A Primer on Transmedial Storytelling and Game/Theater Crossover: Topics to consider, questions to ask, and lessons learned from two pioneers in this new and emerging genre

Background

Adrienne Mackey of Swim Pony Performing Arts (Philadelphia) and Ian Garrett of ToasterLab (Toronto) are both theater devisers who have shifted their artistic work from more traditional live performances to projects that merge theater’s capacity to connect people in embodied, intimate experiences with games’ structured systems of interaction that give participants agency. This area of exploration – the hybridization of theater and game – is a relatively new one in devised theater. Another term for such projects is “transmedial storytelling,” which refers to using a variety of media, in this case as part of a theatrical experience.

As Mackey puts it, game design is based on building systems of input and response. One’s input is substantively impacting the system in a way that forwards some action or objective. She’s excited about incorporating it into theater because, “It’s like casting an audience member as, if not the central character, at least a meaningful character in a performance.”

Mackey recently premiered The End, a month-long theatrical game that guides individual participants in an exploration of their own mortality through daily role-play and improvisation via text message with “The End.” This entity helps players select from 52 daily quest options (site-specific/in-person interactions, snail mail, phone calls, writing, meditation, etc.) that best suit the player’s personal mission in playing the game. It had its first full run in Philadelphia in May 2017.

Meanwhile, Garrett’s Transmission is a multi-site performance series using augmented reality in the form of 360-degree video and binaural audio recordings to investigate making performance accessible at different times while maintaining the specificity of location. The Transmission app features 31 story elements (videos, podcasts, live performances), most of which can only be unlocked in the location where they take place. Transmission premiered as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2017.

Mackey and Garrett agree that incorporating game design ideas and interactive digital content to theatrical work provides a concrete framework for audience agency and expands the definition of what “theater” can be. By expanding beyond the limits of traditional live performance to play with duration, time, geographical location, and technology, there are all kinds of new questions to be considered. To explore these and other shared interests, Mackey and Garrett met for a four-day intensive residency in Toronto. Below is a synthesis of some of their investigations, both philosophies they’ve built through their own work and questions they continue to ask themselves every time they create.
Content and Form Feedback Loop

For Mackey and Garrett, one of the greatest advantages of devised theater, and why they typically work in that realm rather than on traditional plays, is because form and content can be in constant conversation. As Mackey puts it, “If I’m making a piece about a Turkish family celebrating Ramadan, that could be on a stage, that could be at a dinner table, that could be outside, that could be in Turkey. If I’m at a large regional theater, that’s on a stage with some set number of seats. So the process of devising is about asking, ‘What is the content you want to convey, or the question you want to ask, and how does form best suit that?’ Once you’ve discovered some things about the form, how does content then respond to the limitations you’re imposing?” The opportunity to ask these questions expands even more with the addition of new technological forms that can be incorporated. So, in developing original work, Mackey and Garrett suggest continually asking:

*What is the story we want to tell? What’s the form that’s best to tell that? Or, what kinds of stories can only be told in this way?*

Narrative vs. Agency

Garrett notes that interactivity is extremely resource intensive, and that there are some limits you have to put into someone’s ability to change story if you want to control some aspect of plot or how they experience the narrative. In responding to this, Mackey suggests asking yourself:

*Is the goal to have something that’s an interactive experience, or is it for it to feel like it’s an interactive experience?*

Her own aim is the former, for an experience that’s not only interactive, but consequentially and meaningfully so. Projects that succeed at that prize the subjective experience, saying that each individual audience member is an important part of the story. Mackey’s core mission is to give the audience the agency to make choices and therefore find their own meaning in an experience. Garrett notes that video games often do this to a rudimentary, archetypical level, because there’s only so much complexity that can be interwoven to respond to all the nuances of humanity. That’s why they both continue to work in live performance: because essentially, a human actor is a “non-player character” (to use the video game term) that is infinitely responsive.

Game Design Foundations

Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek’s paper “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research” provides a useful starting place for what it is about games that are useful to think about for a theater-maker. According to the paper, games are built on:

- Mechanics – the most basic components of a game; the actions and behaviors a player can literally take
• Dynamics – how the mechanics and player inputs interact to create effects over time. What concretely happens as a result of the mechanic?
• Aesthetics – the emotional response hoped for in the player, as evoked by the mechanics and dynamics

For example, in Monopoly, there’s a mechanic that a player can build a hotel on their property, and when someone else lands there, they’ll have to pay the owner money. So each player has an incentive to build bigger properties so they can win the game. That hotel-building mechanism results in a dynamic of trying to build as many properties as possible to capture other players and take all their money. And it often results in an aesthetic experience of competition and anger and frustration.

