'It's (Not) Only a Game'... some Game-Changing Potentials of Game-Based Theatre

Josephine Machon with Munotida Chinyanga and Persis-Jadé Maravala

> Play is as essential as food, air, sleep, whatever else we have to do to stay alive
> *(Cas Holman: Design for Play)*

Abstract *This conversation between Josephine Machon, Munotida Chinyanga and Persis-Jadé Maravala surveys some potentials of game-based theatre. We consider how play, gaming and gameshow, as aesthetic methods for establishing 'communities' within live performance, resonate with Joan Littlewood's Fun Palace' ideals, as illustrated by State of the [Art]'s How To Build [The City] (2021/2022) and ZU-UK's Pick Me Up (& Hold Me Tight) (2020), Project Perfect Stranger/PlagueRound (2021) and Radio Ghost (2021-).*

Introduction

This chapter began as a 'keynote-conversation', with contexts, themes, and provocations framed by Josephine Machon, to which Munotida Chinyanga (Co-founder, Co-artistic Director of State of the [Art]) and Persis-Jadé Maravala (Co-founder, Artistic Director of ZU-UK), responded through reflection on their practice.[1] State of the [Art] and ZU-UK, in comparable and contrasting ways, construct performance 'playgrounds' and offer models for the potentials of game-based theatre in reimagining social relationships; an ethos that was necessarily exercised and re-examined during the crisis of Covid-19. The conversation offers reflections on the appropriations, inspirations, and mutual transfers of play, game, and gaming *in*

1 For information on State of the [Art] see, https://chinyangam.wixsite.com/stateoftheart/home, and for ZU-UK and all works referenced see, https://zu-uk.com/.

and *as* theatre. We consider how play, gaming, and gameshow, become dramaturgical methods for establishing 'community' within live performance, as illustrated by State of the [Art]'s *How To Build [The City]* (*H2BTC*, 2021/2022) and ZU-UK's *Pick Me Up (& Hold Me Tight)* (2020), *Project Perfect Stranger/PlagueRound* (2021) and *Radio Ghost* (2021–).

Framed and edited by Machon in the spirit and style of its original form, names have been abbreviated to Jo, Munotida, and Persis-Jadé and a conversational style and layout maintained. Any text that appears in quotation marks without academic citation belongs to the named practitioner, indicated within the sentence. Other sources are referenced accordingly.

Play as ethos, discipline, training

State of the [Art] is an international collective, co-founded and co-artistically directed by Munotida, based in London, and Simone Giustinelli in Rome, with a multicultural ensemble of Associate Artists. It was set up as an artist development programme in 2018, evolving out of the MA Theatre Arts at Middlesex University to give underrepresented emerging artists based in the UK the opportunity to train and develop work around Europe. It quickly found its 'antidisciplinary' approach, combining intercultural, multilingual, physical storytelling and gamified narratives within diverse relational aesthetics. Its focus is twofold; facilitating interactive experiences for audiences that do not identify as 'citizens of the arts'; and, for the collective, continuing to 'redefine the relationships and rules of practice'.

Anglo-Brazilian ZU-UK, founded by Persis-Jadé and Jorge Lopes Ramos as Zecora Ura Theatre Network in 2005 and known as ZU-UK since 2012, works at the intersection of performance, games, and technology. Persis-Jadé designs experiences that are playable, interactive, and always driven by the political. Situating art in places that 'non-arty people go', the company plays inventively with readily available *and* cutting-edge tech. Played out across public spaces, ZU-UK's work mediates the space between strangers; scaling intimacy by forging playful, sometimes deeply meaningful, connections.

Persis-Jadé: I make player-centred experiences, creating dialogic spaces for players. We use the term 'hacking the familiar' because we're looking at how people 'play games' already in day-to-day social situations in all kinds of ways; hacking, as in, accessing and emphasising everyday behaviours and attitudes. We adjust and repurpose the existing tacit rules we live by to create new perspectives. For this reason, we tend to put our work in clubs, car parks, bingo halls, malls, or public transport, unpicking and replaying the games that are already at work in those spaces. We also work in the digital space, with ubiquitous technology. I've used

communication technology and text-messaging to matchmake people in paired performance experiences, generating playful and intimate connections between strangers, for about 15 years; making instruction-based games on Conductor since 2015 and WhatsApp since 2018. When the pandemic happened, that brought games and intimacy into a different, more immediate frame, which fed into the game app we created called *Radio Ghost* (2021–), a three-player game for shopping malls.

