"Be the Tooth Fairy and not Santa Claus":
Designing a Facilitator Role to Support Audience Agency in an Immersive Theatre Environment

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PURPOSE

Informal learning environments that provide open-ended tasks and support active participant engagement (e.g., makerspaces (Wilkinson et al., 2016) and immersive theatre spaces (Siciliano, 2022)), can serve as sites for inquiry into learner agency. Although facilitators play an essential role in such spaces (Gutwill et al., 2015), research examining facilitators' pedagogical practices and how to design these roles and practices to foster learner agency is just beginning to emerge (Kajamaa et al., 2020; White et al., 2021). In this paper, facilitation moves and the design of a facilitator role to foster learner agency are explored in the context of an immersive theatrical space, *FORTS!: Build Your Own Adventure*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In immersive theatre, agency may be viewed as audience members choosing how they participate and the extent to which their actions contribute to the performance (Breel, 2015). Designers structure the possibilities and limits of audience engagement, often determining how performers interact with audience members to facilitate action. It is within these interactions between performer and audience where agency is negotiated and shared (White, 2013). Wertsch et al.'s (1993) sociocultural approach to agency aligns with this disciplinary approach in that agency is socially distributed and interactional, mediated by tools and interactional structures.

METHOD & DATA SOURCES

Reflective interviews were conducted separately with two members of the *FORTS* team: the Artistic Director (AD) and the Experience Designer (ED). These designers described their design including the development and implementation of the Adventure Guide (AG) role. Analysis included iterative coding and analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2021) and explored the designed interaction between the AG and audience, asking: what features of the AG role were designed, redesigned, and why; what were the anticipated and actual audience member responses to facilitation; and how does the designed interaction support audience members' participation? A final phase of analysis focused on determining designed AG facilitation moves.

ESTABLISH A SAFE & KIND CULTURE

Setting up initial expectations and ways of treating others in the space, setting a tone for the event

"That's something that we really underscore in the opening spiel is 'Great! You look out for each other, we'll look out for each other and take care of each other.'" - ED

MAINTAIN A SAFE & KIND CULTURE

Keeping the participants' interactions with the space and each other safe and positive

"If someone is acting in an un-Fortsman-like way, an Adventure Guide's best first bet is redirection. So that's step one, always. If someone's throwing stuff at other people's things, like 'Oh, hey, can you help me with this? Help me do this project?'" - AD

MODEL BOUNDARIES & POSSIBILITIES OF PLAY

Showing what can be done for inspiration and guidance

"Sometimes they'll go in and they'll go 'Can I remove this box?' and in that situation sometimes it's okay for an Adventure Guide to fall into a pyramid and show them that you can just - you can do that, too, like that kind of modeling is important." - ED

