The Spontaneous Playfulness of Creativity: Lessons from Interactive Theatre for Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

Improvisation is intuition in action, a way to discover the muse and respond to her call. The outpourings of intuition consist of a continuous, rapid flow of choice, choice, choice.

—Stephen Nachmanovich,
 Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art [14]

This paper maintains that the practice and theories of improvisational and activist theatre can infuse interactive computer games with spontaneous, playful creativity. This playfulness can inspire not only character, relationship and social issue possibilities in the digital game development, but can also tease out creative ideas through live improvisational gameplay among development teams. Working from the premise that computer games are both a unique art form and an experiential way to rehearse social change, this paper suggests novel ways of drawing on the games and artistry of Stephen Nachmanovich, Ruth Zaporah, Uta Hagen, and Keith Johnstone, and the activism of Augusto Boal, David Diamond, and Richard Rohd to enhance computer gameplay experience. It also makes a call to action for kinaesthetic involvement in live gameplay, because getting up and trying the games is better than just reading about them.

Author Keywords: Improvisation, Activist Theatre, Character, Relationships, Social Issues, Kinaesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

Digital games are a mainstay of our twenty-first century cognitive environment: children, teens, and people in their twenties and early thirties have never known a world without these games. From an economic standpoint, according to ABI Research, revenues of digital games are expected to double from $32.6 to $65.9 billion worldwide between 2006 and 2011 and much of the growth will be in online gaming [1]. Software designers will be under continual pressure to provide interesting character attributes, relationship possibilities and social group interactions for digital playspaces.

Small wonder that the game industry is actively recruiting innovative ideas from dramatic performing arts for professional development sessions. Game conferences ask for submissions on topics like "Best practices for creating realistic and expressive real-time faces," "Believable character physics," and "Artificial intelligence agents," [8] as well as generic social-issue-related themes like "Social and ethical issues in games" [9]. Resultant workshops and presentations will undoubtedly provide useful design tactics for game designers, but these topics are not yet mining the playfulness of spontaneity and collective social expression available from interactive theatre art.

The analysis of digital games as a temporal art form is gaining credibility. Theoretical linguist and video game player Paul James Gee [10], for example, describes video games as a unique art form that is "closer to living inside a symphony than to living inside a book." With this musical metaphor in mind, I believe that creative spontaneity can conduct new ways of designing, mapping, modeling, and implementing games into a greater artistic crescendi. My intention in this paper is to spark ideas about how improvisational and activist theatre practice can endow digital games with the raw spirit of spontaneous playfulness; enabling spirited character and social interactions in interactive play spaces.

DESIGN: UNLEASHING THE IMAGINATION

Improvisation

Be spontaneous, use your imagination and just play! In one form or another, this is the mantra and rebel yell of the following artists: improvisational musician Stephen Nachmanovich, Action Theatre innovator Ruth Zaporah, Theatresports founder Keith Johnstone, and Augusto Boal, whose activist Forum Theatre features "rehearsals" for real situations. Each of these practitioners also feels that being true to spontaneous insights is a way of keeping the editor of self-censorship out of the process of creation.

Stephen Nachmanovich passionately believes that art comes from inner sources of spontaneous creation. In *Free Play:*

Improvisation in Life and Art he claims "What we have to express is already with us, is us, so the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles of its natural flow" [14]. He asserts that by inventing a channel of flow from one's heart directly into reality, one is allowed to "experiment without fear of consequences, to have a playspace safe from fear of criticism, so that we can bring out our unconscious material without censoring it first."

Ruth Zaporah's Action Theater puts Nachmanovich's theory to work, offering games and exercises to work through what Zaporah calls "the body-heart-head thing" that links the three in games that open up expression and a sense of play. Her group games aim to move the participant player effortlessly from thought to feeling to imagination to remembering … rather than "worry, think, conjure … what we're going to do, say, or be next" [17]. Recognizing situations and patterns as they arise through relaxation of imagination leads to transformation of the form and content of an action into a resolve, or a "meaning" for oneself and, eventually, others. Keith Johnstone concurs with this sense of spontaneous creation and relates that when people are asked to give an original idea, they are thrown into chaos. He states that "if they said the first thing that came into their head, there'd be no problem," and that, in the context of imagination and spontaneity, striving too hard after originality … "makes your work mediocre" [13].

