

Machina eX: Working Collectively at the Interface of Theatre and Video Games. In Conversation with Clara Ehrenwerth and Anton Krause

Réjane Dreifuss and Simon Hagemann

Abstract *This interview with two current members of the German artist collective machina eX, pioneers of game theatre, looks back at some of their work from the last thirteen years and addresses various questions about the interplay between games and theatre. The discussion touches upon topics including the role of the audience, aesthetic aspects of games, different kinds of venue, the role of technology, and the political dimension of games.*

Interview

Machina eX has been researching the interface between theatre and computer games since 2010. The Berlin-based theatre collective was formed by a group of students from the University of Hildesheim and has been producing participatory game theatre ever since. Machina eX combines modern technologies and spatial arrangements inspired by computer games with the means of classical theatre to create immersive, playable theatre plays that are also walk-in computer games, as the collective calls its performances¹. Since its inception, machina eX has produced around thirty game theatre shows in German-speaking countries and internationally.

Réjane Dreifuss: *More than ten years ago, a few Cultural Studies students from the University of Hildesheim founded the theatre collective machina eX and developed interactive theatre shows inspired by point-and-click adventure games. How has the team changed over time?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: The machina eX collective² has existed for 13 years. The team has changed a lot over time. There used to be nine of us at the beginning. Since then,

1 See <https://machinaex.org/en/>

2 Information on the machina eX collective can be found at <https://machinaex.org>.

some have joined, and others have left. The independent theatre scene and the Berlin location don't suit everyone's life plans, at least not in the long term. People want to move on to other things at some point. There are currently four of us in the core team, but we have a large circle of associates around us who are not involved with *machina eX* on a daily basis but join us for specific projects. Some 15 to 20 people are typically involved in our projects (in areas such as scenography, sound design, dramaturgy, game design, programming, interaction design, etc.).

Simon Hagemann: *With this high fluctuation of members, is it still possible to speak of a fixed artistic label or identity?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: Absolutely. I think there are enough things that characterise us as a collective that have been incorporated into our artistic style and that have remained constant. Which is not to say that we always use the same handwriting. In its different variations, this combination of theatre and game, or other forms of expression and games, has remained what connects all our projects. In recent years, we have experimented more than before due to the pandemic and have changed the format relatively significantly as a result.

Anton Krause: *Machina eX* is characterised not only by the people who take part, but also by a certain aesthetic approach to the topics and problems that we are artistically dealing with. There is always a great fascination with the kindred spirit, the way in which we feel like looking at certain issues and then moulding them into a form in which the performers then work with them.

Simon Hagemann: *Adventure games have characterised machina eX performances. How has this aspect developed over time?*

Anton Krause: I saw the first play by *machina eX* at the University of Hildesheim in 2010. At the time, I had the feeling that while other theatre groups might have found their way to games, here it was the other way round: It was gamers who found their way to theatre. They took point-and-click adventure games seriously very early on. They saw them as a cultural form of expression, as a cultural practice, and then transferred them into a theatre. Which is normal for theatre. The great power of theatre is that you appropriate the cultural practices that take place in society and bring them to the stage. Games have always been inherent to our collective. This can also be seen in our logo, both the former and the new version. The central motif is and remains the mouse pointer, and not without reason, but because games are a central element in our work.

Simon Hagemann: *How has the relationship to games developed? Are the collective members still gamers? Are there still so many artistic influences coming from this side?*

Anton Krause: We are still a very game-affine collective. We think out of the game. Interestingly, this game theatre³ format has become much bigger in the last 13 years. So have digitalisation and interaction. We mostly use digital tools to involve and move the audience. We don't use digitalisation as a topic, but as a means of participation. We use digital feedback and tools to enable this agency, participation, and decision-making. A performance would be otherwise too difficult to moderate if everyone could simply do everything. With computer games, the player has a certain range of options that they can explore. It's the same with our projects. There are many different formats of computer games. We don't try to work our way through all of them. Some computer game formats don't interest us at all, and some others interest us very much, which you can see again and again in the gameplay of the performers. They play like so-called NPCs, non-player characters, and the audience member sees and feels it because they don't have an actor in front of them, but an NPC.