I come from a tradition of games as used in interactive theatre and applied drama. When I started out with my own company, ParaActive, I often ended up bartering my skills for rehearsal space, offering after-school workshops for children in return for use of the school hall or community centre. Retrospectively, I realise I was laying the ground for my mid-career work around games and participation. I would have to devise new games every week for them to level up and remain interested. It taught me so much about games and how they're transformative experiences. From there it was the methods and games of Brazilian practitioner Augusto Boal that influenced me.[2] He devised a specific way of politicising people through games, which stayed with me forever. I was inspired by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop and her approach to ensemble-making, forging temporary communities in a short space of time. Clive Barker's theatre games and Keith Johnstone's improvisation games and methods were also influential. I'd later go back to Johnstone's techniques and re-evaluate them through the one-on-one work that I developed, in terms of the discipline and the listening it takes to play more open-ended games with people.[3]

Jo: Munotida, since starting out in 2018, State of the [Art] has spent five years actively investigating games and gameplay as a means of establishing a performance collective and, in turn, a means of that collective establishing a performance vocabulary to interpret an epic text. At the heart of this runs your own fascination with wrestling as a performance convention mixing wrestling terms, techniques, and mythologies with parallel aesthetics and archetypes found in K-Pop.[4]

2 For the background and practice of Augusto Boal (1931–2009) and the way play lies at the heart of his 'Theatre of the Oppressed', see *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (2002), as used by Maravala.

3 We go on to discuss the mission and practice of Joan Littlewood (1914–2002) further below, and recommend her autobiography, *Joan's Book* (1995) for context. Keith Johnstone (1933–2023) was a renowned improviser and pedagogue, whose writings and workshops on improvisation as a performer-training *and* performance-making process continue to influence writers, performers, and educators, especially in Britain and North America. Johnstone's *Impro* (2018) is referenced here by Maravala. For more on the radical working-class advocacy and playful theatre practice of UK performer, actor training coach, and academic, Clive Barker (1931–2005), refer to his *Theatre Games* (2010).

4 K-pop, short for 'Korean Popular Music' is a form of popular music originating in South Korea, made widespread since the late 1990s by social media platforms. For a straightforward explanation of K-pop see Erklärt Tapakapa's video (2016), available at: https://www.youtu

Munotida: I'm a director and sound designer, with a technical mindset for how you can heighten moments using sound, set, space, dimension, and using bodies in that space. I spent much of my childhood watching wrestling. In retrospect, I realise I was engaging with spectacle that was all play. This was my first experience of 'theatre'. There's a lot of talk about wrestling being 'fake', but by examining wrestling as a discipline I saw how it created worlds, performance playgrounds, that are scripted and choreographed. I use wrestling terminology alongside K-pop references and translate that into the space of theatre to interpret epic texts, such as *Gilgamesh*.[5] K-pop terms such as, 'Visual', 'My/Ultimate Bias', 'Stan', 'Fancam', 'Fan Chants', serve as a shorthand among the ensemble.[6] They became references and tools for developing characters, games, or structuring scenes and audience interaction during rehearsals. For instance, each member of a K-pop band has specific roles, including the role of 'Visual', assigned to those who best fit a strict Korean beauty standard. In *H2BTC21*, we had performers on stage and artists engaging with the public outside. The performers on stage were the 'Visuals' because they had the most contact time with the audience, carried them through the show. They had a responsibility to be watched and become the 'popular kids', characters the audience wanted to befriend, to facilitate that relationship. Another example is 'Bias', which defines a K-pop fan's favourite band member. 'Ultimate Bias' is the absolute favourite across all the bands. 'Stan' refers to an extreme K-pop fan and is used as a verb and a noun, 'I stan…', or 'I'm a K-pop stan'. 'Fancam' is unofficial footage taken by these fans**.** During rehearsals we like to incorporate the 'choose-your-character/player' concept found in video games. This allows performers to develop unique characters, which encourages audiences to develop attachments throughout the show. It's like wrestling, where fans have favourite wrestlers with their own set of rules for engagement, gestures, taunts, catchphrases, including 'Fan Chants'. This elevates each character and encourages audiences to support them physically, vocally. We challenge the audience to engage beyond clapping and traditional theatre behaviour, in ways that are closer to sports events or concerts. We also encourage the audience to take videos during the show; through that video content, we see who they 'stan'. Performers play to the cameras, resulting in 'fancam' edits that we use.

I also paint the picture of what I'm envisaging through wrestling terminology as shorthand for archetypes or archetypical routines; terms and techniques I've ab-

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be.com/watch?v=_S7XXvQNong. For K-pop archetypes and aesthetics, see Taylor Glasby's overview (2018).

5 *Gilgamesh*, told in the ancient Akkadian language, is the collected tales of the eponymous Mesopotamian hero's odyssey in pursuit of eternal life. See Stephen Mitchell's translation (2005) or Surayo Field Fiorio's and Amir Houshang Moein's animated adaptation (2021).

