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Immersive Narrative Experiences

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Journal of Interactive Literature and Drama

The Villain Has Not Yet Been Chosen:

Randomized Antagonists and Emergent Mystery in Interactive Drama

A formal essay on modular dramaturgy, fair-play design, and participatory suspense

Eleanor Ashcombe

Abstract

Conventional murder mysteries begin with a predetermined culprit and a fixed solution. This essay examines an alternative in Interactive Drama: a randomized antagonist selected immediately before performance. Treating the culprit as a late-bound variable, it argues that such mysteries constitute a form of modular dramaturgy, requiring an invariant world, a variable overlay, and a reliable drawing mechanism. The essay distinguishes flexible dramatic clues from conventional puzzle clues, explores how character histories, motives, and secrets can sustain latent guilt across configurations, and assesses how authorial uncertainty affects authenticity, agency, and suspense. It also proposes a practice-based research design in which a single scenario is performed repeatedly with different culprit assignments. Randomization, the essay concludes, does not replace the fixed solution but offers different trade-offs and a distinctive vision of contingent guilt.

Keywords

Interactive Drama, randomized antagonist, modular dramaturgy, murder mystery, flexible clues, participatory theatre

Introduction

Every murder mystery begins, in a sense, at its end. Before a single guest arrives, before the first clue is placed on a table or the first suspect delivers an alibi, the author of a conventional murder mystery has already decided who killed the victim, how the crime was carried out, why it was committed, and which pieces of evidence will allow an attentive investigator to reconstruct the truth. The experience of the evening is then organised as a controlled journey toward a destination that was fixed in advance. Guests are cast as suspects, handed character booklets, and invited to mingle, yet the shape of the whole has been settled by the person who wrote the solution. This essay examines an alternative arrangement, one in which the villain has not yet been chosen at the moment the scenario is written and is selected only immediately before play begins. The alternative is attractive for practical reasons, since it allows one scenario to be performed repeatedly without growing stale. It is also interesting for theoretical reasons, because it forces a rethinking of what a mystery is, what a clue is, and what kind of knowledge investigators are actually seeking.

Interactive Drama, as the term is used here, designates a form of participatory theatre in which audience members take on fictional roles within a scripted world, supported by a facilitator or an ensemble of performers who maintain the fiction and supply structure. It occupies a territory between the scripted play, the tabletop role-playing game, and the live-action role-playing event. Participants are neither passive spectators nor fully autonomous players. They speak and act within the constraints of the characters they are given, yet the outcomes of their conversations are not scripted, and the

dramatic arc of an evening depends on what they choose to say, conceal, believe, and decide. In this territory the conventional murder mystery party is a limiting case, a form in which participation is real but the destination is preordained. The randomized-culprit mystery is a different case. It preserves the characters, the setting, and the atmosphere, but it withholds from the authorial design the one fact that conventional mysteries treat as foundational, namely the identity of the guilty party. That withholding is the subject of this essay, and its consequences extend well beyond the question of who is guilty.

Four questions guide the inquiry. The first concerns consistency: how can a mystery maintain a coherent fictional world when its culprit is not determined until immediately before performance? The second concerns the nature of evidence: what distinguishes a flexible dramatic clue, which remains meaningful under several possible solutions, from a conventional puzzle clue engineered to lead toward exactly one? The third concerns the quality of interaction: does uncertainty about the actual antagonist encourage more authentic character interaction and investigation, or does it merely dilute the satisfactions of deduction? The fourth concerns the architecture of the experience as a whole: how does randomized casting of the antagonist alter the balance among game design, player agency, and theatrical suspense? These questions are not independent. A design that answers the first poorly will produce clues that fail the second test, and a design that fails the second will undermine whatever benefits the third promises. The essay therefore treats them as facets of a single design problem rather than as separate topics.

The central claim is that a randomized antagonist is best understood as a form of modular dramaturgy. In a modular dramaturgy, the work is composed of parts that are designed to be recombined, so that the identity of the whole is a property of the configuration rather than of any single component. The culprit becomes a late-bound variable, in the vocabulary of software design, a value assigned at run time instead of fixed at compile time. This reframing has a demanding consequence. Every element of the scenario that touches the crime, including timelines, physical evidence, relationships, secrets, and motives, must be written so that it remains true and interesting under every permitted assignment of the variable. The author's task shifts from constructing a single argument toward guilt to constructing a field of possibilities within which guilt can settle on different figures. This shift changes how mysteries are written, how they are rehearsed, how they are facilitated, and how they are experienced by those who take part in them.

The argument proceeds in ten stages. The next section describes the fixed-solution tradition and identifies what it secures and what it forecloses. The third section locates the randomized villain within the wider field of participatory theatre and game design. The fourth, fifth, and sixth sections form the technical core, addressing in turn the world, the clue, and the character. The seventh and eighth sections consider the experiential consequences for authenticity, agency, and suspense. The ninth section proposes a practice-based research design, because the questions raised here are best answered by repeated performance rather than by argument alone, and the conclusion draws the threads together. Throughout, the essay aims for a balanced assessment.

Randomization is not presented as a universal improvement on the fixed solution, but as a different set of trade-offs that suits some purposes and not others.

The Fixed-Solution Tradition

The murder mystery inherits its fundamental structure from detective fiction, and the most useful account of that structure remains Tzvetan Todorov's observation that the classical detective novel contains two stories. The first is the story of the crime, which is absent, already completed, and concealed. The second is the story of the investigation, which is present, unfolding, and constructed from the effort to recover the first. The pleasure of the form lies in the relationship between these two stories. The reader or participant moves through the second story, accumulating observations, while the first story waits behind it like a sealed room. In a fixed-solution mystery, the first story is complete before the second begins. The author has written the murder in full, with its method, its timing, its motive, and its perpetrator, and the investigation is the process by which that finished narrative is gradually exposed. The investigation is therefore always, in a precise sense, a revelation of something that already exists.

The Golden Age of detective fiction elaborated this structure into a set of conventions that are usually described as fair play. Ronald Knox's commandments and S. S. Van Dine's twenty rules, whatever their eccentricities, share a common principle: the reader must be given every clue the detective possesses, and the solution must be derivable from the evidence presented. This principle makes the mystery a contest between author and reader, and it requires that the author be accountable to the solution. A clue that points

nowhere, or that points to the wrong person without justification, is a breach of the contract. A solution that depends on information withheld from the reader is a cheat. Fair play thus depends on a fixed solution, because accountability requires a stable thing to be accountable to. The author can only be judged fair if there is a determinate truth against which the clues can be measured, and that determinate truth is the culprit and the circumstances of the crime as the author conceived them.

Commercial murder mystery parties translate these conventions into a social format. A typical boxed or scripted event provides a host with a set of character sheets, a sequence of rounds, a collection of clue cards, and a sealed solution to be read aloud at the end. Each guest receives a character with a name, a personality, a relationship to the victim, and a private secret. Rounds are structured so that information is released at intervals, and guests are encouraged to question one another, to trade information, and to commit to an accusation before the solution is revealed. One character, whose identity is fixed by the script, is the murderer, and that guest typically receives instructions that differ from the others, such as an obligation to deflect suspicion. The design is efficient and reliable. A host with no theatrical training can run the evening, the clues can be tested in advance, and the solution is guaranteed to be consistent with the evidence because the evidence was written to fit it.

The fixed solution secures several genuine goods. It guarantees coherence, because the author can verify that every clue supports the solution and that no clue supports a rival solution more strongly. It allows the puzzle to be calibrated, since the difficulty of the deduction can be tuned

by adjusting how obvious each clue is. It provides closure, because the evening ends with a determinate answer that explains the evidence and resolves the tension. It also supports a particular kind of pleasure, the satisfaction of having solved something, which depends on there being a solution to solve. These goods are not trivial. A great many successful mysteries, from the novels of Agatha Christie to the most modest party game, rely on them, and any alternative must either preserve them or justify their loss. The randomized-culprit mystery cannot guarantee coherence in the same way, and it must find other means of securing the satisfactions that the fixed solution provides almost automatically.

The fixed solution also forecloses certain possibilities. The most obvious is replayability. A mystery whose solution is known cannot be performed again for the same audience, and a host who runs the same scenario twice for different groups must trust that nobody has spoken to the first group. A second foreclosure concerns the murderer. Because the culprit is fixed, the participant cast in that role has a different experience from everyone else, one governed by foreknowledge and by the task of concealment, while the other participants are in a position of sincere ignorance. This asymmetry is part of the design, but it also means that the investigation is partly theatre, since at least one participant knows the truth and the rest are discovering it at the pace the author has arranged. A third foreclosure is subtler. In a fixed-solution mystery, the authorial design contains exactly one correct accusation and many incorrect ones, and the incorrect ones are, by construction, errors. Guests who suspect the

wrong person have not made a different reading of the drama; they have simply failed.

The contrast with a randomized culprit should not be overdrawn. Even in the fixed tradition, authors have long played with multiplicity. Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* offers a famous solution in which every suspect is guilty, and the 1985 film adaptation of the board game Cluedo ended in three alternative versions in which different characters turned out to be the murderer. The board game itself, which preceded the film by nearly four decades, selects its solution by drawing cards into an envelope before play, and so is in a modest sense a randomized mystery. These examples show that the fixed solution is a convention rather than a necessity, and that popular culture has already tolerated and enjoyed the idea that the same story world might support different answers. What distinguishes the Interactive Drama approach is the commitment to making that multiplicity a structural principle of the design rather than a flourish at its edges.

Interactive Drama and Modular Dramaturgy

To understand the randomized villain it helps to place it within the broader practices of participatory performance. Augusto Boal's forum theatre dissolved the boundary between performer and audience by inviting spectators onto the stage to intervene in the action, and he coined the term spect-actor to name the resulting hybrid. Immersive theatre productions of recent decades have extended this logic by moving audiences through physical spaces and allowing them to choose which scenes to witness. Live-action role-playing, particularly in its Nordic and freeform traditions, has

developed sophisticated techniques for composing characters and relationships that participants then inhabit for hours. Each of these traditions shares with Interactive Drama a conviction that the dramatic event is produced jointly by designers and participants, and each wrestles with the same tension between providing enough structure to sustain a coherent fiction and leaving enough openness for participants to contribute something that was not scripted.

Game design provides a second set of resources. Jesper Juul's distinction between games of emergence and games of progression is especially helpful. In a game of progression, the designer specifies a sequence of challenges that the player must overcome in order, and the player's freedom consists in how she overcomes each one. In a game of emergence, the designer specifies a small set of rules from which a large number of variations arise, and the player's freedom consists in exploring that space. The conventional murder mystery is a game of progression: clues are released in a planned order and lead toward a planned conclusion. A randomized-culprit mystery moves toward emergence. The designer specifies rules, characters, and clues, but the particular course of an evening, including its eventual accusation, arises from the interaction of those elements with the participants' choices and with the draw. Neither mode is superior, but they ask different things of designers and offer different things to players.

Social deduction games supply a third precedent, and perhaps the most instructive one. In games such as Mafia, Werewolf, and their many descendants, roles including the hidden antagonist are assigned randomly at the start of each round, so that the same set of players produces a different drama

every time. The pleasure of these games depends on the fact that nobody, including the designer, knows in advance who the culprit will be, and that suspicion must therefore be generated by behaviour rather than by pre-written clues. Their lesson for Interactive Drama is twofold. They demonstrate that randomization of the antagonist can sustain long-term engagement, and they demonstrate that such engagement depends on rich social interaction among the players. Their limitation, from a dramaturgical standpoint, is that they usually lack a fictional world of any density. Their characters are placeholders, their evidence is conversational, and their setting is a pretext. A randomized mystery in Interactive Drama attempts to supply what these games lack, namely a detailed world in which the hidden culprit's actions leave traces that matter.

Umberto Eco's concept of the open work offers a theoretical frame for the whole enterprise. In *The Open Work*, Eco described artworks that deliberately leave certain elements of their final form to be determined by the performer or the audience, and he distinguished them from works that are merely ambiguous by insisting that the openness must be organised. An open work is not a formless one. It specifies a field of possibilities, and its identity lies in the constraints that shape that field. A randomized mystery is an open work in precisely this sense. The author does not abandon authority; the author exercises it at a different level, by designing the space of permissible solutions rather than a single solution within it. The quality of the work is then determined by the quality of the field: whether each possible configuration is coherent, whether each is dramatically interesting, and

whether the set of configurations as a whole offers genuine variety rather than mere permutation.

Modular dramaturgy names the compositional method that makes such organised openness possible. A modular work is built from components whose interfaces are defined so that components can be exchanged without breaking the whole. In a randomized mystery, the components include the characters, each of whom must be capable of occupying the role of culprit, the physical clues, each of which must be capable of pointing in more than one direction, and the scenes, each of which must remain functional whichever configuration is drawn. The crucial design object is the interface: a specification of what a component promises to the rest of the scenario. A character's interface might state that she has a plausible motive, a gap in her alibi, and a secret that explains her suspicious behaviour, regardless of whether she is guilty. If every character honours this interface, then any character can be drawn as the villain without damaging the coherence of the scenario, and the author can reason about the whole by reasoning about the interfaces rather than by enumerating every possible configuration in detail.

Constructing a World Without a Culprit

The first and most fundamental question is how a mystery can maintain internal consistency when its culprit is unknown until immediately before performance. The answer begins with a distinction between what is true of the world in every performance and what is true only in some. A workable architecture divides the scenario into three layers. The first is the invariant substrate, which comprises everything that holds regardless of who is guilty: the setting, the victim, the

discovery of the body, the relationships among the characters, the historical background, and the general chronology of the evening. The second is the variable overlay, which comprises the facts that depend on the draw: who committed the crime, by what route, with what immediate motive, and what traces they left. The third is the drawing mechanism itself, the procedure by which the overlay is selected and communicated to those who need to know it. Consistency is secured by ensuring that the substrate never contradicts any overlay and that every overlay is complete enough to explain all of the evidence the substrate contains.

The discipline this imposes on the substrate is considerable. Because it must remain true under every permitted overlay, it cannot contain facts that favour one suspect over the others in ways the overlay would later have to contradict. A substrate that states, for instance, that the gardener was seen leaving the study at nine o'clock has effectively named the gardener as a suspect and implicated him in a particular sequence of events, which any overlay naming a different culprit must then explain away. The author must therefore distinguish between facts that are safe to assert in the substrate and facts that belong in the overlay. Safe facts tend to be those that are neutral, ambiguous, or distributed. A sighting of the gardener might be safe if every suspect has an equally ambiguous sighting, and if each sighting can be innocently accounted for or can be a fragment of a guilty narrative. The discipline is one of symmetry: the substrate must be uniformly suggestive rather than selectively so.

Timelines present the most demanding consistency problem. A conventional mystery contains one timeline of the crime, from which the alibis of the innocent are derived by

subtraction. A randomized mystery must contain a timeline skeleton that is compatible with several possible crimes. One effective technique is to construct a grid of time windows and locations, specifying for each character where they were and who could confirm it, and to ensure that every character has at least one window of unverified activity long enough to commit the murder under some overlay. The overlays then specify which window was used, and which of the unverified periods are filled with innocent but embarrassing activity. This approach multiplies the author's labour, because every window must be written twice, once as a possible crime and once as a possible innocent secret. It nevertheless provides a rigorous guarantee that no participant is eliminated from suspicion by the structure of the evening alone, which is a precondition of honest uncertainty.

Physical evidence demands a similar approach, with the added constraint that objects are fixed in space while meanings are not. A weapon, a stained handkerchief, a torn letter, or a missing key must be placed in the performance space before the culprit is known, or must be placed afterwards by a facilitator who has received the draw. The first strategy produces evidence that is truly indifferent to the solution, and so must be interpretable in several ways. The second strategy allows evidence to be tailored to the draw, but at the price of a delay and of reliance on a facilitator whose behaviour might leak information. Many designs combine the two, placing a core of ambiguous objects in advance and supplementing them with a small number of conditional items that appear only under certain overlays. The conditional items are carefully chosen so that their appearance does not itself reveal the draw. If a particular

object appears only when a particular character is guilty, an experienced participant will soon learn to read its presence as a signal, and the mystery will degrade into a code.

Alibis and backstories raise the problem of continuity of character. In a fixed mystery, a character's biography can be written with the solution in mind, so that the murderer's history contains the seeds of the crime and the innocents' histories contain red herrings. In a randomized mystery, every biography must contain seeds that could germinate into a crime and also explanations that could account for the same facts innocently. A character who was once dismissed from the victim's employment, for example, might have been dismissed unjustly, which supplies resentment, or justly, which supplies shame. Under one overlay the resentment hardens into murder, and under another the shame drives a clumsy cover-up of an unrelated embarrassment. The biography does not change; what changes is the reading that the overlay licenses. Writing in this way demands that authors think in terms of potential rather than determination, and that they resist the habit of giving each character a single clear trajectory.

The drawing mechanism deserves attention because it is the point at which the design meets the world. The draw may be made by lot, by dice, by a shuffled deck of role cards, or by an algorithm run by the facilitator, and it may be performed in public, in private, or in a manner that is partly concealed. Each choice has consequences. A public draw announces that the villain is unknown even to the author, and it is theatrically powerful, but it requires that the culprit-player be able to conceal the result. A private draw preserves the participant's secrecy, but it requires trust that the facilitator has not

manipulated the outcome. Some designs weight the draw, so that certain characters are more likely to be drawn than others, or constrain it, so that a character cannot be the villain in consecutive performances for the same group. These refinements are matters of dramaturgical judgment. What is essential is that the mechanism be reliable, that it deliver the overlay in a usable form to the right participants, and that it leave the substrate undisturbed.

The consistency problem can finally be stated more abstractly. A fixed mystery is consistent if its evidence entails its solution. A randomized mystery is consistent if, for each overlay in a defined set, its evidence is compatible with that overlay and the overlay explains all of the evidence that has been presented. The author need not guarantee that every participant will reach the truth, only that the truth, whichever it is, is discoverable from what the world makes available and that no overlay renders any part of the substrate nonsensical. This is a more demanding standard in terms of the amount of design work and a less demanding one in terms of the narrowness of the target. It replaces the question of whether the clues lead to the answer with the question of whether the world can sustain every answer, and that replacement is the foundation on which the rest of the design rests.

The Flexible Clue and the Puzzle Clue

The second guiding question concerns what distinguishes a flexible dramatic clue from a conventional puzzle clue. A puzzle clue is designed to lead toward one predetermined solution. It is typically a piece of information whose significance is fixed by the author: the broken window shows that the intruder came from outside, the torn glove shows that

the killer was left-handed, the stopped watch shows the time of death. The clue is meaningful because it eliminates alternatives and narrows the field. Its value is measured by how efficiently it contributes to the inference. A puzzle clue that is ambiguous is a defective one, since ambiguity wastes its power to discriminate, and the ideal puzzle clue is one that appears innocuous until the final reasoning reveals that it was decisive.

A flexible dramatic clue works differently. Its value lies not in what it eliminates but in what it provokes. A flexible clue is an object, a fragment of speech, a pattern of behaviour, or a document whose meaning is not fixed by the author and which can be coherently interpreted in more than one way. A torn letter that mentions a debt, for example, might point to the character who owed the money, to the character who was owed it, or to a third character who knew of the arrangement and sought to exploit it. Under one overlay, the letter is the trace of a motive; under another, it is a decoy deliberately planted; under a third, it is a coincidence that the culprit has exploited. The clue is the same in each case, but its dramatic function changes, and participants who investigate it will find that its significance depends on the story they are collectively telling.

This difference implies a different set of design criteria. A puzzle clue is judged by its precision, its fairness, and its elegance. A flexible clue is judged by its generativity, its parity, and its resilience. Generativity is the capacity to stimulate conversation, conjecture, and conflict among participants, so that handling the clue produces drama in itself. Parity is the property that the clue does not unfairly favour any suspect, so that its apparent weight is distributed

in a way that does not pre-empt the draw. Resilience is the capacity to remain coherent under the overlays that might be applied, so that no overlay renders the clue absurd. A clue that scores highly on these criteria will often be less crisp than a puzzle clue, and designers must accept that some of the pleasure of sharp deduction is sacrificed in exchange for dramatic fertility.

A useful working taxonomy distinguishes universal clues, conditional clues, and pivot clues. Universal clues exist in every performance and are neutral with respect to the overlay. They establish atmosphere, supply common ground, and give participants something to discuss before any specific suspicion has formed. Conditional clues appear only under particular overlays, and they carry the burden of making the solution discoverable. Their design requires great care, because their presence or absence must not signal the draw, and because each overlay must provide enough of them to make an accusation defensible. Pivot clues are those whose meaning can swing between two or more readings depending on the overlay, and they are the most dramatically productive. A pivot clue is a hinge: it connects the substrate to several possible overlays and allows the same physical fact to be a decisive piece of evidence in one performance and a misleading coincidence in another.

The construction of conditional clues raises a problem that is peculiar to randomized design, which might be called the problem of leakage. In a fixed mystery, a clue that points to the murderer is simply a good clue. In a randomized mystery, a clue that appears only when a particular character is guilty can be read by repeat participants as a sign of the draw, and the resulting knowledge corrupts the investigation. Leakage

can be reduced by ensuring that each character has a similar number of conditional clues in both the guilty and innocent configurations, so that quantity of evidence is uninformative. It can also be reduced by writing conditional clues in pairs, so that for each guilty-case clue there exists an innocent-case clue of similar form and prominence. The goal is for the participant's inference to depend on the content of the evidence rather than on its existence, which restores the integrity of the deductive task.

A further distinction concerns the temporal structure of clues. Puzzle clues are normally released in an order that shapes the solver's path: early clues suggest an interpretation that later clues refine or overturn. Flexible clues cannot rely on such sequencing, because their meaning depends on the overlay and because participants will encounter them in an order determined by their own movements and conversations. Designers instead rely on redundancy and on clusters. Rather than a single critical clue, the scenario provides several overlapping indications, any of which may be found first, so that the deduction does not hinge on an item that participants might miss. Redundancy also protects against the fragility of live performance, in which a clue may be ignored, misunderstood, or mislaid. This resembles the way a skilled facilitator in a role-playing game ensures that important information can be reached by several routes, so that the story does not stall when a single door remains closed.

Finally, the flexible clue changes the epistemic status of the final accusation. In a puzzle mystery, the accusation is correct or incorrect according to whether it matches the author's solution. In a randomized mystery, the accusation is evaluated against the overlay that was drawn, but the more interesting

measure is whether the participants' accusation was reasonable given the evidence they had gathered. A group that accuses the wrong character on the basis of a coherent and well-supported theory has performed a legitimate dramatic act, and the revelation that the culprit was someone else becomes a moment of dramatic irony rather than a simple verdict of failure. The design should therefore provide a closing mechanism that acknowledges the quality of the investigation as well as its outcome, so that the satisfactions of the evening are not confined to those who guessed correctly.

Histories, Motives, and Competing Suspicions

If the clue is the mystery's object, the character is its agent, and the randomized mystery requires a distinctive approach to character construction. The central principle is latent guilt. Each character must be written so that guilt is a genuine possibility, with a credible motive, plausible access to the means, and an opportunity that cannot be ruled out. At the same time, each character must be written so that innocence is equally credible, with a believable account of the suspicious facts that surround them. The author therefore writes two characters in one: the character as potential murderer and the character as innocent person under pressure. The two versions share the same facts but diverge in intention, and the performer must be able to play either, or more accurately, must be able to play the shared facts without prematurely collapsing into one reading.

Motive is the most delicate component of this balance. In conventional mysteries, the murderer's motive is typically the best developed, because it must support the solution, while

the motives of other suspects are sketched as red herrings. In a randomized design, every motive must be developed to a comparable depth, because any might be called upon. This does not mean that all motives must be identical in kind. Greed, jealousy, fear of exposure, protection of a loved one, ideological conviction, and wounded pride all offer different dramatic textures, and a varied cast makes for a varied field of suspicion. What matters is equivalence of weight: no motive should be so thin that its bearer is dismissed at once, nor so overwhelming that the bearer is obviously the culprit. The designer calibrates motives against one another in the way a composer balances voices in a chord, ensuring that each contributes to the harmony without drowning the rest.

Secrets that are not the murder are among the most powerful instruments in the randomized designer's repertoire. A suspect who is hiding an affair, a financial irregularity, or a past indiscretion will behave evasively when questioned, and this evasiveness is indistinguishable, to the observer, from the evasiveness of guilt. In a fixed mystery, such secrets function as red herrings. In a randomized mystery, they serve a structural purpose: they ensure that suspicious behaviour is distributed across the cast regardless of the draw, so that the culprit does not stand out merely by being evasive. A cast in which every member has something to hide creates an ecology of concealment in which the genuine murderer can blend in. The secrets must be revealed at appropriate moments, because a mystery in which every suspect is eventually exonerated of everything but the murder risks becoming a catalogue of confessions, but their existence is a major source of the credibility of uncertainty.

Relationships among characters supply the connective tissue from which alliances, rivalries, and accusations grow. A designer who wishes to support multiple solutions will weave relationships that cross-cut one another, so that any pair of characters has both reasons to trust and reasons to distrust. Two characters may be old friends and also business rivals; a third may have saved the life of one and been betrayed by the other. Such overdetermined relationships generate competing narratives of loyalty and betrayal, and they give participants motives to protect or to denounce one another that are independent of the question of guilt. These social forces are what allow an Interactive Drama mystery to feel like a human community rather than a logic puzzle. They also generate the alliances and accusations that vary from performance to performance, because the same set of relationships will be activated differently depending on who is under suspicion and who is the actual villain.

