**The Gaming Democracy Project:**

**Virtual Democracy in the Age of Fascism IRL (In Real Life)**

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Joe: Good morning. Fascism. Computer games. Theatre. What’s the link? This is the question Tom and I have been thinking about for some time. The link between the first two may appear obvious in light of the far-right’s effective global online mobilisation. But something else is happening in digital spaces that intersects with the interactive and world-building models used in immersive and participatory theatre. Real life long ceased to refer to the corporeal world. We can now create our own reality. We think theatre can help us understand what these realities are and who we become inside them.

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Joe: I believe this quote from Stuart Hall has something profound to say about today’s digital culture. He’s writing about Thatcherism - ideology as tv commercial- but his central point that politics is a project dedicated to projecting images of ourselves into the future holds true for today’s political climate. The relationship between the contemporary media environment and the far-right was brought into sharp relief with the election of Trump, a reality tv plutocrat and Simpsons’ meme turned demagogue. But the script for the potential future of American democracy Trumpian politics projects started to be written with *24*. An action thriller for the 9/11 generation, *24* depicted a USA under constant invasion by ‘the terrorists’ who were abetted by Washington bureaucrats and liberal stooges. Torturing civilians, mass surveillance, and military occupation are democracy in action in the world of *24.* The show was a smash hit and retains a certain cult status amongst those of us who remember the War on Terror. (When did it end? Who won? No one seems certain). Looking at it now, I see a deep cultural yearning for the simplicity of violence where all of us can play Jack Bauer, saviours of democracy, one murder at a time.

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Joe: The true crime book *One Of Us* tells the story of the far right terrorist Anders Breivik who killed over fifty people in 2011 was an early influence on the project. I remember being struck by Brevik’s fascination with World of Warcraft because I had briefly played the tabletop version, Warhammer, as a teenager, and found it rather dull and silly. But Breivik’s search for comradeship took him to the messageboards where pulp fantasies of wizards and elves became an analogue for the utopian white civilization of his twisted imagination. *The Economist* was a play based on Breivik’s life that showed how an accelerated version of children’s make-believe games can become augmented into a scripted reality.

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Joe: Turning to the zeitgeist of this project. About five years ago I noticed how theatre students were becoming increasingly interested in LARPing as a performance form. It seemed to reflect an urge to step away from the screen and shape the physical world into an alternative reality. The popularity of LARPs also signals how participatory aesthetics is becoming a signature of performance in digital culture. Students spoke about the importance of community playing LARPs engenders. Participation in this context is as much to do with building a fictional world through online collaborations as it does playing a character in a story.

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Joe: Then in 2020 I came across this project by the director of *DAU*, which was a kind of Stalinist *Synecdoche New York*. The plans for this Ukranian Holocaust memorial included reenactments of Nazi atrocities using AR and live action. The trend of turning history into participatory performances evidences a further stage in hybridity between virtuality and corporeality. The result is a reconfiguration of humans into players who can shape reality into narratives they control. Their identity becomes an avatar who is not bound by social conventions and moral codes. The self becomes augmented into archetypal cultural constructs. Hero. Victim. Nazi. Jew.

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Joe: And I’ve included the podcast documentary series Sweet Bobby to underscore the theatricality of the internet. Sweet Bobby is about an incredibly elaborate catfishing operation occurring over several years. A woman believes falls in love with the online avatar Bobby who she eventually learns is her cousin. I’ve included here just to note my interest in the use of theatrical terminology to describe online hoaxes. Kirat is described as being cast into a romantic story through world-building on social media. She is gently enveloped into a script without being aware that is a character in someone else’s drama. Again we can see how the concept of the real in the digital milieu has attained a performative edge.

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Tom: There’s something interesting here, for me, in the interconnectivity between the digital and the physical, the performative and the playful. There’s a liminality, here – an inbetween-ness (cf. Allern, 2022, p.79) of states – a metaxis, as it were – which, as developed from Plato by Voegelin, refers to an oscillatory state between ‘order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence’ (Voegelin, 1989, p.119-120). It’s been my contention for a while that interactive performance practice – whether online or onstage – and when done *well* – can, in a way, create a ‘liminal world between the actual and the imaginary’ (Wright, 2006, p.30) where ‘alternative political futures can be investigated and rehearsed within the theatrical space’ (Drayton, 2022, p. 108). Or, to put it another way – my interest in the gamification of performance practices is built on John Jordan’s (1998, p.133) assertion that playfulness ‘proposes an alternative political reality’ within the liminal space created within the game / performance or participatory structure.

