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Immersive Theatre: The Speculative Solution to Post-Structuralism

COVID-19 has presented fundamental problems for performing arts, an industry which traditionally relies on bringing in audiences for live performances. The pandemic created a need to take theatre to the audience instead and Team 12 have been working with local business Raucous to create an immersive theatrical experience that fuses physical and digital elements, which the participant can enjoy at home. In this essay, I will reflect on our project and examine immersive theatrical experiences through two critical lenses: post-structuralism, and speculative design, in order to illustrate that immersive theatrical experiences inherently fuse these two theories to create an engaging and reflective entertainment product.

Structuralist theory was an early 20th century doctrine led by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who argued that the relationships between different individual elements, such as linguistic fragments, should be understood through their context within the whole structure they constitute (Mambrol, 2016). Furthermore, Ferdinand de Saussure established semiology as the study of the sign, which is a culturally constructed union of the 'signifier', a sound or image, and the 'signified', a meaning which the 'signifier' represents (1959, pp.66-9). This creates the impression of a systematically homogenic, even totalitarian, social institution. Post-structuralism was a reactionary movement which built on this theory, but instead argued that Saussure's signs are open to multiple interpretations and therefore that the powerful focal point of a structure is itself not without influence (Mambrol, 2016). Jacques Derrida pioneered this idea by applying Lévi-Strauss structuralist principle of *bricolage*, meaning the discourse and transformation of presumptions, to structuralism itself (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p.247). This portrays structure as a system of different tensions and dialogue, which creates an indeterminate rather than a fixed centre to mediate between signs and their varied interpretations (Derrida, 2001, p.360).

Figure 1: *Bricolage* at work in "Dungeons & Dragons" (Cullen, 2020)

Traditional theatre could, perhaps controversially, be framed as a structuralist establishment, due to its didactic portrayal of universal moral roots, despite the different narratives these may be embedded in (Vico, 2002, pp.218-20). Such ritualistic entertainment creates issues of accessibility and elitism, due to the sophisticated audience it attracts (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p.139). However, immersive theatre takes the emphasis away from the theatre-maker, and instead gives the

participant agency to determine the narrative direction, thereby facilitating entertainment intrinsically rooted in post-structuralist theory. The functional premise of an immersive theatre piece is open to different interpretations from different participants, who may, as *bricoleurs*, choose to adapt the narrative in their own unique directions. Such creative collaboration is also a feature of participatory design methodology (Forlano and Mathew, 2014, pp.8-9).

Nothing exemplifies theatrical *bricolage* at work more perfectly than the fantasy role-playing game "Dungeons & Dragons" (see Figure 1). One participant, the "Dungeon Master" or "DM", uses the rules in the D&D Player's Handbook to create an imaginary world, whilst the other participants create "player characters" who explore and interact with this world (Gygax, 2014). On the one hand, the player characters are at the mercy of the DM and the rule book, which enforce the reality of the game world. On the other hand, the DM is forced to make creative decisions and shape their narrative according to the other players' choices. Neither party is in full control, it is the balance and union of their collective creative energy which allows the game to function in its strongest imaginative state (La Farge, 2006). The dialogue which this immersive experience creates therefore embodies post-structuralist discourse of power.