The overlay interacts with relationships in ways that the designer must anticipate. When a particular character is drawn as the culprit, the relationships in which that character is involved acquire a new meaning. A friendship becomes a source of cover, a rivalry becomes a reason for misdirection, and a debt becomes a means of manipulation. The designer therefore prepares, for each possible culprit, a short account of how the culprit would behave toward each other character, what they would try to conceal, and whom they would try to implicate. This preparation is not a script but a briefing, and its purpose is to give the culprit-player a repertoire of strategies. It also serves the facilitator, who needs to know what kinds of pressure are likely to be applied to which participants in order to ensure that the evening remains

balanced and does not collapse into a single dominant narrative.

Competing suspicions are the visible product of all this design. During an evening, participants form hypotheses, share them, revise them, and sometimes campaign for them. These suspicions are not mere noise surrounding the true solution; they are the dramatic substance of the performance. A well-constructed randomized mystery generates several plausible suspicions at once, so that the room is divided and the investigation has genuine tension. Factions emerge: those who believe the steward did it, those who suspect the widow, those who think the victim's death was not murder at all. Because the culprit varies between performances, these factions will form around different people on different evenings, and the design must ensure that none of the plausible suspicions is a dead end that the author has secretly rendered impossible. The authentic distribution of suspicion is a design goal, and it can be measured by observing, across performances, whether suspicion spreads across the cast rather than collapsing early onto a single figure.

A final consideration concerns the performer's relationship to the character. Participants in Interactive Drama are usually amateurs, and their capacity to sustain a character is limited by their experience, their confidence, and their social comfort. Character materials must therefore be written to be playable by non-experts. They should offer clear behavioural cues, concrete facts, and a small number of memorable traits rather than extended psychological portraits. Under the randomized system, this requirement is intensified because the performer who receives the villain overlay must absorb a considerable amount of additional information in a short time.

Well-designed overlays are concise, action-oriented, and framed as invitations rather than obligations. They tell the culprit-player what the character knows, what the character wants, and what the character fears, and they leave to the player the choice of how to pursue these things within the evening's unscripted exchange.

Uncertainty and Authentic Interaction

The third guiding question asks whether uncertainty about the actual antagonist encourages more authentic character interaction and investigation. The word authentic requires care. In the context of Interactive Drama it does not mean realistic in the sense of resembling police procedure, nor does it mean sincere in the sense of lacking performance. It means that the participants' actions are responsive to the situation as they actually perceive it, rather than to a script, a guess about the author's intentions, or foreknowledge of the result. Authentic interaction in this sense is interaction in which people are genuinely uncertain, genuinely invested, and genuinely affected by what others say and do. The hypothesis worth examining is that the randomized culprit tends to produce such conditions more reliably than the fixed solution, because it removes several sources of inauthenticity that the fixed solution quietly introduces.

The first source of inauthenticity in fixed-solution play is the author's shadow. Participants in a conventional murder mystery party quickly learn that the evening has a designed answer, and many begin to reason about the design rather than about the fiction. They ask which character the author would make the murderer, which clues seem too prominent to be genuine, and which suspect has been given the most

conspicuous alibi. This is a sophisticated form of reasoning, but it is reasoning about a text, not about a world. It treats the other characters as devices and the clues as puzzle pieces, and it undermines the sense that the characters are people with real concerns. When the culprit is determined by a draw, this strategy loses its force. There is no authorial intention to infer, because the author did not choose, and the participants must therefore return to reasoning about the characters, their histories, and their behaviour in the room.

The second source concerns the culprit-player. In a fixed mystery, the person cast as the murderer knows from the outset that they are the culprit, and often knows that the script requires them to survive until the final accusation. The other participants, by contrast, play in ignorance. This asymmetry is part of the intended design, but it also tends to produce a recognisable style of play in which the murderer is guarded and slightly theatrical, and the others are fishing for tells. A randomized system does not remove the asymmetry between culprit and innocents, but it changes its character. Because every participant knows that anyone might have drawn the villain role, every participant must consider the possibility that their own character is the one the group will suspect, and every participant must prepare to defend themselves convincingly. The experience of being under suspicion becomes a general condition rather than the unfortunate fate of a few.

Uncertainty also affects the performers and facilitators who maintain the fiction. A performer who knows the solution tends to steer, consciously or not, toward it. A facilitator who knows that the butler did it will, with the best intentions, nudge participants away from alternatives that the script has

marked as wrong. This steering is often subtle, a raised eyebrow, an encouraging pause, a hint dropped a little too readily, but it shapes the evening in ways that participants sense. When the facilitator has only a general knowledge of the overlay, or knows the draw but is trained to respond to what happens rather than to what should happen, the evening is freer. The performer becomes an attentive partner in an unfolding event rather than a guardian of a conclusion, and the participants experience the investigation as something they are conducting rather than something being conducted for them.

There is a strong connection here to what the theatre tradition has described as playing the moment. Stanislavski's emphasis on given circumstances, and the improvisational traditions that grew from it, teach performers to attend to what is happening rather than to the outcome toward which a scene is supposedly heading. Keith Johnstone, writing about improvisation, observed that performers who try to control where a scene is going tend to produce stilted work, whereas performers who respond honestly to their partners produce scenes that surprise everyone. A randomized mystery places participants in a similar position. Because they cannot know, with the certainty a fixed script provides, which direction the story must take, they are encouraged to respond to what the others say and do. The investigation becomes a sequence of genuine reactions, and the drama arises from the friction among those reactions rather than from adherence to a plan.

Uncertainty may also deepen the emotional stakes of accusation. When a participant accuses another, the act has a certain moral weight, even within a fiction. In a fixed mystery, an experienced group may suspect that an

accusation will be confirmed or refuted according to an answer sheet, and the emotional gravity of the act is thereby reduced to a gamble on the script. In a randomized mystery, a participant who accuses another character does so on the basis of the evidence and the interaction they have experienced, and the revelation that follows is a genuine surprise or a genuine confirmation. This produces a more consequential form of play. Participants take care in building a case, listen carefully to defences, and feel the discomfort of pressing an accusation against someone whom they have come to like. These are the textures of authentic investigation, and they are more difficult to produce when the participants suspect that the outcome has been predetermined.

The benefits of uncertainty should not be overstated, and several costs deserve acknowledgment. The first is that uncertainty is more demanding for participants. A fixed mystery offers a clear task, to find the murderer the author has hidden, and a clear measure of success. A randomized mystery offers a less structured task, and participants who are accustomed to the conventions of the genre may feel unmoored. They may be uncertain what counts as a good deduction, how much to trust the evidence, or whether the evening has a correct answer at all. Facilitators must therefore provide clear framing at the outset, explaining that the culprit has been chosen by lot, that the evidence supports the solution that was drawn, and that the aim is to investigate in good faith rather than to guess the author's mind. With such framing, most participants adapt quickly and many report a heightened sense of engagement.

A second cost is the possibility that uncertainty may be used by participants as an excuse for disengagement. If any

character might be the culprit, a participant may reason that no deduction is possible and decline to investigate seriously, or may accuse at random in the knowledge that the draw is arbitrary. The remedy lies in the design of the evidence. If the clues are rich, parity is maintained, and the overlay genuinely explains the evidence, then careful investigation is rewarded, and participants discover that the world is more orderly than it first appears. The design must make the evidence matter. A randomized mystery in which the clues are merely decorative will collapse into a social deduction game with theatrical costumes, which may be enjoyable but is not the aim. The promise of the randomized villain is that uncertainty and rigour can coexist, and that promise must be honoured by the quality of the construction.

A third cost is that the author surrenders a certain kind of control over the shape of the drama. A fixed mystery can be designed so that its climax arrives at a particular moment, its revelations are ordered for maximum effect, and its final scene delivers a satisfying emotional payoff. A randomized mystery can supply none of this with the same precision, because the climax depends on which overlay is drawn and how the participants behave. Designers must therefore think carefully about the structural beats that all performances share, such as the discovery of the body, the first round of interviews, the revelation of a major secret, and the final accusation, and must supply flexible content to fill each beat. The result is a drama whose rhythm is guaranteed even though its content is not, and many designers will find that this combination of structural reliability and local surprise is precisely what makes the form compelling.

Randomization, Agency, and Suspense

The fourth guiding question concerns how randomized casting of the antagonist alters the balance among game design, player agency, and theatrical suspense. These three terms represent different sources of value in a participatory performance, and they are in permanent tension. Game design contributes rules, structure, and fairness, and promises that the experience will be coherent and that effort will be rewarded. Player agency contributes freedom, and promises that what the participants do will matter. Theatrical suspense contributes the pleasures of anticipation, surprise, and emotional release, and promises that the evening will have shape and momentum. A fixed solution tends to prioritise design and suspense at some cost to agency, since the story is arranged in advance. A randomized solution redistributes the balance in ways that deserve careful analysis.

Consider first the effect on agency. In a fixed mystery, a participant's agency is real but bounded: they may investigate, question, and accuse, but the truth they are seeking was settled before they arrived, and their actions can only discover it or fail to do so. In a randomized mystery, the participants' agency extends further, because the story has not been completed in advance. The conversations they have, the alliances they form, and the lines of inquiry they pursue influence which clues are found, how they are read, and what the group eventually concludes. In a modest but meaningful sense, the participants co-author the interpretation of the crime. The overlay fixes what happened, but the collective understanding of what happened is built from the evening's interactions, and that understanding can be right, wrong, or partly right in ways that the author did not foresee.

The effect on game design is equally significant. Randomization shifts the designer's attention from the construction of a solution to the construction of a system. The designer must think probabilistically, asking not what will happen but what could happen, and must test the scenario against each permitted overlay as well as against the typical behaviours of participants. This is closer to the work of a game designer building a board game than to that of a playwright composing a script. It also introduces the concept of balance, borrowed from game design, into dramaturgy. The designer must ensure that no overlay is much easier or much harder to solve than the others, that no character is systematically advantaged by the draw, and that the evening does not systematically favour particular styles of play. Such balance cannot be achieved by intuition alone, and it is one reason that practice-based testing is so valuable, as the ninth section will discuss.

Theatrical suspense is perhaps the most interesting of the three terms, because randomization seems at first to threaten it. Suspense, in Hitchcock's famous account, depends on the audience knowing something the characters do not, and a mystery depends on the opposite, on the audience being ignorant of something the characters, or at least the culprit, know. In the randomized mystery, both forms of tension may coexist. The culprit-player knows the truth and the others do not, which supplies the Hitchcockian tension of dramatic irony, since the culprit watches the investigators circle. The investigators, meanwhile, experience the classic mystery tension of the unknown. Moreover, because the culprit was selected by lot, even the culprit-player does not know until the last moment that the role will be theirs, which gives the

beginning of the evening an unusual charge. The drawing of the role becomes a dramatic event in itself, a moment in which chance enters the fiction and is transformed into fate.

The position of the player who draws the villain role deserves particular consideration. In a fixed mystery, the murderer is chosen by the host or the script, and that choice may be experienced as a compliment, a burden, or a matter of indifference. In a randomized mystery, the role arrives by chance, and the player who receives it faces a distinctive situation. They did not seek the role, they cannot be said to have been selected for their acting ability, and they carry a secret whose weight is the greater for being unexpected. Many participants find this exciting, and the sudden shift from innocent bystander to hidden antagonist produces a vivid sense of transformation. Some, however, find the role uncomfortable, especially if they are shy or if the fiction involves difficult subject matter. Responsible design therefore includes mechanisms of consent, such as the ability to swap or decline the role discreetly, and sensitivity in how the villain's actions are framed.

Fairness is a related concern. A randomized system relies on the integrity of the draw, and participants must trust that the selection of the culprit was genuinely random, or at least that it was not manipulated in ways that disadvantage them. Where the draw is conducted openly, trust is easy to establish. Where it is conducted in secret, trust depends on the reputation of the facilitator and on the transparency of the method. There is also a subtler form of fairness, concerning the distribution of dramatic opportunity across repeated performances. If the same participants repeatedly draw the villain role, or never draw it, the experience may feel

unequal. Designers can address this by constructing draws that are random but constrained, ensuring that over a series of performances each participant has a similar chance of being cast in the central role, while preserving the unpredictability that makes each individual evening uncertain.

The facilitator occupies a pivotal position in this system, serving at once as game master, stage manager, and guardian of the fiction. In a randomized mystery, the facilitator must know the draw, or at least know enough to respond appropriately, while also resisting the temptation to steer. This requires a particular discipline, which might be called responsive neutrality. The facilitator listens, observes, and intervenes only to keep the fiction coherent, to protect participants' wellbeing, and to ensure that the evening reaches a satisfying conclusion. When participants stall, the facilitator may supply a new piece of evidence or prompt a scene; when they surge ahead, the facilitator may slow them with a complication. These interventions shape the rhythm of the evening without determining its content, and they reflect the broader principle that the randomized mystery distributes authority among designers, facilitators, and participants rather than concentrating it in a single author.

There is, finally, an ethical dimension to the use of chance in dramaturgy that deserves acknowledgment. To assign the villain by lot is to say that the question of who is guilty is not a moral or psychological one but a matter of configuration. This is a sobering thought for a form that has traditionally drawn its force from the idea that guilt is meaningful, that the murderer has a reason and that the reason can be understood. Randomization does not abolish this meaning, since each overlay supplies a motive and a history that make the crime

intelligible. But it does draw attention to the contingency of guilt, the sense that any of these people, under slightly different circumstances, might have done what one of them did. This is a rich thematic resource, and designers who embrace it may find that the randomized mystery offers not only a technical alternative to the fixed solution but a different and in some ways more disquieting vision of crime and character.

A Practice-Based Research Design

The arguments of the preceding sections are, for the most part, conceptual, and several of them make claims about experience that can only be tested in performance. A randomized mystery either produces more authentic interaction or it does not; its clues either remain coherent across overlays or they fail; its suspicion either distributes across the cast or collapses onto a few figures. These are empirical questions, even if the evidence is qualitative, and they invite a practice-based research method in which the scenario is treated as an experimental apparatus and each performance as an observation. The proposal developed here is a design for such research rather than a report of its results. No findings are claimed, and the purpose of the section is to specify how a single scenario, performed repeatedly with different culprit assignments, could generate comparable data about the dramatic structures that randomization produces.

The core of the design is simple. A single scenario is written with a fixed cast of characters, a fixed setting, and a fixed substrate. Each character is provided with a complete overlay that specifies what that character would have done, concealed, and implicated if drawn as the culprit. The

scenario is then performed a number of times, ideally with a range of participant groups, and in each performance the culprit is selected by a documented random procedure immediately before play. Because the substrate is constant, differences between performances can be attributed with some confidence to the draw, to the participants, or to the interaction between them. By ensuring that each character is drawn at least once, the researcher obtains a complete set of configurations, which allows direct comparison of how the same world behaves when guilt settles on each of its inhabitants in turn.

Documentation is the foundation of comparison. Each performance should be recorded in several complementary ways. Audio or video recording captures the sequence of conversations, accusations, and revelations. A structured observer log, kept by a researcher who does not intervene, notes the timing of key moments such as the first accusation, the formation of factions, and the final vote. Facilitator notes record every intervention made to the fiction, so that steering can be identified and accounted for. Participants complete brief questionnaires before the draw, immediately after the final accusation, and following the revelation, capturing their suspicions, confidence, and emotional responses at each stage. Finally, short post-performance interviews explore how participants understood the clues, how they experienced uncertainty, and whether they felt that their actions mattered. Together these sources offer a layered record of each evening.

The analysis can proceed along several dimensions that correspond to the questions explored in this essay. To assess consistency, the researcher can examine whether any performance produced a contradiction, a dead end, or an

unintended solution, and can identify which clues generated confusion or required facilitator repair. To assess the flexibility of clues, the researcher can map how each clue was interpreted across performances, noting which clues were read in different ways under different overlays and which were consistently read in a single way. To assess authenticity, the researcher can compare the language, pacing, and emotional register of interaction across performances and with performances of a fixed-solution scenario, if one is available. To assess agency and suspense, the researcher can analyse participants' reports of influence and tension, and can examine how the distribution of suspicion changed over time.

Several quantitative or semi-quantitative measures can supplement this qualitative analysis. One is the distribution of suspicion: at intervals during the evening, participants can be asked to name or rank their suspects, producing a sequence of snapshots from which the spread and convergence of suspicion can be charted. A scenario in which suspicion collapses early onto one character may indicate a failure of parity, while one in which it remains widely distributed until late in the evening suggests that the design supports genuine uncertainty. Another measure is the accuracy of the final accusation across overlays, which can reveal whether some configurations are systematically easier or harder to solve. A third is the variation in accusation, alliance, and conclusion between performances of the same overlay, which indicates how much of the drama is determined by the draw and how much by the participants. These measures are modest, but they provide a disciplined way of comparing structures.

The design also carries methodological cautions. Performance is a social event, and the presence of researchers, cameras,

and questionnaires will alter the behaviour of participants. Groups differ in size, familiarity, and temperament, and a small number of performances cannot support strong generalisations. The researcher who designs the scenario is also likely to be its facilitator, and this dual role creates risks of bias. These limitations suggest that the findings of such a study should be treated as exploratory and descriptive, with an emphasis on rich comparison rather than on statistical inference. The aim is not to prove that randomization is superior, but to learn what it does: which dramatic structures it produces, which design principles it requires, and which trade-offs it entails. In this respect the research is closer to design research or action research than to controlled experiment, and its value lies in the quality of the insight it generates.

Conclusion

The randomized antagonist invites a rethinking of the murder mystery from its foundations. By deferring the choice of culprit until immediately before performance, an Interactive Drama scenario transforms the central fact of the genre from a given into a variable, and in doing so reveals how much of the conventional mystery's architecture depends on that given. The fixed solution secures coherence, calibrated difficulty, and closure, but it does so by treating the investigation as the unveiling of a completed text. The randomized solution gives up some of that security in order to make the investigation an event in which the truth is, in a real sense, still open. The essay has argued that this exchange is best understood through the idea of modular dramaturgy, in which a work is composed of components designed to be recombined and in

which the identity of the whole emerges from the configuration.

The four guiding questions can now be answered, if provisionally. A mystery can maintain internal consistency without a predetermined culprit by separating an invariant substrate from a variable overlay and by designing the substrate with disciplined symmetry, so that every timeline, object, alibi, and biography remains compatible with every permitted overlay. A flexible dramatic clue differs from a puzzle clue in that it is valued for its generativity, parity, and resilience rather than its precision, and it is best organised into universal, conditional, and pivot types that guard against leakage. Uncertainty tends to encourage more authentic interaction by dissolving the author's shadow and returning participants to reasoning about people rather than about designs, though it carries costs of disorientation and diffusion. And randomization redistributes the balance among design, agency, and suspense, extending agency and transforming suspense while demanding new forms of fairness and facilitation.

The broader significance of the argument lies in what it suggests about mystery as a performed form. Written mysteries are texts to be decoded, but performed mysteries are events to be lived, and the randomized villain makes that difference visible. In performance, the truth is not merely discovered but enacted, because the culprit-player must actually conceal, deflect, and persuade, and the investigators must actually weigh, doubt, and accuse. The mystery is therefore always partly made by the people who take part in it, and the randomized design acknowledges this by building the openness of performance into the structure of the work

itself. This acknowledgement, far from diminishing the author's role, calls for a more sophisticated authorship, one that composes possibilities and designs interfaces and takes responsibility for the integrity of a field rather than a single path.

Much remains to be learned. The practice-based research design proposed here offers one route to testing the claims advanced, and its value will depend on the willingness of designers and researchers to perform scenarios repeatedly, to document them carefully, and to compare them honestly. It is likely that such work will uncover limitations and surprises that this essay has not anticipated, and that some of the principles proposed will require revision. That would be a fitting outcome for a study of emergent mystery. If the villain has not yet been chosen, neither has the final account of what the villain's absence from the design makes possible, and the most productive response is to continue the performance.

Eleanor Ashcombe

Eleanor Ashcombe is a mystery-game designer and former magazine puzzle editor who has spent more than fifteen years organizing small-group immersive mysteries. Her interest in randomized antagonists began when she discovered that the most satisfying solution to a murder mystery was not always the one she had written in advance. She develops modular clue networks, tests character motives with volunteer players, and studies how improvisation can preserve a sense of fairness without making a story predictable. Although she does not hold an academic appointment, she is a meticulous reader of dramaturgy and game studies. Her friends know her as a pleasant dinner guest who can make an ordinary seating arrangement seem suspicious.

Everyone Knows a Different Story:
Distributed Knowledge, Secrets, and Dramatic Irony in Salon LARP

Clara Whitlock

Abstract

Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, which organizes dramatic knowledge around the stable, panoptic perspective of an external spectator, salon live-action role-playing (chamber or freeform LARP) systematically decentralizes narrative authority. By abolishing the auditorium and replacing the shared script with isolated, contradictory pre-game character sheets, salon LARP constructs a polycentric narrative ecosystem in which no participant possesses complete knowledge of the fictional situation. This essay synthesizes post-classical narratology, possible worlds semantics, sociological theories of secrecy, and performance theory to establish a comprehensive framework for Distributed Narrative Knowledge. Examining simultaneous internal focalization, asymmetrical relational design, the economy of productive versus paralyzing secrets, emergent narratives driven by unreliable testimony, and first-person dramatic irony, the study demonstrates that salon LARP operates not as a single unified plot, but as a Bakhtinian polyphonic constellation of overlapping subjective stories powered by epistemic asymmetry.

Keywords

Distributed narrative knowledge, salon LARP, internal focalization, dramatic irony, epistemic asymmetry, Bakhtinian polyphony

Movement I: The Panoptic Stage Versus the Epistemic Labyrinth (Expanded Analysis)

The history of Western dramatic theory is, at its foundational core, a history of managing visual and epistemological access. When Aristotle defines tragedy in the *Poetics* as the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, the adjective *complete* (*teleios*) carries both a temporal and an cognitive mandate. A dramatic action is complete not merely because it possesses a beginning, a middle, and an end, but because its causal architecture is rendered wholly intelligible to the perceiving mind of the spectator. Throughout the evolution of theatrical architecture—from the sun-drenched radial geometry of the Theatre of Dionysus at Epidaurus, through the hierarchical sightlines of the Renaissance court theatre designed by Sebastiano Serlio and Andrea Palladio, to the darkened, immersive discipline of Richard Wagner's Bayreuth Festspielhaus—the physical apparatus of drama has laboured to secure a single, overriding privilege for the audience: the privilege of the panoptic witness. Even when the stage action depicts chaos, deception, madness, or epistemological breakdown, the chaos is framed within a proscenium arch that guarantees the spectator's cognitive sovereignty.

Consider the operation of epistemic management in a canonical masterpiece of classical European drama, such as Jean Racine's *Phèdre* or Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. In Ibsen's drawing room, secrets abound: Hedda's pregnancy,

Eilert Lövborg's lost manuscript, Judge Brack's quiet blackmail, and Thea Elvirested's fragile devotion. The characters conceal information from one another behind the polite masks of nineteenth-century bourgeois decorum. Yet how is this web of secrecy communicated? Ibsen constructs a rigorous sequential focalization for the auditorium. Whenever two characters exit the drawing room into the back parlor, the two characters remaining on stage immediately lower their voices and disclose the truth of their schemes to the twenty-fourth wall—the invisible window through which eight hundred spectators are peering. The audience hears Hedda confess her boredom to Brack; the audience watches Hedda burn Lövborg's manuscript page by page in the stove while uttering her private venomous incantation; the audience sees Hedda hand Lövborg the pistol. Every single member of the audience receives the exact same dataset in the exact same chronological sequence. By the time the fatal shot rings out behind the curtain in the final act, the auditorium possesses a synthesized, supra-character omniscience. No spectator leaves the theatre wondering whether Hedda burned the manuscript or whether Judge Brack recognized the pistol; the dramatic power of the play relies upon the absolute transparency of the characters' secrets to the watching house.

Even the twentieth-century avant-garde challenges to the proscenium stage rarely dismantled this underlying informational contract. When Luigi Pirandello fractured theatrical illusion in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, or when Bertolt Brecht deployed the *Verfremdungseffekt* to expose the ideological machinery of the stage, the disruption was still staged as a unified spectacle presented to a collective

audience. More recently, the rise of immersive promenade theatre—exemplified by companies such as Punchdrunk and their landmark production *Sleep No More*—has begun to fracture the unified audience by allowing masked spectators to wander freely through a multi-story warehouse, following different actors from room to room. Yet even in promenade immersive theatre, the fundamental ontological boundary between the knowing performer and the silent, non-intervening spectator remains rigidly enforced. The masked audience member in *Sleep No More* is a mobile camera lens; they cannot speak to Macbeth, they cannot warn Banquo of the approaching assassins, they cannot invent a lie that alters the trajectory of the banquet, and the actors moving through the warehouse are executing a meticulously choreographed, repeating loop of movement and text that has been rehearsed to perfection under the central authority of a director.

The salon live-action role-playing game—emerging from the confluence of tabletop role-playing games, parlour murder mysteries, psychodrama, improvisational theatre, and the distinct artistic traditions of British freeform, American theatre-style LARP, and the Nordic *kammerrollespil* (chamber role-play)—executes a far more radical break with theatrical history. It does not merely allow the spectator to walk onto the stage; it liquidates the category of the non-participating spectator altogether and replaces the rehearsed script with a decentralized network of incomplete, unverified, and partisan epistemic inputs.

To grasp the sheer scale of this epistemological rupture, let us trace the material lifecycle of a salon LARP from its

inception to its execution. Months or weeks prior to the gathering, a writer or design collective constructs a fictional situation—for instance, a conclave of cardinals electing a new Pope amidst a sixteenth-century plague, a reunion of estranged siblings dividing a crumbling family business in contemporary New England, or a truth and reconciliation commission investigating atrocities aboard a generation starship. Instead of writing a linear script of scenes and dialogue, the designer produces a corpus of discrete textual documents: a short setting overview read by all participants, and a series of fifteen to thirty private character dossiers. Each dossier is assigned to a single participant.

