

Operations & Encounters: Playing Out Performativity

Mary Flanagan

Abstract *Flanagan uses the lens of media archaeology to examine performativity—from early virtual theatre and internet-based ‘navigable narratives’ to play-based community activism.*

This piece is intended to offer a bit of media archaeology, sampling nearly 30 years of operations and encounters in performative and playful systems, from early internet-based art, via online theatre, to later hybrid and analogue modes. Games and game-adjacent art have always struck me as highly performative—even early ‘net.art’ that was deployed over the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s had deep performative roots. I have not been alone in this line of thinking: In 2000s, Patrick Lichty wrote about new media art as performance and explored Sue Ellen Case’s ideas from *Performing Lesbian in the Space of Technology*, (1995) positing that even the process of writing text on the computer is a performative act, with its own set of protocols and rituals. The metaphor of the performative act could be linked, as Lichty noted, to the creation of a web page, to a game, to creating navigable video and VR situations, as well as to programming itself (Lichty 2000, 351). Programming is especially performative, for programmers use language not only to describe digital logics and situations but actually cause actions to happen through the writing act. Performativity not only provides a philosophical framework for actions and other phenomenon, but conversely, such phenomenon end up framing the performance. Karen Barad argued that instead of ‘things with interactions’, we might end up looking at the *intra*-action between phenomena (Barad 2003, 815) in a network of social actors (Latour 1996).

Writing about new media work up to the year 2000, Lichty linked new media art (which tended to be interactive, even game-like) to cybernetics, which Norbert Wiener defined as the theory of self-regulating systems set up to generate and receive continuous feedback (1948). Theatre, like a cybernetic system, functions as a closed-loop feedback system, something it shares with interactive art, whose performativity stems from interplay among players and viewers. More recently, in part because gaming has now become a topic of research and scholarship, contemporary game scholars and designers are increasingly referring to games as ‘artforms

of agency', as sites of enactment, manifest by players who are guided by rules, experienced in time (see C. Thi Nguyen's 2020 book *Games: Agency as Art*). Performance, broadly writ, has much in common with gaming, whether computational or not, as well as with multiple hybrid forms of interactional experiences. Therefore, to unpack the capability of games and game-adjacent works and how they relate to live performance, we first need to draw on insights from the wealth of ideas around performativity.

Figure 1: The 1990s brought 'digital performance' to semi-mainstream conversations. Image created with an AI by the author.



Performance theories have their roots in philosophy with John L. Austin, who looked at the power of speech that is called 'performative language', which does something out in the world (1962); John Searle's speech acts, which created moral bonds between people (1969); Jacques Derrida, who argued that the mere stating of

something transformed reality (1984); and Judith Butler, who has linked performative acts and phenomenology to the construction of unstable conditions for gender (1988, 1993, 2006). As Butler and other phenomenologically minded philosophers (including Simone de Beauvoir) have shown, gender and even identity itself is not a stable construct but one made from acts, encounters, and performances. Therefore, iterations of gestures, movements, and other enactments co-create both experience and individual 'selves'.

Though at first glance early computed environments seem to have nothing to do with gestures, movements, and the like, numerous—seemingly disembodied—ways of forging performative capacities and functions emerged quite early in networked digital space. The user/player/interactor followed basic rituals of moving, pointing, clicking, swiping, vocalizing, commanding, and even singing. With limited means to interact, the distilled interaction itself took on greater importance.

Take early experiments in virtual theatre. The fundamental way we operationalize encounters through mediation and sets of instructions—implicit or explicit—serves to contribute to how we understand the performative spaces and possibilities in playful theatrical amalgams. Technology-performance hybrids and experimental works proliferated in the 1990s as the technology began to make projection and networking affordable and accessible. The ACT Lab at the University at Houston at Austin, led by artist Sandy Stone, was one locus for virtual performances. One particular work involved thousands of people across the network using a virtual chat room to sing together. Another of these early hybrid works took place at the 3rd Annual Digital Storytelling Festival in Crested Butte, Colorado, in September 1997.

