Hour of the Wolf – An Investigation into Puzzle Design in Live Theatre

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between theatre practice and game design has a rich history of innovation. Productions such as Punch Drunk's *Sleep No More* (2013), One Step at a Time Like This' *Since I Suppose* (2014), and Blast Theory's *A Cluster Of 17 Cases: Online* (2021) have all incorporated game-like elements, whether in pervasive, digital, or physical forms. However a fundamental question remains: How far can we push the boundaries of game design within the realm of theatre, and where does one art form intersect with and enrich the other?

From a game studies perspective, extensive research has explored the pervasive elements in this interdisciplinary realm, as seen in the works of Montola (2009), Celia Pearce (2019). While other researchers have looked at digital spaces as holding theatrical potential, see Callaghan (2020) Harris and Lulham (2022).

Many analyses have approached this intersection from the phenomenological experience of audience (Biggin 2017; Machon 2013; Kolesch, SchГjtz, and Nikoleit 2019), or to critique the theatricality of the work (White 2012; Alston 2016; Harper 2019), this study seeks to contribute to the academic discourse from a designer's standpoint, employing a practice-based research approach. Drawing from a year-long engagement as the interactive dramaturge for Malthouse Theatre's *Hour of the Wolf* (2023), we delve into the intricate integration of puzzle design within the immersive performance.

Hour of the Wolf was an immersive theatre show, presented by Malthouse Theatre running for approximately hour and a half. Audiences wear headphones which pick up on infrared sensors throughout the space and transmit either mic-ed audio from live actors, or prerecorded audio which is triggered or cued to certain events. Audiences were allowed to explore the town of Hope Hill, while actors played out scenes covering the course of a single night.

This investigation uncovers the challenges and creative transformations arising from shifting the performance paradigm from being observed to being actively engaged in and with. Two major puzzles were conceived and woven into the fabric of the production, altering not only the script but also the non-linear format of the work. As the interactive dramaturge, it was my job not only to onboard game design concepts to

the director and writer in initial scripting, but also to design the puzzles that would be implemented into the work itself.

The significant puzzle I will be presenting on is the "Mrs. Wolf" puzzle. As designer, I adopted a semi-escape room format, players exploring the world to uncover information and revealing tokens associated with dates. Players had to uncover five dates and input them correctly to access a hidden room which holds a secret scene with the mysterious Mrs Wolf. This design process not only influenced the script but also the spatial architecture.

This puzzle underwent numerous iterations within the initial two weeks of testing. These iterations were driven by audience feedback and actor requests, representing the interplay between ludic resonance and performance output as actors adapted to serve as both objects of play and performers. Design choices made before audiences could only be tested once the audience was live. This experience provided unique design challenges and resulted in a quick iterative process of both performance, narrative, and ludic design. The practice of working within the multidisciplinary modes of theatre and game design provides a unique opportunity to provide perspectives to both game design and theatre making. By having to be aware of the push and pull of the ludo-theatrical space, we not only explore what is expected in immersive spaces, but also what is accepted too for not just audiences but actors also. This may provide a fresh perspective on live games practice, one which is complimentary to a narrative performance space.

This presentation aims to share the findings of the playtests, highlighting the challenges of designing for an unresettable space and the insights gained from amalgamating traditional escape room design with immersive theatre practice.

BIO
David Harris is a teacher of interactive narrative and game design at Swinburne University of Technology, and a PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts. His research looks at the intersection of interactive or immersive theatres with the principles of interactivity in play and games. His enquiry is one of what a game or work offers an audience or player, and how these playful stakeholders respond to the situations these games or theatrical works provide. David is also an artist and theatremaker, with a practice of immersive theatre making and live game design.

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