When the participants gather in the physical play space—which may be an ornate rented mansion, a black-box studio divided by folding screens, or a series of hotel conference rooms—they undergo a brief pre-game workshop to establish safety mechanics, physical calibration, and aesthetic alignment. Then, at a designated signal, the diegetic frame descends. From that second until the end of the game three or four hours later, there is no central stage. There is no main dialogue track. In a game of twenty-four players, there may be eight separate conversations occurring simultaneously: three pairs whispering in corners of the main salon, a group of four debating heatedly around a dining table, two characters exchanging a clandestine bribe in the corridor, and twelve other players shifting dynamically between these clusters, eavesdropping, interrupting, or retreating into solitude to read a newly discovered letter.

Within this polycentric acoustic and spatial environment, the

classical dramaturgical hierarchy of knowledge is turned completely inside out. No human being in the building—including a non-playing Game Master watching from the sidelines—knows the entirety of what is happening in the fiction at any given moment. If Player 1 and Player 2 whisper a pact in the conservatory, that pact is known solely to Player 1 and Player 2. If Player 1 subsequently walks into the main salon and lies to Player 3 about what was just agreed in the conservatory, Player 3 has no structural mechanism to verify whether Player 1 is telling the truth, except by walking over to Player 2 and asking for confirmation—at which point Player 2 may either corroborate the lie, expose the betrayal, or offer a third, entirely different account designed to serve Player 2's own hidden agenda.

Furthermore, this runtime opacity is built atop a profound pre-game opacity. Because no participant has read any other participant's character sheet, no player knows the actual boundaries of the fictional universe they are inhabiting. In a conventional stage play, the actor playing a minor servant knows that they are in a tragedy about royal regicide because they attended the table read and hold the full script in their hands. In a salon LARP, a participant whose character sheet focuses entirely on securing a modest bank loan to open a bakery may have zero awareness that the four bankers they are petitioning are actually rival intelligence operatives using the bank as a front for nuclear espionage. Conversely, a participant whose sheet is saturated with paranoid warnings about an imminent occult assassination may spend two hours interpreting every spilled drink and nervous glance as a satanic signal, utterly unaware that the other nineteen

characters in the room have no occult elements on their sheets whatsoever, or that the designer intentionally wrote the character as a unreliable paranoiac surrounded by ordinary bourgeois citizens.

This structural condition—in which every agent acts with total diegetic autonomy inside a shared physical environment while possessing only a tiny, heavily refracted shard of the total informational archive—constitutes what we term *Epistemic Asymmetry*. In traditional media, epistemic asymmetry is a localized, temporary narrative device managed by an omniscient author for the benefit of an external spectator. In salon LARP, epistemic asymmetry is the fundamental ontological medium in which the artwork exists. The central theoretical task before us is to explain how this radical fragmentation of knowledge avoids degenerating into an unintelligible cacophony of twenty private delusions, and how, instead, the deliberate distribution of incomplete stories serves as the most potent engine of collective dramatic interaction ever devised.

Movement II: The Mechanics of Multi-Agent Focalization and Modal Worlds (Expanded Analysis)

To construct a formal narratology capable of accounting for this decentralized architecture, we must interrogate the foundational assumptions of structuralist and post-structuralist narrative theory. When Gérard Genette formulated the category of focalization in *Figures III*, his primary methodological victory lay in separating mood (*who*

perceives?) from voice (*who speaks?*). Prior to Genette, Anglo-American and Continental theories of point of view—such as those advanced by Percy Lubbock, Norman Friedman, and Franz Stanzel—routinely conflated the grammatical person of the narrator with the perceptual limitation of the narrative filter. By distinguishing between zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization, Genette demonstrated that a third-person narrator can still be strictly tethered to the epistemic horizon of a single character, just as a first-person narrator can retrospect from a position of quasi-omniscient superiority over their younger, more ignorant self.

Subsequent revisions of Genette's model by Mieke Bal and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan introduced further granularity by separating the perceptual facet of focalization (what a focalizer literally sees and hears within the spatial frame) from the psychological facet (what the focalizer knows, remembers, believes, and feels toward the focalized object). In her influential synthesis *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Bal emphasized that focalization is inherently an ideological and relational act: the focalizer *colors* the focalized object with affective bias, interpretive assumptions, and historical memory before that object is ever handed over to the narrator for linguistic encoding.

Yet across all of these refinements, classical and post-classical narratology implicitly retains a single, overarching structural axiom: the axiom of *serialized reception*. Whether a novel employs fixed internal focalization (as in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*), variable internal focalization

shifting from character to character across chapters (as in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), or multiple internal focalization recounting the same event through several distinct minds (as in Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*), the text itself remains a linear, sequential artifact delivered to a solitary reader. Even when the focalization shifts radically from page to page, the reader sits outside the text, accumulating each partial view into a cumulative cognitive ledger. In a work of multiple internal focalization, the reader compares Account A against Account B and Account C, gradually triangulating the contours of the underlying fictional world by measuring the distortions of each focalizer against the others.

The salon LARP shatters the axiom of serialized reception by substituting *simultaneous, embodied, multi-agent focalization*. In a freeform chamber game, the twenty internal focalizers are not arranged sequentially like chapters in a bound volume; they are instantiated concurrently as physical human organisms occupying a shared three-dimensional topography. There is no external reader who traverses all twenty consciousnesses. Instead, each participant is permanently locked inside a single focalizing apparatus for the duration of the performance. This structural permanence produces a striking paradox: from the global perspective of the game as a whole, the event is a radical exercise in multiple internal focalization; yet from the phenomenological perspective of any individual participant inside the room, the event is experienced as an unbroken, relentless exercise in *fixed internal focalization* combined with *radical external focalization* toward everyone else.

Let us examine the cognitive mechanics of this dual perceptual state in granular detail. When Player A stands in the center of the salon, they possess direct, unmediated access to their own character's psychological facet of focalization—the private history, ideological prejudices, secret guilt, and urgent goals inscribed upon their character sheet, augmented by the real-time inner monologue generating within the player's own mind. Simultaneously, however, every other character in the room presents themselves to Player A exclusively through the mode of external focalization. Just as Ernest Hemingway's famous narrator in "The Killers" can report only the physical movements and spoken words of the gunmen without penetrating their skulls, Player A can observe only the external signifiers generated by Player B: the slight tremor in Player B's hand as they pour a glass of sherry, the abrupt change of subject when the missing will is mentioned, the furtive glance cast toward the conservatory doors.

In a literary text, external focalization is an artistic restriction imposed by an author who *could* reveal the character's thoughts but chooses to withhold them for aesthetic effect. In a salon LARP, external focalization toward the Other is an inescapable physical reality of human embodiment. Player A cannot read Player B's mind, nor can Player A read Player B's character sheet. Consequently, every act of perception in a chamber LARP requires an immediate, high-stakes act of what cognitive narratologist Lisa Zunshine calls *Theory of Mind* (or mind-reading): the attribution of hidden mental states, beliefs, and intentions to an opaque external body based upon ambiguous behavioral cues.

Because every participant is simultaneously projecting external signifiers and engaging in feverish Theory of Mind decoding toward their peers, the perceptual field of the salon LARP is governed by a rigorous *spatial and acoustic horizon*. In prose fiction, a focalizer perceives whatever the author places on the page; there is no background noise unless the author describes background noise. In an embodied chamber LARP with twenty-four players, the perceptual facet of focalization is continuously assaulted by sensory surplus and sensory occlusion. If Player A is standing near the buffet table speaking with Player B, their auditory field is partially masked by the clinking of glasses and the rise and fall of four other conversations occurring ten feet away. Across the room, Player A can *see* Player C hand a folded slip of paper to Player D and watch Player D's face go pale, without being able to *hear* a single syllable of the whispered exchange accompanying the transfer.

This divergence between the visual field (which often encompasses the entire salon) and the auditory field (which is strictly localized to a three-to-five-foot conversational radius) creates a unique narratological phenomenon: *perceptual decoupling*. A participant routinely witnesses the silent pantomime of dramatic turning points occurring across the room while remaining entirely deaf to their semantic content. Watching a trusted ally laugh warmly with one's mortal enemy on the far side of the chandelier becomes an agonizing text to be decoded. Did the ally just betray the faction, or are they brilliantly distracting the enemy as agreed an hour ago? Because the participant's focalization includes the visual image of the laugh but excludes the acoustic channel of the

dialogue, an immediate epistemic vacuum is opened—a vacuum that the player's paranoid or hopeful imagination rushes to fill.

To formalize how these twenty-four decoupled, mind-reading internal focalizers construct and negotiate a shared fictional reality, we must expand upon the modal semantics of Possible Worlds Theory developed by Lubomír Doležel in *Heterocosmica* and Marie-Laure Ryan in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. In classical modal logic, a possible world system consists of a set of worlds $\mathbf{W}$, within which one world is designated as the actual world w_0, linked to alternative possible worlds via an accessibility relation R. When Ryan adapts this framework to narrative poetics, she posits that a fictional text projects its own autonomous universe centered on a Textual Actual World (TAW), which serves as the objective reference point for all factual propositions within the story. Surrounding this TAW is a constellation of private mental worlds held by the characters: their Epistemic Worlds (K-worlds, what they hold to be true), their Bouletic Worlds (W-worlds, what they desire), their Deontic Worlds (O-worlds, what they are obligated to do), and their Fantasy or Intention Worlds (F-worlds and I-worlds, the plans and projections they formulate to bridge the gap between reality and desire).

In Ryan's Principle of Minimal Departure, a reader or spectator constructs a mental model of a fictional world by assuming it resembles the real world in all respects unless the text explicitly mandates otherwise; similarly, within the

fiction, narrative conflict is measured by the topological distance between the TAW and the satellite sub-worlds of the cast. A plot moves forward whenever a character recognizes a discrepancy between the TAW and their Bouletic W-world, formulates an Intention I-world (a plan of action), and executes a physical or verbal act designed to shift the TAW into alignment with W. However, as Ryan observes, an Intention I-world is never built directly upon the objective TAW; it is built exclusively upon the character's subjective Epistemic K-world. If a character's K-world is flawed—if it contains false propositions resulting from deception, ignorance, or perceptual error—then the plan they formulate in their I-world will misfire when executed in the TAW, producing tragic catastrophe or comic farce.

When we map this modal architecture onto the salon LARP, we discover that the medium executes a profound ontological split within the category of the Textual Actual World itself. In a novel or a film, the TAW is unified and singular: both the historical backstory of what happened ten years ago and the present-day actions occurring in Chapter Twelve belong to the same unassailable plane of authorial fact. In a salon LARP, by contrast, the TAW is severed into two non-communicating hemispheres: the **Archival Pre-Game World** (TAW_{Pre}) and the **Performative Runtime World** (TAW_{Run}).

The Archival Pre-Game World (TAW_{Pre}) consists of the master backstory authored by the game designer before the event—the chronological ledger of who actually stole the

diamond, who fathered the child, and what clauses were written into the secret treaty of 1894. Yet here lies the crucial narratological rupture: *the Archival Pre-Game World never enters the room*. Unless the designer prints out a master solution manual and reads it aloud during play—which would destroy the game—TAW_{Pre} ceases to have any direct ontological existence the moment the workshop ends. What enters the room instead is exclusively the set of individual character sheets, which represent twenty-four separate, heavily curated, and frequently contradictory Epistemic Worlds ${K_1, K_2, \dots, K_{24}}$ at time t_0.

As a result, within the lived reality of the game, historical truth does not exist as an objective TAW; it exists solely as a contested probabilistic field distributed across ${K_1, \dots, K_{24}}$. Let us trace the radical implications of this structure. Suppose that in the designer's private notes (TAW_{Pre}), Lord Arthur was murdered by his nephew Charles. Suppose further that the designer writes on Charles's character sheet ($K_{Charles}$): "You poisoned your uncle's brandy at 9:00 PM, though you feel terrible remorse." Meanwhile, on the sheet of the family physician (K_{Doctor}), the designer writes: "You examined Lord Arthur's body at 9:15 PM; his heart failed naturally from chronic arterial disease, and there was zero trace of poison in his system." And on the sheet of the butler (K_{Butler}), the designer writes: "At 8:45 PM, you poured out the poisoned brandy Charles had prepared and replaced it with harmless colored water, though you saw Lady Eleanor slip a lethal dose of digitalis into Lord Arthur's tea at 9:05 PM."

When these three players walk into the drawing room at the start of the game, each inhabits a completely coherent, internally consistent Epistemic World regarding Lord Arthur's death. Charles *knows* he is a murderer; the Doctor *knows* no murder occurred; the Butler *knows* Charles is innocent of the fatal dose while Lady Eleanor is the true killer. None of these three participants has access to TAW_{Pre}. When Charles, overcome by dramatic guilt in the second hour of the game, falls to his knees in the center of the salon and confesses to poisoning his uncle's brandy, what is the ontological status of that confession within the **Performative Runtime World** (TAW_{Run})?

In TAW_{Run}, the confession itself is an indisputable objective fact: every player in the room physically hears Charles utter the words "I killed him with the brandy." Yet the historical proposition contained within that speech act reacts with explosive instability across the divergent K-worlds of the listeners. For five guests who knew nothing of the medical details, Charles's confession is immediately integrated into their K-worlds as settled truth, prompting them to call for the constable. For the Doctor, who knows the brandy was harmless and the death seemed natural, Charles's confession appears to be either a bizarre psychotic delusion or a noble lie designed to shield someone else. For the Butler, Charles's confession is a tragic farce, because the Butler knows Charles's poison never reached the victim's lips—and the Butler now faces an agonizing Deontic dilemma over whether to exonerate Charles by exposing his own tampering, or stay silent to protect Lady Eleanor, whom the Butler secretly loves.

Notice how this interaction operates entirely without reference to a central narrator or an objective canonical timeline. The narrative engine is powered by *modal friction*: the clash between a public performative speech act in TAW_{Run} and the private archival propositions held within ${K_1, \dots, K_n}$. Every time a participant speaks, hands over a prop document, or performs a physical action in TAW_{Run}, they send a shockwave through the room that forces every witness to update their private K-world. Yet because each witness filters that new datum through a different pre-existing set of archival beliefs, the same public event produces radically different epistemic updates across the ensemble. Instead of converging toward a single shared truth as the evening progresses, the Epistemic Worlds of the participants frequently diverge even further into complex, branching trees of suspicion, alliance, and misinterpretation. The dissolution of the central narrator does not create a vacuum of meaning; rather, by removing the transcendent anchor of an accessible TAW_{Pre}, the salon LARP transforms every participant into an active, embattled cartographer of reality, continuously redrawing the map of a world whose true territory exists nowhere outside the collective friction of their minds.

Movement III: Paratextual Architecture and the Engineering of Relational Asymmetry (Expanded Analysis)

To appreciate how this modal volatility is systematically manufactured prior to runtime, we must undertake a close structural analysis of the freeform character sheet as a

paratextual and dramaturgical instrument. In classical literary scholarship, Gérard Genette defined the paratext as an auxiliary discourse—comprising peritexts such as chapter titles, prefaces, and footnotes, alongside epitexts such as interviews and diaries—that remains subordinate to the primary text, existing solely to ensure the text's reception and consumption in the world. When this concept is migrated to the domain of salon LARP by theorists such as J. Tuomas Harviainen, Evan Torner, and Kaisa Kangas, the ontological hierarchy between text and paratext undergoes a complete inversion. Because the runtime performance of a freeform game is ephemeral, unrecorded, and improvised, the pre-game character sheets, briefing booklets, and physical prop documents represent the only durable, authored textual artifacts of the work. Yet they are not the work itself; they are the generative source code designed to compile a live human ensemble into an interactive dramatic system.

How does a character sheet compile a human reader into an epistemic agent within a fictional world? The process relies upon a sophisticated manipulation of linguistic voice, cognitive framing, and informational geometry. Consider first the rhetorical mode of address. Across the history of freeform design, character briefs have predominantly utilized either the second-person singular (*"You are the third daughter of the Duke; you have always despised your elder sister's effortless charm"*) or the intimate first-person confessional (*"I have spent thirty years serving this ministry, and my hands are stained with ink and blood"*). Both modes of address perform a vital ideological inoculation before the player ever arrives at the venue. Unlike an objective encyclopedia entry or a third-

person dramatic biography—which invites the actor to stand outside the character and evaluate their flaws from a position of critical neutrality—the second-person and first-person character brief operates as a cognitive visor. By narrating the history of the fictional world exclusively through the syntax of personal grievance, pride, trauma, or ambition, the brief merges the informational content of the backstory with the affective evaluation of that backstory.

Let us examine how this fusion of fact and affect operates across a multi-character relational matrix. In a well-constructed salon LARP, no historical fact is ever delivered neutrally; every fact is delivered wrapped inside an ideological interpretation that is structurally incompatible with the interpretation handed to the character standing across the room. Suppose a designer is constructing a chamber drama set inside an Antarctic research station that has just lost radio contact with the outside world after a catastrophic laboratory fire. In a conventional stage play or screenplay, the writer would establish the objective history of the station for the audience through early exposition, gradually revealing who left the faulty heater turned on in Lab Three. In a freeform LARP, the designer instead uses the laboratory fire as a prismatic wedge to fracture the epistemic unity of the six scientists inhabiting the station.

On the character sheet of the Chief Geologist, the fire is framed through the lens of bureaucratic betrayal: for six months prior to the incident, the Geologist submitted urgent requisitions for updated electrical wiring, all of which were vetoed by the Station Director in order to divert funds toward

the Biologist's classified genetics project. For the Geologist, therefore, the cause of the fire is not a localized mechanical accident; it is the foreseeable, criminal consequence of the Director's corruption and the Biologist's hubris. On the character sheet of the Station Director, however, those exact same budget vetoes are narrated as an agonizing triage forced upon the station by corporate budget cuts from the mainland—cuts that the Director kept secret from the crew to prevent a mutiny during the polar night—combined with a devastating private suspicion that the Geologist intentionally sabotaged Lab Three to destroy evidence of falsified mineral core samples. Meanwhile, on the character sheet of the Junior Technician, the fire is a source of paralyzing personal terror: twenty minutes before the alarm sounded, the Technician slipped into Lab Three to steal medical alcohol for a secret addiction, accidentally knocked over a rack of glass flasks near the heating coil, and fled in the dark without looking back.

Notice the epistemological geometry that has been engineered across these three documents before a single minute of runtime has elapsed. Every one of the three participants possesses a genuine, textual basis for their conviction. The Geologist is not "making up" the vetoed safety requisitions; they are an indisputable historical fact recorded in the Geologist's brief. The Director is not inventing the mainland budget cuts or the anomalous mineral data; they are explicitly documented in the Director's dossier. The Technician is not hallucinating knocking over the flasks. If the designer has further secretly noted in the master design file that the flasks contained harmless saline and that the fire was actually

sparked by a solar geomagnetic storm surging through an ungrounded antenna—a fact known partially only to the Communications Officer, who was asleep at their post—then we have four human beings entering a locked room, each bearing a piece of a puzzle that points with overwhelming subjective certainty toward a different culprit.

When the game commences and the Station Director demands an immediate tribunal to inspect the Geologist's mineral logs, the Geologist does not perceive a rational administrative inquiry; filtering the Director's demand through the pre-game visor of the vetoed wiring requisitions, the Geologist perceives a ruthless tyrant attempting to scapegoat a whistleblower to cover up fatal negligence. The Geologist responds with righteous fury, accusing the Director and the Biologist of burning down the station for corporate profit. Hearing this accusation, the Junior Technician—who believes with every fiber of their being that their own clumsy theft caused the blaze—watches in horrified paralysis as two senior officers tear each other apart over a crime the Technician thinks they committed.

This is the fundamental mechanism of the paratextual engine: *the conversion of informational asymmetry into immediate dramatic kineticism*. No narrator needs to enter the room to announce a plot twist, nor does the facilitator need to hand out mid-game event cards to keep the players talking. Because the pre-game texts have engineered a high-pressure gradient of incompatible beliefs across the ensemble, the simple act of placing these characters in the same physical room guarantees an explosive chain reaction of accusation,

defense, investigation, and moral crisis.

Beyond the refraction of shared historical events, the paratextual engine relies upon a precise calibration of what LARP designers term *relational topography* or *the character web*. In a cast of twenty characters, there are $\frac{20 \times 19}{2} = 190$ possible pairwise dyads. Clearly, no human participant can memorize or meaningfully enact nineteen distinct, deeply textured personal relationships over the course of a three-hour evening. Cognitive load constraints dictate that a player can actively sustain between four and seven primary relational bonds during a single session. Consequently, the designer constructs the ensemble not as an undifferentiated crowd where everyone knows everyone equally, but as a small-world network of overlapping clusters—factions, families, professional guilds, or ideological cells—connected by crucial *bridge characters* who hold membership in two or more otherwise antagonistic spheres.

Within each of these localized clusters, the designer systematically deploys asymmetrical relational hooks to prevent premature equilibrium. We may classify these asymmetrical hooks into three primary dramaturgical archetypes: *Asymmetry of Valuation*, *Asymmetry of Definition*, and *Asymmetry of Dependency*.

In an **Asymmetry of Valuation**, two characters share the same basic factual understanding of their relationship, but assign it radically different weights within their respective Bouletic and emotional hierarchies. On Character A's sheet, Character B is listed at the very top of the relational roster in

a three-paragraph entry saturated with fierce devotion: Character B is the protégé for whom Character A has sacrificed their career, their marriage, and their reputation. On Character B's sheet, however, Character A appears fourth from the bottom in a brisk, two-sentence summary: "Character A is an aging, somewhat clingy patron who helped you secure your first appointment; now that you have the ear of the Chancellor, you find Character A's constant advice increasingly tedious and embarrassing." When play begins, this valuation gap generates immediate, heartbreaking theatrical subtext. Every time Character A approaches Character B expecting intimate solidarity and urgent consultation, Character B offers polite, distracted brush-offs while craning their neck to catch the Chancellor's eye. The resulting hurt, confusion, and eventual eruption of confrontation require no scripted dialogue; they emerge organically from the collision of the two asymmetric valuations.

In an **Asymmetry of Definition**, both parties view the relationship as central and high-stakes, but they inhabit incompatible generic or ontological definitions of what the bond actually is. Suppose Character C and Character D have been exchanging passionate, coded letters for two years across enemy lines. Character C's dossier frames this correspondence as a sublime, tragic romance—a meeting of soulmates transcending political tribalism, culminating in tonight's secret rendezvous where they will finally abandon their causes and elope. Character D's dossier, by contrast, frames the entire two-year correspondence as a cold, masterpiece intelligence operation: Character D is a counter-

espionage handler who has been systematically cultivating Character C as a high-value asset, using romantic rhetoric as standard tradecraft to extract troop movements, though perhaps beginning to feel a dangerous, unwanted twinge of genuine pity for their mark. When the two meet in the alcove five minutes into the game, they are literally speaking different languages while using the exact same vocabulary. When Character C whispers, "I have brought everything we need to be free," referring to railway tickets and wedding rings, Character D hears a promise to hand over the encrypted fortress blueprints. The protracted, agonizing scene in which the two players gradually discover the chasm separating their definitions of the relationship is one of the quintessential aesthetic triumphs of the chamber LARP form.

In an **Asymmetry of Dependency** (or structural triangulation), the designer constructs a non-reciprocal loop of leverage across three or more characters, ensuring that no dyad can resolve its conflict in private isolation. Rather than making Character E and Character F mutually dependent on one another—which would allow the two players to strike a quick, rational bargain in the first ten minutes of play and spend the rest of the evening sitting idle—the designer routes their dependencies through a closed directional cycle ($E \to F \to G \to E$). Character E desperately needs the signature of Character F to validate a royal pardon; however, Character E possesses nothing that Character F wants. Instead, Character F's primary goal requires obtaining a sacred relic currently held by Character G; and Character G's primary goal is to secure the military protection that only Character E's regiment can provide, yet Character G harbors a blood feud against

Character E's family.

By engineering dependencies into transitive loops rather than reciprocal pairs, the paratextual engine forces information and negotiation to travel through intermediaries. To get the signature from Character F, Character E must first discover *what* Character F wants (which requires investigative conversation or eavesdropping), then discover *who* holds that object (Character G), and then figure out how to persuade or coerce a sworn enemy (Character G) into surrendering the relic so that it can be traded to Character F. Every step along this transitive chain forces the participant to cross factional borders, expose portions of their own agenda to untrusted third parties, and recruit temporary brokers who inevitably demand their own cut of epistemic or political capital.