In this work, Adrien Jenik and Lisa Brenneis created an online, interactive live performance of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1997–2002) in a 2D chat room in 'The Palace', a commercial yet freely available browser-based chat room that used 2D avatars to represent those participants currently in the space.

In the course of the play, the actors were interrupted, played along with, ignored, or simply tolerated by the participants. For live performance in digital spaces, notions of agency and embodiment play an important role. Carrie Noland, in her work on dance and performance, returns to phenomenology when asking how human meaning can be made and who possesses the ability and power to make sense of matters neglected by earlier philosophical traditions, arguing that 'kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that cannot otherwise be explained' (Noland 2012, 2–3). In *Waiting for Godot*, the kinesthetic experience is, at first, challenging to see clearly. The actors did not speak, they typed, and they navigated via mouse click. Yet they also moved the images that represented them around the space, embodied by silly proto-emojis and 2D icons. The sensation of kinesthetic experience was miniaturized in the virtual space of the chat, and the work ended up

a playful mashup between game, chat, puppeteering, and acting on a prototypical (if flat) theatrical stage.

Figure 2: Adrien Jenik, with Lisa Brenneis, *Desktop Theater: Waiting for Godot* 1997–2002. Screenshot by Adrien Jenik.



Early virtual 3D performance works from the 1990s tended to move away from the world of games, first of all because networked commercial games were just emerging with the rise of first-person shooters, and thus relied on motifs of violence and expensive technologies not available to artists at the time; and second, the division between games and art was one of class, taste, and values, much like in the early days of cinema, when it was compared to its more tasteful counterpart, the theatre. Newer experiments with collectively mediated projects move beyond some of these earlier prejudices.

My own early performative VR works in the 1990s were built using Virtual Reality Modelling Language and pushed through a special plug-in for web browsers on computers that, in most cases, had very slow connection speeds. In these 3D worlds, I explored the spatial implications of storytelling in what I called 'naviga-

ble narratives' (Flanagan 1999). Imagine a film physically cut up into bits and tossed into space, where they hover; the scenes then become encounterable. They need to be navigated in order to put the pieces together. Such a work in what was then a new virtual space became a liminal form, an object with game-like tendencies without the other framing mechanisms of games such as point structures or end goals.

Figure 3: [the perpetual bed] (1999). Mary Flanagan. Screenshot by Mary Flanagan.



One project, *[the perpetual bed]* (1999), was an online, virtual VRML site in which users could interact with the world, and in some cases with each other, from within boundaryless spaces. A hybrid of video, interactive art, installation, and animation, the piece is based on a family experience. My aging grandmother fell ill, and in a delirious state, she said that someone had come into her hospital room and pulled out a tray of chocolate chip cookies from under her bed. For days she was in a dream space, and I set out to create the world she was describing. Motifs from this space were mirrored in the virtual environment: animated images of early 20th century doctors, mid-20th century country scenes, farm animals, and text were intermingled with contemporary images of visiting a hospital or wheeling in a wheelchair. While I created some set camera paths to follow through the space connecting storylines, these were optional, and anyone visiting the website URL could navigate in any direction they wished. Equally important to me at the time was attempting to

tell a story about aging in the context of the 1990s dot-com bubble, when elderly people were almost completely excluded from the technological revolutions happening around them. My grandmother spent her childhood working on a family farm with draft horses and a wagon as their only transportation, and by her eighties, she was transported to a virtual world.

The opening up of the 3D technological system for networked interaction between visitors was only possible with custom software and very specific tools (namely Macromedia Director, which had the capacity for networking and created a new custom VRML multiuser browser). The interaction between other visitors to the space took place through a technology developed with computer scientist Christopher Egert, called Navigable Chat, where users could perceive each other through their textual presence—a multiuser 3D text space was used to stage networked global participatory performances as a ‘level’ on top of the base world for co-creation.

Engaging with multiple people live felt wonderful and revolutionary to do from a technology standpoint; the performances could be viewed on any internet browser with the plug-in, though they were rarely recorded. Sometimes I performed in the worlds in person, and this provided the opportunity for local audience feedback, enhancing the cybernetic aspects of the performance. Most of the performances were conducted as guest visits to universities and festivals, and at conferences in the arts, with audience members in attendance and an extended network of collaborators meeting me online.