However, such alternative-reality-creation through participation and gamification is of course not limited to the field of theatre and performance. Our use of the term gamification is built upon Linda Schlegel’s Radical Activism Awareness report for the European Commission in 2021 – *The Gamification of Violent Extremism and Lessons for P/CVE* (Prevent or Challenge Violent Extremism), in which she defines gamification as ‘the use of game elements in non-game contexts’ (Schlegel, 2021, p.5) Whilst she refers explicitly to gamification within an online space, we are also interested in the gamification of offline structures – such as theatre and performance – but also how the gamification of online contexts – and the world building within such - then bleeds into the real world. A quick example of this would be the gamified world-building ‘play’ of the QAnon conspiracy theory which was situated – initially – within online forums such as 4chan and then 8kun – in which cryptic ‘drops’ by supposed White House insider (but probably just 4chan moderator Paul Furber and, later, 8chan owner Ron Watkins) were deciphered by dedicated ‘players’. This ‘worldbuilding play’ then spread more widely onto mainstream platforms Youtube and Facebook and then, of course – violently into the real world, such as when, in 2017, Edgar Maddison Welch attempted to storm the basement of Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in Washington in order to save sex-trafficked children from being held there before their blood was drunk and their flesh eaten by Hillary Clinton (of course – there were no children waiting to become Clinton’s meal – there isn’t even a basement in the Pizzeria) – or, on a grander scale, the storming of the Capitol in January 2021. Such gamification is described by Schelgel as ‘bottom-up’ – indicating that ‘gaming culture has penetrated online communication and some individuals may apply the experiences they have had while [gaming] to make sense of real life events’ (Schlegel, 2021, p.6).

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To return to my specialism of contemporary performance – and to look at this on a micro-scale. We can also take LeBeouf, Ronnko & Turner’s *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS* as an example of the far-right’s gamification of the online structure bleeding into the offline.

*(The following is from an article of mine from 2018 that I’ll mostly paraphrase and will work to cut down in the meantime, too)*

‘The original piece was installed on an outer wall of the Museum of Moving Image, New York, to coincide with the day of Trump’s inauguration and was intended to remain ‘open to all, 24 hours a day… live-streamed continuously for four years, or the duration of the presidency’ (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner 2017). The installation, described by Turner as ‘resisting division and the normalisation of division’ (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018) consisted of a webcam, above which bold black capitals proclaimed simply; ‘HE WILL NOT DIVIDE US’. Participants were invited to repeat the phrase as many times, and for as long as they wished in a ‘show of resistance or insistence, opposition or optimism, guided by the spirit of each individual participant and the community.’ (LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner 2017). […] In less than a week, the installation had become a target for alt-right groups, and self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis both on- and offline. Two days into the stream, a man wearing a cap strikingly similar to that worn by SS officers pushed past LaBeouf to ‘recit[e] white supremacist slogans into the camera’ (Cliff 2018). […] Meanwhile, it was reported that moderators on 4chan and Reddit were attempting to stop users ‘organizing harassment campaigns’ (Broderick 2017) against people who could be seen on the live-stream, with ‘personal information being stored on a neo-Nazi wiki page’ (Broderick 2017). Other attempts at [gamified] disruption included pizzas being delivered to the site of the exhibit and alt-right activists modifying the museum’s sign to read ‘Museum of KEK’ (Hewillnotdivide.us 2017), in reference to the ‘Pepe the Frog’ meme which has become synonymous with factions of the far right (Lawrence 2017). Then, after an incident in which a figure at the installation ‘claim[ed] to be an ISIS suicide bomber’ (L. Turner, personal communication, June 13th 2018) […] the museum decided to end its engagement with the project[…] The webcam [relocated to Mexico, and was then shut down again due to reports of violence – it] remained silent for a number of weeks, until [in March 2017] the image of a white flag against a blue sky appeared on the stream, with the ‘He Will Not Divide Us’ text emblazoned on its side. Despite the location being unannounced, the flag was soon taken down by two members of the Traditionalist Worker Party and self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis (Turner 2017), and replaced with a ‘Make America Great Again’ cap and a ‘Pepe the Frog’ T-shirt (Hewillnotdivide.us 2017). The installation, still in its flag iteration, then moved to the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology in Liverpool, England, before being taken down by the gallery due to ‘dangerous, illegal trespassing’ (FACT 2017). A few months later, the stream relaunched, showing the flag pinned against a white background in an unknown location. The flag was then installed at Le Lieu Unique in Nantes, France, before an ‘unauthorised drone carrying a burning piece of cloth approached the flag to try to set it alight’ (Agence France-Presse 2017), leading to the re-worked interactive-webcam iteration being launched at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in June 2018.’