Finally, the paratextual architecture governs the temporal pacing of the narrative through the strategic embedding of *conditional triggers* and *epistemic gating*. Because the designer will not be present inside the diegesis as a narrator to control when the climax occurs, the character sheet itself must often contain internal clocks or conditional permissions. A dossier may instruct a participant: *"You are determined to maintain your composure and protect your spouse's alibi during the preliminary inquiry; however, if you ever hear anyone suggest that your child was involved in the conspiracy, or if the clock strikes ten and the Inspector has still not cleared your name, your patience will snap and you will reveal everything you saw on the balcony."*

Such conditional clauses function as distributed dramaturgical algorithms stored inside the neural hardware of the cast. They

guarantee that the game does not expend all of its explosive revelations in the first fifteen minutes of chaotic conversation, while simultaneously ensuring that crucial information cannot remain buried forever if a particular investigative thread stalls out. Through the synthesis of affective voice, prismatic historiography, asymmetrical relational vectors, transitive dependency loops, and conditional triggers, the pre-game character sheet operates as an extraordinary achievement of decentralized narrative engineering—creating a rich, volatile fictional universe whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

Movement IV: The Sociology and Dramaturgy of the Secret Economy (Expanded Analysis)

Once the paratextual engine has seeded this asymmetrical archive into the minds of the ensemble and the runtime frame commences, the narrative enters a dynamic socio-economic phase governed by the circulation, withholding, and detonation of secrets. To understand the mechanics of this circulation at a rigorous theoretical level, we must bridge the gap between game design praxis and the sociology of information, beginning with Georg Simmel's foundational 1906 monograph *The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies* and extending through Erving Goffman's analysis of *Strategic Interaction* and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

For Simmel, human sociality is predicated upon a paradox of partial knowledge: we can never know another human being completely, yet we must constantly construct coherent mental

images of others in order to interact with them. Within this baseline condition of fragmentary knowledge, the *secret*—defined as the conscious, intentional concealment of realities by one party from another through positive or negative means—introduces what Simmel calls a "second world alongside the obvious world." The existence of a secret immediately reorganizes the spatial and psychological geometry of a room. It divides any gathering into those who are *inside* the circle of knowledge and those who are *outside* on the perimeter. Crucially, Simmel demonstrates that the sociological energy of a secret is governed by a dialectic of two opposing forces: the centripetal impulse of *retention* (the sense of power, superiority, and autonomous personhood derived from possessing exclusive knowledge that others lack) and the centrifugal impulse of *betrayal or confession* (the intoxicating drama of the moment when the barrier is dropped and the hidden world crashes into the manifest world). As Simmel famously observes, the secret is sustained by the consciousness that it *can* be betrayed; kept completely inert without the ever-present possibility of exposure, it loses its psychic tension and ossifies into dead data.

Erving Goffman expands this sociological framework into the micro-politics of face-to-face performance by analyzing how social actors manage *destructive information*—secrets that, if revealed, would discredit or collapse the public definition of the situation ("face") that a performer or a team of performers is currently maintaining on the "front stage." In Goffman's taxonomy, social ensembles are divided by their access to different types of secrets: *dark secrets* (information that a team conceals because it directly contradicts the image they

are projecting to the audience), *strategic secrets* (intentions and plans that a team conceals only until the moment an action is executed, such as a military ambush or a surprise financial bid), and *inside secrets* (knowledge whose possession merely marks an individual as a member of an exclusive group, regardless of its operational utility). Alongside these secrets stand specialized informational roles: the *informer* (who pretends to be a member of the back-stage team in order to leak dark secrets to the audience), the *shill* (who pretends to be an innocent member of the audience while secretly collaborating with the performers), and the *go-between* or broker (who learns the secrets of two opposing teams and claims loyalty to both while manipulating the gap between them).

When we apply the Simmel-Goffman apparatus to the salon LARP, we realize that freeform game design is nothing less than the systematic aestheticization of Goffmanian information management. Every salon LARP constructs an environment in which virtually every participant is simultaneously maintaining a front-stage persona, guarding dark and strategic secrets in the back-stage of their mind, and acting as an informer, shill, or broker across multiple overlapping teams. Yet there is a decisive ontological difference between Goffman's everyday social actors and the participants in a chamber LARP. In real-world corporate politics, diplomacy, or espionage, the primary objective of an actor holding a dark secret is *permanent concealment*: if a real-world embezzler or spy goes to their grave without anyone ever discovering their crime, they have achieved total strategic victory.

In the aesthetic frame of interactive drama, however, permanent concealment is not a victory; it is an artistic catastrophe. This brings us back to the central design problem of the freeform medium: how to construct an informational economy where characters possess dark and strategic secrets that they have every diegetic reason to hide, while ensuring that those very secrets are systematically forced into circulation during the three-hour window of the game. To solve this problem, we must analyze the exact structural anatomy of what happens when a secret fails (*epistemic paralysis*) versus what happens when a secret succeeds (*productive detonation*).

Let us examine the pathology of epistemic paralysis in clinical detail. Why do players hoard secrets even when they know, on an intellectual level, that LARP is a collaborative storytelling medium? The answer lies in the vulnerability of embodied performance and the cognitive default of *defensive play* (or what Nordic LARP theorists call the *survival instinct* of the avatar). When a human being steps into a room of twenty strangers without a script, their only psychological armor is the status, competence, and social leverage granted to them by their character sheet. If a character sheet states that the character is the respected Lord Chancellor, but harbors the dark secret that they accidentally strangled a blackmailer in the garden before dinner, the player immediately perceives that exposing this secret will strip away their social status, terminate their political plots, and potentially result in their character being locked in a side room (or executed) an hour before the game ends. Faced with the threat of *diegetic disenfranchisement*—losing the ability to act meaningfully in

the room—the player instinctively treats the dark secret as a fatal weakness to be armored over.

If the game designer has failed to construct external pressure mechanisms around that secret, the player's defensive armor proves impenetrable. When another player playing the Police Inspector approaches the Lord Chancellor and asks, "Where were you at 7:30 PM?", the Chancellor's player simply improvises a seamless, unprovable lie: "I was in my private study reviewing tax tariffs alone." Because a salon LARP is not a computer game with an environmental physics engine or a tabletop game where a Game Master forces a "Deception vs. Insight" dice roll, the Police Inspector has zero mechanical authority to falsify that statement. The Inspector says, "Ah, very well, my Lord," and walks away. The scene lasted twelve seconds, generated zero emotional friction, and left both players standing in the middle of the room wondering what to do next. Multiplied across twenty characters, defensive hoarding produces the dreaded "cocktail party stagnation" of poorly designed chamber LARPs: a room full of heavily armed epistemic battleships circling one another in polite silence, each waiting for someone else to fire a shot that no one has any incentive to fire.

How, then, does advanced freeform design dismantle defensive hoarding and engineer secrets that *must* be spent? Beyond the foundational principles of fractured triangulation and play-to-lose calibration introduced earlier, master designers construct an intricate **Thermodynamics of Secret Circulation** based upon four structural laws: *The Law of Perishable Value*, *The Law of Necessary Complicity*, *The Law*

of Visible Symptomatology, and *The Law of Escalating Safe-Harbor Aftermath*.

Under **The Law of Perishable Value**, a strategic or dark secret is designed such that its transactional worth decays rapidly toward zero if it is not expended before a specific diegetic milestone. Rather than giving a character a static defensive secret (a shield), the designer frames secrets as offensive or transactional *keys* that can unlock only one specific door during a limited temporal window. Suppose Character A possesses the dark secret that they forged the late Patriarch's final codicil, and also possesses the strategic secret of where the original, authentic will is hidden inside the library paneling. If the designer structures the scenario such that the Family Solicitor will irrevocably execute the forged codicil at 9:30 PM—which happens to disinherit the very sister whom Character A loves most in the world—then the secret of the hidden original will possesses a strict expiration date. Character A cannot sit on the information until the post-game debrief; every minute approaching 9:30 PM increases the pressure on Character A to trade, confess, or conspire to retrieve the authentic document before the Solicitor's gavel falls.

Under **The Law of Necessary Complicity**, a secret is engineered so that its bearer is structurally incapable of resolving the crisis associated with the secret alone. Returning to our Lord Chancellor who strangled the blackmailer in the garden before dinner: in a naive design, the body is already hidden and the crime is complete, allowing the Chancellor to stonewall. In an advanced freeform design,

the character sheet instead states: *"You struck the blackmailer in the conservatory ten minutes ago and locked the door, believing them dead; however, you just realized that your monogrammed signet ring came off in their coat pocket, and the conservatory is scheduled to be unlocked by the Head Butler for the champagne reception in forty minutes. Worse still, you have a crippled leg and cannot physically move the body or pick the conservatory lock by yourself."*

Look at how this simple structural modification transforms a paralyzing secret into a dynamic engine of interaction. The Lord Chancellor *cannot* keep the secret to themselves; if they stay silent for forty minutes, the doors will open and their monogrammed ring will be found on the corpse. To survive, the Chancellor is forced to immediately recruit an accomplice from among the cast—perhaps approaching a morally compromised physician, a loyal estranged bastard child, or a rival politician against whom the Chancellor holds counter-blackmail—and whisper, *"I need your help right now, and if you betray me, we both go down."* The secret is forced out of the solitary skull and into the interpersonal bloodstream within the first five minutes of play, creating an instant Goffmanian back-stage conspiracy team that must now actively plot, distract the Head Butler, and negotiate the massive debt the Chancellor suddenly owes to their newfound accomplice.

Under **The Law of Visible Symptomatology** (or externalized tells), the designer embeds behavioral, material, or social traces of the secret directly into the performative surface of the character or the epistemic briefs of their peers. Instead of

leaving a secret purely internal, the character sheet may mandate a physical prop or a behavioral compulsion—for example, a bloodstained cuff that must be kept hidden under a shawl, a shaking hand caused by withdrawal from an antidote that only one other player in the room carries in their medical bag, or a series of numbered bank bearer bonds that must physically change hands during play. Simultaneously, other characters are given *diagnostic keys* on their sheets: Character M's sheet notes, *"You know as an experienced toxicologist that anyone poisoned with nightshade will exhibit extreme sensitivity to candlelight and an unquenchable thirst within an hour; watch the guests closely during the toast."* By linking internal secrets to observable physical theater, the designer bridges the gap between internal focalization and external focalization, giving observant players concrete signifiers to latch onto and interrogate.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially for neutralizing the player's defensive survival instinct, is **The Law of Escalating Safe-Harbor Aftermath** (often summarized in LARP design theory as *making failure more interesting than success*). A player hoards a secret when they believe that exposure equals the end of their game—that once they are exposed as the spy, the adulterer, or the thief, they will be socially ostracized or locked in a fictional jail cell with nothing left to do for the remaining two hours. To prevent this, a sophisticated salon LARP is engineered so that the exposure of a secret does not *end* the character's participation, but rather *unlocks their second act*.

In many contemporary chamber LARPs, the social or legal

setting is explicitly constructed as a deadlocked equilibrium where immediate physical expulsion or execution is impossible. The characters may be diplomats protected by absolute sovereign immunity, essential specialists aboard a submarine who cannot be locked in the brig without the vessel sinking, or family members bound by a legal stipulation that requires unanimous physical presence in the drawing room until midnight lest the entire fortune escheat to the state. Even more powerfully, when a devastating secret is finally detonated in the middle of the salon—when the matriarch stands up and confesses that she bankrupted the company to pay ransom for her kidnapped grandson—that revelation immediately invalidates the old agendas of six other characters and creates an urgent new political reality. Suddenly, the characters who spent the first hour trying to audit the matriarch's books must pivot to deciding whether to fund the rescue of the grandson, impeach the matriarch, or exploit the family's sudden insolvency. Far from being pushed to the sidelines after confessing, the exposed secret-bearer becomes the gravitational center of the room's most intense emotional scenes. When players trust that surrendering their secrets will be rewarded with an avalanche of rich dramatic engagement rather than ludic elimination, the economy of concealment transforms from a miserly vault into a generous, roaring furnace of theatrical revelation.

Movement V: The Cybernetics of Rumor, Unreliable Testimony, and Emergent Plot (Expanded Analysis)

Building upon the thermodynamic circulation of secrets, we

must now examine how these hidden units of information transform during runtime as they pass through the fallible, biased, and mendacious mouths of twenty interacting participants. In classical narrative theory, the transmission of information from an author to a reader is governed by a reliable communicative channel. Even when a literary text employs an unreliable narrator—such as Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* or Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*—the unreliability is a stable, static textual property designed by an overarching implied author. The reader decodes the narrator's bias by measuring it against the normative baseline of the work, and the underlying facts of the story remain fixed in the author's master record.

In a salon LARP, information transmission does not follow a linear, static conduit; it operates according to the principles of *cybernetic feedback systems* and *informational drift*. When a piece of testimony is spoken aloud in a noisy, crowded drawing room, it is instantly subjected to acoustic degradation, selective listening, confirmation bias, emotional distortion, and strategic reframing. This communicative process resembles the children's parlor game of telephone, but with a crucial qualitative difference: in a salon LARP, every link in the telephone chain has its own urgent Bouletic agenda, its own paranoid suspicions, and its own deliberate desire to manipulate the narrative for political or personal gain.

To formalize this phenomenon, we must analyze the mechanics of **Epistemic Drift** and **Cybernetic Amplification** within closed-room ensembles. Let us trace a

detailed runtime scenario to observe how an initial, relatively minor piece of information undergoes runaway magnification as it traverses three distinct conversational hops.

Imagine a salon LARP set in an eighteenth-century aristocratic manor where the elderly Count has just suffered a sudden stroke. In the designer's master file (TAW_{Pre}), the Count's stroke was a purely natural medical event caused by high blood pressure, though the family physician administered an experimental sedative at 8:00 PM to calm his nerves.

- **Hop Zero (The Source):** The Physician whispers to the Steward in the hallway at 8:15 PM: *"I gave the Count a double dose of the poppy extract to quiet his spasms; I pray his weak heart holds out until morning."*
- **Hop One (The First Intermediary):** The Steward, who secretly owes massive gambling debts to the rival Baron and is desperate to secure a loan, overhears the Physician's medical disclosure through a slightly paranoid lens. The Steward interprets the word "poppy extract" not as a therapeutic sedative, but as deliberate poisoning. Five minutes later, the Steward approaches the Baron in the library and whispers a heavily distorted version of Hop Zero: *"I have just learned from the inside that the Count was given a mysterious substance by the Physician; it is far worse than a stroke."* Notice that the Steward has not technically told a complete lie—he did hear that a substance was given—but by stripping away the medical context and

adding insinuation, he has transformed a therapeutic treatment into a suspicious anomaly.

- **Hop Two (The Second Intermediary):** The Baron, whose character sheet notes that he has long suspected the Physician of being a foreign spy, seizes upon the Steward's hint with intense confirmation bias. Two minutes later, the Baron encounters the Count's eldest daughter in the grand gallery and states with grave, performative certainty: *"My dear, I have confirmed from multiple independent sources that your father was deliberately poisoned by the Physician on the direct orders of the rival faction."*
- **Hop Three (The Terminal Explosion):** The daughter, already half-crazed with grief and terror, absorbs the Baron's assertion as absolute, unassailable truth. Rushing into the drawing room where twenty guests are gathered, the daughter falls to her knees and screams that the family has been massacred by a treasonous assassin.

Within twenty-five minutes, the Physician's modest, professionally vulnerable medical confession has been magnified through three recursive feedback loops into an unmitigated political crisis. More importantly, what happens next in the Runtime Performative Actual World (TAW_{Run}) completely overwrites the designer's original intention. Fearing for her safety, the Physician—who knows nothing of how her words were twisted in the library—sees twenty armed guards rushing toward her and panics, drawing a concealed dagger and bolting for the

courtyard doors. This physical act of flight is witnessed by the entire room as definitive, smoking-gun proof of her guilt. The guards tackle her, tie her hands, and lock her in the cellar.

An emergent narrative has been successfully born. The designer never wrote a poisoning plot into the game; the designer merely wrote an aging Count with high blood pressure and an anxious physician. Yet through the cascading amplification of unreliable testimony, selective deafness, and institutional paranoia, the ensemble collectively authored a dramatic conspiracy trial that dominated the final two hours of the evening.

This dynamic illustrates why the salon LARP stands as a triumph of **Emergent Narrative Systems**. In digital gaming, "emergent narrative" is frequently used to describe how algorithmic rules (such as procedural generation or physics engines) produce unexpected combinations of game states. In interactive drama, emergence is *social and cognitive*: it is the byproduct of bounded human consciousnesses attempting to navigate an ambiguous informational environment using limited, biased tools.

Every participant in the room is simultaneously an unreliable narrator and an active consumer of unverified testimony. Because characters must act—they must make accusations, sign treaties, profess love, and deploy leverage—they cannot afford the luxury of Cartesian skepticism. A player cannot pause the game for forty-five minutes to conduct forensic lab tests on a rumor; they must make high-stakes decisions in real time based on whatever partial, distorted version of reality

has currently reached their ears. When those decisions are enacted in the shared physical space, they force every other character to react, embedding the rumor deeper into the objective reality of the world. The falsehood becomes a fact; the hallucinated conspiracy becomes the political reality that must be managed. In this fashion, the salon LARP demonstrates that human history and dramatic plot alike are rarely driven by the orderly revelation of absolute truth, but rather by the compounding, self-fulfilling momentum of collective misunderstanding.

Movement VI: The Aesthetics of First-Person Dramatic Irony and Split Subjectivity (Expanded Analysis)

The culmination of this epistemic complexity brings us back to the psychological and aesthetic core of the participant's experience: the management of dramatic irony without an external auditorium. In our earlier theoretical outline, we noted that the absence of a non-participating audience is compensated for by the phenomenon of *First-Person Audiencehood* and *split subjectivity* (double consciousness). Here, we must expand this analysis into a rigorous exploration of how players actively curate, enjoy, and weaponize ironic distance during live performance.

In traditional dramatic theory, dramatic irony is a static gift bestowed by the author upon the spectator. Sophocles knows that Oedipus is the killer of Laius; the Athenian audience in the Dionysian amphitheatre knows it; Oedipus does not know it. The aesthetic pleasure of the spectator derives from

observing the painful discrepancy between the hero's confident subjective certainty ($K_{Oedipus}$) and the cataclysmic objective reality (TAW). The spectator savors this discrepancy from a safe distance across the footlights, untouched by the moral terror engulfing the stage.

In a salon LARP, that safe distance is annihilated. The participant is simultaneously the actor standing on the stage and the spectator sitting in the house. This dual consciousness generates an intense, exhilarating psychological state that Nordic LARP theorists term *bleed*—specifically, epistemic and emotional bleed, wherein the boundaries between the player's awareness and the character's focalization become porous and mutually transformative.

Let us analyze the two primary modalities through which players manipulate this split subjectivity during play: **Intra-Diachronic Irony Generation** and **Ironic Steering**.

Intra-Diachronic Irony Generation occurs when a player utilizes their out-of-character knowledge of the overarching relational web to engineer exquisite moments of subtextual tension during face-to-face dialogue. Suppose Player A knows from reading the master relationship chart (or from brief out-of-character conversations with the designer) that Character B—the seemingly mild-mannered librarian sitting across the tea table—is secretly the revolutionary leader planning to blow up the parliament at midnight. Character A's *character*, however, is a loyalist bureaucrat who believes the librarian is a harmless scholar.

In a poorly calibrated role-playing environment, a player

possessing this out-of-character knowledge might commit the cardinal sin of "metagaming"—abruptly arresting the librarian five minutes into the game and ruining the narrative pacing. In a sophisticated salon LARP, the experienced participant uses that exact same meta-knowledge to construct an artistic masterpiece of dramatic irony. The player consciously suppresses their character's awareness, adopts a posture of warm, innocent trust, and leans across the tea table to say: *"Professor, these are troubling times; thank goodness we have loyal, quiet scholars like you in the archives, far away from the radical violence tearing the capital apart."*

For the player of Character A, the aesthetic thrill of this moment is immense. They are tasting the ironic flavor of the line from both sides: they feel the warm, trusting sincerity of the loyal bureaucrat, while simultaneously experiencing the delicious, chilling subtext of knowing that the quiet scholar is fingering the detonator in their pocket. Across the table, the librarian's player—who also recognizes the irony—slows their breathing, takes a sip of tea, and replies with a thin, polite smile: *"Indeed, my Lord. Still, we must always remember that the quietest corners often conceal the most profound transformations."* The two players are collaborating in real time to build a cathedral of shared dramatic irony, savoring the micro-second-by-micro-second friction between what is being said and what is known.

This leads directly into the second modality: **Ironic Steering**. In traditional dramatic performance, an actor is expected to submerge their own identity entirely into the character, acting as a transparent vehicle for the author's script. In chamber

LARP, the player acts as a *director of their own character's tragedy*. When a player realizes that their character is heading blindly toward a catastrophic trap—perhaps because the player has pieced together clues from three different conversations that their spouse is about to betray them—the player faces a crucial aesthetic choice. In a defensive mode, the player could steer the character *away* from the trap to ensure survival. In the artistic framework of First-Person Audiencehood, however, the player frequently chooses the opposite path: they deliberately steer the character *deeper* into the blind spot, because they recognize that the resulting emotional wreckage will create a more powerful, memorable narrative for everyone involved.

When the betrayed spouse walks straight into the study, ignores the obvious warning signs, and hands their signature over to the treacherous partner, the player is executing a deliberate sacrifice of the avatar for the sake of the aesthetic experience. The player *wants* to feel the emotional impact of the betrayal; they *want* the room to gasp when the truth comes to light. This willingness to play to lose—to act as an intelligent co-creator of one's own downfall—distinguishes salon LARP from almost every other competitive or ludic medium. The participant embraces double consciousness not as a cognitive burden, but as an aesthetic instrument, stepping inside the epistemic labyrinth to experience the terror of blindness while simultaneously holding the golden thread of irony in their hand.

Movement VII: Polyphonic Ontologies and the Retrospective Constellation (Expanded Analysis)

The culmination of our journey through the architecture of epistemic asymmetry, paratextual seeding, secret thermodynamics, unreliable testimony, and first-person dramatic irony brings us directly back to the overarching ontological question with which we opened this inquiry: what, precisely, is the narrative of a salon LARP? When the game concludes, the facilitator calls "time out," the artificial lighting of the room returns to standard brilliance, and twenty human beings step out of their fictional masks, where does the story they have just enacted actually reside? Can a freeform chamber LARP legitimately be understood as a single, unified narrative whose disparate pieces were merely scattered across the physical space like a jigsaw puzzle waiting for a final reassembly? Or does the radical decentralization of knowledge produce an ontological mutation so profound that we must abandon the concept of the unified plot altogether, reconceptualizing the salon LARP as an irreducible constellation of overlapping, autonomous, and occasionally irreconcilable subjective stories?

To resolve this question, narrative theory must engage fully with the philosophical and literary framework developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his revolutionary analyses of Dostoevskian poetics and the dialogic imagination. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin established a fundamental distinction between the *monologic* artwork and the *polyphonic* (or dialogic) artwork. In a monologic work—which encompasses

the vast majority of classical epics, lyric poetry, conventional theatre, and traditional narrative cinema—regardless of how diverse, conflicted, or passionate the characters appear, their voices remain ultimately subordinated to a single, overarching authorial consciousness. The monologic author possesses a "surplus of vision" that encompasses all characters; the characters are objects of authorial representation whose ideological disputes, moral failures, and emotional struggles are eventually synthesized, judged, or resolved within a unified narrative design. Even when a monologic author deploys multiple viewpoints, those viewpoints are arranged hierarchically beneath the transcendent roof of an authoritative narrator who knows the truth of the fiction from beginning to end.

In a genuinely polyphonic work, by contrast, Bakhtin argues that the author surrenders this finalizing monologic monopoly. A polyphonic structure consists of a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, each possessing equal rights and each inhabiting its own fully valid world. The characters in a polyphonic text are not mere objects in the author's hands, but autonomous subjects of their own directly signifying discourse. They interact dialogically on a plane where no transcendent voice steps in to pronounce a final, objective verdict. As Bakhtin writes, Dostoevsky's characters are "not only objects of authorial discourse, but subjects of their own directly signifying discourse." Their consciousnesses do not merge into a single authorial synthesis; instead, they enter into eternal, unresolved dialogic tension, questioning, refuting, and illuminating one another without losing their distinct autonomy.

For decades, post-classical narratologists have debated whether true Bakhtinian polyphony is ever strictly attainable within the medium of the printed novel, given that every word on the page—whether spoken by Ivan Karamazov, Raskolnikov, or the Grand Inquisitor—still passes through the single material funnel of the historical novelist's pen and is received sequentially by a single reader. The salon LARP, however, accomplishes what the novel can only simulate: it translates Bakhtinian polyphony from a literary metaphor into a literal, material, and embodied ontology. In a freeform chamber LARP, the plurality of unmerged consciousnesses is not an artistic illusion crafted by a single writer; it is a physical reality enacted by twenty distinct human minds operating simultaneously within a shared spatial chronotope. Once the designer surrenders the text at the threshold of play, the monologic surplus of vision vanishes entirely. Every participant becomes the sovereign center of their own narrative universe—an autonomous focalizer synthesizing sensory inputs, memory shards, and emotional crises into a coherent first-person dramatic arc.

Consider again the radical divergence that occurs across a three-hour salon LARP set in a besieged diplomatic embassy during a revolution. If we examine the lived experience of three participants—Player X, Player Y, and Player Z—who occupied the exact same physical building for one hundred and eighty minutes, we discover three entirely distinct narrative universes.

- **Player X**, portraying a disillusioned intelligence officer, spent the majority of the evening in the dimly

lit basement archives and the stairwell, engaged in a tense, claustrophobic cat-and-mouse game of blackmail and document forgery with two other spies, culminating in a quiet, devastating moment of mutual self-sacrifice where they burned the agency's master cipher to protect an innocent informant. For Player X, the genre of the evening was a gritty espionage thriller, its emotional spine was the redemption of a cynical soul, and its climax occurred at 10:15 PM by the basement furnace.

- **Player Y**, portraying the Ambassador's estranged spouse, never once descended the basement stairs and had no idea that an intelligence cipher even existed in the building. Player Y spent the entire three hours in the grand ballroom and the adjoining conservatory, navigating an agonizing chamber drama of marital infidelity, generational trauma, and bitter inheritance disputes with four members of the aristocratic family, reaching a shattering emotional climax at 10:40 PM when they publicly tore up their marriage contract during a champagne toast. For Player Y, the intelligence officers occasionally walking past the ballroom doors were mere atmospheric background extras—nameless figures in dark coats who briefly interrupted a domestic tragedy.
- **Player Z**, portraying an idealistic young revolutionary infiltrator disguised as a catering servant, moved fluidly between the kitchen, the hallway, and the perimeter of the ballroom. Player Z overheard

> fragments of the aristocratic marital collapse and witnessed one of the spies slipping a forged passport into a coat pocket, yet interpreted both events purely as symptoms of bourgeois decadence justifying the imminent artillery bombardment scheduled for midnight. For Player Z, the evening was a revolutionary political parable about class solidarity and ideological resolve.

