, self-sufficient food sources. Another was “Lead_tag”, a US
soldier stationed in Iraq during the simulated crisis who was active every day of the game, reflecting from a soldier’s perspective on fighting a war without oil (McGonigal 306).

The most inspiring stories I found were from player, “OrganizedChaos”, a real world employee of General Motors who realized through the game play that her current real-world job was not sustainable. After contributing over fifty media artifacts, the player informed the online community contained within the simulation that she would be returning to school to prepare for a career that would be more effective in the economy of a post-oil world. These stories are only a small handful of the massive response to the World Without Oil simulation, all of which have now been compiled into an accessible online document, “A to Z: A World Beyond Oil” (A to Z). Within the document, stories, advice and solutions collected from the player’s activity in the simulation have been organized into chapters in hopes of inspiring future social activism in the face of a real-world oil crisis. The topics range from architects who attended conventions distributing information on how to build homes without oil, to parenting and spiritual leadership advice on how to raise children and remain compassionate amidst the chaos of an oil crisis. This collection reflects the unique aspect of this gaming experience; the ability to give players an active voice in bettering their society through gameplay.

Nina Simon, blogger for Museum 2.0, referred to the World Without Oil simulation as, “a huge growing, twisting network of news, strategy, activism and personal expression” (Simon). McGonigal notes that though the simulation began with almost post-apocalyptic undertones, through player responses it quickly grew into a community narrative told through sharing stories of resilience and plausible solutions to counteract the crisis (308). In a reflection of the project with McGonigal, Ken Eklund stated, “WWO didn’t only raise awareness about oil dependence. It roused our democratic imagination. It made the issues real, and this in turn led to real
engagement and real change in people’s lives. Via the game, players made themselves better citizens” (310).

Eklund’s statement of success proves accurate as countless postings on the site after the completion of the simulation depict individual players who express gratitude for the game explicitly because the global awareness of the potential crisis has inspired them to make real adjustments in their everyday life. For instance, one player posted,

I can't imagine what a high you guys must be on knowing that you created a the first ARG think tank that has had a significant impact on the changing the world. I think this game has ushered in a new wave of building community and educating the masses in a digital world. The founders of this ARG made history and we, the players thank you for it…Thank you to everyone, players and creators, for helping change my life and change the world. I and the planet will be forever grateful. I end this post with HOPE. Because, that is what I'm filled with in this moment. I have HOPE for our future and what a powerful feeling that is.
(The End)

Another player, sad to see the simulation end, posted, “I really mean it when I say WWO changed my life. I really have been using my cloth bags at the stores, walking more/driving less, turning off lights, and, yes, recycling. My friends, family and coworkers have all noticed the difference. In all seriousness, this entire thing has made me a different person” (The End).

Player, MTALON, posted on the main WWO website, “As for me, in this here and now, I'm a different person thanks to WWO. I'm much more aware of the fragile thread that supports the lifestyle I and others keep. I'm making changes, but there's a long way to go. But I AM changing, and that means that for me, WWO was a success” (World Without Oil).
These accounts have not fallen on deaf ears, classrooms and community enrichment programs have taken up repeating the simulation to prepare and collect insight within their own communities, continuing to invent solutions and engage in the conversation. Jessica Clark, Research Director for the Future of Public Media Project at the Center for Media and Social Impact at American University noted that, “This is public media at its most innovative, engaging a global public concerned with the world’s dependence on oil and both educating them and moving them to action” (World Without Oil). Moving the players to action was the ultimate goal of *World Without Oil* and the success came from the game’s agential allocation. Instead of pushing a specific point of view on participants, *World Without Oil* encouraged players to draw from their own experience, imagine their own futures, find their own solutions and learn whatever lessons developed from their own experiences. By taking aspects of collaborative gameplay, popular in commercialized alternate reality games, and applying such strategies to real world issues, players were advantageously viscerally and personally affected through the sharing of their own voices, imaginations, stories and opinions. *World Without Oil* is a successful example of how the interconnectivity and agency allocated online can be utilized through a marriage of gaming and audience co-authored narrative to educate humanity and not only promote but sustain genuine social change. The elements that ultimately led to *World Without Oil*’s success include the previously discussed gaming factor of eustress, combined with copious agency and online, virtual communitas. McGonigal states,

