Donald Trump's Viral Narratives and Shifting Pandemic Communication

A Search for Playful Affordances (2014–2021)

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Donald Trump has a long history of disparaging (racial) others based on diseases that they might presumably bring to the United States. During the Ebola epidemic in West-Africa (2013–2015), he often tweeted about the threat of Ebola, and regularly expressed the view that any flights from Africa must be stopped, suggesting that West-Africans were consciously trying to sneak the Ebola virus into the United States (Polak 2021, 51). When COVID-19 first became visible on the world stage, Trump initially ignored it (Haberman 2022, 412), and he then blamed China, calling the coronavirus "the Chinese virus," a term that became a force to be reckoned with in the worldwide surge of anti-Asian racist violence (Wu and Wall 2021, 108). Later, he called the virus a hoax, presumably in response to skepticism about coronavirus measures from his regular support base, while also first hogging and then dividing among the states necessary medical equipment, based on governors' political allegiances, 'selling' on Twitter the false claim that hydroxychloroquine was a proven drug against the disease, as well as floating the suggestion that light or disinfectant might work to combat it (Haberman 2022, 424). On the campaign trail, he regularly mocked Democratic candidate Joe Biden's careful avoidance of crowds and mask-wearing, but after he had himself contracted the disease, argued that he had been to "the real school" of the coronavirus and was therefore the presidential candidate best equipped to deal with its challenge (Klar 2020). He also prepared for a reemergence from the hospital in a Superman costume, or at least circulated the persistent rumor that he wanted to do so (Polak and Zwetsloot 2022, 377).

As a result of these often seemingly contradictory antics, President Donald Trump's behavior in response to the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020–the period when the pandemic first raged in the United States, and the final year of his presidency–has often been described as flippant, unpredictable, and ineffective (Bump 2020). While it was all of those things, I want to argue here that it is helpful to understand his shifting responses over the year, as the situation changed, in the context of *play*, and particularly, in terms of *playful affordances*. Trump was, I

will show, consistently looking for possibilities within the given situation to draw attention to himself and to assert his superior position vis-à-vis any perceived opponent. Rather than, as one might expect, combating the pandemic, Trump perceived himself, and behaved, as if he were engaged in a fiercely competitive game for attention and superiority in which the pandemic played a role as one of the gameable challenges in play, but in which fighting it was not the only or even primary aim. Rather, 'winning,' broadly but always personally, and being seen as such by his supporters, was key. Fighting the pandemic occasionally offered a means for doing so–as he had in the past employed pandemics to proclaim his superiority–but was hardly the focus of his response. Instead, he played to win, in a broadly intuitive sense: personally, to appear healthier, better, richer than, and dominant over others, as a president up for reelection, to get good rankings (polls, approval ratings, treatment in the media), and–as is central to play–for its own sake, and to engage other players, a reflex that Trump had shown for decades. A key element in Trump's pandemic play became the notion that so much around managing the pandemic (in terms of policies and safety measures) became politicized. And thus, in the US's polarized political landscape, spectacles of disruption and grotesque disorder could easily work to his advantage too. I will study Trump's manner of playing with the pandemic in terms of affordances, focusing particularly on the affordance of 'fuck-up-ability'–the perceived potential of action that Trump played with especially effectively. As James Gibson, who introduced and popularized the concept of affordance defines it, "[a]n object's affordances are the 'possibilities of acting' that we perceive when we look at it" ([1979] 1986, 160). The idea that an affordance is perceived is very important, since it understands affordances as fundamentally relational and more than just 'objectively given' possibilities of action offered by the environment. Gibson's 'affordances' refers to both the environment and the human at once, the physical (part of the world of matter) as well as phenomenal (part of the world of the mind) ([1979] 1986, 160).

I will show that a central affordance that Trump perceived and employed in his pandemic play to gain personally as a politician, both long before and during his presidency, was the affordance of 'fuck-up-ability,' the possibility of acting that allowed him to spectacularly and cartoonishly mess up 'serious' politics and management of a public health crisis. The term 'fuck-up-ability' may seem unduly frivolous; I employ it nonetheless, to emphasize both the seemingly trivial, playful and autotelic motivation of Trump's bumbling, and also the serious political effects and implications of political leadership that is not interested in effectively managing a crisis.