If we ask after the game has ended, "What was the story of the Embassy LARP?", any attempt to reduce the event to a single unified narrative immediately commits structural violence against the lived aesthetic reality of the participants. In Player X's story, the Ambassador's spouse is a non-entity; in Player Y's story, the burning of the cipher never happened; in Player Z's story, both the spies and the aristocrats were minor obstacles in a narrative of proletarian liberation. Crucially, these three narratives are not merely three different viewpoints on the *same* sequence of events, after the manner of a multi-perspective novel where characters offer conflicting reports of a shared crime. Rather, because the participants were physically distributed across different rooms and acoustically isolated within different conversational clusters, they literally enacted and witnessed *different sequences of events* that overlapped only at brief, contingent points of intersection.

A salon LARP is therefore best theorized not as a unified line, nor even as a branching tree, but as a **Polyphonic Topology** or a **Constellation of Overlapping Subjective Stories**. Within this topology, every character's trajectory constitutes a

complete, self-contained narrative filament with its own exposition, rising action, peripeteia, and denouement. Yet these filaments are not hermetically isolated inside separate black boxes; they are woven together through a dense mesh of causal and epistemic nodes. When Player X burns the cipher in the basement at 10:15 PM, that action causes the embassy's telegraph lines to go dead at 10:20 PM; when the telegraph goes dead, the Ambassador in the ballroom panics and demands immediate liquidation of the family trust to bribe the border guards; and that sudden financial demand is the exact catalyst that pushes Player Y, the estranged spouse, to tear up the marriage contract at 10:40 PM. Player Y never learns *why* the Ambassador suddenly demanded the trust fund at 10:25 PM, and Player X never learns that burning the cipher destroyed a thirty-year marriage upstairs. The causal energy transfers seamlessly across the nodes of the network while the epistemic content remains localized within each subjective filament.

This architecture allows us to synthesize our entire inquiry into a comprehensive **Framework of Distributed Narrative Knowledge**, mapping the operational lifecycle of the freeform narrative across three distinct ontological phases:

1. **Phase One: Paratextual Seeding (The Fractured Archive)** — The designer constructs a cohesive pre-game universe and intentionally subjects it to epistemic fragmentation, calibrating the ratio of shared public lore to private, asymmetrical, and contradictory knowledge sets ($K_1, K_2, \dots, K_n$). The narrative exists here as a modal matrix of

unfulfilled potentials.

2. **Phase Two: Kinetic Negotiation (The Polyphonic Runtime)** — Participants step into the diegesis and activate the matrix through simultaneous, multi-center internal focalization. Information operates as a scarce thermodynamic resource; secrets are leaked, traded, and detonated; unreliable testimonies and cognitive biases collide to generate emergent plots; and participants navigate the space via First-Person Audiencehood and double consciousness.
3. **Phase Three: Retrospective Synthesis (The Dialogic Debrief)** — The fictional frame dissolves, and participants gather for the formal debrief and "war stories." Here, players attempt to pool their partial Epistemic Worlds into a retrospective zero focalization, uncovering hidden connections, retroactive ironies, and structural counter-plots.

Yet even in this final phase of retrospective synthesis, the dream of a single, unified master narrative proves to be an illusion. As the twenty participants compare notes, it becomes clear that no amount of post-hoc testimony can ever fully reconstruct the totality of what transpired. Conversations in whispered corners cannot be reproduced in their exact emotional nuance; the internal psychological struggles of a player who spent forty minutes wrestling with a moral dilemma remain untranslatable; and even shared conversations diverge in memory.

Rather than collapsing the twenty subjective filaments into a

single authoritative text, the post-game exchange of war stories multiplies the narrative further, generating a fourth layer of dialogic meaning: the story of *how our stories missed, grazed, and transformed one another*. The participants come to realize that the aesthetic magic of the evening depended entirely upon the fact that they *did not know* the whole truth while it was happening. The incompleteness of each participant's perspective was not a flaw to be corrected, but the very condition of possibility that allowed twenty distinct works of art to blossom simultaneously within the same four walls.

In the final analysis, the salon LARP stands as one of the most radical narrative experiments in contemporary culture precisely because it refuses the comfort of the panoptic eye. By dismantling the proscenium arch, silencing the omniscient narrator, and distributing fractured, contradictory archives of knowledge across an ensemble of autonomous focalizers, freeform interactive drama transforms epistemology into dramaturgy. It proves that a fictional world does not require a central sovereign voice to hold it together; on the contrary, a world feels most viscerally alive when its inhabitants must grope through the fog of partial information, testing their private histories against the opaque intentions of others, trading secrets as lifelines, and authoring emergent realities out of mistaken beliefs. In a salon LARP, no one ever sees the whole play, because there is no single play to see. There is only the vibrant, fragile, and irreducibly plural web of human interaction—a shared room where everyone knows a different story, and where the collision of those incomplete stories is the very essence of drama.

Clara Whitlock

Clara Whitlock works in community oral-history projects and has been an enthusiastic salon LARP participant since her early twenties. She is fascinated by the ways groups construct different versions of a shared event, particularly when no individual possesses enough information to understand the entire story. Her scenario designs favor conflicting testimonies, imperfect memories, and characters who sincerely believe incompatible things. Whitlock has facilitated storytelling workshops for adults and young people, drawing on practical experience rather than a conventional academic career. At home she keeps boxes of fictional letters, family trees, and correspondence from games that ended years ago. She insists these are research materials, although their storage requirements suggest a second occupation.

Playing the Unreliable Text:
AI, Horror Freeform Interactive Drama Salon LARP, and Interpretive Ambiguity in the EFL Literature Classroom

Brian David Phillips

Introduction: The Room That Holds Two Truths at Once

Picture a classroom in Taipei on a humid Tuesday afternoon. A student playing John in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" insists, with the gentle condescension of late nineteenth-century medical authority, that nothing is wrong with his wife. Another student, playing the narrator, has just finished describing the woman who creeps along the floor behind the wallpaper and slips outside in the daytime to crawl across the lawn. A third student, playing Jennie, watches the exchange and decides whether to keep what she has seen to herself. The room holds two contradictory truths at once, and nobody is allowed to resolve them. The teacher does not step in to declare which student has read the story correctly. What you are looking at, in that moment, is the architecture of literary interpretation made visible. Every speaker holds a partial truth. Every listener weighs evidence. The text sits on the desk, closed for now, waiting for the debrief that will follow.

That moment of doubled reality is what this essay is about, and the working argument can be stated plainly. AI-supported horror freeform LARPs deepen EFL learners' literary

interpretation by allowing them to perform ambiguity, unreliability, and conflicting perspectives rather than merely identify them analytically. The umbrella claim is equally direct. AI does not replace literary pedagogy or LARP design. AI expands the teacher's capacity to generate playable structures, differentiated roles, and language-rich scenarios, while the teacher remains responsible for interpretation, classroom fit, and reflective learning. The phrase to hold onto, for our purposes throughout the essay, is teacher's capacity. Capacity is not autonomy. Capacity is the size of the toolbox the teacher gets to bring to class.

The Pedagogical Problem

EFL literature classrooms tend, under perfectly understandable pressures, to push students toward a single correct reading of a text. Time is short. The cognitive load of reading literary English in a second language is real and well-documented in research on working memory and language processing (Sweller). Assessment regimes, especially those tied to college entrance examinations or international proficiency tests, reward students who produce the expected interpretation efficiently. Teachers who have stood at the front of an EFL classroom know the gentle gravitational pull toward closure. A student says something half-formed about the narrator. The teacher, wanting to be helpful, completes the thought. The class moves on. The ambiguity has been managed.

Horror and weird fiction resist that move. Their meaning lives in irresolution. The Tudor governess in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* either sees ghosts or descends into a hallucination that endangers the children in her care, and the

text refuses, with a precision bordering on cruelty, to let the reader pick. Gilman's narrator either shares the room with a supernatural presence or constructs that presence out of the wreckage of her own confined mind. Shirley Jackson's villagers either share a single belief about the lottery or harbor private horrors they cannot voice. The educational opportunity these texts present is precisely what makes them so hard to teach in EFL. They demand that students hold multiple readings simultaneously, in a second language, while resisting the very habit of comprehension that has gotten them this far.

The Intervention

Theatre-style interactive drama freeform LARP, supported by AI-generated role briefs, lets students perform ambiguity from the inside. You are not asking them to identify unreliability as a feature of the text. You are asking them to be unreliable, and to meet other unreliabilities in the room. Every character in a well-designed scenario carries a partial reading of events. Every encounter between characters is a small interpretive negotiation. The classroom becomes, for the duration of the play, a machine for producing readings that differ from one another along axes the teacher has chosen in advance.

The educational move that makes the form work is the debrief. Students travel from "my character believed this" to "the text supports or complicates this interpretation." That single sentence, spoken in roughly that order, is the entire pedagogical action of the unit. Students who have just spent ninety minutes inside a partial truth find that the analytical move from belief to evidence becomes available to them in a

way it rarely is when they have only read the story silently. The play has given them an appetite for the argument.

Roadmap

The argument unfolds across nine further sections. Section two takes up the literary-theoretical ground, asking why ambiguity in horror and weird fiction has the structure it does, and why that structure is particularly difficult for EFL learners to handle through analytical instruction alone. Section three bridges from literary theory to performance pedagogy, showing how reader-response theory and unreliable narration scholarship anticipate the move into embodiment. Section four locates theatre-style freeform LARP as a designed form with two decades of educational practice behind it. Section five takes up the role of AI as a co-designer, with attention to what it does well, what it does badly, and what the teacher must continue to do regardless. Section six walks through the design architecture required to turn an ambiguous source text into a runnable classroom freeform. Section seven offers four worked examples drawn from "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The Turn of the Screw*, Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space," and Jackson's "The Lottery." Section eight takes up the debrief in detail, since the debrief is where the analytical learning happens. Section nine treats limitations, ethics, and considerations specific to the EFL context. Section ten consolidates and gestures forward.

What you will find, you may find, is that the argument develops in widening loops. The same claim is made at the level of theory, at the level of design, at the level of worked example, and at the level of debrief practice. The repetition is intentional. The room of partial truths is not a single insight. It is a habit that has to settle into the bones of the curriculum.

The Problem of Ambiguity in Horror and Weird Fiction

Let's get started with the texts themselves. The literary-theoretical ground is the first thing to lay down, because everything that follows depends on a clear sense of what these stories actually do and why their ambiguity is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be inhabited.

Two Questions, Not One

The standard EFL comprehension question, "What happened in the story?", collapses on these texts. It is the wrong question, asked in the wrong key. When a student answers the standard question for "The Yellow Wallpaper," they typically produce some version of the following: a woman is locked in a room, she goes mad, she imagines a woman behind the wallpaper, and at the end she crawls around the room. The summary is not exactly wrong, but every word in it has been chosen to resolve an ambiguity the text refuses to resolve. "Locked" assumes coercion the narrator describes ambiguously. "Goes mad" assumes a psychological diagnosis. "Imagines" assumes the woman is not real. The summary smuggles a reading in under the cover of plot description.

The richer question for these stories is "Whose version of reality do we believe, and what is at stake in believing it?" That question opens the text rather than closing it. It treats the central interpretive uncertainty as the subject of study rather than as an obstacle to comprehension. The shift in question is small. The shift in pedagogical possibility is enormous.

Todorov's Hesitation

Tzvetan Todorov's structuralist account of fantastic fiction provides a starting frame. In *The Fantastic*, originally published in French in 1970 and translated into English by Richard Howard in 1975, Todorov locates the genre in a specific kind of hesitation. The fantastic, on his account, is the experience of a person who knows only the laws of nature confronting an event that appears supernatural; the genre lives in the moment of doubt before the reader chooses between a natural explanation (the uncanny) and a supernatural one (the marvelous) (Todorov 25). The fantastic ends when the choice is made. Stories that preserve hesitation indefinitely are pure fantastic. Stories that resolve toward natural causes become uncanny. Stories that resolve toward supernatural causes become marvelous.

Todorov's framework matters for our purposes because it names the precise pedagogical move the EFL classroom usually performs without noticing. When the teacher resolves the question for the student, the fantastic collapses. The text becomes either a story about madness or a story about ghosts, and the interpretive richness, which lived in the uncollapsed state, is gone. The horror freeform, by contrast, distributes the hesitation across the room. Some characters resolve toward the uncanny. Some resolve toward the marvelous. Some sit in the hesitation. The structure of the genre and the structure of the play match.

Carroll on the Cognitive Structure of Horror

Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* extends the analytical reach into questions of cognitive engagement. Carroll defines what he calls "art-horror" as a

specific emotional response to fictional monsters that combine threat with category violation, things that are at once dangerous and impure (Carroll 28). His framework is useful here for one reason in particular. Carroll distinguishes carefully between what a character believes about a monster, what the reader believes about the monster, and what the implied author appears to believe. These three layers can come apart, and when they do, you have the cognitive structure of unreliable horror narration.

In Gilman, the narrator believes the woman behind the wallpaper is real. The reader receives the story through the narrator's perceptions and must decide whether to share them. The implied author has constructed a frame that allows the reader to read against the narrator without requiring them to do so. The freeform mirrors this triple structure with three layers of its own. The character believes one thing. The student playing the character holds their own out-of-character readerly response. The class, when it convenes for debrief, looks at what the implied author has built. That triple structure is what makes the form a genuine engine of literary interpretation rather than a pleasant theatrical exercise.

Fisher's Weird and Eerie

Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie*, published shortly before his death in 2017 by Repeater Books, gives us a vocabulary for two related but distinct modes that recur in this corpus (Fisher 9). The weird, for Fisher, is the sensation produced by something that does not belong, an alien presence within a familiar frame, a Lovecraftian fungus among the roses. The eerie is the sensation of a failure of presence or absence, a question of why something is here

when it should not be, or why something is missing when it should be there. The eerie question, on Fisher's account, has the form "Who or what is responsible for this?" and the unsettling answer is often "We do not know."

Fisher's distinction lights up the source texts for our purposes. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is largely weird, an alien presence creeping in a familiar room. "The Turn of the Screw" is largely eerie, the question being whether something is present or absent, and whose interpretive failure has produced the ambiguity. Lovecraft is weirdness with a vengeance. Jackson's "The Lottery" produces an eerie effect because something terrible is present where nothing should be, and no one can say who is responsible for keeping it there. When students play characters in these scenarios, the design choices around the weird and the eerie show up as different mechanic options, which we will work through in section six.

Why EFL Learners Struggle Here

The cognitive load of holding ambiguity in a second language is genuinely heavy. John Sweller's foundational work on cognitive load theory established that working memory has narrow limits and that instructional design must be sensitive to those limits (Sweller 257). Reading a difficult literary text in L2 already loads working memory with vocabulary lookup, syntactic parsing, and inferential comprehension. Adding the metacognitive demand of holding two interpretations of the same event simultaneously is, for many students, more than the system can carry without scaffolding.

Gillian Lazar's *Literature and Language Teaching*, published by Cambridge in 1993 and still a standard reference in the

field, surveys the pedagogical strategies that EFL teachers use to bring literary texts within reach of language learners (Lazar 24). Geoff Hall's more recent *Literature in Language Education*, published by Palgrave in 2015 in its second edition, updates the conversation with attention to digital tools and contemporary classroom practice (Hall 76). Amos Paran's evidence-based survey in *Language Teaching* provides the most thorough audit of what research actually supports about literature in instructed foreign language learning, and his careful treatment of the gap between teacher enthusiasm and student response is worth reading slowly (Paran 469). Across these sources, a consistent pattern emerges. EFL students often default to dictionary literalism when faced with ambiguous prose. They look up words, they assemble plot, and they hand back a reading that resolves the text against the grain of its own design. The default is not a failure of intelligence. The default is what working memory does when it is at the edge of its capacity.

The Interpretive Opportunity

When the text resists single readings, every student's partial reading becomes legitimate raw material. This is genuinely a gift in mixed-proficiency classrooms because it democratizes contribution. A student whose English is not yet strong enough to articulate a full interpretive argument can still hold and voice a partial truth from inside a character. A student at higher proficiency can play the same role with more verbal texture. The form is forgiving at the level of language and demanding at the level of stance. That combination is rare in EFL pedagogy and worth preserving.

The classroom that takes ambiguity seriously is also a classroom that prepares students for the kinds of texts they will encounter in higher education and beyond. Modernist short fiction, postcolonial unreliable narration, magical realism, contemporary autofiction, and the canonical horror corpus all share a commitment to unresolved interpretation. A student who has learned, through play, that holding two truths at once is a feature rather than a bug has acquired a transferable interpretive skill. That skill is what literature instruction is supposed to deliver, and what it often fails to deliver under the time pressures that govern most EFL classrooms.

The argument so far establishes that horror and weird fiction reward an interpretive stance the standard EFL classroom rarely supports, and that the cost of asking students to identify ambiguity analytically in L2 is high. The next section moves from literary theory to performance pedagogy, showing why embodiment offers a route into these texts that analysis alone does not.

Reader-Response, Unreliable Narration, and Why Performance Matters

Now we are going to take the bridge from literary theory to performance pedagogy carefully, because the move from analysis to embodiment is sometimes treated as a soft option, and it is not. Performance, when designed well, is a deeper engagement with the same theoretical claims that reader-response and unreliable-narration scholarship have been making for decades. The freeform does not sidestep theory. It literalizes it.

Iser's Gaps and Rosenblatt's Transaction

Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1978, argues that meaning lives in the encounter between text and reader, in the gaps that the text leaves for the reader to fill (Iser 169). The text is a structure of indeterminacies. The reader, drawing on prior experience and inferential work, completes the structure. No two readers complete it identically, and the text is not the same object before and after the act of reading. Iser's German phenomenological vocabulary can sound abstract, but the working idea is concrete. A novel is a partly drawn map. The reader walks across it and the walking is what makes the map into a place.

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, articulated in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, published by Southern Illinois University Press in the same year, develops a parallel account from a different intellectual lineage (Rosenblatt 18). Rosenblatt distinguishes between efferent reading, which extracts information for use elsewhere, and aesthetic reading, which dwells in the experience of the text. The aesthetic stance, on her account, is a transaction between a particular reader and a particular text under particular circumstances. No reading is universal. Every reading is situated.

Both theories anticipate the move that the freeform makes literal. The gap that Iser describes becomes a scene. The transaction that Rosenblatt describes becomes a conversation between two characters whose readings of events do not match. The theoretical claim is not modified by the performance. The performance gives the claim a body.

Unreliable Narration as a Critical Tradition

The concept of unreliable narration enters narrative theory through Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1961. Booth defines a narrator as reliable when he or she speaks for the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), and unreliable when he or she does not (Booth 158-59). The relational structure matters. Unreliability is not a property of the narrator alone. It is a relationship between narrator, implied author, and reader.

James Phelan's *Living to Tell About It*, published by Cornell University Press in 2005, extends Booth's framework into a more granular taxonomy. Phelan distinguishes between unreliability along axes of facts and events, knowledge and perception, and ethics and evaluation, and within each axis between misreporting, underreporting, misreading, underreading, misregarding, and underregarding (Phelan 49). The taxonomy may sound baroque, and it is, but the underlying point is simple. Narrators can be unreliable in different ways for different reasons, and pedagogy that treats unreliability as a single yes-or-no flag misses most of what the technique can do.

Ansgar Nünning's cognitive turn, articulated across several essays in the late 1990s including his contribution to *Recent Trends in Narratological Research* edited by John Pier and published by the Université de Tours in 1999, locates unreliability in the gap between the implied reader's frame and the narrator's reported frame (Nünning 69). Unreliability, on this account, is something the reader infers when textual signals fail to align with what the reader takes the implied

author to want. The reader's interpretive labor produces the unreliability rather than discovering it ready-made in the text.

The freeform turns this triangle of narrator, implied author, and reader into a room of people. Each player holds a frame. The frames do not match. The text sits offstage as the implied author. The class, in debrief, reconstructs the gap and names what the text was doing.

The Limits of Analytical Instruction

When you ask EFL students "Is the narrator reliable?" you are asking them to perform a sophisticated metacognitive operation in a second language while parsing a difficult text. Many students bounce off the question because the question itself loads working memory beyond capacity. The standard response, if the student gives one at all, is something like "She is unreliable because she imagines the woman in the wall." That answer is not exactly wrong, but it is not yet an interpretation. It is a paraphrase of a teacher's hint.

Performance lets students inhabit the operation before they have to name it. A student who has spent ninety minutes playing the husband John, gently dismissing his wife's concerns and frowning at her diary, has acquired a working model of how an implied author can position a narrator that the reader is meant to read against. The student now has somewhere to stand when the analytical question is asked. They have lived inside the gap that Nünning describes. The gap is no longer an abstract noun. The gap is the moment when their character said something the player knew was wrong.

Embodied Cognition

The cognitive science literature on embodied learning supports this move. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1980, established that abstract concepts are routinely understood through bodily metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 14). Arthur Glenberg's research program on embodied cognition, summarized in articles such as his contribution to *WIREs Cognitive Science*, demonstrates that language comprehension recruits motor and perceptual systems, and that learning anchored in physical action produces stronger retention than learning that does not (Glenberg 587). When a student speaks lines as a character, the meaning lands in posture, breath, and inflection, not just on the page. When the student later writes about the text, the sensory memory of having stood next to another student and disagreed in character travels with the analysis.

The mechanism, for our purposes, is not mysterious. The body is a memory system. A claim about a text that has been physically performed has more cognitive purchase than a claim that has only been silently encoded. EFL students, who are already working at the boundary of their linguistic capacity, benefit disproportionately from anchoring claims in physical performance because the performance offloads some of the load onto systems other than verbal working memory.

The Practitioner's Claim

The case for performance pedagogy is not new in the LARP literature. Sarah Lynne Bowman's *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, published by McFarland in 2010, argues that role-playing supports identity exploration, problem-solving,

and community formation in ways that other forms of learning do not (Bowman, *Functions* 13). Bowman's work, alongside the broader corpus of nordic larp scholarship and the Wyrd Con companion books edited by Bowman and Aaron Vanek, establishes a body of practitioner-scholarship that takes role-playing seriously as a developmental and pedagogical form. What this body of work shows, again and again, is that the embodied character produces cognitive and affective effects that exceed what reading or discussion alone can deliver.

For the literature classroom, the relevant claim is narrower than Bowman's general argument but follows from it. When the literary text is itself about the failure of perception, about the gap between what a character believes and what a reader is invited to suspect, then embodying a character is a route into that very structure. The form mirrors the content. A student playing the governess in James does not need to be told that the governess might be unreliable. The student lives inside the question of whether they are.

Bleed

Bleed is the term, common in the nordic larp scene and theorized at length by Bowman in her article "Social Conflict and Bleed in Role-playing Communities" in the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, for the bidirectional flow of emotional and psychological material between player and character (Bowman, "Social Conflict" 4). Bleed-in occurs when the player brings their own feelings into the character. Bleed-out occurs when the character's feelings persist in the player after the game has ended. Markus Montola's contributions to the same journal and to the Knutepunkt anthologies have developed the concept further,

distinguishing between bleed that supports immersion and bleed that compromises player wellbeing (Montola, "Positive Negative Experience" 156).

Horror freeforms produce bleed. That is part of how they work. The student playing the narrator in Gilman is not unaffected by the experience of describing a woman creeping behind the wallpaper. The student playing John feels the discomfort of dismissing concerns they suspect they should be taking seriously. The bleed is a feature of the form, not a defect. Handled well, the residue of feeling becomes pedagogically useful in the debrief, where students examine the gap between what their character believed and what the text actually says. Handled poorly, the residue can compromise both the learning and the student's wellbeing. Section nine returns to this question with the seriousness it deserves.

The bridge from theory to performance is now in place. The next move is to specify what kind of performance we are talking about, and why theatre-style freeform LARP, in particular, is the appropriate form.

Theatre-Style Freeform as a Pedagogical Form

Let's now establish that theatre-style freeform LARP is not improvisational chaos. It is a designed form with conventions, lineages, and roughly two decades of educational practice behind it. Those conventions translate to classroom use because they were partly developed in classroom-adjacent contexts to begin with.

Defining the Form

The terms vary by community, and clarity matters. Salon LARP, often used in North American contexts, refers to indoor socially focused games playable in a single room or suite of rooms, typically running between two and four hours, organized around intrigue, relationship webs, faction goals, and hidden information. Parlor LARP, common in the United States, especially in the New England tradition associated with Interactivities Ink and Shifting Forest, emphasizes accessibility, minimal props, few mechanics, compact runtime, and character sheets that push players into conversation. Theatre-style freeform LARP, the term most often associated with the United Kingdom, Australian, and Nordic-influenced design lineages, emphasizes dramatic scenes, emotional arcs, character-driven play, and metatechniques such as monologues, flashbacks, workshops, black box scenes, and calibrated consent tools. Lizzie Stark's *Leaving Mundania*, published by Chicago Review Press in 2012, gives an accessible journalistic introduction to the broader LARP world and includes sustained attention to the freeform end of the spectrum (Stark, *Leaving Mundania* 198). For our purposes, the family resemblance is more important than the terminological distinctions. We are talking about LARPs played in a room or two, mostly through conversation, with characters whose interior lives carry the dramatic weight.