SPARK PLAY

Sneakily providing items for participants to discover and play with

"...you want to be the Tooth Fairy and not Santa Claus. So, you want people to just kind of discover the thing and not make a big deal out of it... Turn on a few flashlights, set 'em around. You will pass things out, but try to have them discover the things. Discover the mode of play. Discover the object. Whatever it is, have them discover it, and that's way, way better. That's your goal. So that's kind of the philosophy while passing out objects as much as possible." - ED
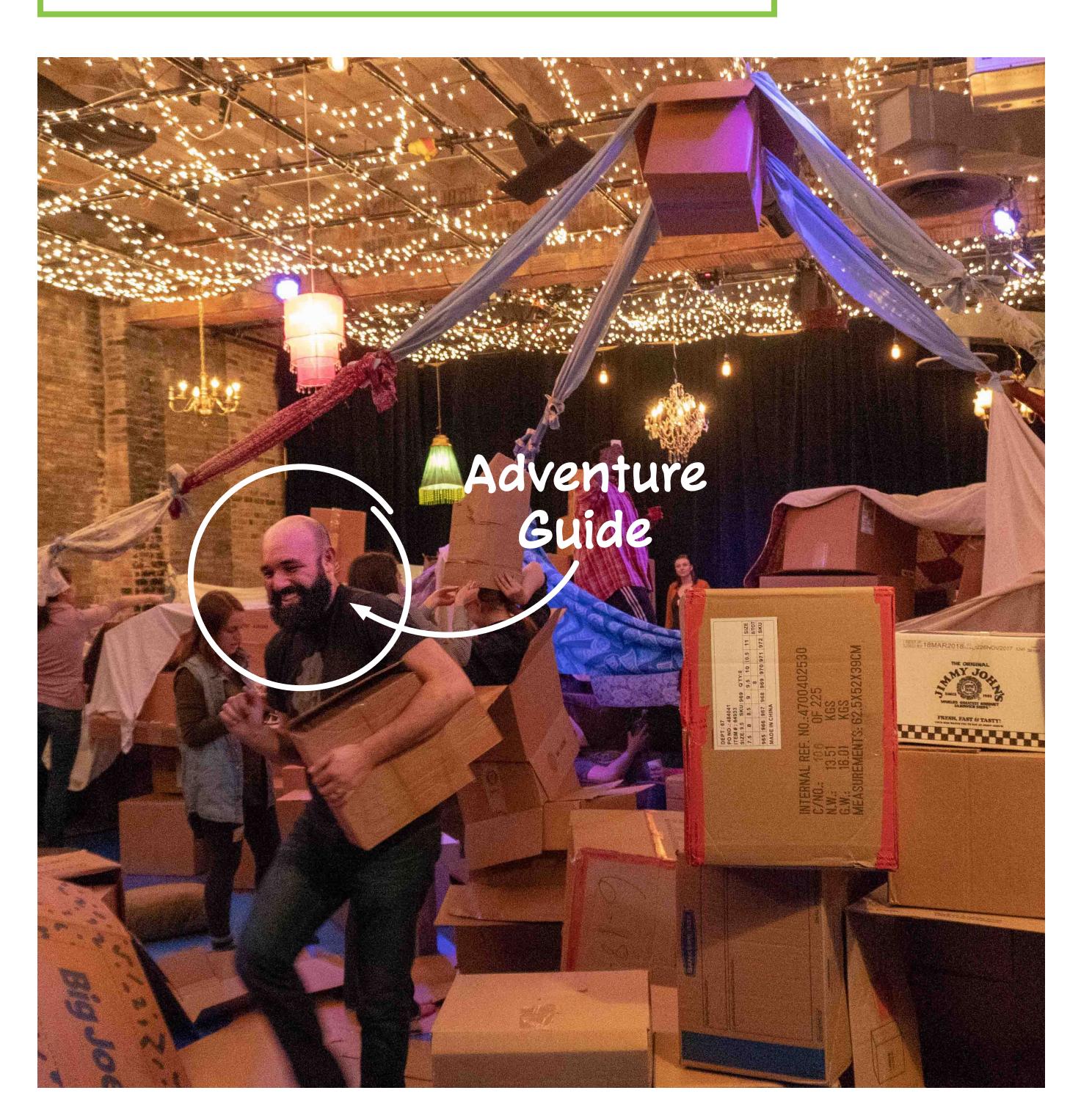
ASSIST EXISTING PLAY

Helping participants who are engaged in play continue their play

"...your job should be to facilitate that moment, it should be to facilitate the dad and a daughter putting together a big thing, and him like reaching that upper thing and her being the manager of that project. However that play looks, it should be that. If you need to step in and nudge it, cool." - ED

STEP AWAY FROM THE PLAY

Observing play from afar and not joining in

"I think the hardest part about being an Adventure Guide is being okay with sitting and observing cause I think we're so used to, especially with teaching artists, like 'I'm in there. I'm doing this. I'm all up in your play.' But it's okay to feel like you're not doing anything." - AD

Adventure Guide

SUBSTANTIATED CONCLUSIONS & SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE

What AGs said, did (or did not do), and how, in addition to when they should speak or act and why, was iteratively developed by designers.

Six categories of facilitation moves were identified: **establish a safe and kind culture**, **maintain a safe and kind culture**, **model boundaries and possibilities of play**, **spark play**, **assist existing play**, and **step away from the play**.

In order to spark play, for example, an AG would quietly provide items such as flashlights without calling attention to the delivery, thereby "be[ing] the Tooth Fairy and not Santa Claus" with the goal that people would discover objects and modes of play on their own. While some interactions require the AG to step back from the action, others were designed to be more interactive. In establishing the culture of the space, AGs would reinforce behavioral expectations by asking audience members to look out for and take care of one another, thereby sharing the power and responsibility of monitoring what happens at *FORTS* with the audience members.

Studying the design of a facilitator role intended to support learner agency in this unique context gives us insights into the designed features of these roles, what kinds of facilitation moves exist, and how to better support participant agency in informal, open-ended exploratory spaces.

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