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This continual disruption by the alt-right of this participatory, political performance art was powered online by the use if memes and videos that reframed the continual harassment of the piece as a game, with alt-right internet users able to take part in the disruption through various channels, and with videos breaking the harassment into ‘episodes’ for people to catch up on, all fuelled by antisemitic and Nazi propaganda, memes and online humour.

Whilst I bring this up as an example the bleed between on/offline participatory performance and the gamification of online spaces used by the far-right to disrupt such – it’s also to address a bigger point in that – as scholars and makers of theatre and performance, Joe and I are particularly interested in how theatre and performance (and theatre and performance studies) gives us a useful lens and language in order to explain how we exist within the online space – and how gamification within this bleeds into the offline space, too.

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The language of theatre – and participatory performance – in terms of character, narrative, storytelling, actors, agency, etc – enables a framework for us as theatre scholars to interrogate such issues, whilst also – and this is what we’re here for, too – allowing artists, academics and activists from completely separate fields and specialisms to engage with each other under a shared framework.

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Joe: So, the *Gaming Democracy: Participatory Performance Strategies for Countering Far-Right Politics* project brings together academics and artists working in the fields of immersive and participatory theatre, criminology, cyber-psychology, mixed-reality performance, and international politics, alongside performance practitioners and computer game designers, to investigate how participatory performance, social media, and democracy interact in the present political conjuncture. The British Labour party and wider establishment left show no signs of being able to build a new political bloc that stands in opposition to fascists acting as major political actors in digital culture. We believe theatre must position itself as an interventionist force in digital spaces to halt the infiltration and normalisation of far-right ideas into the mainstream through gamification systems. In direct contrast to the online gamification of hatred by the far-right (using memes, role-play on chat forums, and computer games), Gaming Democracy explores the untapped potential of gameplay as a model for alternative world-building. These worlds can enable us to imagine the future of democracy as a digital architecture that flows between and across the virtual and offline spheres. With Web 2.0 becoming an engine of radicalisation, how can we combat fascist and white-supremacist ideologies through investigating and participating in alternative political realities built from the fields of political science, game design, and interactive theatre?

Tom: So, the crux of the *Gaming Democracy* project is to bring together an interdisciplinary network to investigate how participatory performance, social media and democracy interact in the contemporary political and online landscapes. In direct contrast to the online gamification of conflict by the far-right through the use of memes, role-play and alternative world-building, we want to explore the untapped potential for more egalitarian and progressive forms of online (and onstage) political engagement. Through collaborative conversations and experiments between a variety of creatives and researchers, the project aims to develop new, interdisciplinary perspectives and ways of working together. Much of the research on the intersection between computer games and the far-right comes from the fields of criminology, sociology, and political science. The methodologies in these fields are largely confined to quantitative analysis of data framed within theoretical arguments of political extremism. These studies are comprehensive, but research into the far-right’s use of aesthetic devices – such as role-play and alternative world-building in virtual environments – to radicalise gamers is scant. The practice-based research methodology of the *Gaming Democracy Project* will structure novel cross-disciplinary dialogues by applying theoretical perspectives into audience participation as a form of political agency, identity construction (role-play) in fictional worlds, and the reconfiguration of offline reality through mixed-reality performances to knowledge domains not traditionally associated with theatre and the arts. The collaborations in the network will produce new understandings of the role digital aesthetics have in constructing far-right identities and communities of activists, and how computer games are becoming a powerful engine for far-right ideology to influence democratic politics in offline reality. This is key to developing strategies to counter the far-right in virtual environments.

Joe: The project addresses what we see as an urgent need to understand how computer games and emerging trends in virtual reality, particularly the possibility of a ‘metaverse’ or three-dimensional Internet, are enabling new forms of extremist political activism and ideological formation, and the potential consequences for designing effective counter radicalisation programs when the far-right use digital aesthetics to radicalise and recruit new members. In this sense, the project aims to understand how gamers become part of a political movement by playing fictional roles in virtual worlds. Moreover, the project will also investigate if gamers’ avatars on social media constitute an alternative instantiation of their offline identity that allows them to express political views in virtual forums that they may feel are disconnected from their ‘real’ self, and how the confluence of social media and game-worlds creates an immersive political reality that bleeds into offline reality and manifests in extremist discourse and political violence.