These masters of improvisation offer ways to uncover new methods of involving interactivity in digital game design and, at the same time, recognize that one role of imagination and spontaneity is to keep the internalized editor at bay. As a parallel in human-computer interaction (HCI) creativity, authority Bill Buxton paraphrases Linus Pauling by stating, "The only way to have a good idea is to have ten crappy ones." In his seminar "The Social Life of Sketches," [4] Buxton insists that sketching out an uninhibited, spontaneous array of hand-made drawings is fundamental to early-stage interactive media design. Further to that, he agrees that self-imposed censorship is detrimental to free thinking and says that "critical to understanding, as a designer, is how to survive the critics to extract the courage to re-interpret."

Social Activism
In the arena of social activism, Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre harnesses theatre's ability to represent real-life conflicts as "rehearsals for reality" [2]. Forum is a dynamic place of interactivity through direct action and social change, and an environment in which spectators become embodied as "spect-actors." Through a creative process that is largely composed of playing games of spontaneity and imagination, spect-actors can jump into the action and replace a character they see struggling with social conflict, taking the story in new directions. "Cop-in-the-Head" for example, is a game meant to destabilize internalized oppressions to help people get over their fear of taking political action [3].

Boal has influenced a great number of theatre-based activists all around the world. As an example, Vancouver theatre activist David Diamond has developed a variation of Forum called "Power Plays" that use theatre as a spectactor-initiated tool for investigating, changing, and celebrating community [6]. Similarly, American community activist Michael Rohd experiments with ways that theatre can enhance understanding of things that "honestly matter to people" [15] . Like Diamond and Rohl, designers of social-issue digital games can find inspiration in Boal's struggles with social conflict. In the digital realm, using this style of Forum Theatre could feasibly mobilize designers and activists from both the server side (software designers) and the client side (embodied participants) to act out and raise consciousness about world problems in multiple-player virtual environments.

MAPPING AND MODELING CHARACTER AND RELATIONSHIPS
Stanislavski-inspired acting teacher Uta Hagen held a key to mapping and modeling character attributes for use in digital games and interactive stories. Hagen [11] strongly believed that stage actors should identify with the characters they play with feelings and circumstances from their own lives. By "playing in the moment" the actor can suspend all knowledge of what is to come, and hence be rendered vulnerable and open to surprises. This is akin to the way story narrative should unfold in digital play spaces where webs of possibilities exist rather than pre-determined plotlines.

Hagen mapped out essential steps of character analysis that have as much relevance to game and interactive story creators as they do for stage actors in the development of character subtext or backstory.

- Who am I? What is my present state of being? How do I perceive myself? What am I wearing?

- What are the circumstances? What time is it (year, season, day)? Where am I (city, neighbourhood, building, and room)? What surrounds me (immediate landscape, the weather, the objects around)? and What are the immediate circumstances (what has just happened, what do I expect will happen later on)?

- What are my relationships (to circumstances, place, object and other people)?

- What do I want (overall and immediate needs and objectives)?

- What is my obstacle (what's in my way and how can I overcome)?

- What do I do to get what I want? How do I achieve my objective? What's my behaviour? What are my actions? [11] (p134)

Computer-game developer and interactive storyteller Chris Crawford says that taking good art in one medium and simply transferring it to another does not make good art but instead, an artist should strive to express content that is most "parallel to the grain of the medium" [5]. Hagen's "internal" principles of character analysis clarify the practice of embodying an emotional memory of the character and letting that image in the body be reflected out. Thinking about character attributes from the "inside out" promises to result in a useful cross-over effect into the digital character realm, paralleling the Stanislavski/Hagen internal development technique of subtext through emotional memory.

There is also an "external" technique of character development, in the spirit of Commedia dell'arte, where masks that cover the face are used to physically manipulate an imaginative response in the body [7]. Mask work is similar, in my mind, to the technique that digital game artists currently use when creating and modeling a character's external attributes in the computer, rendering them from the "outside in" — sculpting a face or body in a 3-D rendering software program. This is a valid creative approach in both theatre and in digital game character development but is not, by my way of thinking, complete enough to deliver a fully fleshed-out character where a backstory is crucial for believability.