Design Lineages

The Nordic tradition is the most heavily theorized branch of the family. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola's *Nordic Larp*, published by Fëa Livia in 2010, documents thirty influential Nordic productions and includes essays that contextualize the tradition in relation to theatre, art, and

games (Stenros and Montola 18). The earlier *Beyond Role and Play*, edited by Montola and Stenros and published by Ropecon in 2004, and *Playground Worlds*, edited by Montola and Stenros and published by Ropecon in 2008, collect academic and practitioner writing from the annual Knutepunkt convention and remain primary sources for design theory in the form. The Knutepunkt and Solmukohta anthologies, published yearly in conjunction with the convention, are the running record of the field's evolving conversation.

The North American theatre-style scene, less heavily theorized in book form, has been documented in the Wyrd Con companion books edited by Bowman and Vanek between 2012 and 2015, and in journals such as the *International Journal of Role-Playing* and *Analog Game Studies*. The Australian and UK scenes have developed in close conversation with the Nordic tradition while maintaining their own conventions and design preferences. The differences between traditions matter for the teacher because they correspond to different design choices the teacher can make. Nordic designs tend to favor pre-game workshops, narrativist play, and explicit calibration tools. North American designs tend to favor character-rich packets and mechanical clarity. UK designs vary widely. None of these is the right tradition. They are a salad bar of design options.

The Educational LARP Tradition

The educational LARP tradition has a specific institutional anchor at Østerskov Efterskole in Hobro, Denmark, founded in 2006 as the world's first role-playing-based boarding

school. Malik Hyltoft, the school's vice principal, has written extensively about the form. His chapter "The Role-players' School: Østerskov Efterskole" appears in *Playground Worlds* and provides the foundational account of what an entire curriculum built around edu-larp looks like in practice (Hyltoft, "Role-players' School" 12). His later chapter "Four Reasons Why Edu-Larp Works," in Karsten Dombrowski's edited collection *LARP: Einblicke* published by Zauberfeder in 2010, articulates the pedagogical theory underlying the practice (Hyltoft, "Four Reasons" 43).

The edu-larp scene extends well beyond Denmark. Michał Mochocki's article "Edu-LARP as Revision of Subject-Matter Knowledge" in the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, published in 2013, reports on Polish secondary-school history classroom use (Mochocki 55). Bowman and Anne Standiford's "Educational Larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study," published in the *International Journal of Role-Playing* in 2015, presents quantitative and qualitative results from a science curriculum intervention in a Los Angeles charter school (Bowman and Standiford 4). Mark Aaron Peterson and Aaron Vanek's chapter "Live Action Role-playing (Larp): Insight into an Underutilized Educational Tool" in Karen Schrier's *Learning, Education and Games*, published by ETC Press in 2016, surveys the broader landscape of educational practice across multiple subject areas (Peterson and Vanek 219). What this body of work establishes is that edu-larp is not an experimental curiosity. There is a research literature, however small, with empirical findings about engagement, retention, and student response.

What Freeform Brings That Tabletop Does Not

Tabletop role-playing also has classroom uses, and the literature on TTRPG pedagogy is robust. What freeform brings that tabletop does not is embodiment, time pressure, and the social fact of other bodies in the room making demands on you. A student in a tabletop session can describe their character's actions while sitting at a table. A student in a freeform must actually walk across the room to confront another character, must hold their gaze, must speak in their voice. The cognitive and affective load is different. The pedagogical effects are different.

For our purposes in the literature classroom, the bodily charge of freeform is the feature that matters most. The texts under discussion are about the failure of perception. Reading them at a table is one kind of engagement. Standing across from another student and refusing to acknowledge what they have just said, in character, is a different kind. The latter teaches something about what it is like to be the husband in Gilman's story that the former cannot. The bodily fact of the encounter is the teaching.

The Classroom Adaptation Problem

Most published freeforms run between two and four hours, with workshops adding another hour or two on top. A school period in a typical EFL context runs forty to fifty minutes. The mismatch is real and must be addressed. Section six returns to the design question. The point to flag here is that classroom adaptation is not a matter of running shorter versions of existing games. The temporal compression changes the form. It changes what mechanics can carry, what characters can develop, and what kinds of dramatic moments

are possible. A teacher who tries to import a published freeform without redesigning it for the classroom is likely to discover that the form does not survive the transposition.

Calibrated Consent and Safety Mechanics

The safety mechanics common to contemporary theatre-style freeform are not optional bolt-ons for horror content. They are load-bearing structures in any classroom use. The OK check, the X-card, the lookdown, and the cut-and-brake conventions are described in detail in Johanna Koljonen and colleagues' *Larp Design: Creating Role-Play Experiences*, published by the Knudepunkt Books series in 2019 (Koljonen et al. 273). Lizzie Stark's edited collections and her ongoing work documenting safety practices, including her chapter "Where Do We Go from Here?" in *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*, edited by Juhana Pettersson and published by Fëa Livia in 2012, provide additional practitioner perspectives (Stark, "Where Do We Go" 97).

The classroom case for these mechanics is straightforward. Students playing horror content need a way out that does not require them to explain themselves. The lookdown, a gesture in which a player looks at the floor to indicate they are temporarily out of the scene, costs nothing to teach and provides genuine protection. The X-card, a piece of paper or other token that any player can tap to signal that the current content needs to stop or shift, performs a similar function. These mechanics matter doubly in EFL contexts where students may not yet have the vocabulary to articulate discomfort in real time. A gesture or a token is faster than a sentence, and the student does not have to translate their distress before getting relief.

What the Form Asks of the Teacher

The teacher's role in a theatre-style classroom freeform is light-touch facilitation rather than active direction. The teacher frames scenes, calls time, occasionally offers an offstage prompt to a stalled scene, and otherwise stays out of the way. The role is closer to that of a stage manager than a director. The play, when designed well, runs itself. The teacher's heavy lift is in the design and the debrief, not in the running.

This redistribution of teacherly labor has implications for workload, which we will return to in section nine. The short version is that the teacher does more work before and after the play and less during it. For teachers used to managing a classroom moment by moment, the in-game silence can feel uncomfortable. The discomfort is part of the form. Students are doing the work the teacher would otherwise be doing, and trusting them to do it is what makes the pedagogy land.

The form has been specified. The next move is to take up the question of AI, which is what makes this kind of teaching practically scalable for working teachers who do not have weeks to design from scratch.

AI as Co-Designer of Interpretive Roles

OK, let's talk about AI carefully, because the temptation in either direction, toward boosterism or toward dismissal, is real. The position this essay takes is the practitioner's position. AI is a draft engine. The teacher remains the author. What you may find, when you actually use AI in this workflow, is that the teacher's labor changes shape rather than disappearing.

What AI Does Well

The current generation of large language models, evaluated within the specific workflow of designing classroom freeforms, does several things well enough to matter. The first is generating draft character briefs from a single source text. Given the full text of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and a list of perspectives the teacher wants represented, an AI can produce first-draft briefs for the narrator, John, Jennie, and a doctor figure within minutes. The drafts will need editing. They will not be ready for the classroom. They will, however, be substantially complete first attempts at what would otherwise take a teacher hours to assemble.

The second thing AI does well is distributing evidence and contradictions across roles. Given a clearly stated interpretive ambiguity, the AI can produce a contradiction grid showing where each character's account of events overlaps and conflicts with each other character's account. This is genuinely useful design labor that previously took experienced freeform writers significant time to produce. The AI is not better at this than an experienced freeform writer. It is faster, and it is available to a teacher who is not an experienced freeform writer.

The third thing AI does well is producing variant readings. Asked to generate three different interpretive frames for the same character, with different evidence and different inferences, the AI will produce three drafts that differ along the axes the prompt specifies. The teacher then chooses, edits, and combines. The AI's variation is mechanical rather than insightful, but mechanical variation is exactly what is needed at this stage of the design process.

The fourth thing AI does well, and this matters disproportionately in EFL contexts, is producing parallel briefs at different proficiency levels for the same role. Given a B2 brief, the AI can generate an A2 version that preserves the dramatic situation while easing the language load. The translation is not always accurate without revision, and the teacher must check it, but the labor of producing differentiated materials, which would otherwise be prohibitive, becomes feasible.

What AI Does Badly Without Supervision

The same generation of models does several things badly enough that unsupervised use is irresponsible. The first is hallucination of textual references. Asked for a specific quotation from a story, the AI will sometimes produce a quotation that does not appear in the story, or that appears in a different story by a different author, with complete confidence. For a teacher building briefs that depend on textual evidence, this is a serious problem. Every quotation in an AI-drafted brief must be checked against the source text.

The second is flattening of ambiguity into plot summary. Asked what happens in "The Turn of the Screw," the AI will often produce a summary that resolves the central ambiguity in one direction or the other. This is particularly insidious because the resolution sounds confident and fluent, and a teacher in a hurry may accept it without noticing what has been flattened. The strategy that works against this tendency is to prompt explicitly for what each character believes and what evidence they have, rather than for what really happened. The reframe shifts the AI from omniscient narrator

to character-bounded witness, and the output preserves more of the structure that matters.

The third is cultural insensitivity in horror tropes. Horror genre conventions developed in particular cultural contexts and do not transfer uniformly. AI trained predominantly on English-language Western horror will tend to produce briefs that reflect those conventions, sometimes in ways that land badly in other cultural contexts. A Taiwanese teacher adapting "The Lottery" for a Taipei classroom will need to attend carefully to which horror conventions transfer and which do not, and to whether the AI's drafts are reflecting the local cultural context or the dominant one in the training data.

The fourth, harder to name, is sycophantic alignment with whatever the prompter pushes for. If the teacher asks the AI to produce a reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in which the narrator is straightforwardly mad, the AI will produce that reading. If the teacher asks for a reading in which the supernatural is real, the AI will produce that one too. The flexibility is useful for generating variants. The risk is that the AI's output reflects the prompter's preferences rather than the text's structure. This is the place where the teacher's content knowledge has to do most of its work.

The Teacher as Editor and Curator

The framework that captures this division of labor most usefully is Punya Mishra and Matthew Koehler's TPACK framework, articulated in their 2006 article "Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge: A Framework for Teacher Knowledge" in *Teachers College Record* (Mishra and

Koehler 1017). TPACK locates effective teaching at the intersection of technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge. AI sits squarely in the technological corner. The teacher's pedagogical knowledge, knowing what students at this proficiency level can handle and what scaffolding they need, remains the teacher's. The teacher's content knowledge, knowing what the text is actually doing and which readings the text supports, also remains the teacher's. The AI does not have either. It has a statistical model of language that resembles content and pedagogical knowledge superficially but cannot substitute for them.

Neil Selwyn's *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates*, in its third edition published by Bloomsbury in 2022, provides a sober general account of the limits of educational technology that extends to AI without much modification (Selwyn 142). The pattern Selwyn documents, in which technological enthusiasm produces inflated expectations that crash against the actual conditions of classroom use, is worth holding in mind. AI in the freeform workflow is genuinely useful when the teacher's pedagogical and content knowledge are robust. AI is misleading when the teacher's knowledge is thin and the AI's fluency masks the gap.

Wayne Holmes, Maya Bialik, and Charles Fadel's *Artificial Intelligence in Education: Promises and Implications for Teaching and Learning*, published by the Center for Curriculum Redesign in 2023, provides a more recent and more enthusiastic account, with attention to specific applications and ethical considerations (Holmes, Bialik, and Fadel 56). Reading the two together, Selwyn skeptical and

Holmes optimistic, gives a useful pair of frames within which to locate the working teacher's actual experience.

Practical Prompting Strategies

The prompting strategies that produce useful character briefs share a common structure. They specify what each character believes, what evidence they have, and what they are afraid of. They do not ask the AI to determine what really happened. They preserve the interpretive ambiguity by distributing it across briefs rather than resolving it.

A working prompt for the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" might run as follows. "Generate a character brief for the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' written in second person, suitable for a B2 EFL classroom. The brief should specify what she believes about the woman behind the wallpaper, what evidence she has from her own observations, what she is afraid will happen if she tells anyone what she has seen, and what she wants from John, Jennie, and the doctor. Do not resolve the question of whether the woman behind the wallpaper is real. Preserve the ambiguity. Use the language of the story where useful."

The same prompt structure, applied to John, asks for what he believes about his wife's condition, what evidence he draws on (medical conventions of the period, his own observations of her), what he is afraid of (her illness becoming severe, professional embarrassment), and what he wants from her (compliance with the rest cure, recovery). Critically, the prompt does not tell the AI that John is wrong. It allows John to be a sincere late-nineteenth-century physician operating

within the medical paradigm of his time. The student playing John then meets the student playing the narrator, and the gap between their two sincere readings becomes the dramatic engine of the scene.

What you may find, in practice, is that prompts which preserve perspective generate better briefs than prompts which ask the AI to render judgment. Perspective is what the form needs. Judgment is what the debrief is for.

Differentiation in EFL Contexts

The differentiation move deserves a few additional sentences because it is one of the strongest cases for AI in this workflow. EFL classes are often mixed-proficiency, sometimes spanning A2 to B2 within a single class. Producing differentiated materials by hand is labor a working teacher rarely has time for. AI can generate parallel briefs that preserve the dramatic situation while varying the language load. The narrator's brief at A2 might use shorter sentences, more concrete vocabulary, and direct rather than indirect discourse. At B2, the same brief might preserve more of the original text's syntactic complexity and lexical density. The character is the same. The scene the player will encounter is the same. The language is calibrated to the player's capacity.

The teacher must check the differentiated briefs. AI is not perfectly reliable at proficiency calibration, and a brief intended to be A2 may include a B2 collocation that derails the student. The check takes time. The alternative, producing all the briefs at the same level and watching half the class disengage, is worse.

The Risk of Homogenization

A real concern in this workflow is that if every teacher uses the same AI to adapt the same canonical horror texts, classroom freeforms will start to rhyme. The AI's stylistic preferences and structural defaults will impress themselves on materials produced across hundreds of classrooms. The result, over time, would be a flattening of the form's variety.

The strategy that works against this tendency is to treat AI as a draft engine that the teacher then breaks, complicates, and localizes. The teacher's local knowledge, of the specific class, the specific cultural context, the specific texts that the class has already read together, is what makes the materials distinctive. The teacher who runs the AI's output unedited produces homogenous classrooms. The teacher who edits, replaces, and overwrites produces classrooms that share a form but differ in texture.

The toolbox metaphor matters here. The AI is one tool on the bench. It is not the bench. The bench is the teacher's accumulated practice and understanding of the students in front of them. When the AI is treated as a tool, the form thrives. When the AI is treated as the workshop, the form impoverishes.

The argument for AI as a co-designer of interpretive roles is now in place. The next section turns from theoretical framing to practical design, walking through the architecture required to turn an ambiguous source text into a runnable classroom freeform.

Design Architecture: Building the Horror Freeform

Alright. We have the theory laid down and the AI question framed. Now we are going to walk through the actual design work, step by step, the way you would walk through it sitting at a desk with the source text open and a blank document ready. The design architecture is where the abstractions either become a working classroom unit or do not. For our purposes, the architecture rests on roughly nine moves, and each move asks the teacher to make a deliberate choice rather than to default to whatever the source text happens to suggest.

Source Text Selection Criteria

The first move is choosing the text. Five filters, applied in order, will eliminate most candidates and leave a workable shortlist. The first filter is ambiguity that genuinely resists resolution. A text that looks ambiguous on a first reading but resolves cleanly on a second is the wrong text. The whole pedagogical apparatus depends on the text supporting more than one reading, with textual evidence for each. The second filter is manageable length. A novel will not work for a single-period or two-period unit. A short story or a tightly compressed novella is the right scale. The third filter is multiple viable perspective characters. The text must offer at least four characters whose accounts of events would differ. A story with a single first-person narrator and minimal supporting cast will not produce a freeform. The fourth filter is language accessibility, with possible scaffolding. The text must be readable by the class, in the original or in a sensitively prepared version, before the play begins. The fifth filter is ethical fit for the specific classroom. Some horror texts are simply not appropriate for every group of students, and the teacher knows the group.

The four texts we will work through in section seven, "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The Turn of the Screw*, Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space," and Jackson's "The Lottery," pass the five filters differently, which is itself useful pedagogically. Each demonstrates a different combination of strengths and risks.

The Perspective Inventory

Once the text is chosen, the second move is identifying the perspectives that will become characters. For a classroom of fifteen to twenty-five students, you typically want five to eight playable roles, with multiple students assigned to each role in larger classes. The roles need to differ along axes that matter for the story's central ambiguity. In *The Turn of the Screw*, viable perspectives include the governess, Mrs. Grose, Miles, Flora, the absent uncle as offstage presence reachable by letter, Douglas as framing narrator, the unnamed listener of Douglas's tale, and possibly Quint and Jessel as ambiguous presences. Each of these positions carries different evidence and different stakes. The governess sees the figures and believes they are ghosts. Mrs. Grose has known Quint and Jessel personally and knows things the governess does not. Miles and Flora possess the central evidence but cannot or will not communicate it directly. The uncle is responsible for the children but absent. Douglas frames the story decades later with his own interpretive distance. The unnamed listener stands in for the reader.

The teacher's choice of which perspectives to include and which to omit is itself an interpretive act. Including the ghosts as playable shifts the design toward the supernatural reading. Excluding them shifts toward the psychological reading. The teacher who includes both as ambiguous presences whose

visibility to other characters is itself contested has built the design that most fully preserves the text's hesitation.

Information Architecture

The third move is structuring information across characters. A working approach uses three layers. Public facts are what every character knows, and these typically come from the agreed-upon backstory of the scenario. Private knowledge is what only this character knows, drawn from their position in the story or from the role's specific history. Interpretive lens is the frame through which this character processes events, the assumptions and habits of mind they bring to what they see.

In Gilman, the narrator's public facts include that she has been ill, that John has prescribed the rest cure, and that Jennie keeps the house. Her private knowledge includes the patterns she has been tracing in the wallpaper, the figure she has begun to see, and her diary, which she hides from John. Her interpretive lens is shaped by the late-nineteenth-century medical discourse that frames her as patient rather than agent, and by her own emerging counter-discourse of resistance to that frame. John's public facts are the same. His private knowledge includes his professional concerns, his correspondence with Dr. Mitchell, and his calculations about how long the rest cure can continue before he must consider more aggressive intervention. His interpretive lens is shaped by his medical training and by the gendered authority structure he embodies without examining.

Players will leak public, guard private, and reveal lens through play. The leakage and the guarding are dramatic

engines. The lens, when it becomes visible to other characters and to the player themselves, is where the interpretive learning happens.

The Contradiction Map

The fourth move is the contradiction map. A grid showing where each pair of characters' accounts conflict, where they overlap, and where they fill in each other's gaps gives the design its motion. Without the map, the play can stall in pleasant agreement. With the map, every conversation has friction.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the contradiction between the governess's account of Quint and Mrs. Grose's account is the engine. The governess sees Quint and identifies him from the description Mrs. Grose has provided. Mrs. Grose has not seen the figure herself. The governess's account depends on Mrs. Grose's confirmation, but Mrs. Grose's confirmation depends on the governess's description, and the circularity is the point. When two students play this scene, the design supports them in producing the textual structure that James produced on the page. The play is not a translation of the text. The play is a parallel performance of the same interpretive problem.

AI is genuinely useful at drafting the contradiction map. Asked to identify the conflicts and overlaps between any two character accounts, the model produces a credible first draft within seconds. The teacher then revises, complicates, and adds nuance. The labor that previously took experienced freeform writers significant time becomes available to a

working teacher in a single planning session.

Goals and Pressure

The fifth move is goals and pressure. Each character needs at least one strong goal that pushes them into conversation with at least three other characters. Without pressure, freeform stalls into polite chat. With excessive pressure, it becomes melodrama. The image to keep in mind, borrowed from the freeform design tradition, is dominoes set up in a room of caffeinated cats. You want motion, not chaos. The dominoes are the structures of pressure. The cats are the players. The teacher's job is to set the dominoes carefully enough that the cats can move through the room without knocking everything down at once, and yet things still fall.

The narrator in Gilman wants John to release her from the rest cure. John wants the narrator to comply with the cure so that her recovery proceeds. Jennie wants the household to function and the narrator's distress to subside. The doctor, when present, wants confirmation that his protocol is being implemented correctly. Each goal pushes the character toward conversations they would otherwise not have. Each conversation produces friction with another character's goal. The play moves on its own.

Mechanics for the Unsayable

The sixth move addresses how characters communicate experiences that are not straightforwardly speakable. A vision, a hallucination, a memory that may or may not be real, an encounter with something the character cannot name. Several mechanic options exist, each with implications for how the play resolves toward interpretation.

Monologue cards allow a character to step out of the ongoing scene briefly and address the room with a soliloquy. Used sparingly, they let the player render interior states the character would not voice in dialogue. Flashback scenes, common in jeepform design, allow two or three characters to enact a remembered event from their shared past, with the present-tense narrative paused. Shadow players, who voice unspoken thoughts of a character with whom they are paired, externalize the gap between what is said and what is felt. Written notes passed to the GM allow the teacher to introduce events offstage that affect characters without requiring them to be enacted publicly. Ambient sound cues, played at the GM's discretion, mark transitions or signal that a character has noticed something the others have not.

The choice of mechanics shapes what the play can teach. A design built around monologue cards privileges interior expressiveness and produces material the debrief can use to discuss narrative perspective. A design built around shadow players makes the gap between articulated and unarticulated experience visible and produces material for discussion of unreliable narration. There is no neutral choice. Every mechanic is also an interpretive frame.

Time Architecture

The seventh move adapts the form to the available time. Two-to-four-hour designs do not survive direct transposition into forty-to-fifty-minute periods. Several strategies exist. The multi-session arc spreads the play across two or three class periods, with each session covering one phase of the story. The pre-game asynchronous workshop assigns character

preparation as homework, freeing class time for play and debrief. Compressed scenes with offstage time-skips let the play move through narrative time faster than real time, with the GM calling jumps to keep the pace. Hot-seating segments interrupt the play to put one character in the chair while the others ask questions, generating dense character disclosure in concentrated time.

The trade-offs are real. Multi-session arcs require students to maintain character state across days, which is hard. Asynchronous workshops shift labor to homework, which not all students will complete. Compressed scenes lose texture. Hot-seating produces information at the cost of dramatic momentum. The teacher's choice depends on the specific class and the specific term.

Workshops and Warmups

The eighth move is the pre-game workshop. The Nordic tradition has developed a robust pre-game practice, documented across the Knutepunkt anthologies and in Koljonen and colleagues' *Larp Design*. The workshop builds character voice, calibrates physical and emotional contact norms, and primes interpretive readiness (Koljonen et al. 145). For the classroom, a compressed workshop of fifteen to twenty minutes before play begins covers the essential ground.

Useful workshop activities include status walks in which players move around the room embodying different relative power levels, voice-of-the-character exercises in which players try out the cadence and register of their character's speech, evidence-sorting exercises in which players review the textual cues for their character and consolidate what they

know, and two-truths-and-a-lie in character, which gives players a low-stakes way to practice making claims their character would make. Each activity primes a different element of the play.

The GM Role

The ninth move is the teacher's role during the play itself. Light-touch facilitation, as established in section four, means scene framing, time calls, occasional offstage prompts to stalled scenes, and otherwise staying out of the way. The GM is not directing the play. The GM is holding the frame so the play can produce something the class can think about afterward.

Specific moves the GM can make include calling a freeze and offering a private aside to a character whose play has stalled, suggesting that two characters who have not interacted yet might find each other in the next scene, introducing an event card that changes the offstage situation, and signaling time milestones so players can pace their own arcs. None of these moves directs the content of play. All of them maintain its momentum.

The architecture is now in place. The next section walks through four worked examples that show the design principles in action across different texts and classroom contexts.

Four Worked Examples

Now let's actually build four of these. Each example takes a single source text and walks through the design choices that

produce a runnable classroom unit. The four cases are arranged to demonstrate different design problems. Gilman shows mechanic design. James shows information architecture and language adaptation. Lovecraft shows the language-fails mechanic and the EFL gift of admitted limitation. Jackson shows accessibility and the public-private gap.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The cast for a Gilman freeform includes the narrator, John, Jennie, Mary (the housekeeper or nurse, sometimes conflated with Jennie depending on edition), and the doctor figure based on Silas Weir Mitchell, whose actual rest cure protocol Gilman was treating with critical irony. A sixth role, the woman behind the wallpaper, can be played by a shadow player who voices what the narrator perceives without speaking it aloud, producing the play's central interpretive gap as an embodied feature of the scene.

The central interpretive question, framed for the classroom, is whether the narrator's experience is a medical pathology, a supernatural emergence, or a feminist allegory about confinement. The text supports all three readings. The brilliance of Gilman's design is that the readings are not mutually exclusive. The play preserves this by giving each character access to evidence for a different reading, with overlap.

The signature mechanic is the diary as physical object. The narrator's diary entries are written in real time during the play, on actual paper, and the GM determines when other characters discover or read fragments of them. The mechanic has several effects. It makes the text's central textual artifact,

the diary, into a literal object in the room. It creates dramatic tension around discovery and concealment. It produces material that can be reread in the debrief alongside the actual story.

The EFL angle is the contrast between the language of nineteenth-century medical authority and the narrator's evolving internal voice. John speaks in the register of a confident professional. Mitchell, when present, speaks in the register of the published expert. The narrator begins in the same register and shifts toward something stranger, more associative, more disrupted. The play makes the register shift available to students as a felt phenomenon. They hear the difference between how John talks and how the narrator talks. The debrief then asks them to find the same difference on the page.

Hypothetical classroom run notes suggest that the diary mechanic produces strong engagement when the GM rations the discovery moments carefully. Releasing too many diary fragments too early dissipates tension. Releasing them at moments of dramatic peak amplifies it. Students playing John often report, in debrief, that they felt the gap between their character's professional certainty and the evidence the diary fragments revealed. That gap is the interpretive learning.