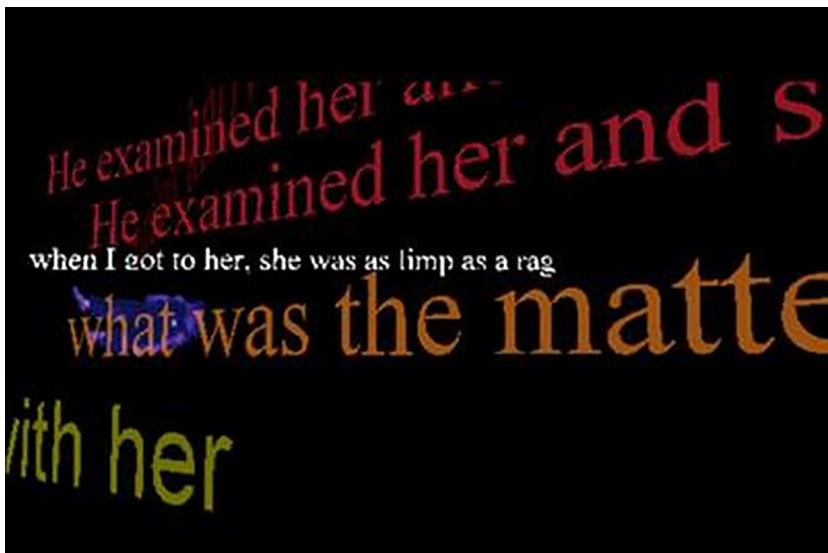
Inventing virtual performances did come at a price. Some spectators, in particular academics, were confused by the idea of a virtual performance, or even aghast that one would dare call something a performance ‘just because you are twiddling your fingers?’ Linking screen-based cybernetic-style feedback loops to ideas of wholly mediated performativity was a difficult concept for many at that juncture. But returning to the notion of performance itself, Erving Goffman’s notion of performance as meaning derived from activities done by an individual in front of a set of observers or an audience holds true inside virtual space as well as physical space (1959).

My goal with [*the perpetual bed*] was to tell a story in an altogether new way—that of allowing the user to move through a story, to ‘happen’ upon a scene, to do and show others, and to find their own meaning in this ever-enacted place. Users could then leave their mark and become part of the story—leaving hints, impressions, etc.—for the next viewer. These were open virtual performances, inspired by Allan Kaprow’s notion of Happenings in a virtual space. Navigation inside a virtual place in front of others is a performance of a particular space; performance in virtual space has additional implications, as the environment is completely artificial and constructed, and at the time, there were shifting norms about what the internet actually was. Concerns about the construction of worlds in software may not be obvious. For ex-

ample, there are gendered implications embedded into the logic of much existing software and hardware systems, which were written by a relatively small group of mostly male authors. These have the danger of enmeshing users in 'conventional' or biased subject positions based on conventional norms embedded in the technological systems. Designing a vast space without the stereotypical metaphors that were rampant at the time (virtual houses, mailboxes, and neighborhoods, for example, were very popular), and allowing participant players to make their own meaning by navigating an abstracted space, was my way of pushing back against the material tendencies of the computational medium.

Artists using new media, whether multi-user or single-user, constructed works from the temporal and motion-imaging elements of film and video, the accessibility of the internet, the user-centered narratives of interactive art, the seek-and-navigate patterns of games, and the sense of embodiment and disembodiment one can find in elements of choreography. The live, real-time interaction between performers and audiences fits a cybernetic model of performance in which feedback helps shape behavior real time. The question of whether the idea is still relevant in emerging mediated performative forms today remains to be seen.

Figure 4: [the perpetual bed] (1999). Mary Flanagan. Screenshot by Mary Flanagan.



The exploration of 'navigable narratives' also touches on the notion that performative play is reliant on historical precedents created by artists, particularly those involved in the Fluxus arts movement. Artists Ben Patterson and George Maciunas

co-organized the historic 1962 Fluxus Festival in Wiesbaden, Germany. Patterson's interview with Emmett Williams—which was held at the start of this festival—was one of the first articles about Fluxus and set the stage for a new wave of performances in art spaces, particularly by women artists. Fluxus artists Alison Knowles and Yoko Ono invoked rule-based systems for playful performance in their practices from the early 1960s, in some cases, and have continued to do so to the present day. Depending on the audience, these works are called performances or scores, but equally, each of their performances could be called games—as many Fluxus works were called—in their own right.