6 Jason Pham's overview provides a summary and explanation of K-pop terms cited here by Chinyanga (see Pham 2020).

sorbed by watching documentaries, reading books, obsessing about the practice. We use wrestling terms to explain intention and motivation as much as to establish games, movement, postures; Hot Tag, Heel, Main Event, Gimmick, Put Over, or Taunt.[7] If there's a villain, we'll use the term 'Heel' as the ensemble knows the history of 'Heel', which unlocks so many different sequences of actions, intentions, and motivations that then build character or a scene. Because we make work in short and intense timescales, the terminology in performance and those references within design help us to establish performance moments quickly, unlock ways to create the show and communicate meaning.

We also investigate 'play' within the rehearsal room and on stage. In the early days there were times where we'd been working seriously on the text and we'd spontaneously have to break, play a game, have a singalong. Those were the moments where we saw and felt the company's identity. We wanted to translate that within our interpretation of *Gilgamesh*, taking it from the epic to the contemporary, interpreting its seriousness by applying authentic play; examining what it means to play within the shows, keeping it fresh. When it comes to playing as an ensemble, playing *seriously*, there must be an understanding of the science of play. We spend a lot of time reading about gameplay to gamify all aspects of our practice. Everything becomes a game during the process, even when we're sitting for lunch and eating, there's continuous talk of how we can gamify those situations, riffing on ideas in books we've shared that look at ways in which you can turn moments, situations, the rules of games, into experiences. For instance, we transposed management theory to theatre following a shared reading of *Gamestorming* (Grey, Macanufo, Brown 2010).[8] By applying the games to building a collective, a democratic ensemble, we shifted the strategies and gameplay away from any capitalist ideals in the book to uncover the fun of emergent play, where the play alone is the focus and outcome. By identifying the fundamentals and interrelations of any game, we could then explore and expand those ideas to interpret a story with an audience, through competitiveness as much as playfulness in shared dramaturgical composition. Working with and against each other in small groups the ensemble interprets sections of *Gilgamesh* as a game that's entertaining to watch. It helps us to make sense of the themes, to challenge the narrative and in turn that translates into key scenes to present to an audience.

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7 For the wrestling drills and terminology referenced by Chinyanga here, see Bill Welker's handbook (2013). For historical and critical contexts of wrestling as a performance practice see Sharon Mazer's ethnographical study (2020) or Chow et al. (2016). Wikipedia provides a useful overview for 'Heel', which expands on Chinyanga's subsequent example: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heel_(professional_wrestling).

8 *Gamestorming* is a practical handbook, authored by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown and James Macunfo, outlining games for use in the workplace designed to encourage better communication and idea-generation among teams. There is also a website to accompany the book: https://gamestorming.com/ (accessed 21 March 2024)

Similarly, Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* (2016) enables us to investigate an idea, see if a concept works by using different ways of thinking within the room.[9] Those references in our process, applied in a gamified way, help us understand the limitations and all possible outcomes of whichever scenes we're trying to create. It's a continuous process; those theories inform the creation of new games, becoming a game cycle that evolves, keeps us authentic, and allows us to tell stories without acting (see figure1).

Figure 1: Gilgamesh *games in H2BTC (2022). Photo: State of the [Art].*

9 De Bono's 'Six Hats'® is a creative problem-solving technique based on the human brain's different modes of thinking. In teams, individuals or groups are assigned figurative coloured 'hats' to 'wear': The white hat is facts and data driven; the black hat is caution-led, identifying risks and negatives; yellow hats consider benefits and potential uses of any suggestions; green is creativity, emphasising existing possibilities and alternative ways for developing the ideas generated; red uses feelings, intuition, gut instincts in response, while blue is process-driven, focused on planning and action, summarising findings and identifying next steps. Time limits for each hat enable individuals or groups to 'try on' other hats, which encourages everyone involved to consider the idea from different perspectives.

Gameplay mechanics in the work of ZU-UK and State of the [Art]

Jo: You both inventively deploy gameplay mechanics and tech in performance contexts, to establish performance composition, as well as inviting impromptu or improvised audience engagement in the work.