The Turn of the Screw by Henry James

The James freeform is the most demanding of the four. The cast includes the governess, Mrs. Grose, Miles, Flora, the absent uncle (accessible by letter only, with the GM playing his replies), and Quint and Jessel as ambiguous presences

whose visibility is itself a mechanic. The design challenge is preserving the central ambiguity, which is whether the ghosts are real or whether the governess is unraveling, when the form normally requires that things either happen or do not.

The signature mechanic is the seeing card. Any character may play their seeing card once during the play. When the card is played, the character describes what they see in the current location. Other characters in the same location cannot contradict the description, but they may say what they see in the same space. The mechanic produces overlapping accounts of the same scene without resolving which is correct. Two characters may both see Quint, neither may see Quint, or the governess may see Quint while Mrs. Grose sees the empty stairwell. The text's hesitation is preserved as a designed feature of the play.

The EFL angle is James's syntactic complexity. The original text is dense with subordinated clauses, indirect discourse, and qualified perceptions. Adapting role briefs for an EFL context requires careful translation work that preserves the qualifications without overwhelming the player. AI is genuinely useful here, generating drafts that simplify syntax while retaining the epistemic markers that make James's prose work. The teacher must then check the drafts against the source, because the AI's drafts will sometimes flatten ambiguities the simpler syntax was supposed to carry.

The information architecture is the design's heaviest lift. Mrs. Grose knows things about Quint's history with Miles that the governess does not. The governess knows things about her current perceptions that Mrs. Grose can only

receive secondhand. Miles knows what he knows but cannot or will not say it. Flora knows what she knows and is younger and more easily silenced. The uncle knows the legal structure of his guardianship but is absent. The contradiction map for *The Turn of the Screw* is dense, and building it well takes the teacher real time.

When the play runs, the typical discovery is that students playing the governess feel the pressure of her interpretive position from the inside. They see a figure on the stairs. They are not sure whether to trust their own perception. They look to Mrs. Grose for confirmation. The confirmation, when it comes, is partial and equivocal. The student lives inside the governess's epistemological vertigo for forty minutes, and the debrief question, "How does James produce this vertigo on the page?" lands on a student who has just felt it.

"The Colour Out of Space" by H. P. Lovecraft

The Lovecraft freeform draws on the broader Lovecraftian corpus for design conventions but anchors in a single text. "The Colour Out of Space," published in 1927 and one of Lovecraft's strongest stories, has the advantage of relatively contained geography (the Gardner farm), a manageable cast, and a central interpretive question that is precisely about the failure of language. The cast includes the surveyor (Lovecraft's narrator), Ammi Pierce (the elderly farmer who knew the Gardners and tells the surveyor much of the story), members of the Gardner family (Nahum, Nabby, Thaddeus, Merwin, Zenas), and additional roles such as a skeptical academic from Arkham and a journalist who has come to investigate. The Gardners' arc spans the duration of the

contamination, and players take their characters through stages of decline.

The central interpretive question is how anyone describes what cannot be described. The story's signature device is its insistence on the inadequacy of language for what the meteorite has brought. The colour of the title is not actually a colour in the usual sense, and Lovecraft's narrator returns again and again to the failure of his words. The cosmic indifference at the heart of the story becomes, in the classroom, a dramatic problem. How does a character communicate something for which they have no words?

The signature mechanic is the language-fails token. When played, the speaker stops talking and another player narrates what their character cannot articulate. The mechanic is, alongside its dramatic function, a substantial pedagogical gift in EFL contexts, because the form admits and uses linguistic limitation. A student whose English is not yet strong enough to render a complex perception in continuous speech can play the token, and the form turns their limitation into the very phenomenon the text is about. The student's L2 limit and the character's perceptual limit become the same limit. The play teaches what the story is doing by enacting the failure that the story enacts.

The EFL angle extends to specific vocabulary. The play teaches the vocabulary of perception, hedging, and epistemic modality. "It seemed." "Almost." "As if." "Something like." These are the moves Lovecraft's narrator makes constantly, and a student who has heard another student make them in character has acquired the vocabulary in a way the textbook

does not produce.

When the play runs, the typical discovery is that students find the Lovecraftian register surprisingly accessible. The hedging is what the form requires. The students' uncertainty is what the form rewards. The debrief discussion of cosmic indifference and linguistic failure connects to the play they have just experienced, and the analytical claim about Lovecraft's stylistic choices lands on students who have spent ninety minutes inside those choices.

"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson

The Jackson freeform is the most accessible of the four and the one most often successful with lower-intermediate classes. "The Lottery," published in *The New Yorker* in 1948, is a short story written in plain American English with minimal syntactic complexity. The horror lives entirely in the gap between the village's collective practice and the private experiences of its inhabitants. The cast includes Tessie Hutchinson, Bill Hutchinson, Old Man Warner, Mr. Summers, Mr. Graves, several villagers with private opinions about the ritual, and possibly Tessie's children.

The central interpretive question is what the village believes and what each individual believes. The story's structure makes the public-private gap the central horror. Everyone participates. Few seem genuinely enthusiastic. Old Man Warner is enthusiastic, but his enthusiasm is itself disturbing. Tessie's protest comes only when she is selected, which is the horror of the story's moral structure.

The signature mechanic is the private thought pause. The GM freezes action periodically and each character speaks one

sentence the others cannot hear. The sentences are spoken aloud to the GM and to the room generally, but in the fiction they are interior. The mechanic externalizes the public-private gap that the story builds. Students hear what their fellow villagers privately think. They cannot react to the private thoughts in character. They must continue performing the public role of the villager who participates without complaint.

The EFL angle is Jackson's accessible language masking massive interpretive depth. Lower-intermediate students can read the text without significant scaffolding. The interpretive work is in what the text refuses to say. The form, by externalizing the private thoughts, makes the interpretive work available to students who might struggle to articulate the same gap from analytical reading alone.

When the play runs, the typical discovery is that the public-private gap produces visceral discomfort in students, even in classes that have read the story before. The play makes the participation physical. Students walk through the lottery's ritual stages. They draw papers. They watch their fellow villagers continue to participate. The debrief question, "What does Jackson's prose technique do to render the same gap on the page?" lands on students who have just performed the gap and felt its weight.

The four examples demonstrate that the design architecture generalizes across texts of significantly different shapes. The mechanics differ. The information architecture differs. The EFL pedagogical gifts differ. What stays constant is the move from text to perspective inventory to information architecture to mechanic to time architecture to play to debrief. The next

section takes up the debrief in detail, because the debrief is where the analytical learning happens.

Debrief: Turning Bleed into Argument

OK, the play has happened. Students are still sitting in their character's energy. The room has the texture of having held something that was not entirely comfortable. The temptation, for a teacher, is to move directly to analytical discussion. That temptation should be resisted. The freeform is not the lesson. The debrief is the lesson, and the debrief has a structure of its own that, when honored, produces interpretive learning that the play alone cannot.

The Structural Move

Students must travel from "my character believed this" to "the text supports or complicates this interpretation." That single sentence, delivered slowly, is the entire pedagogical action of the unit. The freeform built the appetite for textual evidence. The debrief converts the appetite into argument. Skip the debrief and you have run an entertaining piece of theatre. Run the debrief well and you have taught literary interpretation.

De-roling

The first move in the debrief is de-roling. Bowman and others in the LARP studies literature have written extensively on why de-roling matters, and the practice has consolidated across the field (Bowman, "Social Conflict" 12). Emotional residue from horror play is not analytical material until it has been consciously held at a distance. A student who is still partly in the governess's panic cannot yet think about James's

prose technique. A student still feeling Tessie's terror cannot yet think about Jackson's narrative distance.

Practical de-roling techniques are simple and fast. Players name three things outside the fiction (the date, what they had for breakfast, something they can see through the window). Players physically swap shoes with a partner and back, marking a transition with a small ritual. Players speak their own name and one statement that is true about themselves outside the game. These techniques sound trivial. They are not. The cognitive shift from inside the character to outside is genuine, and the small physical acts catalyze the shift more effectively than verbal instruction alone.

Beth Gentry Beltrán's article "Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes," published in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2012* edited by Bowman and Vanek, treats de-roling as a Jungian individuation process and gives the practice a deeper theoretical frame than space allows here (Beltrán 89). For classroom use, the key principle is that de-roling is non-negotiable and takes only a few minutes when done properly.

The Three-Column Move

The second move is the three-column worksheet. Students populate three columns before discussion begins. Column one: what my character believed during the play. Column two: what actually happened in the play (events, dialogues, decisions). Column three: what the text actually says (with specific reference to lines, scenes, or passages). The worksheet does not require continuous prose. Notes are fine. The point is to make the analytical separation physical.

Students see, in their own handwriting, the difference between their character's belief, the play's events, and the text's evidence.

The teacher who introduces the worksheet says the following, slowly. "Your character believed certain things during the play. Some of those beliefs were supported by the play's events. Some were not. Some of those beliefs are also supported by the original text. Some are not. Take five minutes and fill in the three columns." The five minutes are real. The students need them. The pause between play and discussion is the pedagogical action.

From Belief to Evidence

The third move is teacher-led discussion that pushes students from first-person claims to text-anchored claims. The recurring question is "Where in the story does it say that?" The freeform has built the appetite for evidence. The debrief is where the appetite gets fed. Students who would not, before the play, have engaged with the question "What evidence does the text give for the governess's reliability?" now have a personal stake in the answer, because they have just inhabited or interacted with the governess's position.

The discussion does not need to resolve the central ambiguity. In fact, it should not. The whole point of the form is to preserve the ambiguity while equipping students to argue about it on textual grounds. A successful debrief produces multiple readings, each defended with evidence, with explicit acknowledgment that the readings differ and that the differences matter.

Comparing Readings

The fourth move is comparing readings across the room. Different characters will have produced different readings. Different students playing the same character may also have produced different readings. The classroom is now a room full of partial truths held by named people. This is the structure of literary criticism in miniature.

The teacher might frame the comparison as follows. "The student who played the narrator just argued that her experience supports a supernatural reading. The student who played John just argued that the same play supports a psychological reading. Both students are drawing on what happened in the play. Now look at the text. Which reading does the text support more fully? Or does the text support both?" The question is genuine. The answer depends on what the text actually says, which is what the students are now equipped to investigate.

The Writing Follow-up

The fifth move is the writing follow-up. A short interpretive essay, evidence-mapping task, or scene-rewrite exercise locks the analytical move into language production. For EFL contexts, this is where the language objective lands hardest. Students are now writing about a text whose ambiguity they have inhabited, with vocabulary they have used in character, about questions that have personal stakes.

The writing prompt should be specific. "Choose one moment in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' that supports two readings. Show, with specific reference to the text, what each reading would emphasize. Conclude by saying which reading you find more

compelling and why." The prompt invites argument. It requires evidence. It permits, within argument, the acknowledgment that the alternative reading has its own grounds. That last permission, often missing from EFL essay prompts, is what the form has worked toward.

Assessment

The sixth move is assessment, which deserves its own brief discussion. The play itself should not be graded. Grading the play introduces performance pressures that distort the form and risks penalizing students whose linguistic confidence is lower. What gets graded is the debrief artifacts (the three-column worksheet, the discussion contributions) and the writing follow-up.

Rubric construction should attend to claim, evidence, and acknowledgment of counter-readings. A student who produces a clear claim, supports it with textual evidence, and acknowledges that the text supports a different reading has done the analytical work the unit aims to teach. A student who produces a confident single-reading essay without acknowledging counter-evidence has missed something the play was specifically designed to make visible. The rubric should reward the structural move from belief to evidence to argument with counter-argument, which is the structure the form produces when it works.

Hammer, Schrier, and others have written on assessment in edu-larp contexts, with attention to the difficulty of assessing both the play experience and the academic learning that follows from it. The general consensus, which holds in the literature classroom, is that the academic deliverable is the

appropriate site for grading and that the play itself is the means rather than the end.

The debrief structure is now in place. The next section takes up the limitations and ethical considerations specific to AI-supported horror freeform in EFL contexts.

Limitations, Ethics, and EFL-Specific Considerations

Now we have to be honest about what can go wrong, who this does not fit, and what ethical stakes are specific to this combination of AI, horror content, and second-language learners. Some of the considerations that follow are non-negotiable. Others are matters of judgment that depend on the specific classroom.

Trauma and Horror Content

Students bring histories the teacher does not know. A scenario that seems pleasantly creepy in design can land traumatically on a student whose family or personal experience touches the content in ways the teacher cannot anticipate. The mitigations are familiar from broader trauma-informed pedagogy and from the LARP safety tradition. Pre-game opt-outs allow students to decline a role or a scenario without explanation. Content warnings, given before the play and again before specific scenes, allow students to prepare or to step out. The lines-and-veils convention developed in tabletop role-playing and adapted to LARP, in which players collectively name content that is off the table (lines) or that may happen offstage but not be enacted (veils), gives students agency in setting the boundaries of play. The ability to leave

the room without explanation, established at the beginning of the workshop, is essential.

These mitigations are not optional. A horror freeform run without them is irresponsible. A teacher who is not willing to honor a student's opt-out, or who would interpret the opt-out as a failure of engagement, should not run the form.

Cultural Fit

Horror tropes do not translate uniformly across cultures. Western ghost-story conventions land differently in East Asian classrooms, where ghost narratives have their own established conventions and may carry religious or familial weight that Western frames do not anticipate. Jackson's village ritual lands differently in cultures with active ritual practice. Lovecraftian cosmic horror, with its inheritance of early-twentieth-century anxieties about racial and biological contamination, requires careful handling regardless of context but particularly so in cross-cultural adaptation.

The Taipei classroom, where this writer is working, sits within a cultural context in which ghost stories carry significant traditional weight. Ghost month observances, family practices around ancestor veneration, and a robust literary tradition of supernatural fiction in Chinese all shape how students will receive a Western ghost story. None of these factors makes the form impossible. They make the form context-sensitive. The teacher's local knowledge is the necessary corrective to the AI's tendency to flatten cultural specificity.

The practical move is to prepare scenarios with explicit attention to which conventions transfer and which do not, and

to invite students into the comparison rather than around it. A *Turn of the Screw* freeform played in Taipei can productively engage the contrast between Jamesian Victorian ghosts and the conventions of Chinese-language supernatural fiction. The play becomes, partly, a comparative exercise in genre.

Power Dynamics and L2 Vulnerability

Speaking in a second language is already exposing. Asking students to do so in character, in horror content, compounds the exposure. The mitigations include home-language scaffolds, character briefs that include language-level guidance, and generous improv-warmup norms that establish that linguistic stumbles are part of the form rather than failures within it.

A specific practice that works well is the codeswitch permission. The teacher establishes at the workshop that any player may switch to their L1 momentarily if they cannot find an English expression for what their character is trying to say, and that the L1 expression will be honored as character speech. The permission shifts the play's center of gravity. Students who would otherwise stall on language find themselves moving forward. The codeswitch can be brief or sustained, and the teacher's permissive stance signals that the play prioritizes character expression over English production. The English production happens anyway, and arguably increases, because the pressure has been relieved.

AI Bias and Hallucination

AI may invent textual evidence, misattribute lines, or produce briefs that subtly tilt toward dominant readings. The teacher's

editorial responsibility is real and time-consuming. Every quotation must be checked against the source. Every interpretive claim must be examined for whether it preserves or flattens the text's ambiguity. The labor cannot be skipped without compromising the academic integrity of the unit.

A specific risk in the EFL context is that AI may produce simplified language that, while linguistically appropriate, removes the hedging and qualification that the source text requires. A James passage that depends on its subordinated clauses for its ambiguity may, in simplified form, become unambiguous in ways the original is not. The teacher must compare the simplified version with the original and verify that the interpretive structure has survived the simplification. If it has not, the simplification needs to be redone, often by hand.

Teacher Workload

Be honest. Designing a horror freeform with AI assistance still takes hours. The first time a teacher runs the form, the workload is comparable to a major project unit, and possibly heavier. Subsequent runs of the same scenario amortize the cost, but the initial investment is real. Teachers considering this approach should plan for it as a multi-week development project, not as a quick lesson.

The compensating return is that the unit, once built, can be run multiple times across cohorts with relatively minor adjustments. The character briefs, the contradiction map, and the debrief worksheets all transfer. What needs adjustment is the pacing, the specific scaffolding for the current class's proficiency, and the cultural framing for the current group.

The development cost amortizes across runs in a way that conventional lesson planning often does not.

Generalizability

This works best with intermediate to advanced learners, roughly B1 and above. With lower proficiency, the freeform structure may collapse under language load. A2 and lower students can engage with simpler scenarios, but the texts under discussion in this essay generally require enough English to support character speech. Scaffolds for lower-proficiency contexts include providing key phrases on character briefs, allowing more codeswitching, and reducing the number of characters in play. The form does not scale infinitely downward, and a teacher with an A2 class should consider whether the canonical horror corpus is the right fit, or whether the same techniques applied to simpler texts would serve the class better.

What This Cannot Do

The form does not replace careful close reading. Students who have played a freeform of "The Yellow Wallpaper" still need to read the text carefully, return to it after the play, and engage analytically with its specific language. The freeform builds appetite and produces interpretive material. The reading does the analytical work. A teacher who substitutes play for reading has misunderstood the form.

The form also does not replace the teacher's content knowledge. A teacher who runs the unit without having developed their own clear sense of what each text is doing, what readings it supports, and what evidence the text gives for each, will produce a freeform that runs but does not teach.

The AI does not supply this knowledge. It supplies drafts. The drafts depend on the teacher's evaluative capacity, which is itself a form of expertise that takes time to develop.

The limitations are real. The form is not a universal solvent. The form is a particular kind of pedagogy that fits particular kinds of texts in particular kinds of classrooms when handled by particular kinds of teachers. The good news is that the conditions for good fit are not exotic. An intermediate or advanced EFL classroom, with a teacher who has time to design and a willingness to learn the form, is a perfectly common setting.

Conclusion: The Room of Partial Truths

We have walked together through theory, through design, through worked examples, through the debrief that converts play into argument, and through the limitations that make the form context-sensitive rather than universal. Let's gather the threads.

The umbrella argument has held. AI does not replace literary pedagogy or LARP design. AI expands the teacher's capacity to generate playable structures, differentiated roles, and language-rich scenarios, while the teacher remains responsible for interpretation, classroom fit, and reflective learning. The capacity is real. The expansion is real. The teacher's responsibilities have not been reduced. They have been redirected toward editorial judgment, contextual adaptation, and pedagogical curation, which are the labors AI cannot perform.

The thesis has held also. AI-supported horror freeform

LARPs deepen EFL learners' literary interpretation by allowing them to perform ambiguity, unreliability, and conflicting perspectives rather than merely identify them analytically. The performance is not a substitute for analysis. The performance is one of the conditions under which analysis becomes possible for L2 learners working with texts that resist resolution. A student who has played the governess in James now has somewhere to stand when asked to write about James's narrative technique. A student who has played John in Gilman now feels the shape of the medical-authority discourse he sustained. A student who has voiced a private thought in Jackson's village now knows what the public-private gap weighs.

Return to the opening image. The classroom in Taipei on a humid Tuesday afternoon, with John insisting nothing is wrong while the narrator describes the woman behind the wallpaper. That room held two truths at once. That room is what literature classrooms can be when the form is given to them, and the form has been given to them. The materials of theatre-style freeform LARP, the safety mechanics, the design conventions, the educational lineage at Østerskov and elsewhere, exist. The AI tools that make scaling feasible exist. The texts are public-domain or freely teachable. What remains is for working teachers to decide that the form is worth the development time.

Future research could productively explore comparative studies across language proficiency bands, longitudinal effects on interpretive writing, the development of shareable AI-prompt libraries for canonical horror texts, and questions

about how this method scales beyond horror into other ambiguous genres. Modernist short fiction, postcolonial unreliable narrators, magical realism, and contemporary autofiction all share the structural features that make horror freeform work. The toolbox extends.

What you may find, if you take the form into your own classroom, is that the first run will be uneven. Some scenes will land. Others will stall. The debrief will be longer than you planned. A student will say something in the discussion that makes you reconsider what you thought the unit was teaching. The second run will be better. By the third, you will have your own version of the form, with your own design choices and your own preferred scaffolds, and the form will have become part of your practice rather than an experiment within it.

The room of partial truths is not a single insight. The room of partial truths is a habit, settled into the bones of a curriculum, that produces a particular kind of student. That student holds two readings at once. That student looks at a difficult text and looks for evidence rather than for the answer. That student knows, from experience, that interpretive disagreement is an ordinary feature of literary thought rather than a failure of comprehension. That student is what the form aims to produce, and what the form, run with care over a term or a year, actually does produce.

Go out and play. Build a freeform from a story your students will actually read. Run it. Run the debrief. Watch what happens. Tell other teachers what worked and what did not. The form lives or dies on practitioner exchange, and the

exchange is what every section of this essay has, finally, been arguing for.

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The Room That Is Not There

Theatre of the Mind as Scenic Design in Interactive Drama

Beatrice Holloway

Abstract

This essay examines theatre of the mind as scenic design in Interactive Drama and salon live action roleplaying. It argues that imagined environments become theatrically usable through shared orientation, bodily enactment, selective props, and conventions governing consequential action. Comparisons with tabletop description and immersive theatre distinguish environmental construction from participants' opportunities to inhabit and change fictional places. A hypothetical reception translated into a castle, starship, and haunted mansion demonstrates how modest material anchors can support different dramatic environments. The analysis considers descriptive authority, simultaneous scenes, accessibility, mental imagery, portability, and the labor of maintaining shared conditions. It proposes a research framework connecting design choices to observed use and participant interpretation. The central contribution is a functional account of scenography that evaluates settings through the encounters they enable rather than their degree of physical reproduction.

Keywords

theatre of the mind, Interactive Drama, salon LARP, imaginative scenography, shared fictional environments, participatory performance

Scenic Design Through Shared Imagination

A classroom becomes a starship when the people gathered inside it can act together on the understanding that they are aboard one. The fluorescent lights need not resemble navigation displays, and the windows need not reveal an approaching planet. Participants may still know where the bridge ends, who can enter the communications room, and why a private conversation beside the engine console matters. This transformation does not eliminate the physical environment. It gives that environment another organization through description, convention, and performance. The central question is how an imagined setting becomes sufficiently available to support consequential encounters among people who remain visibly present in an ordinary room.

Theatre of the mind names a family of practices in which verbal communication and imaginative interpretation establish fictional environments without requiring their comprehensive material reproduction. In tabletop roleplaying, participants can describe a distant landscape while remaining seated together. In an embodied salon event, they can combine such description with movement, gesture, direct address, and selective objects. The result is not simply a narrated tabletop session conducted while standing. Participants encounter one another through actual bodies, while the represented setting extends beyond what those bodies and their surroundings literally display. Scenery

becomes a relationship among available signs and the actions those signs make intelligible.

This essay argues that theatre of the mind can function as scenic design when it organizes participants' orientation, expectations, and opportunities for action. Its value cannot be measured solely by how vividly someone visualizes a nonexistent room. A fictional environment also works through knowledge of relationships: a doorway leads somewhere, a council chamber permits public address, a sealed letter can change hands, and a balcony offers a place for a confidential exchange. Such relations give the setting dramatic use. A richly imagined ceiling may contribute atmosphere, but an understood boundary between public and private conversation may matter more to the unfolding performance.

The argument concerns Interactive Drama as described in the proposal: a designed salon form in which participants portray characters, pursue objectives, and develop scenes through interaction. It does not claim that every event using that name follows the same conventions. Nor does it assign all tabletop games or immersive productions a single method. The comparison follows selected functions across arrangements: how environments are introduced, how participants establish facts, how space conditions encounters, and how changes become available to others. These functions can be organized through elaborate construction, sparse materials, sustained narration, or combinations of those resources.

The distinction between a world being represented and a world being literally reproduced is familiar within theatre. Shakespeare's prologue to Henry V asks an audience to

supplement the playhouse with imaginative work, inviting small material means to signify much larger events (Shakespeare, Henry V, Prologue). That invitation does not make spectators performers with independent characters. Its relevance lies in an older theatrical acknowledgment that the visible stage and the represented world need not coincide. Interactive Drama changes the task by allowing participants to make decisions within the environment they help sustain. Their imaginative supplementation has immediate consequences for other people's possibilities.

Calling this process scenography requires attention to what design accomplishes. A setting provides more than an attractive background. It directs attention, distinguishes places, frames bodies, and helps establish what an encounter means. Rachel Hann's account of scenography as a crafting of place orientation supports a wider understanding than scenery treated only as constructed decoration (Hann, 2019). The present argument develops that opening through the specific demands of participant performance. It asks whether verbal and social arrangements can perform scenic work, while preserving the difference between that theoretical proposition and evidence about how particular participants experience an event.

The account is conceptual and comparative. Its invented examples demonstrate possible design relationships rather than report observed outcomes. A haunted mansion, a diplomatic starship, and a royal court provide recurring situations in which the physical room offers limited resemblance to the fiction. The analysis considers how those situations might operate, where they might fail, and what a study would need to establish. Claims about reduced

construction requirements can follow from a design's material specifications. Claims about greater immersion, stronger learning, or better accessibility require evidence about participants and circumstances. Keeping those kinds of claims distinct strengthens the case for imaginative scenery.

The most useful starting point is that theatrical place can be jointly enacted without being uniformly pictured. Participants need enough common ground to recognize where their characters are, what they can perceive, and what they may do next. They may differ in incidental visual detail, emotional association, or imagined scale without disrupting the scene. Design becomes effective when it preserves the agreements that matter and leaves appropriate freedom elsewhere. The room that is not there becomes dramatically present through a dependable pattern of orientation and response, maintained by people who can still see the room that is.