Clara Ehrenwerth: In recent years, we have also been strongly inspired by board games. In the production *Life Goes On* (premiere HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, 2022),⁴ we developed a cooperative multimedia board game that first took place in the theatre and could then be played at home as an online version. During the preparation and the research phases, we played a lot of board games to understand how mechanisms of cooperation, storytelling, and puzzles work in this context and how analogue and digital tools can be combined. Many board games now have digital extensions or supplementary tools. So, over the last few years, we've also played a lot of board games and didn't just have controllers in our hands.

Réjane Dreifuss: *The founders of machina eX were all enthusiastic video gamers and theatre makers. How does that fit together? How did you come up with the idea of combining theatre and video games?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: I think they go together wonderfully. I don't see the big gap in between. There are so many parallels between theatre and videogames. It's still a

3 Among those involved in the development of the concept of game theatre was the German critic Christian Rakow in 2013. https://nachtkritik.de/index.php//index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8728:a-presentation-about-the-new-game-theatre-and-its-political-relevance-at-the-conference-replayce-thecity-in-zuerich&catid=53:portraet-a-profil&Itemid=83.

4 <https://machinaex.org/en/life-goes-on-2022/>.

bit of a relic from the separation between highbrow culture and light entertainment that you think there are two completely different worlds, but it's the same as between literature and theatre, music and theatre, or film and theatre. There is a lot of overlap between theatre and videogames, and one has often grown into the other. It's productive to throw the characteristics of games and theatre together and see what happens when you bring strategies from videogames onto the theatre stage or into the theatre space. That was the basic idea behind *machina eX*. Back then, there were already action-based games that could also be played in physical spaces, such as paintball. In other words, there were already games which were more physical, dealing with speed and skill, but not so much with storytelling, and the idea at the time was to see what would happen if you transferred a format like a point-and-click adventures game into a theatre space. The point-and-click adventure has the great advantage that it is also story-based and therefore a lot of content is dealt with there, and we found the way this content is conveyed, namely interactively, so interesting that we also wanted to try it out in the theatre.

Simon Hagemann: *At the same time, escape rooms have also become increasingly popular in recent years. What distinguishes your work from this format?*

Anton Krause: In the German Wikipedia article on *Escape Games* (in German *Escape Game* refers to both physical escape rooms and the related genre of point-and-click videogames), there is even a reference to *machina eX* as one of the first theatre companies dealing with this topic in Germany.⁵ The organisers of escape room games have different problems than we do. They must make a living from the people who take part in their games. We don't have to do that. Our job is to look at society and make something exciting out of it. We deal with social issues, and we get money for that. As theatre makers, we do projects for fewer audience members and in that way, we can create much more complex narratives than those who are economically dependent on them. We can also afford for a project to be a flop. The mechanics we use are partly those used in escape rooms and escape games. The idea that time stands still until one acts, for example. Escape rooms are about finding the solution. In our projects, the puzzle may look like it's been solved, but players quickly realise that there's always another solution, and they can discuss these other solutions with the others audience members they are playing with. *Machina eX* makes socially critical escape games, so to speak. Escape rooms are created under different parameters. The development of an escape room game can take up to 2 years, compared to a time of 6 weeks for a theatre production, for example.

5 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escape_Game.

Réjane Dreifuss: *Are your projects intended exclusively for the theatre or also for other venues?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: We mostly do projects with theatres, but they often take place outside the theatre space. However, we also collaborate with museums from time to time. In 2018, for example, we developed a web-app based game at the Natural History Museum in Bern, which can still be played in the exhibition.⁶ We work for schools, in urban spaces, in Berlin on Tempelhof Feld, or in a medieval bastion. Since 2020, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, we have also created living room adventures and online board games.