Play and Playful Politics

Play is fundamental, not just to human beings, but to life in general. Play is also a notoriously difficult concept to define. The game of finding a form of play that does not fit within a given definition yet is undeniably play is never far away from efforts to come up with a set definition. Benchmarking inevitably invites attempts at circumvention, and voilà: play. One effect of this is that play can easily come to be anything, with the effect that the concept also loses its explanatory power. Nevertheless, a key element of play, and playful modes of being more broadly, is to try out what is possible. Miguel Sicart argues in *Play Matters* (2014) that this very basic and fundamental notion of play and playfulness means that play is not something *in* or *of* culture, but that it is much more universal to life. To live, species constantly have to seek out and generate all kinds of affordances, and this search is both a matter of survival and one of play, dismantling the common 'work versus play' or 'survival versus culture' binaries.

Put this way, everything, including turning a courtyard into a playing field by playing football, urban gardening, primate colonies, industrialization, and capitalism could all be understood as play and as key elements in survival–a serendipitous, creative, and adventurous journey to see how and where one can grow or move towards. Play, as well as life itself, then, is a constant search for affordances. This is problematically broad as a definition of play. However, Sicart's assertion that play is a "mode of being in the world" (2014, 70) actually does seem particularly apt to describe Trump, although perhaps Sicart had a more creative notion of play in mind than Trump seems to embody. However, the idea that play is a mode of being in the world–a kind of openness to playful engagement–is a helpful point of departure, even if it is somewhat vague. How Trump played with COVID-19 and the pandemic's narratives and fictions was determined in large part by his very basic attitudes and mode of being. In particular, his attitude seemed to be defined by a focus on competition rather than a broader, more open-ended playful engagement with his surroundings and position. So, from the outset, I would like to engage three further concepts of play: Roger Caillois's notion of "agon" as the (presumably level) playing field that sets the stage of a competition for dominance within the set rules of a particular game ([1958] 1961, 14); Eugèn Fink's (1960) notion that play inherently generates *Spielraum*, a term that refers to both the literal English translation 'play space' and also to 'leeway' or 'wiggle room' (see translators' note 2016, 11); and Johan Huizinga's (1938) famous idea of "the magic circle" (toverkring) as the constitutive locus of play. I will briefly unpack each of these concepts and relate them to instances of how Trump played with and around COVID, and then employ them to enter into a discussion of Trump's seeking and use of playful affordances during the pandemic.

In *Man, Play, and Games* (1958), Roger Caillois, building on Huizinga's very broad definition of play, took up the challenge to classify different forms of play into four

categories: *agon* (in which competition is dominant, such as football and chess), *alea* (which revolves around chance, such as lottery and roulette), mimicry (which centers on simulation, such as playing house), and *ilinx* (in which vertigo is key, such as rapid whirling). These are to be understood as four 'quadrants' of play (Caillois [1958] 1961, 12–13). Caillois particularly explores the notion of *agon* as play that is competitive and that, premised on equal conditions for each player and unequivocal and strictly enforced rules of engagement, will allow the best player to win. The politicization of play often involves the fact that the playing field is usually not level at all, and that while the rules of engagement might seem equal for all, they are in fact determined in part by categories such as gender and class.

For example, when Trump, in October 2020, 'battled' and then 'conquered' a bout of COVID-19, this was often framed in terms of sports metaphors, not least by his own campaign, which routinely disparaged Biden's purported 'weakness' in trying to avoid infection through masking and social distancing. This framing of the disease and infection risk is clearly agonistic in the Cailloisian sense, but the playing field is not level. When Trump was treated for COVID-19 in the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, the care he was given included experimental treatments not available to anyone else (Walker 2020). In a national context in which many people had limited access to healthcare or even sick days, any suggestion that Trump's 'victory' over the virus was a matter of personal merit within a competition against Biden (who avoided the disease) must be understood as an attempt to make a political point through the suggestion of *agon*. This politicization of competitive play can be linked to Chantal Mouffe's (2000) notion of agonism, by which she means political engagement with opponents within the circumscribed boundaries of democratic politics. Like Caillois, Mouffe derives this word from the Greek '*agon*'–conflict, struggle, or contest–but rather than focusing on the play aspect of contest, she emphasizes political struggle. Whether Trump's playing with the coronavirus actually stayed within the politically agonistic, or really veered into antagonistic territory–and became disruptive of political agonism (i.e., the political struggle between opposed interests) remains to be seen.