From our research into D&D and other similar examples, we realised that designing an experience around a participant, rather than a prescribed narrative structure, makes for a more personally engaging and therefore more immersive experience. In contrast to a narrative timeline, we developed the idea of a 'narrative space', where the participant has a found object and some parameters to work within, but ultimately has free reign over the pacing and the extent to which they explore the premise. This space manifests itself in our final concept by presenting participants with a file containing different possible identities for Banksy and then asking them to explore these characters' backstories using the various materials they are provided with. It is up to the participant to decide when and how they use the materials to carry out their investigation. The power is therefore not centrally determined by the theatre-makers, but relinquished partly to the participants, who, as *bricoleurs*, have the agency to build imaginatively on the creative foundation and control their own narrative direction.
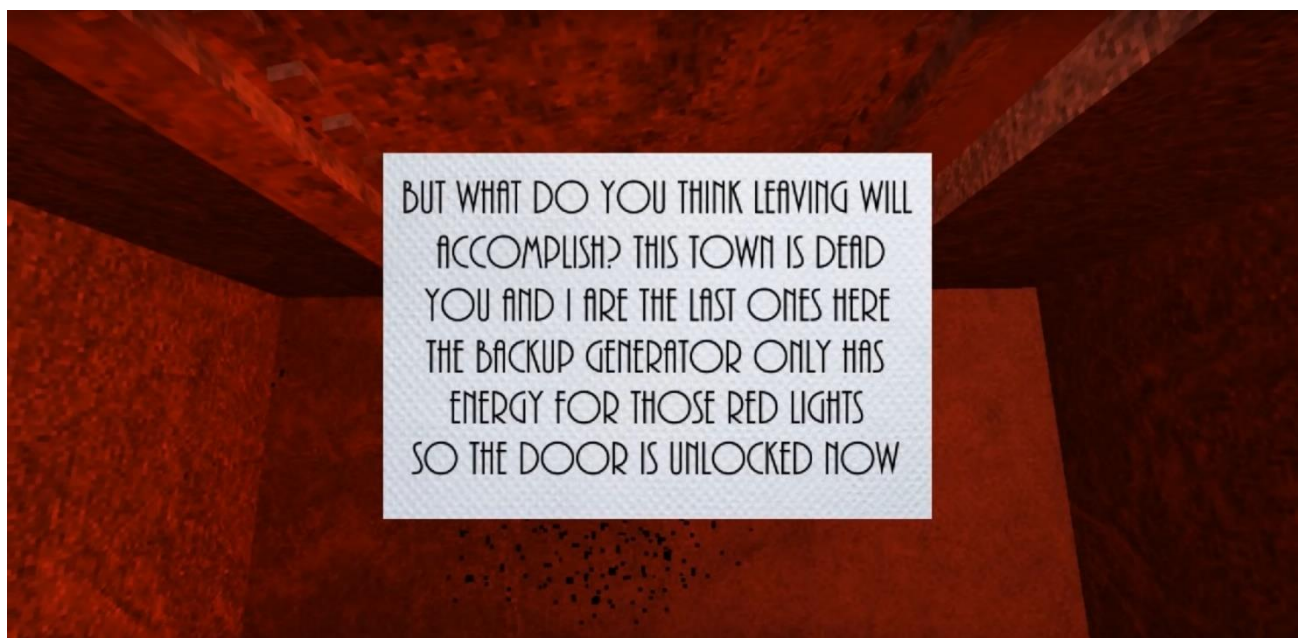

Figure 2: Screenshot from the climax of "Presentable Liberty" (CJUGames, 2016)

Furthermore, theatre can provoke the interrogation of power. For example, in the video game, "Presentable Liberty" by Robert Brock, you have been imprisoned for an unknown reason and you receive letters from the outside world, which you have to read in order to progress in the game

(Presentable Liberty Wiki, 2020). Throughout gameplay, you develop reliance, even trust, in your jailer Doctor Money, but you are ultimately presented with a dilemma at the very end. The door to your prison cell finally opens, but Doctor Money warns you not to escape (see Figure 2). Until this point, you have been spoon-fed gameplay with little scope for decision-making, so this climatic dilemma comes as a surprise and you only have thirty seconds to decide how to continue. Such sudden control over their fate forces the participant to question whether to trust or disobey the source of power in the game, which can also prompt them to reflect on their own liberty and power in real life.

To increase the self-determination of the participant in our experience, we took inspiration from Presentable Liberty's presentation of a game-changing moral dilemma. In our premise, Banksy is under threat and after having explored the possible identities for him, the participant is presented with a choice: should you reveal his identity with the evidence of your findings, or is it safer to let him remain anonymous? The positive or negative consequences of the participant's decision will impact the narrative direction of the experience. The multiple variations created by our premise is emblematic of the post-structuralist principle that a sign is open to multiple interpretations, as one immersive theatre piece can affect participants differently, which affects their choice of its direction.