Persis-Jadé: The important thing about game mechanics in performance is that they should be aligned to the narrative or the theme; the story that's being told. I don't mean a full-on fiction necessarily, but the scenario and trajectory you want participants to experience, goals you want them to engage with. If we're telling the story through game mechanics, the hard work of it is where you try to bring those two things together into a seamless whole. That can happen in quite simple ways. A project that's been running since January 2020, *Pick Me Up (& Hold Me Tight)* rings all the pay phones in the UK at the same time. The tech is set up to call at the annual national peak of suicides, the 1st of January of each year at 11am. There are around 19,000 still working. It takes an enormous amount of tech for the simple mechanic of a phone being triggered to ring, which becomes an invitation for any passer-by to become a player by picking up. When you pick up the phone there's an audio track that you respond to by pressing buttons on the dial pad. We carefully thought through the significance of that central play mechanic. The interactive framework is built around one simple concept that is itself an act of listening, which is what the piece is about; creating better listening and addressing loneliness by asking people to think, just for fifteen minutes, about what it really means to listen to others. That's what I mean when I say the mechanics need to align with the intentions; the actions and the framework can't just be incidental, just for the sake of doing something game-y. It's a strong example of where the mechanic *is* the message. Picking up the phone, pressing the buttons, *is* a commitment to listening, *is* the theme conveyed and behaviour we're promoting. It's all baked in together.

Radio Ghost (2021–), a game for three people to play in shopping malls, explores how we might find a way out of consumer trauma; questions how, in the West, we square our existence, knowing it costs the global majority (see figure 2). Climate research proves it would be dangerous simply to stop consuming, but what we need to do is slow down. With the game, I was committed to building it around the mechanic of physically slowing down, as a literal and metaphorical act of resistance. I was married to that idea and insisted on that trajectory. The game begins by asking players to walk fast, gradually requires them to slow their pace, and ends with the challenge of totally stopping still for 60 seconds in the middle of a mall. The aim is an embodied realisation of slow down, stop, think, and connect to the question, 'What is it that we agree to when we buy something?' The mechanic was working in close relationship to the concept. The tech facilitates integration of meaning and mechanics. We use an accelerometer and a pedometer in a way that is ever-so-gently

gamified, engaging people in this gradual slowing down of their walking pace until they finally come to a stop. Using apps and technology in meaningful but invisible ways, in this instance to physically, literally, make the player slow down and think about their actions.[10]

Figure 2: Imagine & Play. *An audience-player in ZU-UK's* Radio Ghost *2021. Photo: ZU-UK*

10 An in-depth conversation with Maravala and Ramos, discussing the game mechanics and experience of *Radio Ghost* is available on *Voices of VR* (Bye, 2022).

Jo: Munotida, you incorporated cross-platform composition in *How To Build the [City]*, 2021 (*H2BTC21*). Questioning how we might 'build the city back better', you focused this locally, in collaboration with Battersea's Omnibus Theatre, rebuilding social relationships through solution-led play, kicking off by using a 'Hackathon' (Tauberer 2017). Originating in the tech industry, where teams compete in intensive timeframes to create software solutions, you redeployed Hackathon as a dramaturgical device; a means of critiquing *and* constructing performance.

Munotida: We had two central concepts at the start of *H2BTC21*. The first explored how to involve the audience within the rehearsal room while developing the show. We were interested in how we could involve the audience in the creative process rather than at its culmination; how we could make every rehearsal a performance. Opening up our rehearsal space related to questions we had about reopening theatres coming out of lockdown in London. We were keen to play with the positive significance of online interactive experiences and social media broadcasting during the pandemic, where anyone could be invited into everybody's home via live stream. We were also inspired by the *Pokémon GO* craze where people were using GPS and smart technologies in the outside world. Instead of being trapped in your room, we wanted to use tech to connect and interact with nature, with social spaces, with architecture. These were ambitious concepts and questions for us; how to create a show that is full of interactive games for an audience, that culminates in a one-off performance for ticketed audience members, which itself connects these ticketed audience members and performers to unsuspecting members of the public outside. We answered that by using phone messaging, livestreaming, GPS as tools for live interaction between audiences and members of the ensemble inside the studio with those based outside.

Our R&D involved researching how tech start-ups and global tech companies, such as Facebook and Amazon, dealt with problem-solving. This led to a Hackathon as a way for our collective, at that time spread across the UK, Barcelona, Portugal, Italy, to come together via any means. We put a call out for creatives, such as my niece Gabrielle who's a coder, friends who were doctors, poets working across written and visual composition, then split the rehearsal activity into three interdisciplinary groups. Each group was given tasks to create a game that had a different foundation, location, and tools. One group was tasked with being outside and in motion, using GPS and any means of overground transport, including walking. The next group had to imagine a space that connects people, reimagining a sense of home through sport. The third group had to create a game in a cafe that used the rules of any board game as its base. The combinations were randomised to create a challenge and to see what unexpected result we would get. Each group would go away for two hours, create a game, then come back but instead of sticking with the games they'd made, we would then switch people within the groups, establishing

new groups that would then scaffold up those original formats, which could include dismantling ideas. It resulted in about seven groups across a day, with the continual mixing and switching, bringing new eyes to the game. At the end of the day, we came together to play the final outcomes. The Hackathon found creative solutions to how we could reinterpret *Gilgamesh* through scenes that were simultaneously games to be played on both the inside and outside of the performance space (see figure 4). For example, a game of cat-and-mouse with performer-players inside the performance space collaborating with a ticketed audience member and using GPS and messaging to direct another performer, located nearby outside, to locate and 'catch' a performer who was on the other side of London. To ensure progress in bringing that performer in, we would continually re-sculpt the context and narrative around Gilgamesh's odyssey and eventual return for the group giving instructions from the inside.