By turning a real problem into a voluntary obstacle, we activated more genuine interest, curiosity, motivation, effort and optimism than we would have otherwise. We can change our real-life behaviors in the context of a fictional game precisely because there isn’t any negative pressure surrounding the decision to change. We
are motivated purely by positive stress and by our own desire to engage with a
game in more satisfying, successful, social and meaningful ways. (311)

Award winning blogger of *Global Culture*, Juan Gonzales comments on the lasting potential of the emotional and critical engagement Eklund encourages in *World Without Oil*:

“The producers of this Alternate Reality Game have taken the web to create a new form of mass media that may produce more lasting effects and engage people in a more effective way. As I’ve explained before: for a new generation of viewers, viewing is not enough. Participation is a must” (*World Without Oil*). What sets *World Without Oil* apart from the previously analyzed performance/gaming cases is not only the active level of agency players were accredited to imagine, invent and share their own stories and solutions, but the degree of communitas achieved through the simulation that is proving to last years after the performative experiment took place. Even in 2017, players from this 2007 experiment remain in communication with one another, re-evaluating the solutions they contributed to the game and continuing to support each other in real-life decisions to actively engage in civic action. This established communitas has evolved into something crucial for creating social change through immersive gaming experiences creating narrative for Internet Natives - it has become *stable*. I define *stable communitas* as a lasting form of communitas that continues to connect individuals who formed relationships in an immersive/interactive experience through enduring affect that influences real-world relationships, decisions, and meaning making. This is perhaps, the most valuable achievement of *World Without Oil*, as the immersive experiment not only engaged participants in imagining meaningful solutions for social issues, but continues to stimulate social change through collaborative critical and emotional engagement in global issues brought to light through the experience. Matt Locke, founder of *Storythings* and digital storyteller for BBC New Media and
Technology, argues that the agential responsibility of co-authorship distributed in *World Without Oil* is the future of gaming with civic purposes:

Anyone who has heard me speak in the last year will have heard me rave about *World Without Oil*. This is not just because it's an educational Alternate Reality Game, [but] because it points to a future direction for these games, in which the story is not a funnel that directs a few people towards a unique experience, but an open, collaborative story in which lots of different threads can exist alongside each other. (Future Everything)

The fundamentally unique mode of storytelling created in *World Without Oil* taps into the twenty-first century human condition of interconnected, networked information through multiple medias, and uses this interconnectivity to channel individual voices toward awareness of real-world social issues. What sets this particular project apart is its potential to activate players towards civic engagement in real life with not only pedagogical tools, but through the co-creation of an immersive, audience-authored, interactive narrative which empowers individuals to take control of social issues. By weaving players into a hypothetical future and placing them as their own identity in the middle of the plotline, *World Without Oil* ushered in an entirely new way of building and sustaining an online community with a mission to use their own life, insight and voice to create corporeal change in the world around them. This accomplishment is in part due to the motivation of player’s experiencing “awe” in *World Without Oil*.

McGonigal describes “awe” as, “What we feel when we recognize that we are in the presence of something bigger than ourselves. It is closely linked with feelings of spirituality, love and gratitude and more importantly the desire to serve… Awe doesn’t just feel good, it inspires us to do good” (79/99). The importance of awe in *World Without Oil* is the way in which the
emotional connection of being part of something larger than oneself activates critical analysis within the user-generated material. Through the openly designed narrative presented, social activism and civic duty are stimulated by the inherent sense of awe accompanying the project. Dacher Keltner describes awe in her book *Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*: “The experience of awe is about finding your place in the larger scheme of things. It is about quieting the press of self-interest. It is about folding into social collectives. It is about feeling reverential towards participating in some expansive process that unites us all and that enables our life’s endeavors” (268).

In this way *World Without Oil* creates an experience of awe that leads to legitimate social change through a fictitious, interactive and collaboratively authored narrative. The real-world actuality-immersion and authoring experience of *World Without Oil* acts a pedagogical tool, teaching users real-world problem solving skills through experience. Yi-Fu Tuan explains in his 2011 book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience,*”Experience thus implies the ability to learn from what one has undergone. To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given. The given itself cannot be known in itself. What can be known is a reality that is a construct of experience, a creation of feeling and thought” (9).