I have therefore demonstrated that immersive theatrical experiences can put post-structuralist thought into practice both through the active power dynamic between the theatre-markers and the participants and through a participant's self-determination controlling the wider narrative structure.
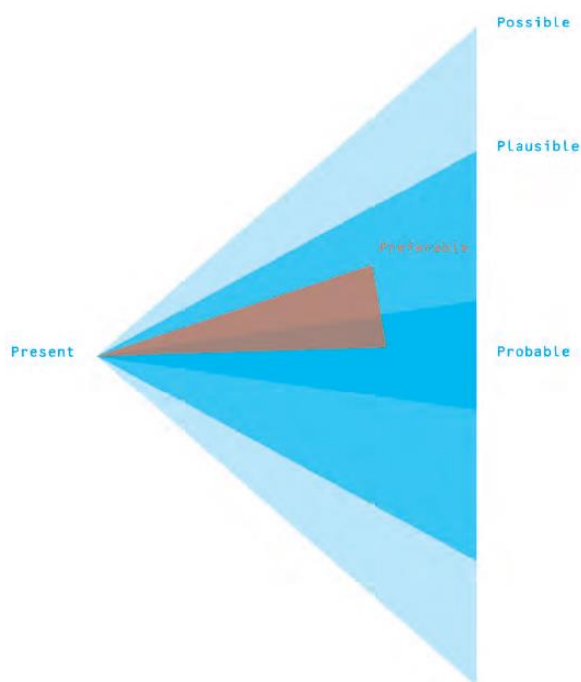

Figure 3: Dunne and Raby's illustration of Candy's Cones (2013, p.5)

Building on the post-structuralist qualities we have identified, we can also understand immersive theatrical experiences as speculative designs, which are defined as proposals which highlight "dilemmas and trade-offs between imperfect alternatives" (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p.189). In "Speculative Everything", Dunne and Raby use Stuart Candy's diagram of potential futures to illustrate this concept (see Figure 3), with different cones representing different levels of likelihood fanning out from the present into the future (2013, pp.3-6). Speculative design enables exploration of preferable futures, which intersect with plausible (unlikely but foreseen) futures and probable (likely and predictable) futures. These designs therefore occupy a space between the extremes of naturalism and futurism.

This concept of an intermediary space also follows another post-structuralist idea, philosopher Michel Foucault's theory of Heterotopias – spaces within spaces that represent or juxtapose other real spaces (1984). Theatre heterotopically creates a temporary illusive narrative space that can speculate over present and possible futures (Margolin, 2007, p.4). In doing so, it challenges reality through offering alternatives that highlight weakness within existing normality (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p.35). Theatrical scenarios are therefore not just entertainment, but creative stimuli which are catalysts for change. Furthermore, the experimental niche of immersive theatre is even more successful in speculation because it does not form part of the entertainment industry's mainstream conceptual consumerism, which has less power to challenge established values because of an audience's familiarity with its presentation (Dunne, 2008, pp.94-6).

The fusion of physical and digital props amplifies the heterotopic nature of an immersive theatrical experience by making the fictional propositions of other worlds tangible. To demonstrate this, I will evaluate two different examples of props from our research.
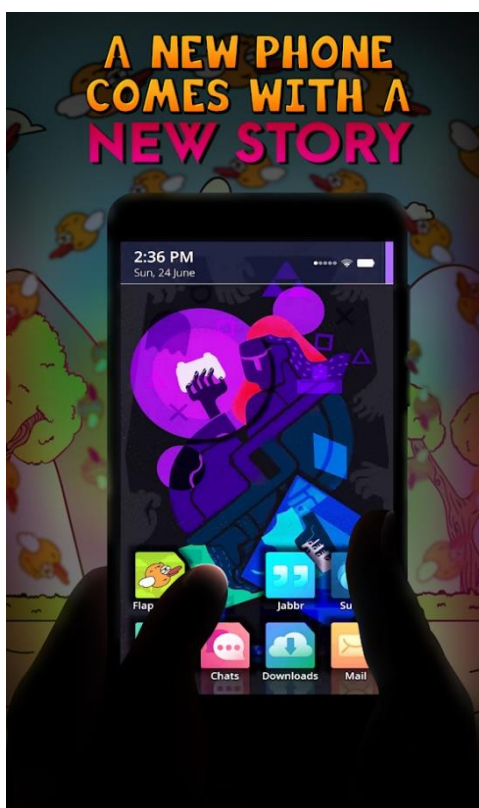