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Tom: *Gaming Democracy* is the first network to draw on the fields of immersive and participatory theatre, criminology, mixed-reality performance, international politics, and cyber-psychology to interrogate far-right online activity by investigating the intersections between computer games and participatory theatre using a performance practice-based methodology. We’re currently working on an Arts and Humanities Research Council – Research Network bid in order to develop a year-long series of workshops, events and interventions. However, what we’ve managed to do in the meantime was begin to find new points of connection across disciplines through a short series of webinars. Each webinar brought together a pair of creatives / researchers from diverse disciplines in order to discover useful intersections in their respective fields. Through a public conversation (as opposed to a more ‘traditional’ sharing of research), we offered space to explore and discuss these issues, to build on these initial connections, and to open up an ongoing dialogue.

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Joe: *Reflections on Ashton’s webinar:*

Video games don’t radicalise people. They accelerate societal and political trends/mores

Terrorism and extremism are cultural products and creative constructs. Propaganda has subcultural meanings

Far-right adapt and mod open world games like Assassin’s Creed to tell new narratives.

Christchurch shooter streamed his attack. Looks like a FPS. Games have been created since based on the attack - Hybrid/cyclical gamification.

Visual language migrates easily across social media platforms. Outwardly harmless and low brow. Must be deconstructed to understand the signifiers of this imagery.

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Alt-histories - antiquity as a utopian model of white civilisation. Videogames as a return to a purer state of racial order.

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VR chat - jumping into online parties on secure servers playing fascist avatars. Deep immersion into the far-right underworld.

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Tom: In our second webinar, we were lucky enough to be joined by Aurelien Mondon, who specialises in the mainstreaming of far-right discourse on & offline, as well as participatory performance expert Malaika Cunningham. The public-conversation between the two was exemplary of how – by connecting experts of two different – and yet interconnected – fields, new insights in terms of the strength of participatory and immersive performance in both the online and offline spheres can be inferred. Malaika’s theatre practice and research focuses on how we might create more imaginative and reflective and pluralist spaces for political discourse through participatory theatre. In the lockdowns of 2020/21 Malaika co-created the ‘People’s Palace of Possibility’ – a project which aimed to facilitate a collective space for political discourse between strangers all over the UK. This was ‘performed’ over a series of week, mostly online, using a mix of interactions between participants including postal objects, telephone calls and online exchanges. In essence, participants were invited to join a ‘network of rebels that dare to imagine that other worlds are possible in a society that thinks that alternatives to the status quo are naïve and dangerous’ (Cunningham, 2022). This blend of online and irl interactions – blending between the digital, the aural and the material object – without ever meeting the other participants in a bodily sense – is a great example of on/offline participatory performance that borrows / hacks elements form far-right gamification structures (thinking back to Qanon) in order to rework it to facilitate progressive, empathetic, pluralist on/offline discursive spaces. Malaika and Aurelien pointed out that these pluralist spaces are lacking both on/offline, and that UK politics particularly, instead focuses on adversarial listening – in which participants use the time the other is talking in order to reload their verbal gun – debates are there to be won, not to be reflected upon and learnt from. However, Malaika’s practice – and her discussion with Aurelien - refers directly to Hannah Arendt’s thinking re: the common – the space between people separate from the individual. She sees this practice as evoking Arendt’s visual metaphor of a table between two people – as a space (which I would contend is a liminal betwixt space both on-and off-line) in which things can be co-created and alternative realities can be put into play.*Reflections re: Malaika’s webinar*

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Joe: Looking ahead, Tom and I aren’t yet certain of what kind of game-theatre art will be producedfrom this research. The closest thing I’ve seen to what we are imagining is the alternative reality game *Raiders of the Lost Crown* by Mexican artist -activist Fran Illich. Its narrative concerns the colonial plunder of Mexo-American artefacts as the antecedent of contemporary capitalist-imperalist extractive regimes. I’m drawn to this multi-modal work through what Jennifer Ponce De Leon calls its ‘stereoscopic aesthetics…that enables the apprehension of multiple realities and the relation between…a dominant reality and…counter-hegemonic worldview(s)’ (2021, 25). Fascism is the death of imagination. Fighting it requires training our imaginations to project a new horizon of democracy’s futurity, an endeavour that we submit is best achieved collaboratively, playfully, and theatrically.