Réjane Dreifuss: *You often make plays for very few people. Do you ever plan to expand your projects and work with more performers and audience members, like Punchdrunk does, for example?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: This is something that would really appeal to us. But the apparatus you would need would be much bigger. It's not just done with a few more performers, you also need a much larger space, or several spaces and a correspondingly larger team to build it. Tickets for Punchdrunk's current show in London cost around £110. They are set up differently to us, who live from cultural funding. Punchdrunk has a machine in the background like a musical. We can't afford that; we simply can't afford such a large ensemble. But we are trying to expand anyway. We haven't done a play for 12 audience members for a long time now. Most of the recent projects have been designed for about 30 people. These 12 audience members came from our observation at the time that 12 is a size of a group of people where you can still get to know each other in a 90-minute performance. I might have come with one or two other people, and I got to know the others. Not in the sense of everyone introducing themselves, but I know that it's the person who said that before or something. Once the group reaches a certain size, that no longer works. You have a peer group within the group. We don't want that. We want the group to function as a group. That's why we've always made sure that the plays we've done for 30, 40, or 50 audience members are divided into smaller groups. To be able to make plays for a larger audience is a topic that keeps us busy, because we want to make our plays accessible to as many people as possible.

Réjane Dreifuss: *Who are the audience members that take part in your plays? Are they interested in theatre or rather in games?*

6 Expedition Fieberwahn – Ein mobiles Spiel durchs Museum: <https://www.nmbe.ch/de/museumsangebot/expedition-fieberwahn>.

Clara Ehrenwerth: It depends on where we play. If we are a guest of a theatre in a smaller town, then the theatre audience of that town will come. Often the younger ones, but not always. Sometimes there is a mix of a theatre audience and people who play games and are coming to the theatre for the first time. We have a mix of people, the ones who are more into theatre and the others who are more into games. There are still mutual prejudices, not among everyone of course, but it does happen. When you see that the puzzling and tinkering also has a quality, when you see the other way round that a story that is complex – following, listening, observing, getting to know the characters – is also interesting, there is a mutual respect, and we are happy when it works.

Anton Krause: In recent years, this audience has been growing together. There are many younger people, aged 25–35, who both go to the theatre and play video games. For the younger generation, there is no clear line between theatre and games that you can draw. Some of the performers we work with are also passionate gamers. When they're not on stage or learning lines, they're playing games. Video games are growing into society. My friends' children are growing up with consoles and computer games and for them, it's not a novelty, it's just always been there. You also must bear that in mind.

Simon Hagemann: *What role does the audience play in your projects? Are your audience members both players and spectators?*

Anton Krause: Every now and then we have one or two audience members who initially only accept the role of spectator and are lured into gaming over time. Very rarely, we have people who completely refuse to become active. We generally think that's a pity. It's nice when everyone plays and takes part. We design the games in a way that makes you want to take part and we usually have a good turnout. If you want to watch from the outside all the time, that's a pity because you lose a quality of the performative act. The performative act that you carry out yourself is part of the action and is important because it also tells a story. If I refuse to participate, then I miss out on a large part of the complexity of the experience, and we try to avoid that. Anyone who comes to our plays wants to take part, that's how we want to announce our projects; we don't hide anything. This is a specific format: I know what this format offers me, and I want to take part. We have been offering this format for 13 years and it has its own audience. There are people waiting for the next machina eX production to come out here in Berlin or in Düsseldorf, and they go there. They want to see it. Those are our fans.

Simon Hagemann: *In theatre studies, there is a debate in relation to immersive theatre about the extent to which audience participation can be understood as emancipatory or, on the con-*

trary, as a practice of neoliberal patterns, as the audience itself must become entrepreneurial to get the most out of a performance.⁷ How do you deal with this question of participation?