Brenda Romero is a game designer who uses the MDA framework and builds on it with the philosophy that “The mechanic is the message.” According to her, the authorship of a game is in creating mechanics, and understanding that that will result in aesthetic experiences for the player. In other words, by saying that something is allowed in the world, that will result in a certain kind of moral universe. To return to the Monopoly example, the mechanics there teach the message that making money and bankrupting your friends is the path to success; there’s no incentive to help someone else out.

The way Mackey sees it, this is applicable to immersive theater because theater artists typically have a strong sense of the aesthetic experience they want people to have. But immersive theater often does not create rule sets that actually result in these aesthetics. For example, as Mackey articulates, “In Sleep No More, they want you to have this dreamy, otherworldly, floaty experience, but they also have a mechanic where if you take off your mask, or touch something you’re not supposed to, or if you do something to a performer, someone comes over and tells you you’re doing things wrong. So this can create an aesthetic experience where you have to be careful because there are rules you have to pay attention to that you might not fully understand.” Out of this, theater-makers can ask themselves:

> How are you incentivizing the player? Are you putting structures in place that might result in aesthetic (or emotional) responses that are the opposite of your goals?

**Rules and Structures**

In many devised theater pieces, Mackey and Garett agree, if one is creating a project where the normal cultures and rules of how people interact with the world are removed from them, it can be easy for the artist to get frustrated with the audience for not understanding what they’re supposed to do. However, there’s simply no way for them to intuit something that’s original to the culture the artist created.

> How can you create ways where participants learn the rules of interaction as they go, or, how best do you make rules explicit so that they understand what to value within the system you’re presenting them with?
Sometimes players discovering structure as they go is an important mechanic to an experience. However, when Mackey and Garrett posed the above questions to Rob Peagler, a game designer and creative consultant who played *The End*, he noted that many people who play video games are used to having visual representations of maps or resources or other tools to help navigate their experience. In some cases, then, perhaps some of the things gamemakers use internally to run the experience could just as usefully be shared with players/viewers to help them understand what happens, without it “ruining” the experience or the narrative.

**Expectations**

In addition to rules learned in playing or participating once someone is already engaged, another component is the *expectations* someone comes in with, a topic broached by Jenna Horton, one of the performers of *The End*. She observes that there are expectations of form and what the rules will be because of that. If audiences assume “theater” means it will be a two hour show with a 15-minute intermission, a creator has to ask,

> How do we begin to talk to audience about expectations? It’s half of the ingredients to bringing them in. So how do we frame audience’s expectations of what something is or will ask of them in a new form/genre?

**Narrative as Collage**

Mackey and Garrett have both observed that in work that is experienced non-linearly, audience members will process the narrative in different orders and will have varying depths of engagement. Thus, each scene or story component should be able to be experienced and valued independently of the other pieces, while simultaneously giving a sense that it is a part of a larger whole and thus motivating viewers to participate further. A game that demonstrates this concept well is *Her Story*, in which the player searches for videos on an old police database using keywords to try to solve a cold case. Each video provides one tiny clue to be collaged together into one’s understanding of the crime, and everyone who plays will see videos in different orders.

**Role of the Audience**

Unlike in traditional theater where the audience is typically unaddressed, hidden behind the “fourth wall” as if they don’t exist, Mackey and Garrett encourage makers of projects that give the audience an interactive role in the story to consider these questions:

> Who is the audience? Who are they in these moments as they get windows into other people’s lives? Are you asking them to pretend to be or know something beyond their reality?
Of course, there are countless answers to these questions depending on the work and its goals. Two extremes worth looking at/considering for reference are larp and technological haunting.

In live action role plays, particularly deeply immersive/story-based ones in the Nordic tradition, there is no break in the role the audience is playing. The idea is that the participant is never asked to pretend anything. As Mackey puts it, it’s the opposite of theater: if something is there, it’s actually there to whatever extent it’s possible to be so, so that the disruption of the breaking of the fourth wall is as minimal as possible. If you want to use this technique, factors to consider are the realism of your story (if it takes place in a different time period, for example, can your audience be expected to actually know all the things the narrative expects them to know?) and the duration of the piece (how long can someone actually live an extreme “as-if” role play session?).

Another option is “technological haunting,” where the audience isn’t given a role per se, but their relationship to the content is defined in a particular way. The view is whoever they are in real life, in whatever space they’re actually in, but the story is viewed through technology, as if the “ghost” of the story still exists in the space where it once occurred. This technique, which Garrett uses in Transmission, explores ways to expand access to site-based performance beyond live events, while still maintaining a sense of liveness and theatricality by adding the extra sensory info of being in the specific place where the narrative occurs. Janet Cardiff’s work offers a great example of this technique.

