

“It Appears to Be a Free-for-All”: Designing for Audience Agency in an Immersive Theatre Environment

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Abstract: While there have been a handful of learning scientists who have championed research in theatrical spaces, there is still so much more to learn from these incredibly rich learning environments. *FORTS* is an immersive theatrical production and informal learning space where participants *actively* co-create knowledge through improvisational and collaborative processes. It was developed by a team of theatrical designers in much the same way that learning scientists design learning environments—through iterative cycles of design. This qualitative case study examines what the lead designer of *FORTS* learned through engaging in its design and implementation. A narrative of the design process was constructed from an interview with the designer which discussed her goals, original design decisions, expectations, feedback, reflections, and iterative design decisions. The theme of *agency* emerged as foundational to the designer's iterative process and to her shifting understanding of the relationship between immersive theatre design and its participants.

Introduction

This past year, the *Journal of the Learning Sciences* published a special issue entitled “Learning in and through the arts” addressing the need for more extensive research in artistic disciplines. However, even though the articles promoted arts environments as “valued sites for learning” (Halverson & Sawyer, 2022, p.1) and explored key disciplinary practices and socio-cultural learning processes, none of them presented work from theatrical learning environments. While there have been a handful of learning scientists over the decades who have championed research in theatrical spaces (Sawyer, 2003; Halverson, 2010), the fact remains that there is still so much more to learn from these incredibly rich learning environments. The present paper seeks to contribute to the clear need for investigation in the arts, specifically in the discipline of theatre.

FORTS: Build Your Own Adventure! is an example of an immersive theatrical production, an increasingly popular form of theatre which breaks down the separation between audience and actors and expands the possibilities of what is considered “playing” space. Unlike more traditional types of productions in which audience members *passively* receive information from the stage, immersive shows serve as informal learning spaces where participants *actively* co-create knowledge through improvisational and collaborative processes. In *FORTS*, audience members *replace* the actors and engage with the constantly changing environment in which they are immersed.

FORTS was developed by a team of theatrical designers in much the same way that learning scientists design learning environments—through iterative cycles of design, implementation, analytic reflection, revision, and retrospective analysis (Cobb et al., 2003). Since there is considerable wisdom often captured in designed objects and activities that is never made explicit (Schon, 1988), researching designer learning can help uncover and examine that wisdom. The purpose of this case study (Stake, 1995) is to explore the learning of the lead designer of *FORTS*. Specifically, this paper asks: *What did the designer learn through engaging in the design and implementation of FORTS?* Answering this question will help us better understand the kinds of learning that happen in immersive theatrical environments and will also help us understand what designers learn when they engage in iterative design processes for both these and similar types of spaces.

Theoretical framing

Machon (2013) suggests key features of immersive theatre are the centrality of audience members, the participants' physical immersion in a sensorial world, and the prioritization of space and place. She explains there are usually either tacit or sometimes explicit “rules of engagement” which guide participation. White (2013) calls the designers who create these environments “procedural authors” who decide the extent of audience agency within an event through setting limits, or “horizons of participation,” and offer suggestions to navigate interactional possibilities within those boundaries. Nibbelink (2019) considers the role of the audience in an immersive performance as one that actively and continuously joins with the “compositional forces” in the piece to construct the event itself.

Given these features of immersive theatre, this paper takes up two related questions: How do designers create the learning spaces and set the stage for audience agency? What do they learn from iterative cycles of designing such spaces? In many respects, the *FORTS* designer confronts the same challenge that learning sciences

researchers confront when they build learning environments intended to promote students' active involvement in the construction of knowledge. That is, in an immersive theatre production, the traditional role of audience member as spectator is intentionally disrupted. Audience members are asked to become performers (Heim, 2015). For example, people may be asked to become voyeurs to a private scene between two actors, make choices about where they want to go next in a giant warehouse full of performers, or even co-create the narrative of a play as it is being performed. Regardless of how the role of audience participant is designed, "the motive is consistent: to give agency so audiences can...choose their own adventure" (Tran, 2013, p. 31). Challenges for *FORTS* designers are similar to those of learning scientists and teachers in formal learning environments: What sorts of tasks, materials, and scaffolds support active engagement on the part of students/audience members?