Jo: The whole process was multilayered gameplay; gamifying the rehearsal room *and* the live performance event while simultaneously connecting the company to members of the community as an audience; connecting those members of community to other community members on the outside; connecting the community once again with its outdoor spaces.

Munotida: Gabrielle, observing us, came up with a solution for how to package all this, to document the experience, collecting all the responses and games, all the opinions and results the hackathon had produced. She coded this into a website live on stage during the final show that would then be gifted to the ticketed audience members and to the people passing by outside who had contributed to the creation of this game. It became a live ephemera for the experience, this moment we created together. It was a reference to how social media was vital in linking us, exhibiting our daily connections, and holding memories. Gabrielle's live coding became coding in-and-as performance; a live digital process that both opened up and fleetingly archived this complicated concept.

Playing the Game(show): Aesthetics, mechanics, care, and caretaking

Whether implicit or explicit, rules were fundamental to the live 'on-boarding' for performer-players and audience-players for State of the [Art] and ZU-UK's projects during the global lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. These rules enabled an understanding of and respect for consent, with a continual renegotiation of permission as play progressed. Tacit or explicit 'contracts for participation' constituted acts of caretaking and were vital in securing the constructs and governing principles of the world of each performance; facilitating *willingness* to participate as much as estab-

lishing structures by which audience and artist safety was supported (Machon 2013, 99–100).

ZU-UK's *PlagueRound* (2020–) and State of the [Art]'s *How to Build the [City]* (2022) both used the formulae of gameshows as a scaffolding for play, shaping the experience as entertainment while gently nudging audience-players to rethink their participation in the social contract through this play. As a format it allowed State of the [Art] and ZU-UK to move from the 'silly' (a term used by both Munotida and Persis-Jadé to describe the form) to the 'serious':

Figure 3: PlagueRound *(2020) Photo: ZU-UK*

Persis-Jadé: I think that 'silly' isn't the opposite of 'serious'. The key thing about using silly as a methodology is that silliness doesn't have to deny the gravity of the situation, and at that time we were in a grave situation. 'Silly' aesthetics can be used to get

to a place of norm-shedding, of doing things in unusual and unexpected ways, that will often open our eyes to a new way of seeing the world and ourselves. *PlagueRound* was a gameshow experience on Zoom (see figure3), with *Project Perfect Stranger* being a separate experience that fed into it by connecting pairs of anonymous strangers via WhatsApp through a series of playful tasks and questions. We were encouraging people to 'norm-shed' by inviting them to break their 'norms'; instead of eating at the table, eat underneath it, sleep in unusual places in the house. Being housebound, it seemed like an important moment to be interrogating what house and home mean to us, how they mean radically different things depending on who you are, and where you are. We were provoking people, through silliness, to rethink the rules and behaviours that go with those spaces. It was also about identity and relationship to local spaces. We had participants wearing other people's clothes or wearing their clothes inside out, or going for a walk blindfolded. There's a lot published on how humour and playfulness can function as ways of reframing a situation and can act as mechanisms to create psychological distance from negative events. Cultivating a sense of the absurd became crucial for us in terms of dealing with that moment, coming in and out of lockdown into a lot of social fear. It was helping weather all that uncertainty. Later versions of *PlagueRound* took the question of how and when our society might get to a place that is 'post-normal' (Sardar 2010). We lost our normalities but were also acknowledging that what had been 'normal' was seriously messed up: What new ways of doing things are we going to take with us and how can we turn uncertainty into an asset?

There's something about 'silly' that's also providing a resistance to the forces of capitalism, isn't there? The screeching at you that if you don't have goals, you're a morally bankrupt person and you're only worth what you produce. Being silly and gameplaying offers something 'contra' to that mode of capitalism. People find it hard to switch into playfulness from that stressful, goal-focused state. When you're playful, when you're being silly, it's not the same as being stupid. You need a lot of skills to be properly silly. You need to be observant, you need to be a little bit innovative, you need to be quick, able to see things from a different perspective, you need to be a risk-taker, really responsive, able to read the room. Those skills that you have when you allow yourself to be playful function well as an approach to solving problems or managing relationships, teaching, presenting information, even conflict resolution. I was hoping with that project that we could find a new language to express our appreciation of the silly. I wanted it to be something that could look a little bit like freedom, even if it was illusory.