Experiencing an alternate reality game like *World Without Oil* gives players the opportunity to indulge in actions of intimacy through the equal voice authorship within the piece. The intimacy of individual actions can be seen in the player/participants’ willingness to give something of themselves within the context of the gaming performance. The agential accountability of making these contributions to the piece and ultimately to societal change can take on a rich and cathartic meaning for participants, encouraging self-reflection and personal real-world change.
The examples discussed in this chapter bridge the gap between serious games and alternate reality games. Serious games generally aim to teach or train, often by realistically simulating some aspect of a world system. These kinds of games are common, such as disaster preparedness games, driving or flight simulators. Serious games offer a kind of education through experimentation, leading to a better understanding of the system at play and the relationships within systems being explored or altered. Alternate reality games, on the other hand, consist of an interactive narrative that uses the real world as a platform to tell an extended story through the use of gaming elements and multiple medias. There is usually an intense sense of player involvement that takes place in real time and evolves according to participants’ individual responses through a scenario controlled by game designers, but altered by the role participants play.

ARG’s (alternate reality games) are attractive to twenty-first century gamers because ARG’s can simultaneously engage mass numbers of player collaboration while adhering to unique, individual responses. *World Without Oil* synthesizes the educational aspects of serious games with an assemblage of an ARG stylized narrative. In this way, *World Without Oil* proved to be the first alternate reality game to take on a serious real world problem, bringing individuals together through online mediums to collaborate in a simulation to institute plausible solutions for the future. As McGonigal eloquently points out in *Reality is Broken*, “Gameplay isn’t just a technological craft. It’s a twenty-first century way of thinking and leading. And gameplay isn’t just a pastime. It’s a twenty-first century way of working together to accomplish real change…Games: In the twenty-first century, will be a primary platform for enabling the future” (13).
Socially activating alternate reality projects successfully establish collaboration in action. This collaboration acts as a collective performance focused in shared concentration, synchronized engagement and reciprocal real-world rewards in the form of solutions to better a shared society. These game-driven narratives tap into the collective intelligence of the Internet to harness the collaborative potential for real-world problem solving through narrative co-authorship. For the past fifteen years, video games and commercial alternate reality games have brought large numbers of players together to solve puzzles, decipher clues or accomplish collaborative tasks. *World Without Oil* stands apart because it used this same collective and collaborative intelligence to focus on real issues facing our contemporary society and employed the collective imagination of thousands of individual authors to create a multi-authored visualization of realistic resilience for the future through the formation of achievable solutions. The *World Without Oil* main social site explains the social change possible through innovative co-authored narratives in twenty-first century gaming:

The game called upon players to act in a civic capacity, entirely in keeping with the emergency scenario, and players responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to contribute. Via a game, people can experience a possible future "from inside," which can be more engaging and life-changing than passive, non-interactive experiences - and it's also satisfying and FUN…*World Without Oil* asked one relatively simple act of its players: to get "in game" - to imagine that the oil crisis story was real. The game rewarded those who got in game, and the effect of more and more players getting in game tended to draw in more players and draw existing players deeper and deeper into the game. The effect is like that of being immersed in a good book - but one that you are actually helping to write. The
result is an experience that many players and observers found to be both deeply satisfying and profoundly moving. (World Without Oil)

*World Without Oil* took concepts of serious and alternate reality gaming and expanded the goals to revolutionize a narrative’s capacity for actuating an affinity for civic service. In doing so, the game blended the alternate reality world with the real world to encourage player insight into the change each individual could actively make to the real-world surrounding them. In this way, *World Without Oil* offered a reflection of reality, through the alternate reality game, that solidifies the position of self for players in their real world decision-making. As Foucault said in his 1967 lecture “Des Espace Autres”, translated as “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias”, “From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there” (46). Alternate reality games are proving capable of acting as this mirror where players may realize their agency within their own position in the world through the reflection seen in the alternate reality they inhabit while playing. Lessons learned through playing become ritualistic habits incorporated into everyday life. Don Handelman comments on the duality of play and ritual in his 1977 research paper, *Play and Ritual: Complementary Frames of Metacommunication*, “Rituals and play are shadow images of one another in the kinds of messages they transmit to the social order” (190).