Clara Ehrenwerth: I don't think that participation and being invited to join in is neoliberal, but rather democratic. We are experiencing a turn; stories are not only told in a representative way. Audience members no longer want to sit exclusively in front of a stage and watch how characters on the stage in front of them experience stories, act, and make decisions. Nowadays the audience members often want to be the ones who press the button, who must make the decisions, not necessarily alone, but as a group. I think this way of playing is an interesting way of playing a democratic society before I think of entrepreneurship and neoliberalism. It doesn't mean that the other [form of theatre] can no longer exist. We didn't start to make theatre with the desire to abolish representative theatre, but rather to invent a subspecies of this genre.

Simon Hagemann: Are there also possibilities for counterplay in *machina eX* performances? Can the players also do something that is not intended by you?

Clara Ehrenwerth: That works to a certain extent. People always find solutions or ways to play the game that we didn't even plan for. A good example is the project *Right of Passage*, which we did in 2014.⁸ The setting was an abstract refugee camp in a fictitious region, and it was about playing a kind of bureaucratic hell simulator to get enough documents together to be allowed to cross the border. It wasn't about portraying the fate of refugees, but about making bureaucratic hell tangible. One evening, 30 audience members decided to storm the border during the performance. They decided to no longer stand in front of the customs officer (performer) and have their documents stamped or not, but that they would simply run over the border. No scene was planned for this. They won in a way, but the situation couldn't really be anticipated by the game. If you compare this to a computer game metaphor, it's like this: We designed the console, of course, if you press the A button, you can press it. If you'd rather press Y, then maybe it's not here, you can press an empty space, but nothing happens. The button assignments are designed by us and within this framework we try to build the story, the game, as big as possible, so that if you somehow turn off somewhere, you can still find something left and not just a wall. It is a question of time, how much can I enrich the story with side scenes, how many

7 See the article by Olivia Levet in this volume or Alston, Adam. 2016. *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

8 See <https://machinaex.org/en/right-of-passage-2014/> or <https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/kulturplatz/video/ohnmacht-erleben---die-fluechtlingstragoedie-als-mitmachtheater?urn=urn:srf:video:98a51fad-5f84-4ffe-b631-454685f007e2>.

other props or rooms can I design. There is a time and an economic limit to this. In any case, we always try to offer different endings that are triggered either by decisions or by gameplay. In a *Telegram* game, for example, which are mainly chat adventures, it's not even that time-consuming to have lots of different answers ready or to prepare different side quests, because it's just texts, photos, and audio material at first, but not a new door that opens a new sub-game.

Réjane Dreifuss: *This leads me to the next question: What kind of theatre do you make? Should theatre be entertaining or political? What are the issues regarding your work?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: We are quite broadly based. We've just done a play about geo-engineering, weather manipulation, and various strategies to combat the climate crisis (*Wenn der Regen kommt*, Stadtraum Moabit, Berlin, 2023).⁹ In recent years, we've dealt twice with the *Treuhandanstalt* (trust agency),¹⁰ which privatised the German Democratic Republic companies in Germany after 1990 during reunification.¹¹ We have also done a lot of science fiction, or rather we always like to go into 'near future' scenarios, in a manageable time[frame], e.g., five years, or in parallel worlds.¹² A certain entertainment aspect is always important to us. We are not interested in a reference theatre where the audience can come and understand everything if they have mastered certain educational canons. We want anyone and everyone to be able to come to our shows and play with us. Of course, there are still barriers. The current play, for example, is not suitable if you have mobility restrictions.¹³ There are language barriers and technical barriers. If you play with a smartphone, a certain level of technical expertise is required. I would say that our projects focus on immersion and entertainment; we want people to have a kind of flow experience where they can completely immerse themselves in the game for the time being. The reflection is more something that happens in the follow-up discussion, at best also as a group, where topics can be deepened or taken up again. There is often no time for such discussions in the short duration of the game.