One factor that is important in answering that question is what the boundaries of the 'normal' political field are. Play generates *Spielraum*, Fink argues. On the most literal level, this is obviously true: once we are kicking a ball around a particular space, that space becomes our playing field. Creating such *Spielraum* through play is neither trivial nor free of risk, largely because this is (also) about claiming space, and occupying space in such a way that the game played there is dominant. If, for instance, a group of white, male Trump supporters ostentatiously ignore local mask mandates in grotesque, and therefore mediagenic and meme-ify-able displays of protest (as was, for example, the case when hundreds of protestors assembled in Michigan's state capitol on April 30, 2020), they are not just creating play space to enact their defiant stance, but they are also seeking to create additional wiggle room

for themselves within public space regulated by coronavirus measures while forcing at-risk others out of the space.

As such, this behavior drives other players off the playing field and effectively undoes the *agon*, including the agonistic model of politics that Mouffe uses the term for, while simultaneously creating play space on another level. This is an example of antagonistic play by Trump supporters–not Trump himself–that does indeed disrupt the long-established, democratic playing field, albeit in a fashion that does resonate on several levels with equally long-established American principles, such as white men's entitlement to bodily autonomy and freedom of expression.

Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* coined the term 'magic circle' to describe more or less the same as what Fink calls play space (although Huizinga's notion is less clearly political): a magic circle is an (often imaginary) world that is played into being. If a group of people (or just one person, really) play that a particular space is their castle, then, within the game it is their castle. They will still know that it's *not really* a castle, but the reality of the game is superimposed on the material world as long as the game lasts. Once players (or even just one of the players) decide to quit the game, the castle no longer exists, although it may be reconstituted after the quitter(s) have left. On the other hand, a magic circle that is consistently sustained may easily come to change the shape of previous realities. If the castle, as in the example above, is really a statehouse, and therefore has some resonances of being a castle, or at least a seat of power–indeed also *the occupiers*' seat of democratic power–the wiggle room lies in the question to what extent they are agonistically or antagonistically occupying the castle. This kind of play in and with magic circles could often be seen, among Trump supporters, but also by Trump himself, for instance, in his suggestions for ways of 'imaginatively' solving the crisis, for example by denying its existence, by doing fewer tests in order to achieve 'better' statistics, and by suggesting bogus cures (Haberman 2022, 424). All of these interventions on the one hand may have exacerbated the scientific reality of the pandemic's impact, and on the other hand, within the magic circle of Trump and his supporters, made the problem 'disappear' or shift into the older and more familiar agonistic game of combatting the Democrats.

Before moving on to a discussion of the different playful affordances that Trump and his supporters found in their various strategies of playing with and in the pandemic, I want to emphasize that, of course, combating a virus outbreak itself–i.e., limiting the spread of the virus, finding vaccinations, or trying to forge group immunity–can be viewed as a game of sorts (a game that has over the last few years found and generated all kinds of affordances), but this was rarely what Trump engaged in personally, although federal agencies under his command, such as the American Centers for Disease Control, and other federal and state agencies did. Instead, Trump played mostly with *outbreak narratives* (Wald 2008), and in doing so he often played with the specific affordances of such narratives.

Playful Affordances

Here, I want to briefly unpack the concept of *affordances*, in order to bring some clarity to the kinds of affordances that are at stake here. James Gibson's original notion of affordances was very much tied to the material world. Moving from surfaces to affordances, Gibson explains:

> The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill. […] If a terrestrial surface is nearly horizontal (instead of slanted), nearly flat (instead of convex or concave), and sufficiently extended (relative to the size of the animal) and if its substance is rigid (relative to the weight of the animal), then the surface *affords support*. It is a surface of support, and we call it a substratum, ground, or floor. It is stand-on-able, permitting an upright posture for quadrupeds and bipeds. It is therefore walk-on-able and run-over-able. ([1979] 1986, 127)

This notion has become very important in design, which often revolves around creating specific affordances, such as 'sit-ability,' rather than objects, such as chairs, as well as in digital media and game studies. Gibson sees an affordance as more relational and more about the combined interactional agency of human and environment than, say, a tactic, possibility, method, approach, strategy, or, from a more sociological standpoint, a habit. An object's affordances are the possibilities of acting that we perceive when we look at it. The 'perceive' here is important, as it indicates that affordances are not 'objectively given,' but a product of perception.