Habitual ritual can also be seen in alternate reality gaming through the utilization of foraging tactics. Creators and storytellers are starting to consider how interactive stories can be told in a meaningful and organic way that utilizes the connected nature of the internet. This is where the concept of foraging became a useful component not only in the creation of structured gameplay, but in the utilization of the connective capabilities of the internet in creating co-authored narrative. By foraging for information through the mass mediums at our fingertips,
people now have the capability to find and piece together a story to either tell ourselves or, contribute to in order to tell others. Scholars in gaming studies and game design are realizing that by learning about gaming, we are actually gaining a cultural understanding of instinctual foraging. Rose argues, “Anything that invites us to participate and promises some sort of reward can become a game- including, as participatory media proliferate, storytelling itself” (*Art of Immersion* 273). Internet Natives forage for emotional connection on online social media platforms and the stories found through consistent updates to user profiles provide this emotional connection. In this way, even using Twitter or Facebook becomes an act of foraging, which humans are instinctively prompted to do for survival. Rose observes, “Any narrative that has game like aspects…can make an appeal to your foraging instincts. We forage for food, for points, for attention, for friends, for the jackpot, for a happy ending, for closure of any sort” (*Art of Immersion* 274).

The question of how newer technologies such as social media affect the evolution of narrative structure in the twenty-first century is being answered through co-authored multi-platform narratives such as *World Without Oil*, and The Mission Business’ project, Zed.to. Companies like The Mission Business are already investigating ways of activating the world around players/participants to not only create alternate world narratives to navigate within the real world but ways in which a player/participant can author their own adventure. The Mission Business is a Toronto based Company that is self-described as an “adventure laboratory that helps businesses up their game” (“The Mission Business”). Made up of producer and COO, Elenna Mosoff, designer/futurist and CEO Trevor Haldenby, Game designer/technologist, David Fono and play theorist/creative director Byron Laviolette, The Mission Business is evolving the nature of storytelling to adapt to twenty-first century social technology and cognitive
engagement. The company is known for their partnership with St. Lawrence College, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and Ontario Learn to develop pedagogical approaches and online curriculum that responds to the learning styles of and needs of the twenty-first century student. The company also combines “theatre and gamification” to create strategy workshops and team training events for corporate companies (The Mission Business). However, the project that The Mission Business is most renown for is Zed.to.

Zed.to was an interactive/immersive project developed by The Mission Business in 2012 that told an 8 month long narrative through an integrated cross-platform combination of online content, live theatrical events and collaborative gaming strategies, ultimately producing an elaborate audience coauthored narrative. Winner of 2012 Digi-Award for Cross-platform fiction, Zed.to created 8 live events with 75 performances and 333 crowdfunders, to grant 3,500 event participants and over 35,000 online users authorship in a massive undertaking of interactive storytelling (The Mission Business). The apocalyptic story begins with the discovery of a viral pandemic created by the fictional bio-tech company, Byologyc.

The stage for the narrative was initially set in a live event launch party for Byologyc’s newest drug, scattered with actors interacting as the cooperate staff showing around and getting to know the new interns (the audience’s role in the immersive performance). When audience members enter the event they are given a nametag and assigned a position in the cooperation, for instance, Research and Development or Marketing. Participants are sent to various positions within the company from the beginning, ensuring that no two participants experience an identical narrative. Between delivered conference-style speeches and team-building exercises, player/participants are sent to various departments to receive training and tasked with sampling some of Byologyc’s latest inventions. Between panel speeches and tasks given to them by their
department, participants may go about collecting information about the company through exploring and interacting with characters, without drawing unwanted attention from their “superiors”. Eventually, all participants are led to the big event of the night, the unveiling of the ByoRenew pill, the latest miracle drug from the company meant to strengthen the immune system against any common illness. Participants are asked to take the pill. Suddenly, with that active decision, the apocalypse has begun.

After this initial performance, Zed.to led their audiences down different paths. Many participants of the live performances received text messages from anonymous hackers. Some participants received phone calls sending them to specific phone booths to intercept calls with codes that they could then share online with others involved in the narrative to collaboratively decode. Other participants tracked the clues found by peers and created online spaces to collaboratively crack the mystery of the narrative. Each individual involved in the gameplay received specific tasks from one digital format to another, calling on the participant to make fast-paced decisions about how to progress the narrative. Characters were readily available to interact with participants at all times, so direct character interactivity was not withheld only for participants who attended live events. Viral marketing forms were utilized to encourage users to choose an individual path to take through the narrative and individuals could choose exactly how involved they would like to be, giving each individual participant agency over their experience. Live, interactive performances weaved in and out of the narrative expanding online, such as a BRX virus screening at Nuit Blanche where “protestors” tried to block the way of participants who entered to determine whether or not they had been “affected” by the virus. Another option for participants is signing up to join the VIP (Versatile Internship Program), which basically turns participants into spies for Byologyc or double agents working to take down the company
from within. The tagline for the VIP program is, “You collect the data, we provide the future” (ByoLogyc VIP). Pieces of lost podcasts revealing executive secrets were distributed throughout the web for players to piece together collaboratively, and the more participants hunted for information, the more tasks they received. Through too many plot twists for any one participant to encounter, active online collaboration creating organized resistance groups, daily updated self narratives posted throughout the apocalyptic scenario, and leaks released about the companies’ corrupt activity via online media sources, Zed.to created a massive collaborative theatrical performance that allowed individuals to construct and perform the narrative together in the real world over a period of eight months. The goal of the project, as creators of The Mission Business define it, was, “exploring the true costs of a better tomorrow” (The Mission Business).