Anton Krause: Our approach is political. But the political doesn't take place in a discourse. We are not part of a train of thought that *sophisticated* people have been elabo-

9 *Wenn der Regen kommt* (2023): <https://machinaex.org/en/wenn-der-regen-kommt-2023/>.

10 The Treuhandanstalt was a public institution founded in the late phase of the German Democratic Republic with the task of privatising the state-owned enterprises of the GDR according to the principles of the social market economy and ensuring the performance and competitiveness of the companies after reunification. A series of scandals and social protests arose in connection with the privatisation.

11 *Layers of Life* (2021) and *Life Goes On* (2022).

12 *Like Caretaker* (2019).

13 *Wenn der Regen kommt* (2023).

rating for the duration of rehearsals. Well, yes, but not mainly. As an audience member, I can reflect in retrospect on the possibilities for action that I had, my own behaviour in the game, and the opportunities that the game offered me. I can draw metaphors for the world I live in, and then I can decide again whether I enjoyed it, how I decided, whether I would have wanted more freedom of action in one place or another, or would do again what I just did. Through this reflection, you can sometimes describe much more complex systems that are difficult to describe in words, such as climate change, for example, it suddenly becomes tangible, and that is the great quality of gaming. I enter a system, I have to understand it and then I can also criticise it. I am involved in understanding it, and that's also my role in it, and I find that interesting. Hopefully, the audience members who do it will get this added value from it, this greater understanding. That's why we often have problems with theatre critics who look at our plays and see them as a discourse, completely as a discourse, as if we were chewing the discourse for them. That sometimes gives the feeling that it's only entertaining or too shallow or discussed by too few people. But I think it's precisely this gaming experience and this cultural practice of gaming that has a huge impact on it.

Réjane Dreifuss: *Could you give us an example of a project where the audience members/players are confronted with those ethical questions and decisions to make?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: A good example is the play *Lesson of Leaking* that we did in 2016.¹⁴ It was set in 2021, in a near future that is now in the past. It was before Brexit and before the massive rise of the AfD¹⁵ in Germany and the right-wing populist movements in Europe. The story was about a fictitious scenario of a referendum on Germany leaving the European Union and a right-wing populist Chancellor, who had initiated the referendum. During the play, it emerged that the vote was to be manipulated, which was also information that the group of players discovered. At the end of the evening, the audience, consisting of 12 to 15 people, had the option of making public that this election was to be manipulated or destroying this data and allowing the manipulation so that Germany would remain in the EU. That was a dilemma. Of course, you don't want to manipulate anything, but you also don't want to play along with the right-wing populist chancellor. The play was 'gamey', with real game scenes and puzzle scenes, you had to crack a safe and commit a hack together. There was a lot of play and suspense and at the end someone was standing there with this CD, and you had to decide: destroy it or make it public. There were strong discussions between the audience members. The question was: What do we do with

14 <https://machinaex.org/en/lessons-of-leaking-2016/>.

15 AfD. Alternative für Deutschland: Alternative for Germany. A right-wing populist political party in Germany.

this CD? The audience members sometimes spent 20 minutes discussing what to do. There was no more game in it. We played *Lesson of Leaking* for a long time, three to four years, in various European countries. We were in England or Greece, for example, and it was interesting to see how these discussions changed depending on where you were. Sometimes, there was also an international festival audience, people from different countries coming together and meeting the local audience. So we had a lot of exciting discussions that were no longer about the subject matter of the game, but about issues that are happening in the world right now, that the political world brings with it.

Simon Hagemann: *How do you use the technology for your plays? Is the approach rather: We want to tell this story and need those tools to be able to realise it? Or is it the other way round: It's a kind of laboratory; here's an exciting tool and we want to do something with it, how can we use it and confront the audience with it?*

Anton Krause: In the beginning, there were some interesting tools that we used. In the meantime, we have acquired a certain amount of expertise over the years, and we have created our own framework¹⁶ in which we are no longer dependent on certain tools. We mainly think about interfaces, what do we want to do, what format would be good for this, and what do we need for it. Then we acquire the knowledge and can then blend it with our storytelling machine, I would say. We have no pressure to innovate and don't have to do VR or anything like that. But we could work with VR if it's artistically appropriate.