Jo: Munotida, with *H2BTC* at Rich Mix, in London (2022), the rules of play were visibly and verbally introduced in a quiz-style set-up as the performance, a reinvention of *Gilgamesh*, progressed. The performer-players knew these rules in advance, including being able to ask you directly for advice and to renegotiate how the rules

work. You were physically present running the technical design, (projections, live feed, music, and sound), as well as opening the show with a rap to set the scene, giving verbal instructions from behind the desk. In this way, the audience become immediately familiar with how 'the play' was being constructed, in both senses of the word. The audience quickly learned we had to take turns in volunteering to play each game, plot each scene, to get to the end of the show. The informality of the space allowed audience-players to come and go to the bar as they chose, like a pub-quiz, to shout and participate from their seats as much as on stage.

Munotida: The way we build the show is different to a traditional set-up where departments take responsibility for different areas; directors, performers, designers, audience, all do 'their thing'. We build a show only at the point that we get into the venue, which could be the night before. We have blueprints, the foundations that are seen and investigated together by the full collective; everyone has a stake in what we're building and so everyone has an understanding and awareness of how dangerous it could be if rules aren't followed. We discuss every possible outcome within this multiverse so that we can play safely but also know that there are required points of uncertainty that allow us to play with the unknowns, to take risks in a safe environment. For example, several performers were unable to come for rehearsals. Given we'd only a day to get a show on, we used the need for improvisation in the live event as an opportunity to teach those performers the rules of the game *as it played*. The game itself in turn builds the scene, tells the narrative and so interprets pivotal moments in *Gilgamesh* as it unfolds. We shared the rules of each game live with the audience as the performance was being constructed. Additionally, the enforced limitation of performers not being able to make rehearsals became a safeguarding rule; using their vulnerability, the very real sense of 'I don't know what's happening' as an authentic and supportive moment to guide, to teach the rules and outcomes of the scene. The one rule that is always known in advance is that performers can bend these rules where needed, in response to the audience, because of the informal style. It keeps an energy in the playing of each moment; ensemble members, as much as the audience, are learning the rules of each game. That language and that way of interacting creates a shared space with negotiated boundaries that allows for a freedom *to play with and within* the uncertain, to protect each other and the audience.

Figure 4: Gaming Gilgamesh *in* H2BTC *(2022). Photo: State of the [Art]*

Persis-Jadé: The emotional safety of our participants is a priority for me, but I don't really talk about 'safeguarding', because, as you say, Jo, of the job done by clear but playful contracting. I try to establish, through a series of explicit and implicit opt-ins and a human presence on the part of the artwork (whether that's via a physically present performer or a digitally accessible facilitator), responsibility from the artist and from participants. At some point there's always a tacit acknowledgement that we're all adults, that we'll all behave with care and consideration, that we've all agreed to participate in something that's bringing people, usually strangers in the case of my work, up against each other in very intimate and unusual encounters and that that entails a degree of emotional risk. What's important to me about this process of contracting is that it's never separate from the artwork itself; it's part and parcel. It's not an add-on, an extra form where you tick a few boxes, or some kind of waiver. It comes into the language of how the performance-worlds are conveyed.

Instructional work in public space builds respect for those others in that space who aren't part of the event, within the nature and language of the instructions. In *Radio Ghost*, for example, I understand there's a wider public in the mall that has no idea that people around them are playing a game; like 'non-player characters' (NPCs). I create imperatives in the audio instructions to observe those 'NPCs' with compassion, as fellow human beings; to observe details that show their humanity, that endear, noticing details in which we might find our shared woundedness.

Project Perfect Stranger, which pairs strangers via a series of WhatsApp instructions, hinges entirely on language, as the piece itself just consists of texts. The text instructions and framing are premised on a shared understanding of decency and ethics. But that's always also risky, partly because interpretations always vary. I think the biggest danger is when things aren't clear. We try to make the language simple and straightforward. Importantly, there's always a figure present who acts like a guide. In *Project Perfect Stranger*, facilitated entirely via WhatsApp, it's important that we have a human facilitator as the guide, sending out the instructional messages and responding in real time to people's queries and concerns, offering adaptations to tasks, within reason, if people report difficulties with them. Along those lines, it's important to all our work in digital space that we keep the humans behind the tech tangible, accessible. It means that, though people have signed up to a contract of what's involved and what's expected of them, there's always room, within the bounds of the artwork, for responsiveness and a degree of opt-out. I do want to avoid the potentially patronising excess of 'safeguarding' in arts and theatre, when the situation is already a very clear opt-in. I want to respect people's decisions as adults and agents to have taken on the challenge of the experiences we're inviting them to.