Moving to the issue of modeling character relationships, we see that Crawford's "verb-thinking" principles bear a striking resemblance to the theatrical technique of setting action objectives within "beats" in a conventional narrative dramatic scene. In Crawford's case, he uses arithmetic operatives to humanize personalities as they build up interpersonal relationships [5]. Relationship-building through mathematics is an interesting approach for character creation in the digital realm, and one that theatre artists might even try for fun. For example "Inclination[Retort] = 5 x Anger[Actor] x Affection[Actor, Insulter] – 2" describes that an actor responds to an insult based on the factors of firstly, five times the affection the actor feels for the insulter, and secondly half of the anger the actor feels as a result of the insult.

Consider, now, improvisational relationship-building status games such as Keith Johnstone's "status towers" as a way to supplement this formula [20] (p70). In this exercise, actors are assembled into pecking orders where someone begins with some low-status activity, and each person who enters the scene plays a step higher, or vice versa. Studying the result of these scenes may be useful to humanize digital game formula such as that of Crawford's arithmetic operates. Yet another use is to gather implicit, or intuitive, knowledge about the characters' relationships directly by observing the status tower scenes or, better still, through participation and play.

A further example of the rapport between theatre and digital games is the overall improvisational motto of "receiving, releasing, and returning without thinking" [7]. This both heralds and imbues the value of foregoing the sacred-ness of "the proper answer" and has a direct connection to Crawford's definition of interactivity being a cyclic process in which each agent, meaning character, alternately "listens, thinks, and responds." These adages release the idea that the worlds of digital games and non-digital games are not really that dissimilar.

IMPLEMENTATION: MOVE AWAY FROM THE SCREEN
Get up on your feet! There is really no way the spontaneous promise of creativity can gain full effect unless game developers are willing to put them into play. There are literally hundreds of games that have been developed by improvisational and activist theatre artists that can fire up the imagination and build social awareness among creative teams — a kinaesthetic way for the muse to flow forth.

A great exercise that stimulates energy and focus, and that one can play alone in a pinch, is Keith Johnstone's game of "Lists" where first thoughts reign supreme [13]. This is where you just get from your workstation any time, march around a room, or a park, or down halls, pointing at objects and loudly call them something else, whatever comes into your head. You'll be surprised and how it frees the mind.

Michael Rohd, whose community-based theatre enables people to look at their world with compassion, has developed a series of games called "Replace the Protagonist" and "The Antagonist's Dilemma," meant to give a good view from both sides of a social-issue story [16]. His *Hope is Vital Training Manual* describes these games in detail; they experiment with the "magic" of solving problems through what he calls the "key improv pieces: relationship, intention, location, activity, high stakes, strong detailed choices, and circumstance." The exploration of motivations of protagonists and antagonists can evolve from simple exercises like "Machine" in which a group creates a communal motion and rhythm to build a sense of trust. Building trust is a powerful initiator to move us toward the practice of a transitive, participatory, interactive democracy — concepts of utmost importance, especially when building networks of collective intelligence to advance resolution-generating practices in social-issue games.

FINAL THOUGHTS
Johan Huizinga, in considering the cultural aspect of play, claimed that civilization does not "come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it" [12]. The same can be said of improvisational and activist theatre and digital games; their patterns of possibilities are shaped, in part, by the raw and boundless playfulness of creativity. One has to embrace the

fantasy and get into trouble to make things interesting, embodying both theatre and game spect-actors in rounds of extemporaneous risk-taking as a way to have fun and to solve problems.

Keith Johnstone said that "Reading about spontaneity won't make you more spontaneous, but it may at least stop you heading off in the opposite direction" [13]. The same holds true for internal character analysis, relationship building, and theatre games in which getting up and trying is better than just reading about the games. Infusing improvisational and activist theatre into digital game design is not a guaranteed silver bullet to perfecting the art, but by implementing techniques of spontaneous intuition and by staying responsive to the creative potential of rapid-flow choice-making, game designers might just discover a whole palette of surprising new ideas.

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