In a historical context, then, what might it mean to consider games—to study them, play them, and discuss them—as artworks in their own right, artworks with performative tendencies? Games are fundamentally rule-based systems designed for repetition, and historically linked to ritual (Huizinga 1938), and according to scholars like Richard Schechner, performance is always embedded in a rule-based system, and is often a repeatable, renewable, and ritualistic (Schechner 2020, 36). 'Performing takes place both in doing and showing doing', says Schechner (Schechner 2020, 36). This fits perfectly well into concepts of gaming, where players are often making meaningful choices in front of other players and repeating actions from a small vocabulary of options. The emerging spectator culture around gaming established by Twitch.tv and e-sports further supports the notion of games as performative situations.

I have used game systems for autobiographical exploration. An example is my 2004 PC-based work [*domestic*], where I used the first-person shooter game engine Unreal to tell a personal story of a house fire that happened in my childhood. Personal stories repeatedly emerge in my work as a source of inspiration, and perhaps autobiography can be linked to games by the latter's ritual aspects, where, like memories, they are played out again and again. In the environment of [*domestic*], players navigate the experimental spaces, but the experience is stripped of game mechanics except for the shooting mechanic. However, I replaced the typical weaponry of shooter games with my mother's coping mechanism: romance novels, which end up pasted on the walls, or my own small words, such as 'stop', as a kind of transient graffiti that simply vanishes in time and leaves the structure of the game level intact. There are no non-player characters, nothing to kill, and no way to win, but I put in the conventional sound of footsteps and the bullet sound as a reminder that this, too, was indeed to be read in contrast to conventional game tropes. The first-person positioning of the player led to a kind of role playing, where movement, gesture and decision making led the player to the disorienting space of the work. Performativity is an emergent mode, a model of engaging in order to reach deeper understanding, empathy, and transformation.

In some of my later in-person performative events, like the 'massively multiplayer' live urban game events I led in my role as director of the research labora-

tory, Tiltfactor (from 2008 to 2011), I used game frameworks as tools for community entanglements, bringing 20–60 players together at a time who would not have met otherwise, and who interacted as incipient communities. These urban games were designed for community engagement as performative, network-forming, and embodied events that result in a massive dinner party, sometimes framed as a ‘cookoff competition’ like dueling chefs on a TV series. In the massively multiplayer games (Massively Multiplayer Soba; Massively Multiplayer Mushu) players ask strangers for help translating the names of ingredients and discovering various specialty foods, based on the location (neighborhood, city, country) of the gameplay. Players aim to bring the correct food items back to a community center to gain points and contribute to the shared dinner. The players are incentivized to interview the people they encounter about their relationships to particular foods, and in the end, invite them to a free dinner.

Drawing from queer theory and feminist theory, one can consider the massively multiplayer games in terms of the way that agency and situation become essential parts of the conditions for performativity, and how shared elements among players—ingredients, stories, neighborhood—are always in a process of mattering to each other in degrees. These concepts are key to understanding interactive and game-related artworks, because they move us away from representational notions of art actions and objects toward those involved with actions/doings/performances (Barad 2003, 802). These dinner parties become conversations, events, and grassroots organizing, all in one, with a distributed aesthetic that emphasizes transition and change (Bartlem 2005).

The energy from such playful encounters led to [*Play Your Place*] (2013–14), an urban planning, public engagement, and social practice art project created with Ruth Catlow of Furtherfield.org in the UK. The fundamentals consisted of an online ‘game-building’ digital tool and a series of community engagement sessions to develop a collective vision for local communities. In [*Play Your Place*], Ruth and I, with an outstanding team of educators, community outreach professionals, a technical team, and urban planning consultants, staged half a year of drawing workshops at community events, shopping centers, and schools in Southend-on-Sea in Essex. In these workshops, community members drew what they perceived to be challenges, risks, and rewards for their own community, from their point of view, with the aim of increasing public engagement in creative ways. At the drawing workshops, we taught people how they could upload their drawings and transform them into games—the game tool we developed accepted camera phone images of these drawings and transformed them into publicly accessible, online playable 2D games. As players engaged in collective social ideation, they create the resources and rules for games that were played, remixed, and redistributed as they wished.