By combining experience, theatrical participation and co-authorship, The Mission Business used Zed.to to blend the mediated social avenues of reality with a new kind of multi-platform narrative that allocated ambitious spectatorial agency to participants creating the structure of the story. Alan Reed noted in his 2009 book, Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: The Last Human Venue, that the aesthetics of theatrical space rest on the intricate intersection between the natural and the social (15). In this way, The Mission Business cohesively blends the artifice of theatrical narrative with the individual spectator/participant’s positions and points of view in the real world. Theatrical space in the 21st century is being used across multiple media platforms as a forum for discussing real social issues and helping individuals come to terms with the difficulty they face in everyday life through emotional connection in experiential alternate realities encompassing the technological platforms of their modern reality. By utilizing crossover of multi-platform media spaces, The Mission Business is building relationships founded in a co-dependency between performers and participants that engage 21st century audiences to think
more critically about the reality they inhabit. This collective critical analysis throughout the
creation of a co-authored narrative has the potential to stimulate active social change in the real
world based on insight gained from collaboratively constructing narratives in alternate reality
gaming.

Both *World Without Oil* and *Zed.to* create a sense of purpose through players’ agential
allocation that bleeds over into the player’s real world by assuring each participants that their
individual presence and voice within the theatrical alternate reality is meaningful, active and
impactful to the narrative at play. French Sociologist, Henri Lefebvre noted in 2007 that space is
a product of the interrelations (personal, economic and political) between the people who inhabit
it (68). By allowing the culmination of these varying ideologies to grapple with hypothetical
plots that crossover with real world issues such as oil shortages or the corruption of massive
conglomerate corporations, begins an important conversation that continues beyond the co-
created narrative of the game. Lefebvre notes that social space is entirely about the coexistence
of interrelationships. He states, “(social) space is not a thing amongst other things, nor a product
amongst other products, rather it subsumes things produced and encompasses their
interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity- their (relative) order and/or (relative)
disorder” (73).

The way twenty-first century entertainers are successfully engaging Internet Natives
corresponds directly with a concrete understanding of the social spaces they inhabit habitually
online. By evolving the structure of a narrative to encompass the social spaces of online media
through multi-platform play, and designating the same kind of freedom and agency to players as
such social spaces accredit, projects such as *World Without Oil* and *Zed.to* have set a new
standard for the way the Internet is affecting storytelling. The concept of space is important to
note in the evolutionary alteration of narrative in the twenty-first century, as the evolution of what has come to be considered a “space” in the Internet age has become vastly reconditioned. Online spaces are valued equally to real-world spaces in terms of twenty-first century interaction, including but not limited to debate, education and inter-human connection.

Edinborough notes in *Theatrical Reality*, “not only is space dependent on human structures of understanding, it also shapes such understanding” (17). If Edinborough is correct in her claim, this means the social spheres of the Internet that make up a large component of the time humans spend interacting in online spaces ultimately shapes our understanding of the world we inhabit, as well as out place within it. This is why multi-platform media space utilization is proving to engage massive audience appeal in the problem solving and co-authoring of projects like *World Without Oil* and *Zed.to*. I argue that much like theatrical space in a performance, online platforms provide a theatrical reality that can be utilized as a crucible for empathetic engagement and embodied knowledge through collective intelligence and collaborative co-authorship.