Playing together, 'in-it-togetherness': Temporary community and *communitas*

Playing together was a crucial device in creating temporary communities through *Project Perfect Stranger*/*PlagueRound* and *H2BTC21*. These temporary communities were examples of *communitas* in practice. *Communitas*, a Latin term, defines both *the spirit of* community, involving a feeling of intense solidarity and togetherness, and/or a community in which there is solidarity and equality amongst members. Victor Turner, cultural anthropologist and theorist of serious play in ritualised interactions, asserted theatre is ripe for 'Spontaneous Communitas', when there is 'a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities', and a 'liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity' (Turner 1982, 44).

Communitas can be seen in the visionary principles of Littlewood's 'Fun Palaces'. Speculatively designed in 1961 in collaboration with architect Cedric Price, Fun Palaces were conceived as inclusive cultural spaces (Littlewood 1995, 701–754; Bonet Miro 2018 and Matthews 2016). According to architectural scholar Stanley Matthews, Price's blueprint for Littlewood's concept resonates with game design, inspired by the then 'emerging sciences of cybernetics, information technology, and game theory' alongside theatre (Matthews 2006, 39). Integrating concepts of 'technological interchangeability with social participation and improvisation':

> The three-dimensional structure of the Fun Palace was the operative space-time matrix of a virtual architecture. The variable 'program' and form of the Fun Palace were not conventional architecture but much closer to what we understand today as the computer program: an array of algorithmic functions and logical gateways that control temporal events and processes in a virtual device (Matthews 2006, 39).

Unlike conventional theatres, where, as Littlewood put it, audiences 'escape up their own assholes in the dark', Fun Palaces were to be 'where the British worker' would take back agency and creativity, realise 'self-expression' via this 'university of the streets […] playground for adults' (in Matthews 2016) . Beyond a reimagining of what a cultural venue should and could be, this was a socialist shift in thinking around those audiences that the spaces would be for. These would be arts institutions open to all but targeted at those to whom cultural experience had been denied for perceived reasons of entitlement and education as much as related to economic exclusion. Here all were invited to be citizens of that experience, to *become* that cultural experience. Where Fun Palaces in concept 'represented an unprecedented architectural synthesis of technology, cybernetics, and game theory, these were the means but never the objective', instead, they enabled 'the convergence of site and human event' (Matthews 2006, 47). Littlewood imagined a practice where divisions between place, space, art, education, and leisure were blurred within an interdisciplinary, intermedial playground; one that celebrated 'high' and 'low' art forms (Littlewood 1995, 628).[11]

Jo: Littlewood's ideals for fusing communal recreation, egalitarian artistic experiences, and silly-serious collaborative play clearly exist in each of your practices and were proactively implemented during the Covid lockdowns. Munotida, your projects offered you new ways of thinking about playgrounds and theme parks as places of fun and discovery and drew you to positive social relationships that could be encouraged when transiting public spaces, to the potentials of transitory space.

Munotida: During the pandemic I was influenced by the YouTube channels, Beta Squad and Jubilee, who play 'guess the odd one out' styled games.[12] The concept brings random people together to play in a studio setting, encouraging them to connect in a way that serves as a commentary on society, on identity politics, on

11 Though Littlewood and Price's designs were never physically realised, those original blueprints are available via: https://funpalaces.co.uk/about-fun-palaces. Rather than a building, Littlewood's legacy and its contemporary reinvention continues through 'Makers' of Fun Palaces, their annual activity sited in existing community buildings.

12 See Beta Squad: https://www.youtube.com/@BetaSquad and Jubilee: https://www.youtube.com/@jubilee.

social perception and expectation. They also took the games into the real world, surprising passengers with quiz shows in packed buses or lifts, with an unknowing and sometimes unwilling audience. I found it interesting how this activated these transit spaces and moments of waiting and what that encouraged between people.

I watched a wrestling documentary about how Seth Rollins, in response to a career-threatening injury, redesigned, reclaimed and rebuilt himself in order to play at his best (Rollins 2016). I took those principles and translated it into what we were doing with *H2BTC21* to question how we might redesign, rebuild, and reclaim our relationships and our community spaces post-pandemic. Significantly, we were asking how State of the [Art] might rebuild our connections with a wider community of artists. It became important to me and Simone to examine and activate the spaces in which we work; attending to the ways we interact not just as artists but as humans sharing space and place. We've continued with those principles, to expand our 'playground' and to imagine what that might still become. We're constantly wanting to connect with people, to create spontaneous communities and interactions. An aim is to highlight that there's positivity to interaction through technology.

Jo: Jadé, you believe games transform people, that transformations in play correspond to transformations in 'reality'.