The team went on to stage these creativity-driven interventions/conversations in Westminster and other communities. Through the project, with its drawing work-

shops and public game-jam events, people discussed challenges in their neighborhoods, shared experiences and aspirations, and got creative together.

Figure 5: [ConfinementScotch] (2020). Photo: Joseph Havel.



Affect in Analogue

Alongside these computational projects, I have pursued nontechnological play-related frameworks as embodied expressive situations; increasingly my work moves offline as everyday experience is so dominated by technologies that still have not addressed their biases and shortcomings, their commercial ecosystems, their intense data collection, and their intentionally addictive natures. The embodiment of play can be used to provoke conversations around difficult subjects, like the project, [Bombscotch] (2007–present), where I ask players to ‘play out’ the atrocities committed by the US Military over the last 150 years. I recently published a collection of 20 years of these little instructions, as [Mapscotch: A Book of Games] (2021), where such play scenarios can become sites for provocation, reflection, empathy, connection, criticality, and intervention, and continue to make these mini-interventions, such as [ConfinementScotch] during the pandemic lockdown.

The works discussed in this brief essay demonstrate that a thread of performativity has playfully woven its way across early net.art virtual performances, to game-adjacent and game artworks that aim to empower players and visitors and bring new ways of thinking about the world around us. From Norbert Wiener’s cybernetic systems to contemporary game theory such as critical play, interactive playful and

game-related works have performatively challenged hegemonic norms that govern everyday life (Flanagan 2009). Early new media art and game-adjacent art use both performance and performativity; this piece is a sampler of over 20 years of performative and playful systems from early internet-based art, via online theatre, to hybrid and analogue modes. Through this brief survey, it is easy to see that with artworks that grant us a ‘magic circle’ in which to be empowered to play, as proposed originally by Huizinga, anything is possible.

References

- Austin, John L. 1962. *How To Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press.
- Barad, Karen. 2003. ‘Posthumanist Performativity. Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.’ *Signs* 28, no. 3: 801–831. <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.’ *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December): 519–531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2006 [1990]. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. With an introduction by the author. New York and London: Routledge.
- Case, Sue Ellen. 1995. ‘Performing Lesbian in the Space of Technology: Part I.’ *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 1 (March): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208803>. Cited in Lichty, 2000.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1984. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Flanagan, Mary. 2021. *Mapscotch: A Book of Games*. Stuttgart: Verlag für Handbücher.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1971 [1938]. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. New York: Beacon Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 1996. ‘On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications.’ *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4: 369–81. JSTOR.
- Lichty, Patrick. 2000. ‘The Cybernetics of Performance and New Media Art.’ *Leonardo* 33, no. 5: 351–54. JSTOR.
- Markussen, Turid. 2005. ‘Practicing Performativity: Transformative Moments in Research.’ *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 12, no. 3: 329–344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805054273>.
- Noland, Carrie. 2012. *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Richard Schechner. 2020. *Performance Studies*, 4th Edition. New York: Routledge.

Searle, John R. 1996 (2012). *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wiener, Norbert. 1948. *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Biography

Mary Flanagan is an internationally exhibiting artist and writer whose work in emerging tech and gaming offers new perspectives on play, power, and place. Her work is exhibited at museums and galleries around the world, including The Whitney Museum, The Guggenheim, Tate Britain, and institutions in Spain, New Zealand, South Korea, Germany, China and Australia. Her projects have been covered by *ARTnews*, *The New York Times*, *MIT Technology Review*, *La Presse*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Make Magazine*. Flanagan is the author or co-author of many books on digital culture and play, most notably *Critical Play* (2009), *Values at Play in Digital Games* (2014, with Helen Nissenbaum), and *Playing Oppression* (2023, with Michael Jakobsson).