Clara Ehrenwerth: Yes, exactly. *Adaptor: ex*, as the framework is called, is really a great relief. We've been using it for almost three years now. It's currently helping us to develop our plays. It's open source if other people want to do something with it.

Réjane Dreifuss: *machina eX works with game designers, for example with Martin Ganteföhr.¹⁷ How does the collaboration work?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: It's difficult to generalise. Martin was the only one who worked with us as a game designer and a computer game author.¹⁸ Otherwise, we tend to

16 <https://machinaex.org/adaptorex-seit-2021/>.

17 Martin Ganteföhr is an interactive writer and designer and Professor for Game Art and Design at HBK Essen, Germany. Website: <http://gantefoehr.com>.

18 Martin Ganteföhr has worked with machina eX twice: on the projects *Toxik* (Hau Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, 2015) <https://machinaex.org/en/toxik-2015/> and *End Game* (Hau Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, 2015) <https://machinaex.org/en/endgame-2017/>.

work with technology teams that make computer games, among other things. It was interesting to develop a play with Martin because he normally works for a different format. We talked a lot about what works and doesn't work in theatre. One thing is the length. A computer game has a completely different running time. The duration of our plays is between 60 and 120 minutes, which would be a very short production in an adventure game. Martin thought the story in terms of a big arc, which then had to be accommodated in a much shorter narrative time. He always thought about computer characters, who can do pretty much anything graphically, while our performers are flesh and blood creatures and therefore can't suddenly start bleeding. In the beginning, Martin didn't always have the output graphics of our characters on his screen. In any case, it was a productive collaboration. We learnt a lot from each other. It was exciting to see what he could bring to the table and what he might have picked up from us.

Simon Hagemann: *The gaming industry is booming. The public is becoming more and more gamey, as Anton said. Are golden times ahead for machina eX? What are your projects for the future?*

Clara Ehrenwerth: We'll see how golden the times become. As in many other countries, Germany is cutting back quite a bit on cultural funding. This will also affect us, although we are in a luxurious situation. We have already received concept funding from the city of Berlin, which we will receive again for the next four years. During this period of time, we want to expand our network and become more international. We are currently interested in how we can co-produce and tour internationally without the CO₂ emissions that would otherwise be caused by such a guest performance – if we were to fly to Korea with a team of six people, for example. We want to further develop and think about the methods of working together that started during the pandemic. Not to leave these methods in a suitcase as an emergency crisis tool, but to see what we can do with them on an international level.

We now know a few performance companies with whom we have a lot of overlap, who also make digital theatre in their countries and work with games. They are from South Korea, Singapore, New Zealand, India, Great Britain, and elsewhere and do similar things to us. We would like to develop a play with them or show our plays to each other and go beyond the current guest performance mode. In 2024, we will cooperate with a group from Wellington. We will not fly there with our play and they're not coming to Germany with their play, but we're going to swap productions; they're going to cover a machina eX play, and we're going to cover a Binge Culture play.¹⁹ We'll see how it works out. We're all excited because we've never staged someone

19 Binge Culture is a collective of artists living and working in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. <https://www.bingeculture.co.nz/>.

else's material before. From an artistic perspective, I see the golden age for us now primarily in this exchange movement. We'll have to see what the funding situation will be like. In general, we're happy if we can continue to reach an audience that either has no connection to games or spends half their free time playing games.

Biographies

Clara Ehrenwerth started working with machina eX 10 years ago. She has been a permanent member of the collective since 2018 and is responsible as managing director and writer.

Anton Krause has accompanied the collective several times, but only recently joined machina eX as a director and mediator. He is interested in the interfaces between analogue spaces and digital worlds.