Lefebvre observed, “The embodied experience of space is composed in relation to the triadic interplay between the perceived, the conceived and the lived, with each element responding reflexively to the other two” (40). If twenty-first century audiences perceive online social spaces as a forum for empathetic and critical engagement, the utilization of these platforms in performance practice as theatrical spaces is an innovative and successful avenue for creating an internet-evolved form of narrative that speaks to the sensibilities of Internet Natives. Internet Natives have discovered a fine line between theatricality and reality and, through exploring the crossover, have created a new form of narrative that equally values the cognitive analytical powers, stimulated creativity and agential voice of creator and
player/participant/spectator. The Internet has proven itself to be a laboratory for decisive exchange and collective knowledge. I argue that utilizing its connective powers is the key to unlocking the potential for an evolved form of engaging collaborative co-authored narrative in twenty-first century entertainment.
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to point out the dialectic tension between narrative and spectatorial agency in order to address the potential utilization of the two in cohesion with one another within twenty-first century theatrical practice. Through presenting an argument for the cognitive imprint of the Internet on Internet Natives and the way in which technological advancements have restructured narrative, I hope to enable and embolden theatre makers and storytellers in their endeavors to not only reach Internet Natives, but invigorate the potential they hold for lasting social change through audience authored narrative. Utilizing narrative as an empathetic technology in which to create lived experiences in liminal spaces and solidify solutions in virtual realities is a powerful tool for twenty-first century storytellers to use in shaping a better world. By exploring different paradigms of agential allocation in contemporary immersive theatre practices, live-action gaming events and co-authored narratives created online, this thesis attempts to create a framework for which theatre makers of the twenty-first century can fuse the valuable contributions of gaming and popular media to create co-authored narratives in immersive theatrical realities.

Ultimately I argue that experiences of empathy, intimacy and agency in the context of performance are profoundly shaped by the social, cultural and technological conditions embedded in existent reality. I believe in order to effect meaningful social change through performance avenues, these conditions must be taken into account. Theatre is a powerful mechanism capable of influencing and shaping societies as well as emotionally fulfilling and critically evoking individuals. To keep this mechanism functioning at full capacity, it must be tweaked and tuned up to adhere to the needs of its users. I truly believe theatre has the potential to change the world for the better, but to do so it must remain a relevant technology, capable of
transferring knowledge through the mediums and cognitive approaches of the audience surrounding it. Though audience demographics currently display generational gaps excluding the majority of Internet Natives, it is inevitable that in my lifetime as a theatre maker, Internet Natives will become the only audience left to create meaningful theatrical experiences for. I believe it is crucial for theatre makers to guide theatrical experimentation towards audience-authored narrative in order to further investigate the cohesive blending of narrative and spectatorial agency to attract, engage and inspire Internet Natives through our art form. To do so successfully requires a deeper understanding of the following elements and the way in which they work in relation to each other.

**Narrative**

Stories are the way human beings learn about and respond to the world around them. We share stories to know one another better. We indulge in stories to entertain or fulfill ourselves. We create stories to release the depictions of our imaginations, wrestle with social issues and transfer valuable knowledge that others may need. But when we create stories, we create meaning, and creating meaning collaboratively has infinite potential for personal transcendence, establishing communities and creating a lasting social impact. History has proven that as technology advances, narrative evolves into new structures. I think it is essential for theatre makers to consider how the Internet wants to tell stories and how the Internet Native has adapted to participating within the twenty-first century structure of narrative.

**Agency**

The allocation of agency in the twenty-first century within the context of media is more generously expanded than it has been under previous technologies. The ability to connect with anyone from anywhere at anytime has changed the way in which Internet Natives respond to the
reality surrounding them. In an age of habitual digital connection, constant social interchange and active voice become common expectations that insist theatre makers reconsider the role and allocation of agency in performance practices. Agency can be allocated in the form of interaction, navigation, choice, voice or authorship. The range of these agential allocations has been discussed throughout the case studies and examples in this thesis. Ultimately, I advocate that agential allocation of audience authorship is the most effective way to engage Internet Natives in theatrical narratives.

**Intimacy**

In an interconnected world of collective Internet intelligence, information, stories, and socialization can be accessed at any given moment through fingertips on touch sensitive screens kept constantly in close proximity. However, engagements that cannot be as easily accessed through our familiar digital devices become a sought after commodity. Two such modes of emotional engagement are lived experience and authentic intimacy. Within the case study analysis in chapter three, discussing *Sleep No More, Fureza Brueta, and Sweet and Lucky*, I engaged in a phenomenological analysis of experiential narrative focused in re-evaluating the authenticity and ethics of intimacy in immersive theatrical realities. In writing the chapter, I determined that authenticity is the key to unlocking the intimate potential of lived experience in immersive theatre. Intimacy has a powerful affect in immersive performance, which means it must be utilized responsibly by theatre artists in order to create lived experiences that positively effect social change. I argue that intimacy in immersion can lead to deeper understanding and connection in reality.
Liminality