During the occupation of the Michigan State House on April 30, 2020, in protest against the state's mask mandate, viral photos showed white men presumably screaming in the faces of white security officers wearing face masks in accordance with the mask mandate. A photo taken by Jeff Kowalsky focuses on a bearded man who takes on an intimidating pose. His fanatical gaze, forward-leaning posture, and open mouth suggest he is very angry, and he stands well within the 1.5-meter range of social distancing rules, without wearing a mask, thus putting at risk the guard opposite him, at a moment when there was hardly any treatment available for COVID-19 yet. The state house afforded the protesters all kinds of material options (including the surficial affordances Gibson mentioned, such as stand-on-ability and walk-on-ability), but the more obvious affordances of the space are material in a different, more implicitly political way and many are entirely social, political, or playful, without being tied primarily to the material circumstances at hand. One example of the first kind (material affordances that are really political affordances that are being brought into play by the protesters) lies in the fact that the protesters are able to enter the building as a crowd, unmasked and without social distancing, and are able to come into short range of the guards. Here, their freedom to protest

and the coronavirus measures work against each other, but the democratic right to enter government buildings and to protest wins out, despite the fact that this means the guards may risk infection. An example of a political affordance of the situation is the protesters' whiteness; it is entirely possible that this is a key factor in allowing the clash of opposing freedoms and interests to bend in the protesters' favor. A few weeks later, the murder of George Floyd set off massive Black Lives Matter protests that were, also in Michigan, met with far less equanimity by law enforcement (Kishi and Jones 2020).

As noted, looking for possibilities and *Spielraum* is essential to play, and the statehouse in which it was taken and the uniformed, masked policemen, in part because of their composure and official nature, have a certain kind of 'dethronability.' Because of their correctness and officialdom, there is a great deal of potential dramatic effect in soiling and humiliating them, not personally, but as political commentary. The administrative and parliamentary setting, next to affording respect and democratic deliberation, because of its presumption of democratic agonism, also has the inherent political affordance of fuck-up-ability. This is both an invitation to play in a crude and antagonistic way and a highly political affordance, which has driven the alt-right as well as anti-coronavirus measures crowds throughout the pandemic. These political and institutional affordances clearly included specific affordances to racist actors, both as mentioned above, because they employ whiteness as a received sign of dignity and absence of threat, but also because the coronavirus first came from China. As such, the pandemic, and its framing by Trump, among others, afforded a setting for racist conspiracism.

While neither this protest against the coronavirus measures nor Trump's racist framing of the pandemic was necessarily playful, both responses to the pandemic share a focus on finding affordances to deal with it without losing any of the *Spielraum* that the subjects created before the pandemic, which the pandemic or the measures to deal with it might curb. As noted before, play, in general, has the ability to bring out affordances that might not have been obvious at first, and this is even more visible through online playing. Online, it is possible to find and employ immaterial affordances and play spaces that might be less visible or usable offline. The image referred to above is a striking press photo, with all of the affordances such mediations carry (such as evidence of the event's occurrence and a basis for identifying the people in the photo), and it is also, because of its grotesque imagery, a very suitable basis for an internet meme. It has the affordance of meme-ify-ability, which is crucial for its life on social media platforms.