Incorporating Technology

Technological innovations are perhaps the root of why many artists are reimagining how stories get told: the competition of television and movies demands that theater rediscover its superpowers and what it can uniquely offer, and new inventions equal new ways to tell stories. However, as Mackey and Garrett have learned, part of being an effective transmedial storyteller is recognizing not just the possibilities of technology, but also the limitations, and correspondingly what value is added by using a particular form of technology.

Virtual Reality and 360 Video

Virtual reality is one of the better-known methods of creating immersive experiences solely using technology. VR is filmed using cameras that shoot in 360 degrees, typically with at least two lenses that stitch together their visual field to create the full 360 viewing perspective. Full-fledged VR experiences typically require headsets to enter the experience, completely taking away real-world surroundings in terms of visual input. In addition, 360 video can be used outside VR in films that capture the fullness of an environment and let the audience rotate the camera angle themselves while watching, putting control of perspective in the viewer’s hands.
The limits of VR are currently being pushed by camera manufacturers, who of course want consumers to purchase their technology. Garrett explains that these producers think they’re making the cameras for filmmakers. Yet, by moving into 360 video, they’re asking filmmakers to give up their primary visual storytelling tools: the viewer is fixed either farther or closer to something; there can’t be a close-up. There can’t be a pan because it would make people physiologically ill. So, Garrett continues, effective VR actually often comes more from people who have a background in or understanding of theater, because these are essentially the same limitations directors have in putting something on a stage: how do you create focus? How do you direct someone’s attention to something specific? This is why 360 video is a powerful tool for theater-makers, particularly when used in relationship with a specific site to create a multisensory experience.

Tech Reviews and Limitations for 360 Video

Garrett and his team learned many of the pros and cons of various 360 cameras through the long development period for Transmission. Here are some of Garrett’s basic reviews:

- Ricoh Theta – very user-friendly, stitches together the two 180-degree filming angles within the camera and is easily controllable through an app. However, their “HD” is insufficient for 360 video and ends up being very low-resolution. Good for test footage but not for primary use.
- Nikon Keymission 360 – much better video and usable resolution. The app is nearly useless because it requires Bluetooth and wifi and both tend to lose connection to the camera, so you can rarely preview your footage. But if you have an idea of your shot and don’t need to check it in the moment, that can be workable. It’s got a wider body so the stitch putting the two cameras together is a little more gnarly. Very unhelpful customer service.
- Vuze – Four cameras per eye; does stereoscopic recording at a sufficiently high resolution. You can’t preview footage in the app, but you can use the app to trigger it. Made by Human Eyes Technology, an Israeli startup that is very responsive to feedback.

Based on this analysis, Garret’s team typically does a preview and test shots with the Ricoh to check positioning, and then shoots with the Vuze and processes the footage from there.

Phone Software Infrastructure and Scalability

When one uses a phone or app technology in new ways, they should expect there to be challenges in scalability, a lesson learned by both Mackey and Garrett. Whether it’s finding a text messaging software that can manage thousands of texts sent to the same number without dropping any, or balancing a small app size with the intensive data use of streaming videos, or the stress put on a wifi infrastructure by a festival population, there will be surprises that come as a result of running an experience for a full audience in real time, no matter how many tests you run. Some of this one can predict and strategize for, others will be more difficult. Be prepared for the unexpected, and know who to contact and how responsive they are if issues relate to an outside software engineer or company.
Concluding Thoughts
So you’ve made an innovative game/theater project. Now what?

Garrett observed that when he’s brought work to festivals as a theater-maker before, the ultimate goal was to book some additional dates to tour the project. But with a project that involves an app, and numerous 360 videos shot in specific locations, impossible to just transplant it somewhere else. One would have to literally remake everything. He explains, “Our creative team’s narrative has changed from, ‘We’re theater-makers trying to make more theater and we’re going to use technology to do it,’ to ‘We’re theater-makers and we have a certain skill set.’” Moving forward, they’re asking themselves,

*How much time do we want to spend with this story? Do we want to remount this specific show? Or do we want to talk about this type of distributed transmedial performance and what that means for different types of stories? Can you tell a story that has nothing to do with technology? Can you tell a story for different age groups? In different locations? For different genres?*

Mackey, likewise, sees success in this kind of work as being about both form and content. For *The End*, though, “The form of the piece is so tied to the content that it’s hard to imagine exporting it generically.” Both artists’ perspectives combine to form this takeaway: There are pieces of transmedial storytelling that can be directly translated or generalized, but many more that are heavily dependent on the details of a particular project and its content. There are no answers that are universally correct, just an ever-growing list of questions to ask as one creates in this new and exciting field.