I contend that the utilization of liminal spaces is a key component of creating successful immersive theatre. Without a metaphorical wading pool to test the theatrical reality, spectators may be hesitant to fully immerse themselves within the world makers have created. In order to create a community within the space, individuals must be fully committed to immersion in the theatrical reality. Just as a child who does not know how to swim has the potential to panic if thrown into deep water without learning how to navigate the way water changes physical and emotional operations within the new space, so spectators must become accustomed to a theatrical reality before immersing themselves within it or there is risk of trauma. In immersive theatre case studies of Sleep No More and Sweet and Lucky, I discussed liminal pre-shows in which participants could become acclimated to the theatrical reality or find a safe space on the edge of the theatrical reality in the in between. This in between space borders reality and the theatrical reality and is a crucial factor in determining the engagement of an immersant within the performance.

Play and Dark Play

Play is a laboratory to workshop the self and society through lived experience. The transfer of embodied knowledge and freedom of experimentation that accompany play is advantageous in sustaining social change through theatrical practices. In utilizing play, individuals can throw off constructed identities and explore ranges of social behavior and meaning making that are not possible in the realm of reality. To play is to activate the imagination and be free of social constructs in a low consequence environment that encourages individualized experimentation. Through play, individuals can learn truths about themselves that could not be realized within the limitations of reality. However, play is also a powerful tool that
is deeply intertwined with psychological perspectives that influence raw emotional reactions and must be employed ethically by theatre makers and performers within immersive spaces. I argue in chapter three that dark play, or play that intermingles with reality, can be dangerous and emotionally or physically damaging to participants. Because of this, I advise that immersive theatre makers should carefully train performers to adjust interactions specifically to the individuals playing and create a transparent contract between spectator and performer that values consent and authentic agency.

**Eustress and Fiero**

Positive stress is an important aspect of virtual game-play that can be utilized in immersive theatrical performance through giving the spectator a more essential and individualized role in the narrative being constructed within a theatrical reality. Eustress is inherently connected to fiero. As spectators feel more involved, are given more decision and meaning making opportunities and allocated a more essential role within the piece, instinctual pride becomes a key motivational tool in accomplishing tasks, contributing to narratives and exploring theatrical realities. By structuring an immersive performance to evoke these two physically and emotionally driving factors within a spectator, I argue that engagement in and commitment to the narrative escalate.

**Awe and Stable Communitas**

Awe may be the most important factor in creating lasting social change. To awake a participant to the emotional fulfillment of being a part of something larger than oneself is to expose them to the collaborative change they can affect in the real world. I advocate that awe is most successfully achieved in socially activating projects or performances concerning social issues in fictitious realities. To evoke awe in an audience is to create communitas. As
participants feel connected to something larger than themselves, they often realize the community affected by the same awe surrounding them. This realization has the potential to connect a community linked with a responsibility to one another. In chapter five, through an analysis of socially activating projects, I argue that stable or lasting communitas can be created via online avenues. I also argue that stable communitas is most effectively stimulated through awe. The power of feeling connected to something larger than oneself and the fulfillment in sharing that connection with others is efficacious and influential. Once the connection of communitas has been created in relationship with the evoking of awe, I argue a communities’ responsibility to one another outside the theatrical reality will continue to grow, leading to lasting social bonds and meaningful social change.

**Authorship**

Ultimately, I argue that twenty-first century spectatorial agency in theatrical realities comes down to the question of audience authorship. Technological advancements have Internet Natives generating, sharing, and rewriting stories habitually. To deny Internet Natives this agency in performance avenues is to provoke disengagement. I believe authorship or co-authorship within non-linear, open narratives will not only engage Internet Natives, but also utilize their strengths to develop meaningful and necessary stories in the twenty-first century.

**The Culmination**

By integrating and harmonizing these elements of gaming, play and theatre, I believe theatre makers can create lasting and meaningful immersive theatrical experiences for Internet Natives that have the potential to connect individuals in more lasting ways and stimulate significant social change. I truly believe that as a society, we are the stories we tell. I hope this thesis will encourage theatre makers to re-evaluate the way narrative structure is evolving in the
twenty-first century in order to allow Internet Natives to tell the stories that make up their own cognitive process and perception of reality.
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