The field of game studies has expanded the kinds of affordances under consideration, because social media platforms and video games may construct or represent things like stand-on-ability and walk-on-ability, but they are not terrestrial surfaces at all. When a door or window is locked or boarded up in the terrestrial world, it remains visible, and so retains some affordances, even if they are not 'climb-through-

ability' or 'see-through-ability,' but when a door in a video game is removed, there is no way to know that there even was one, and no signal that there still is another space behind the wall. On social media platforms, the affordances for interaction are decisive for the character and atmosphere of a platform (Gekker 2019, 406). This includes things like message length, ability to repost, 'like,' 'love,' bookmark, vote up or down other messages, 'friend' or follow other users, scroll endlessly, and all the other things that can and cannot be done on a specific platform, given their (im)possibilities and rules (and if/how they are kept and monitored). Becoming accustomed to seeing and using these kinds of immaterial media affordances is a key element of online play, and the availability of press photos that are meme-ify-able, in combination with platforms that afford their circulation and mutation, has played a central role in playing politics during the pandemic. In the following section, I will focus more narrowly on Donald Trump's role in finding and using these affordances, via a short detour into the relatively recent past.

Ebola, Corona, and Traditional Outbreak Narratives

Trump has a long history of being able to spot and exploit racist affordances of disease outbreaks on Twitter and in other media. When in 2014, Trump–well before officially becoming a candidate for the Presidency–started to tweet actively about the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, he followed the classical playbook for outbreak narratives first analyzed by Priscilla Wald in *Contagious* (2008). His discourse, through over a hundred tweets, mostly sent in October 2014, was heavily invested in a traditional narrative, which framed the disease as something to be 'kept out' through border control. On July 31, 2014, he tweeted, "Ebola patient will be brought to the U.S. in a few days–now I know for sure that our leaders are incompetent. KEEP THEM OUT OF HERE!" (Trump 2014a). A total of two people died of Ebola in the US during the entire outbreak, which lasted until the end of 2015–both of whom had contracted the disease in Africa. There is no reasonable argument that the US government's domestic response to the epidemic was anything but competent and effective (Hasian 2016). However, the tweet recast the issue so as to frame it in political terms: 'soft' leftist leaders cannot say no and will thus expose Americans to Ebola as part of their longstanding inability to keep out foreigners, however 'soiling' or harmful they are to America's inherent cleanliness.

Two months later, Trump went a step further by identifying a super-spreading 'Patient Zero,' who, with allegedly malign intentions, tried to travel into and within the US while contagious. On October 2, 2014, Trump tweeted, "The Ebola patient who came into our country knew exactly what he was doing. Came into contact with over 100 people. Here we go–I told you so!" (2014b). Like the previous one, this tweet followed the classical narrative in which an epidemic is framed as an attack from

the outside, initiated by racial 'others,' who are projected as enemies trying to enter the 'pure' home country in order to 'soil' it with their disease, which is implicitly connected to their otherness and inhumanity. Yet another follow-up tweet connected the implicit anti-African racism of the first tweets to the US's first black president, whose legitimacy Trump had long been invested in interrogating through the racist Birther Conspiracy. On October 15, 2014, he tweeted, "President Obama has a personal responsibility to visit & embrace all people in the US who contract Ebola!" (Trump 2014c). This flips around the previously implied vector from racial otherness to posing an infection risk: Obama would have to bodily embrace people with Ebola, in order to contract it too, presumably in retribution for having been 'responsible' for bringing it into the United States.

The same could be seen in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, termed "the China virus" by Trump: the virus was all that is 'not-us.' This time, the racial animosity was directed against China, and Asians more broadly, rather than against (West) Africans, but the pattern was the same. This time, to prevent the virus's spread, many flights were actually stopped globally, while simultaneously a massive conspiracy theory machine started to churn out narratives that faulted allegedly ill-intentioned Chinese laboratories and markets where 'strange' animals were sold for consumption, including, supposedly, bats that could have spread the virus. Each of these narratives or topoi ('the virus was lab-produced by evil scientists,' 'exotic eating cultures cause disease,' and 'vampire-like vermin are spreading this thing') are classic outbreak narratives (Wald 2008, 31). They simultaneously dehumanize the carrier and frame the virus as outlandish and far removed from 'us.' At the same time, there was a rise in resistance against any and all coronavirus measures, particularly against the mask mandate, and a host of conspiracy beliefs that suggested that the virus was itself a hoax, brought into the world artificially, or even purely as a fiction, to rein in and control free people. This narrative caught more traction with the development of a vaccine by the end of 2020, because it was paired with pre-existing vaccine skepticism.