Figure 4: A Simulacra poster (Kaigan Games, 2021)

Firstly, "Simularca: Pipe Dreams" is a horror video game by Kaigan Games which follows Teddy, who is addicted to a cursed video game, "FlapeeBird" (2021). Your objective is to defeat the corrupt "FlapeeBird" simulacrum before it absorbs you and Teddy from reality. The user interface simulates a corrupted phone, overlaying the participant's own device and therefore creating a heterotopic prop which makes the familiar scary (see Figure 4). Whilst the experience is intended to critique video game culture, in my opinion, the game is not very successful in provoking discourse because the participant must play "FlapeeBird" repeatedly in order to progress. I believe the resulting frustrations make the participant more critical of the experience than of game culture itself. Dunne and Raby argue that props can only work properly if viewers suspend their disbelief, but personally I find this boring gameplay undermines my inquisition as a gamer (2013, pp.94-6). Therefore, I would argue that whilst the prop and experience are coherent and heterotopic, the game fails to achieve its

speculative purpose of stimulating the participant's imagination enough to suggest preferable futures for socio-technical issues.

Secondly, Sputniko!'s "Menstruation Machine" mixes physical and digital delivery through its prop installation and accompanying video (see Figure 5). The prop of the machine is fitted with a blood dispensing mechanism and electrodes stimulating the lower abdomen in order to simulate the pain and bleeding of a 5 day menstruation process for the wearer (Sputniko!, 2010). The accompanying music video, also created by the artist, features a Japanese transvestite boy who chooses to wear the machine in order to understand how his menstruating friends feel by resembling them biologically, not just aesthetically. In my opinion, this installation is successfully provocative in interrogating the biological and cultural meaning behind menstruation. As an exhibition which creates a heterotopic space by fusing different realities and delivery methods, it not only encourages a social art practice, but presents itself as imaginary anthropology rather than art (Dunne and Raby, 2013, pp.141-4). Clearly, Sputniko! presents a plausible future and prompts users to speculate and evaluate its socio-ethical consequences to create change.