Methods

The bounded case (Yin, 2018) and the focus of this study is the lead Creator (C) of *FORTS*. An hour-long, semi-structured reflective interview was conducted with C. Questions focused on C's role in the design process; her goals, design choices and their rationale; problems she encountered and her solutions; changes to the design over the years; her perspective on audience member participation including specific expectations; and any final reflections. The conversation covered *FORTS*'s three-year run and four variations of *FORTS* design: an "Original" *FORTS* show designed for both children and adults to attend together; Birthday Parties for a birthday child and their guests; Toddler Takeover Days for very young children and their adults; and Adult Nights for adults only. The basic *FORTS* design is framed as a journey from an ordinary world into a magical one. The 45-minute show takes place inside a black box theatre with sofas piled with pillows and cardboard box pyramids placed throughout. Adventure Guide facilitators cued by clock chimes run the practicalities of the performance such as when and how interactive objects (crayons, sheets, clothespins, and flashlights) get introduced. Lights change from day to night and back again to day. Music and sound effects such as doorbells, dogs barking, and crickets get played over a sound system. The one element that changes for each show is who is in attendance.

Analysis. A first phase of analysis focused on identifying C's design process. This phase involved *a priori* structural coding informed by Edelson's (2002) design decision categories (design procedure, problem analysis, design solution) as a framework for initial inquiry. The transcribed interview was parsed and tagged with respect to these design decision categories. The second phase of analysis focused on further parsing C's design process using six categories that reflect different phases of the design process. **Goal statements** ($n=17$) were identified as C's statements regarding desired outcomes of the design. **Original design decisions** ($n=28$) captured the original set of decisions regarding the structure and elements of the design. **Expectation statements** ($n=15$) reflected how C anticipated the audience might participate and behave. **Feedback statements** ($n=27$) were identified as comments about audience enactment. **Designer reflections** ($n=27$) were the designer's comments about her observations. **Iterative design decisions** ($n=27$; design changes=10, no changes=17) were identified as C's decisions whether or not to make any changes to the design following specific feedback and reflection comments. In a third phase, a narrative of the design of *FORTS* was constructed from design decisions, statements, and reflections that were related in space or time in the discussion of the *FORTS* design and enactment. A final analytic phase captured shifts in C's thinking. Throughout analysis, the author contacted C with follow-up questions when necessary.

Findings

Overall, the theme of *agency* emerged as foundational to the entirety of C's design process and to her understanding of the relationship between immersive theatre design and its participants. Initially, C conceived of *FORTS* as an environment that afforded an expansive view of audience agency. However, C's iterations, in response to design problems during implementation, set greater limits on audience actions in the space. Additionally, over the course of several years, C observed consistency in how people participated in *FORTS*. As a result, she then experienced shifts in her thinking about how much control the *FORTS* design exerted over audience members' actions, recognizing ways in which the design actually served to structure participation and limit audience agency. The specifics of the evolution of C's learning about agency in the context of *FORTS* are elaborated in the remainder of the findings.

Goals, design decisions, and expectations

While C had multiple goals for the show, a foundational one and the "kernel of the question that turned into *FORTS*" was a desire to support audience agency. She initially conceptualized agency as giving people "complete" and "total control" over the space, allowing them to be fully in charge of their interactional choices. In conjunction with the design team, C made design decisions which she hoped would facilitate audience agency. These decisions included: eliminating professional performers, and instead having audience members be the

actors in the space; making fort building the show's key activity as it was assumed to have a low barrier to entry; picking objects for people to play with that would be familiar and also open-ended for different uses; establishing two "boundaries" for the space that covered all behavior: *Be Safe and Be Kind*; and determining when and how Adventure Guides would "wordlessly" and "sneakily" leave items around the space to be discovered.

With these goals in mind, C designed with the expectation that any number of possible things might happen because every performance would consist of a different group of people, each with different personalities who might engage in an endless number of potential activities. She worked hard to "release" the traditional expectation of a "good audience" in that as long as people were safe and kind in the space, they could choose to interact with the design however they wanted. Despite "going in with a theory and the trust that audiences are going to be great," C admitted that she "really had no idea" how people would participate and was open to the possibility that the *FORTS* "experiment" might fail.