Trump played several sides of this game, often more or less simultaneously. He blamed China for the debacle, suggesting that the virus might have been a malign invention on the part of Chinese state actors while also playing down the virus's threat and framing politicians' anxiety about it in the US as Democratic weakness and pearl-clutching. Known for having mysophobia (fear of contamination), Trump was both personally inclined to play up and socially and politically motivated to play down the coronavirus's risks. As we have seen, during the Ebola epidemic (and other epidemics, like SARS, MERS, and Zika), Trump had been invested in emphasizing and capitalizing on the risk for American public health as part of a xenophobic agenda as he implicitly paired medical hygiene with its white-supremacist metaphorical counterpart of racial hygiene, already summed up in that

first Ebola tweet: "KEEP THEM OUT!" The real threat of the coronavirus afforded the reinvigoration of the same age-old dog whistle: foreigners carry disease.

But as the COVID-19 pandemic reached all corners of the world, including the United States, which for months was the country where the disease was most prevalent, and where the numbers of dead were the highest in the world, Trump had to embrace the other extreme–that COVID-19 was actually not that serious a threat to Americans–as well. The possibilities to shelter in place, work from home, and isolate when sick were very limited for large numbers of people in a country where only an elite of white-collar workers have good health insurance, financial back-up to miss working days, and the security that staying home in case of possible infection will not cost you your job. Therefore, Trump denied the disease's seriousness and, particularly, the need for far-reaching measures to combat the pandemic. Moreover, many of the state governments' coronavirus measures, and those adopted nationally in other countries, reached very far into the private sphere, which is a centuries-old taboo in mainstream American culture, most certainly among Trump's support base. Thus, Trump moved constantly between different alternative realities that were mutually exclusive, except as different magic circles stacked on top of each other. Gaming the coronavirus, for Trump, was not about fighting the disease but about keeping the upper hand in terms of the upcoming elections, and all the other political games and power play he was involved in (Cailloisian *agon*). To forge *Spielraum* in that process, he needed to flit back and forth between magic circles. This was, effectively, a new affordance he had found for dealing with the pandemic, that he did not yet perceive in dealing with Ebola–or Covid, initially–when he stuck to the old pandemic affordance of mobilizing the virus scare for ostracizing racial others. For instance in press conferences alongside Dr. Anthony Fauci (director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, NIAID) and Deborah Birx (a member of the White House communications team, but also a scientist and a medical doctor), Trump would take extreme liberty with the facts of the pandemic. In doing so, he simultaneously forced them to effectively condone his nonsense, and he vindicated, on behalf of a considerable part of his own support base, the experts and scientific elites, while also offering a massive amount of 'meme fodder' for his fans and detractors alike.

This ability and willingness to embrace a variety of–at least in logical terms–mutually exclusive narratives at the same time is part of the outrage Trump excited amongst opponents, and yet, this very outrage was part of the game. As Johan Huizinga wrote in *Homo Ludens*,

> The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore he is a coward and must be ejected. In the world of high seriousness, too, the cheat and the hypocrite have always had an easier time of it than the spoil-sports, here called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc. It sometimes

> happens, however, that the spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings. ([1938] 1949, 12)

Trump is a spoilsport who has in a very ludic manner created a community with rules of its own—also already before the pandemic, and to a large extent through both the affordances of social media and the affordances of the white supremacist and exceptionalist narratives he tapped into before the pandemic as well as later. In 2020, during the pandemic as well as his run for reelection, he added several other outbreak narratives to his repertoire and played with these all at the same time, a feat that, within the realm of more traditional representative democratic politics, should have been impossible. The necessary friction between opposing narratives, according to Chantal Mouffe's (2013) understanding of agonism in politics, is made untenable and ridiculous if the president embraces different positions at the same time without consistency.