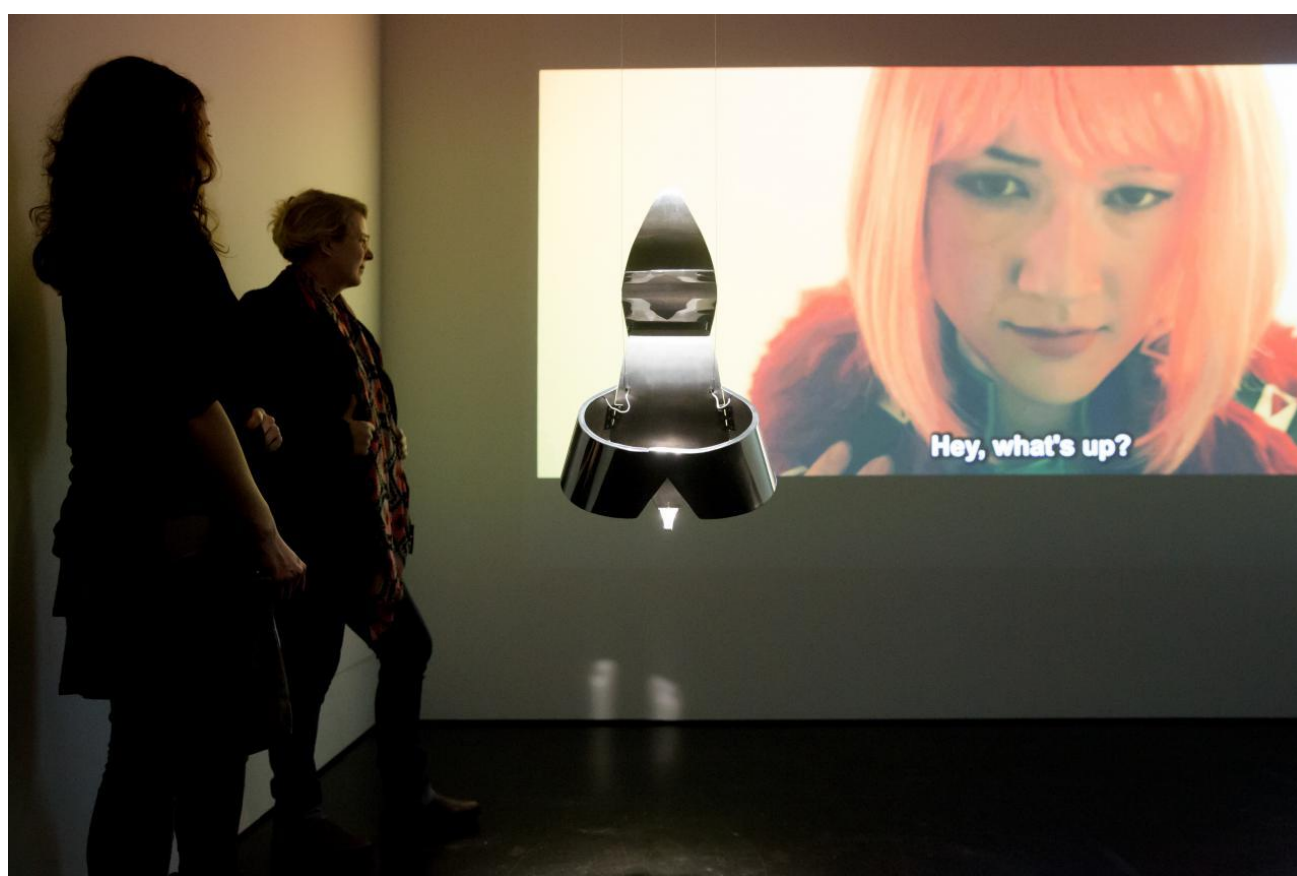

Figure 5: The "Menstruation Machine" in the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe (2021)

Both of these speculative designs influenced the use of moral themes in our experience, which encourage the participant to reflect on issues of identity, the anonymity of Banksy and the ownership of his artwork, according to our premise. I believe this successfully stimulates the audience's imagination and could lead to a change in perspective. Furthermore, our experience manifests itself through a mixture of physical and digital props, with delivery methods derived from the narrative in order to make for a more natural and coherent experience that will allow the participant to suspend their disbelief. Therefore, I believe our experience successfully creates a coherent fictional world which straddles the line between reality and alternatives and challenges the participant in a speculative manner.

In conclusion, I have examined immersive theatre through two different lenses which build on each other. Immersive theatre has been presented as post-structuralist, because it gives the user agency to determine their narrative direction and takes away power from the theatre-maker by presenting opportunities for interaction and choice. It has also been presented as speculative, because it straddles the heterotopic line between naturalism and futurism by proposing alternative ways of looking at the world which challenge reality. My understanding of immersive theatre from these lenses has impacted my perspective in making sure I work with my team to create an immersive theatrical experience which has a participant-driven narrative space, creates moral dilemmas, and uses different delivery mediums coherently. This makes our project not only entertaining but successfully reflective in its interrogation of power and speculative in its exploration of alternatives.

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