Figure 1

The FORTS environment built by audience members



Outcomes, reflections, and revisiting design decisions

C discussed several design iterations which were instituted in response to observing how various audiences interacted with the design. These changes, in contrast to her goal of supporting audience agency, served to set limits and provide more guidance for interaction. One such example is when the designer changed the ending of *FORTS* after a first preview weekend. The initial ending "just used to end with the end of the day," C explained. The lights came up, the sound went away, and audience members were expected to leave behind or knock down what they had created and played with. C noticed how upset children got at this moment and described how hard it was to get people to leave the space. "It was just a really terrible ending," she acknowledged. She wondered how to create a sense of ending for audience members with the absence of a formal curtain call. This design problem was solved by changing the ending in numerous ways: playing a celebratory song and having an Adventure Guide lead a dance party to it; more carefully crafting the "language of leaving"; and creating a ritual of "resetting the space" which encouraged people to rebuild the initial box pyramids together before departing.

Furthermore, after reflecting upon *FORTS* over three years, C was surprised how the enactment of the design seemed to hit the "same notes every time." There were multiple instances where she mentioned how consistent the show felt and how "similar dynamics crop[ped] up." C then mentioned receiving feedback from educators who attended the show and commented on how the design seemed to guide moments of participation. These combined observations contradicted what she had originally designed for and expected to see at *FORTS*. Prior to this, C had not fully recognized the power of the show's design to structure audience actions. But her thinking shifted when she began to see how the design exerted more control over the audience than she had previously envisioned. For example, C suggested that the "very deliberate" and "very crafted" way of how Adventure Guides wordlessly introduce new elements into the space—sneakily scattering them around for participants to discover - held a "tighter structure" than she had previously thought. C also mentioned the overall "container" of the production—the "one script, one aesthetic ethos, vibe"—which may have also facilitated consistent enactment. In contrast to how C originally conceived of *FORTS* as a "total free-for-all" she now says it "feels like, looks like—it *appears* to be a free-for-all experience."

Discussion, implications, and conclusion

Throughout the design and implementation of *FORTS*, C's understanding of the relationship between design and agency shifted, both implicitly through design iterations and explicitly as she recognized how the design created

consistent enactment. The discrepancy between the conception of agency that C sought to support and the structured design decisions that she made highlights the complexity of negotiating this design tension. C's altered understanding of the relationship between audience agency and the design of *FORTS* aligns with what scholars of the immersive theatre genre also assert. Gabelmann (2019) notes that even though audience member roles are changed in this type of theatre, the agency the shift in roles creates is "often illusory." She also suggests that: "Though it seems as though the audience has the power to completely control the narrative, this is rarely the case in immersive theatre. More often than not, spectators follow a series of guidelines that covertly shape their experience of the piece" (p. 26). Many of C's design decisions acted as invisible boundaries or a "series of guidelines" for audience members to follow—the choice of items to include in the show, how they were presented, the day-to-night lighting progression, the sound of a doorbell ringing, even the name of the show—every choice helped to guide audience members to a favorable outcome in their participation at *FORTS*.

While the tension between providing structure and supporting agency has been examined by scholars in the past, the present findings provide an important reminder for continued exploration of this topic. By C's own admission, an essential goal of hers was to fully empower participants in the *FORTS* space. Thus, even a professional with years of expertise in participatory theatre *still* had much to learn about power relations among herself, her design, and the audience.

This analysis has several implications for designers who design with agency at the heart of what they do, including teachers who value student-centered classrooms and learning scientists who attend to power in their designs of learning environments. Supporting agency is an issue to be aware of not just during the conception phase of a design process, but one that is in constant negotiation throughout the entirety of the design process. Additionally, *agency* can mean different things to different people at different times. Therefore, maintaining clarity regarding the specifics of what agency means in a designed environment throughout the design process is crucial to those who value centering learners in their work. For people who design with others, it might be beneficial to explicate what agency means for the team collectively rather than assuming everyone shares the same definition. Based on a common conception of agency, designers can then identify what would count as evidence of audience agency thereby providing agreed upon evaluative criteria.

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