However, Trump acted not just as a spoilsport within the traditional agonistic game of politics, but he went on, in Huizinga's phrase, to "make a new community with rules of its own," a community that revolves around the affordances of social media play, in which embracing a variety of meme-ify-able stances simultaneously or in quick succession is perfectly acceptable. This is not a magic circle entirely of Trump's own making: as we have seen above, the narrative in which white American men are particularly entitled to play the game of democratic rule in whatever way best suits their interest has been widespread, if implicit, in American culture for centuries. Moreover, the affordances of social media platforms, Twitter in particular, include the ability to make malleable all kinds of evidence (including photographic evidence). Reposting something without its original context but overlaid with a new element, filter, or interpretation is a basic affordance of most platforms (Phillips and Milner 2021, 186–87). This also enables the production of memes, image-text hybrids that are usually generated by amateurs, aimed at entertainment, and snowballing across platforms while constantly taking on new meanings (Shifman 2013). It might well be that Trump, through his Twitter activism during the Ebola pandemic in 2014, got the hang of stoking racist outbreak panic online and in 2020 played the same game in a bigger fashion by not just tapping into old outbreak narratives but also by embracing the fact that no consistency is needed within this type of digital play.

Meme culture, as well as Donald Trump in personality and style, are interested in seeking the affordance of fuck-up-ability, in part because that is where their humor and attraction primarily resides, but also because this 'take-down-the-system' sensibility really fits the political moment, with doubt in traditional institutions at a historical low (Pew Research 2022). What in improvisation theater is termed 'finding

the game' (i.e., coming to an unspoken agreement about the parameters of a scene that is improvisationally enacted) is something that Trump is very good at (unlike other aspects of politics), and this process of finding the game is profoundly a matter of play, and of seeking new affordances. It is also, as indicated, a meta-game of sorts, in the sense that it is engaged with forging new rules, or with forging rules that may never be stabilized to the point that they will apply equally to all players.

Conclusion

So, early on in the pandemic, Trump embraced essentially the same outbreak narrative as he did with Ebola, and as was widely embraced in the 1980s around HIV/Aids: the virus was an attack from the outside, perpetrated by malignant or indifferent, contaminated alien others (Wald 2008, 223). In the spring and early summer of 2020, as the US was wrecked with record numbers of coronavirus cases and deaths, this narrative had to change. Trump, in the spring of 2020, would simultaneously take credit for respirators that the federal government had organized, insistently advertise the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID-19 (despite a lack of scientific evidence of its effectiveness), and claim that states, and implicitly people, needing any of these things were losers who could not fend for themselves. This was, of course, inconsistent and opportunistic, but not on a metalevel: by 2020, inconsistent and opportunistic were Trump's best-known trademarks. Indeed, Trump's playful, take-room-where-there-is-any fashion fit perfectly with not just his persona but also with the section of the US electorate that supported him most ardently, and with the classical US American self-image of being entrepreneurial and cowboy-like.

This new attitude, of downplaying the disease's seriousness, and the federal government's responsibility to deal effectively with the crisis, while simultaneously playing up Trump's own role as a cartoonesque pandemic wizard–advising not only hydroxychloroquine but later also disinfectant and light treatment to 'cleanse' the body of COVID-19–came to a head in October 2020. At the height of his reelection campaign, while consistently engaged in employing all the possible affordances of the fact that his opponent Joe Biden was even older than Trump himself and was taking a host of coronavirus measures in his own campaign, Trump contracted the disease himself, and, as mentioned in the introduction, bent this situation into a possibility to emphasize his supposed role as coronavirus-slaying superhero.

The flexibility here is not limitless. The Superman-cowboy-badass frame is one that Trump cannot actually leave, as became clear when he told a rally audience that he himself was vaccinated against the disease (Smith 2021). This did not motivate his supporters to do the same, and earned him boos rather than applause. By tuning in to narratives and narrative frames that his supporters were open to, Trump rode

a wave—that is still there, even if he is now no longer as visibly riding it—and he in part also made and shaped the wave, though his control of it is rather limited. The pandemic, and particularly his own communication in and about it, is a game that plays him, as much as the other way around.

This may be illustrative of a very general conclusion about the Trump presidency, and his negotiation of circumstances that were already there, that he rarely managed to materially change. Trump's pandemic communication brought into focus deep cultural narratives that already existed, initially a traditional outbreak narrative and later a collection of newly mobilized old themes. Trump has playfully mobilized these to his advantage wherever possible and gained through doing so (perhaps almost as much as he lost by not actually intervening more effectively in the pandemic), but he is not in control. A pre-existing movement has found him, and he grotesquely performs its moves, not vice versa.

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