Persis-Jadé: I've seen games that change what people know and how people think about things. People can transform in incredible ways through games, but, importantly, what I've learned is that people only change when they *feel* things. They don't change because you tell them to, they don't change because they ought to, they change because they *feel* something, they've been affected. It must connect on an emotional level. For me, that relates to the spaces where these things happen. A big part of that is how people come across your work; does it just circulate around the same middle class, white circles of exclusivity, or can it happen in places where ordinary people will be able to access that work? We use rituals, playful actions, to invite people into an experience, and these rituals and invitations are always familiar; they wouldn't alienate people. Knowing that a ringing phone is an invitation to pick it up is an understood action, albeit in this instance ritualised, for people to latch onto. Similarly, most people understand how to enter a shopping mall and the activities you might expect to do there.

Whether or not the work genuinely transforms people often depends on who's being reached. Arts aficionados who've already been to several ground-breaking interactive digital experiences that year and are already 'woke' are unlikely to change their shopping habits because of *Radio Ghost*. Which isn't to say you can't transform those people but to stress that it's important to acknowledge *who* is making the work and who they're making the work for. My position is important as well when we're talking about the kinds of play and the kinds of invitations I'm offering as transfor-

mational. I'm trying to create a practice and a culture that refutes the normal hierarchies of patriarchy, of capitalism, and of white supremacy. It's important that you're taking care of where your art happens and with whom you're playtesting. Munotida mentioned something about making work *with* people. Similarly, I'm concerned that when we playtest, we recognise the image we have of who the 'Everyman' is. When we first started making work, I was imagining someone as this neutral recipient of it, but who is that someone? Usually, in our heads it's a white, middle-class, male player yet that isn't the 'Everyman', that's a minority. Re-framing *how* we make work is the most important part of what it means to be 'transforming' people.

Conclusion: Game-changing play – Translations, transitions, transformations

State of the [Art] and ZU-UK both interweave the tools and mechanisms of digital-gaming with long-established play protocols of board games, choose-your-own-adventure literature, team and performance sports, playground recreation, along with the spectacle and fun of gameshows. This mash-up, played out across the online realm, public spaces and in the communal areas of cultural venues, foregrounds team-participation within stage interaction as a *show* of in-it-togetherness. Not 'only a game' but instead an inter/anti-disciplinary fusion of theatre, team-building exercise, and social event; a practice of *communitas*.

State of the Art and ZU-UK's work is gamified theatre that deploys everyday tech imaginatively, to make meaningful connections rather than to accentuate alienation. It illustrates how game in/as performance only has the potential to be game-changing if all players understand and feel invited into – give consent to and have respect for – the 'rules of play' to enable *the play of possibility*. The performance events discussed sought to rebuild physical connection across cities, establishing both silly and serious routes for creative and critical transformation. Participation in the game of each project supported individual risk-taking as much as individual fun, yet always in association with others sharing the physical or virtual play. In so doing, as models of gameplay *in and as* performance practice, these projects emphasise and celebrate the ways in which individual input and outcome directly feed into collective responsibility and reward.

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Biographies

Josephine Machon is a writer, researcher and educator specialising in immersive practice and is one of the first appointed Research Residents at Guildhall School of Music & Drama, London. She is the author of *The Punchdrunk Encyclopaedia* (2019), *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (2013), *(Syn)aesthetics:* Re*defining Visceral Performance* (2009, 2011) and has published widely on experiential and interactive performance. She is Joint Editor of the Palgrave Macmillan Series, Palgrave Studies in Performance and Technology, and on the Editorial Boards for the *International Journal of Performance Arts & Digital Media* (IJPADM) and *Body, Space & Technology* (BST).

Munotida Chinyanga is an 'antidisciplinary' practitioner creating work through multimedia direction, sound design, and international collaborations. She is Co-Founder and Co-Artistic Director, with Simone Guistinelli, of the international arts collective, State of the [Art]. She has worked with leading companies and directors including Katie Mitchell and Headlong at Barbican, with Kwame-Kwei Armah at The Young Vic, and The Gate Theatre, Pleasance Theatre and Oxford Northwall.

Persis-Jadé Maravala is co-founder and Artistic Director of ZU-UK, creating work that sits at the intersection of games, performance, and technology. She has won

awards and nominations in the fields of interactive theatre, hybrid art, and innovation. Her most acclaimed project, *Hotel Medea* (2006–12), is considered a pioneering moment in immersive theatre and became the standout hit of the 2011 Edinburgh Fringe. She is the director and writer of all ZU-UK productions including *Goodnight Sleep Tight*, *Binaural Dinner Date*, *Pick Me Up (& Hold Me Tight)*, *Project Perfect Stranger/ PlagueRound*, and *Radio Ghost*.