What Counts as Scenery in a Participatory Performance

Conventional scenic construction can supply surfaces, volumes, objects, and pathways that participants encounter directly. A wall blocks a view; a raised platform changes bodily position; a functioning door regulates passage. These material properties can have consequences before anyone explains their fictional significance. Theatre of the mind transfers some of that work into description and agreement. An indicated boundary can represent a wall, but participants must know whether it prevents seeing, hearing, movement, or some combination. The substitution is possible because a

performance can distinguish what an object physically permits from what it represents within the event.

That distinction reveals several kinds of scenic work. A setting locates action by establishing here and elsewhere. It differentiates encounters by making one conversation public and another secluded. It can organize access, placing a character near an important object or requiring a negotiated passage. It also gives social meaning to position: standing before a throne differs from sharing a bench with an equal. Finally, it can change during performance. A room becomes closed, a memorial becomes contested, or a familiar table becomes the site of a new agreement. Any account of imaginative scenography should explain how these functions remain intelligible.

Physical resemblance supports some of those functions, but it does not settle all of them. An impressive throne can make a court recognizable while leaving participants uncertain about who may interrupt the monarch. A plain chair can perform the same social function when precedence, address, and access are established. The difference matters because the spectator's recognition of an environment and the participant's ability to act within it are related but separate achievements. Someone may identify a room as a laboratory without knowing which apparent instruments may be handled or what the handling means. Participatory design needs actionable clarity alongside atmosphere.

Theatre of the mind should not become a category for everything absent from the room. A participant may privately imagine childhood memories that have no present scenic role. Another may know a fictional country's history without

locating that country in the performance space. These contributions belong to characterization and world construction, but they become scenic when they organize a situated encounter. A remembered garden becomes relevant to scenography when characters agree that the space beside the windows represents that garden, move there, and treat their exchange as separate from the council. The setting gains an operational relation to bodies and scenes.

This approach also prevents a false division between an entirely material theatre and an entirely imaginative roleplaying event. Constructed environments require interpretation. An actual corridor does not announce whether it represents a palace passage, a hospital wing, or an abandoned spacecraft. Sparse environments remain material. Chairs, voices, lighting, temperature, and the positions of other people continue to shape attention and movement. The practical question concerns how a production allocates representational work across those resources. Some things are built, some described, some enacted, and some deliberately left unspecified. Their coordination matters more than defending a pure category.

Scenic design in a salon form is also temporal. A short introduction may establish a mansion's layout, but that introduction cannot carry every later change without further communication. If a character closes the imaginary library door, the convention must identify who learns that the door is closed and whether the closure blocks sound. If another character reopens it, the new state must become available to those affected. A setting that exists only in the facilitator's preparation has not yet become a usable environment. It

becomes available through the timing and distribution of its representations during actual encounters.

The designer can distinguish enduring conditions from temporary states. Enduring conditions include the existence of a private gallery or the ceremonial status of a dais. Temporary states include whether the gallery is occupied or whether the ceremony has begun. Keeping this distinction explicit reduces the amount participants must repeatedly establish. A room label can preserve the enduring condition, while the people present enact its current use. Such an arrangement does not automate understanding. It provides a stable reference against which participants can interpret developments, including disagreements about whether a fictional restriction has actually changed.

Scenography can also involve deliberate incompleteness. A designer may establish that the ballroom overlooks a stormy sea without specifying the number of windows or the direction of the coastline. Participants can orient to isolation and exposure without sharing those details. The omission becomes a problem only if the missing feature matters to an action. When someone wants to signal a boat from a particular window, the group needs a way to establish the relevant relationship. Design quality includes knowing which uncertainties can remain productive and which must become clear before a decision can carry intelligible consequences.

The resulting definition is functional rather than merely visual. Imaginative scenic design organizes the represented places, boundaries, objects, and environmental changes through which participants perform together. It can include vivid description, but it also includes concise labels, shared

procedures, and physical arrangements that make the description usable. Its success is neither guaranteed by literary richness nor disproved by visible classroom furniture. It depends on whether people can recognize and sustain the setting's consequential relations. That gives research a concrete object: the scenic work accomplished in identifiable episodes, rather than an assumed disappearance of awareness of the surrounding room.

From Tabletop Description to Simultaneous Enactment

A tabletop roleplaying session offers an important comparison because it can establish an extensive world through speech while participants remain together in one location. The 2014 Dungeons and Dragons Basic Rules describe play through an exchange in which the Dungeon Master presents an environment, players state their actions, and the consequences are narrated. The introduction also recognizes variation in how groups use maps and other representations (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). This is a documented example of verbal world presentation, not a definition of all tabletop practice. Its relevance is the communicative cycle through which an environment supports choices.

That cycle often creates a shared focus. When a facilitator describes a chamber to a seated group, the participants can receive the same initial account and ask questions before proceeding. A salon event with concurrent conversations cannot depend on continuous common attention. While two characters negotiate beside the represented engine, others

may be exchanging a secret in the observation lounge. An environmental update delivered only to one group may need to remain local, or it may need another route to reach everyone. The transfer from tabletop description changes the distribution of scenic information as much as the posture of the participants.

Embodied interaction also reduces the need to narrate some actions. A character can approach another person, pause before speaking, or offer a document through actual movement. Those events provide immediate evidence within the local encounter. Other actions still require representation: crossing a vast hangar, watching an approaching vessel, or hearing an announcement from a distant station. A hybrid design benefits from specifying when enactment is sufficient and when narration supplies something absent. Otherwise, participants may be uncertain whether someone has literally changed fictional location or merely stepped aside to hear better in a noisy room.

The tabletop comparison makes the role of questions especially clear. A player might ask whether the imagined chamber has a second exit. In a small seated session, the answer can enter everyone's understanding at once. In a salon event, an equivalent question might arise privately during a scene. If the answer establishes a route that other participants can use, the information has consequences beyond the questioner's immediate needs. Designers need a proportionate way to make relevant environmental facts available without interrupting all scenes whenever a decorative detail is clarified. Common reference material can absorb some of that work.

The distribution of descriptive authority changes as well. A tabletop facilitator may reserve the right to establish major environmental features, while another game gives players substantial descriptive permission. A salon event can make either choice. It might allow participants to embellish a room's appearance while reserving new exits, concealed objects, and changes of access for established procedures. The distinction is practical. Describing a faded tapestry adds atmosphere; declaring a secret passage can change an investigation. Both are imaginative contributions, but their effects on other participants differ. Permission should follow consequence rather than the superficial distinction between speech and action.

The move into simultaneous enactment can make scenery more dependent on participants' conduct. At a table, a narrator can declare that a hall falls silent. In an embodied gathering, the hall remains full of actual voices unless people respond to the cue. The desired condition may require a clear signal and a shared convention. If the event continues despite the noise, participants need to know whether their characters hear a fictional silence or the ongoing conversations. That situation illustrates a central limit of verbal substitution: a declaration may establish a fact without reproducing its sensory experience for those present.

Such differences need not be treated as failures. A production can deliberately preserve the gap between represented conditions and available sensations. Participants may portray a tense whisper without becoming inaudible to neighboring players, provided the convention separates player hearing from character knowledge. Another design may use actual distance and lowered voices to make overhearing physically

possible. The first arrangement prioritizes flexible representation; the second gives actual acoustics more authority. Each needs a clear relationship between what people perceive and what their characters are permitted to use. Imaginative scenery becomes dependable through that relationship.

Movement introduces another difference in pacing. A journey that takes seconds to narrate may require several minutes of walking if enacted literally, while a fictional voyage lasting days may be represented by a brief transition. Salon performance can select the appropriate scale for each event. Participants might move three steps to mark crossing a chamber but use an announced transition for travel to another deck. These choices affect which conversations can interrupt travel and whether characters remain available to one another during it. Spatial representation always carries temporal implications when people can make decisions before arrival.

Theatre of the mind in embodied drama is best understood as an adaptation of descriptive practice rather than its simple importation. It retains language's capacity to establish what is absent, while accommodating multiple centers of attention, actual bodily encounters, and changing local knowledge. The design task is to preserve enough public orientation for independent scenes to remain compatible. A facilitator need not describe every action. Participants can sustain much of the environment themselves when they understand which actions speak for themselves, which require declaration, and which depend on shared authorization. Description becomes a resource within performance rather than its uninterrupted governing voice.

Establishing a World That Participants Can Share

The phrase shared imagination can suggest that everyone must see the same internal picture. That is an unnecessarily demanding and unobservable standard. Participants cannot inspect one another's mental scenery directly. What they can do is communicate, act, and respond in ways that demonstrate compatible understandings of relevant conditions. Two people may imagine different decorative styles for a royal gallery while agreeing that it offers a place for private negotiation. Their difference matters less than agreement about whether an approaching character can hear them. A usable shared environment is built from consequential compatibility rather than presumed identity of inner experience.

Montola's structural account of roleplaying distinguishes the collectively negotiated game world from participants' subjective interpretations, while emphasizing that authority to define fictional conditions is allocated within play (Montola, 2008). That distinction supplies a useful starting point here. A scenic agreement can remain stable even while individual associations differ. The present proposal extends that insight into a design question: which environmental relations must participants establish together for a particular dramatic situation to function? The answer depends on the event. A succession dispute may require clear ceremonial positions; an investigation may require dependable routes among witnesses and evidence.

An opening orientation should establish those relations before demanding sustained character performance. Participants

need to know the represented locations, how movement works, and how public and private encounters are distinguished. The orientation can be brief if the setting is simple. More elaborate fiction does not necessarily require more operational complexity. A starship with several thousand imagined compartments might use only three represented locations during the event. Conversely, a small historical dining room may demand careful explanation of precedence and who can leave the table. The amount of explanation should follow the actions participants are expected to undertake.

The initial account benefits from separating public conditions from character knowledge. Everyone may need to know that the library occupies one corner of the room, even if some characters have never visited it. A participant's operational orientation does not automatically become a character's knowledge of secrets inside the library. The distinction makes performance possible without requiring actual disorientation. It also helps a designer avoid using confusion about the event's procedures as a substitute for fictional mystery. Participants can understand how to investigate while their characters remain uncertain about the answer. These are different forms of not knowing.

An environment can be established through a few dependable anchors. A doorway, central table, and marked alcove may supply enough reference for a courtly reception. The anchors should have recognizable names and roles in the action. Calling a location the north gallery is unhelpful if participants have no shared orientation to north. Calling it the gallery beside the windows connects fictional description to an available reference. The practical language need not diminish

the imagined setting. It allows participants to locate the relevant place quickly and spend their attention on the encounter it supports.

Repeated use strengthens an anchor's meaning through performance. If characters consistently approach the same table to make formal petitions, the table acquires a ceremonial role even without architectural resemblance. Other participants can recognize the beginning of a petition through position and conduct. Such recognition is conditional, not magical. A new participant or someone occupied elsewhere may miss it. Written orientation and clear introductory practice can preserve access without requiring everyone to infer conventions from social confidence alone. The goal is a convention that can be learned and used, rather than a private code maintained by experienced performers.

Contradiction requires an explicit response. Suppose one participant believes an imagined balcony is secluded while another treats it as audible from the ballroom. A consequential secret should not depend on whichever assumption is asserted more forcefully afterward. The group needs a way to clarify the intended relationship, acknowledge what people reasonably understood, and continue. Sometimes the least disruptive response is to establish the rule for future use and preserve the scene's already accepted knowledge. In other cases, a brief local correction can repair the misunderstanding before any major decision follows. Repair belongs to the scenic system itself.

Not all disagreements are contradictions in design. Characters can disagree about whether a house is welcoming, whether a chamber feels oppressive, or whether a monument deserves

respect. Those differences may be the drama's purpose. The design should distinguish interpretive disagreement from incompatible operational facts. Two characters can experience the same gallery differently while still agreeing that it connects to the reception room. Making every subjective impression authoritative would erase disagreement; making every environmental fact negotiable would destabilize action. A shared world needs both dependable relations and room for conflicting experiences of those relations.

Genre expectations can help participants fill gaps, but they can also conceal disagreement. One person may assume that a royal court permits direct petition, while another imagines rigid ceremonial mediation. A starship may suggest unrestricted communication to someone familiar with one fictional tradition and strict departmental access to someone familiar with another. Designers can use recognizable genres without asking their associations to carry essential procedures. A short statement about the present institution is often more useful than an assumption that everyone knows how castles or spacecraft work. This also gives an invented setting its particular character: the world becomes distinctive through selected relationships, rather than through a list of decorative names borrowed from familiar stories.

The most effective orientation can also leave questions available for discovery. Participants need not receive every room's history or every object's significance at the beginning. They need to know how relevant discoveries can become established and whom they can ask when an action exceeds current information. A prepared card, an authorized witness, or a facilitator's clarification can supply further detail when

needed. This distributes description across the event instead of demanding a lengthy opening lecture. The world becomes progressively available through action, while its basic organization remains stable enough for participants to pursue independent intentions.

The Body in the Classroom and the Fictional World

The participant's body occupies the real room throughout the performance. It hears actual voices, encounters actual distances, and has ordinary needs for rest, movement, and orientation. Character performance gives some of those bodily events another significance. An approach can become a diplomatic overture; a pause can become hesitation before a confession. Other bodily events retain practical purposes without entering the fiction. Someone may change position to hear a conversation or sit because standing has become uncomfortable. The design needs to make room for both kinds of action without requiring participants to interpret every movement as an intentional character decision.

The coexistence of physical and fictional position can be organized in different ways. In a literal arrangement, walking toward the designated council table also moves the character into the council chamber. In a more compressed arrangement, a declared transition can move the character between distant locations even though the participant crosses only a few feet. A seated participant might represent arrival through a verbal cue rather than physical travel. These arrangements are compatible when their rules are recognizable. Problems arise when the performance silently assumes that every participant

maps bodily movement onto fictional movement in the same way.

Physical scale places limits on representation without fixing the scale of the fiction. A corner of the classroom can represent the observation deck of a vast spacecraft. The deck's imagined size need not be enacted in full, but the design must decide whether characters can converse across it, approach unnoticed, or leave without passing other people. Compression works best when it preserves the relationships needed for the scene. If every character is physically within earshot while their fictional positions are widely separated, the convention for hearing must supply what distance cannot. Otherwise, the imagined architecture remains decorative while actual proximity governs action.

The relationship between bodily action and imagined condition is especially visible in impossible environments. Participants cannot literally enter a room without gravity or become surrounded by a supernatural mist. They can portray selected consequences, describe others, and accept a common account of the condition. A weightless scene might be conducted seated, with movement narrated and gestures used selectively. That choice creates a different performance from attempting continuous physical imitation. Its success depends on whether the represented condition shapes decisions and exchanges, not on whether participants reproduce every sensation associated with it. The imagination extends bodily performance without requiring bodily deception.

The setting can also alter the meaning of familiar movements. Turning away from someone may be a minor shift in a crowded classroom but an unmistakable dismissal during a

ceremonial audience. Moving behind a marked boundary can become an act of withdrawal from a public assembly. Such meanings arise from the scene's conventions and relationships. They should not depend entirely on a participant's confidence in reading unstated social codes. If a boundary carries major consequences, the event should establish those consequences clearly enough that people can choose whether to cross it. Bodily freedom becomes dramatically meaningful when the available meanings are accessible.

Awareness of the real environment can coexist with sustained character involvement. A participant can notice the classroom clock and still care about whether an imagined ally will keep a promise. The performance does not require a claim that the person has mistaken the fiction for reality. Nor should conscious adjustment be treated as proof of weak participation. People may move between attending to the event's procedures, their character's intentions, and another participant's needs. The relevant question is whether those adjustments allow the scene to continue coherently. Complete absorption is one possible reported experience, not the sole criterion of theatrical accomplishment.

This distinction matters for emotional interpretation. An imagined room can acquire importance because of what occurs there. After a difficult negotiation, the same plain table may signify a broken alliance to the participants who witnessed it. That significance does not establish that every person experienced the same emotion, or that the emotion belongs only to the character. It identifies a relationship between location and remembered action. A careful account can describe the scene and ask participants what the place

came to mean, instead of inferring an internal state from a visible gesture or from the setting's intended mood.

Bodies also carry practical differences into the event. A scenic design organized around standing, rapid circulation, or visual gestures places demands on participants whether the castle is built or imagined. Replacing stairs with a declared transition can remove one physical requirement, but an unamplified announcement may create another barrier. The imaginative method needs a precise account of how people receive information and express actions. Access belongs inside the theory of embodiment because the participant's means of acting help determine what the character can accomplish. The represented body should not be restricted unnecessarily by a single assumed way of performing.

The dual environment is best regarded as a coordinated arrangement rather than a contest between reality and illusion. The real room supplies bodies, voices, objects, and opportunities for mutual attention. The fictional world supplies identities, places, histories, and consequences that transform the use of those resources. Participants sustain the relation through recognizable signals and responses. Scenic design can support that work by deciding which bodily events count as character actions and which remain practical adjustments. The imagined ship becomes available through the classroom without requiring the classroom to disappear from anyone's awareness.

Description as an Invitation to Dramatic Action

Verbal scenery has a distinct advantage: it can establish a vast or impossible environment with a few sentences. That economy can also become its weakness when description offers many impressions but little guidance for action. A participant may hear that a mansion is ancient, magnificent, and haunted without knowing where a conversation can take place or what can be examined. Effective description connects sensory suggestion to usable relationships. It identifies enough about a place that participants can approach, avoid, question, or reinterpret something within it. Atmosphere then supports an encounter rather than replacing the opportunity for one.

An introductory description can move from general orientation to immediate situation. A court may be meeting in a winter palace, but the first actionable facts concern the present reception: the monarch has not arrived, the petition table is open, and a side gallery is available for private discussions. Participants can begin making choices while imagining the larger setting through selected details. The order matters. Information delivered after someone must decide where to go cannot support that earlier decision. Design should place relevant scenic knowledge before the action it is expected to inform, while allowing later discoveries to change the available picture.

Specificity is most useful when it clarifies a consequential relation. Saying that a window overlooks the harbor can establish a route for observing an arrival. Describing its stained glass may contribute tone but usually does less

operational work. Neither kind of detail should be excluded. The designer's task is to distinguish their roles and avoid hiding essential information among decorative elaborations. Participants engaged in conversation may retain only a portion of a description. Repetition of an important route or boundary can be sensible communication, while repetition of atmospheric adjectives may merely lengthen the interruption.

Description can preserve agency by presenting a condition without prescribing a response. A facilitator can establish that a portrait appears freshly damaged without declaring that every character is terrified or suspicious. Participants then decide what the damage means to their roles. The difference is especially important in a social drama where reactions are part of the authored performance. A scenic cue can create an occasion for interpretation; it should not routinely supply the interpretation on the participants' behalf. Even when a character brief specifies a fear or loyalty, the participant still needs room to express that condition through the present encounter.

Perspective provides another resource. The same chamber can be described differently in private character materials because characters know different histories or have different reasons to value it. An heir may remember a family celebration; a servant may associate it with difficult work. These differences enrich the setting without requiring incompatible public facts. The room's present exits can remain stable while its associations diverge. Designers should identify whether a statement describes an established condition, a memory, a belief, or an evaluative impression. Without those distinctions, an intentionally subjective description can be mistaken for an authoritative change to the environment.

The language of uncertainty should be equally precise. A character can hear a sound whose source remains unknown, but the event should establish whether hearing it is public, local, or private. A phrase such as apparently empty can invite inspection without guaranteeing the absence of occupants. Such language creates possibilities only if participants understand how an inspection can occur. A mystery cannot rely solely on suggestive wording while providing no route for inquiry. Verbal scenery becomes interactive when participants can test, ask about, or act on the conditions it introduces under recognizable conventions.

Environmental narration can be distributed through documents, participants, and scheduled events. A letter can describe a closed wing; a character familiar with the palace can offer directions; a public announcement can mark a change of location. These resources reduce dependence on a single descriptive voice. They also introduce differences in reliability. A character's directions may be mistaken or deceptive within the fiction, while an operational room label should be dependable. The event benefits from recognizable signals for those different statuses. Otherwise, participants may distrust necessary orientation or accept an interested character's claim as an unquestionable fact about the setting.

Silence can carry scenic meaning only within an understood context. A facilitator need not continually describe a garden once participants have established it and begun a scene. The absence of new narration can allow attention to settle on the exchange. Silence should not, however, leave participants guessing whether a major environmental condition has changed. The distinction concerns what needs maintenance. A stable fictional location can remain available through

shared reference, while a new alarm or closure needs communication. Good verbal design includes knowing when existing orientation is sufficient and when another intervention has become necessary.

Descriptions can be tested through the questions they enable. After hearing an opening account, participants should be able to identify where their next scene might happen and how to begin it. If they cannot, the problem may be missing orientation rather than insufficient imaginative talent. Asking a few people to explain the represented layout before full performance can reveal ambiguities in names, routes, or permissions. This is a design check, not proof of eventual immersion. It helps ensure that the verbal scenery offers a usable invitation, leaving the quality and consequences of participants' responses available for later evaluation.

Props Boundaries and the Material Support of Imagination

Theatre of the mind does not require an empty room. Selective physical resources can make an imagined environment easier to maintain by giving participants common points of reference. A document can be handed to another person; a chair can mark a ceremonial position; a small sign can identify an otherwise ordinary corner. The relevant choice concerns which material support performs useful work. An object need not resemble everything it represents, but participants should understand its status. A plain envelope can be a confidential diplomatic dispatch without resembling an artifact from the invented culture in every detail.

Props can perform different functions within the same event. Some represent objects that characters can possess and use. Others provide orientation for participants without existing inside the fiction. A public layout sheet may belong to the latter category, while a map carried by a character belongs to the former. Their appearance can be similar even when their authority differs. Designers should make the distinction visible or explain it clearly. A participant consulting operational guidance should not accidentally give a character privileged geographical knowledge, and a character's misleading map should not replace the event's reliable account of how locations are represented.

Material objects can preserve state across conversations. If a treaty is represented by one physical document, its location can help participants track custody. The object does not automatically determine every fictional question. Participants still need to know whether copies exist, whether a signature changes an agreement, and whether annotations count as alterations to the fictional original. These conventions connect the prop to the dramatic system. Without them, the physical act of taking a paper may create an appearance of consequence that the event cannot consistently interpret. A usable prop joins material handling to an established range of fictional effects.

Boundaries require similar care. A ribbon or marked line can represent a wall, a door, a jurisdictional border, or simply the edge of a scene area. Those are different relations. A character might be able to speak across a jurisdictional border while being unable to hear through a wall. Participants should not have to infer the intended rule from the material alone. A boundary becomes meaningful through a stated convention

and consistent use. Its physical form should support that use without obstructing necessary movement through the real room or confusing an operational passage with a fictional entrance.

Furniture can organize encounters without imitating architecture. A small cluster of chairs can make a represented lounge available for slower conversation. A central table can gather public decisions. Leaving open space between zones may help people recognize that they are moving between scenes, even if the imagined locations are far apart. These arrangements affect actual attention and circulation. They are part of the scenography, rather than neutral containers for verbal content. A designer who removes constructed scenery still makes material choices through where people can gather and how readily they can encounter one another.

Hutchins's account of distributed cognition provides a bounded theoretical comparison. It examines cognitive activity through relations among people, practices, and material resources, using navigation as a central domain (Hutchins, 1995). It does not establish findings about salon performance. Here it encourages attention to how orientation might be sustained across speech, labels, props, and remembered conventions rather than located entirely inside an individual participant. Whether a particular arrangement reduces confusion remains an empirical question. The useful implication for analysis is to examine the whole support system through which a scenic fact becomes available and stays available during play.

Selective material support can also reduce unnecessary verbal repetition. If a door's current status is publicly displayed,

participants may not need to ask the facilitator every time they approach. That advantage depends on how changes are authorized and recorded. A marker showing closed must be updated when the fictional door opens. If two people can alter it independently, the event needs a consistent way to resolve competing actions. Material persistence helps only when it remains connected to the performance's current state. An outdated sign can mislead more effectively than an absent one because it appears to carry settled authority.

Atmospheric objects deserve evaluation on their own terms. A cloth, a lamp, or a ceremonial seal may help establish tone even when it carries little operational information. Such objects can invite attention and provide a shared sensory reference. Their effectiveness should not be assumed from the designer's intention. A dim lamp may suggest intimacy while making a character sheet difficult to read. A continuous soundscape may suggest a storm while obscuring speech. The point is not to exclude atmosphere, but to consider its interaction with the event's communicative demands. Sensory enrichment can support one function while complicating another.

Objects can acquire a history that exceeds their initial scenic function. A chair first designated as the founder's place might remain empty through several exchanges and later be offered to a newly recognized successor. Its material appearance stays constant, but participants' earlier conduct gives the invitation significance. The design need not script that development to make it possible. It can establish the chair's initial status and leave future use to authorized decisions. Such an example connects scenic persistence with emergent action: a stable object provides continuity while characters

change its social meaning. Analysis should follow that sequence rather than attributing the later significance entirely to either the original designer or the individual who proposed the change.

Material economy is most productive when it is selective rather than doctrinaire. A designer can reserve physical resources for the relations that are difficult to sustain through speech alone and use description where construction would add little. A real document may be valuable because custody matters; a built staircase may be unnecessary because travel can be declared. The choice should follow the scene's requirements and the participants' means of taking part. Imaginative scenography gains strength from an intelligent partnership with material support, allowing a few dependable objects to anchor an environment whose fictional extent remains much larger.

Immersion Beyond the Quantity of Built Environment

The claim that a sparsely staged event can be immersive becomes more useful when immersion is treated as a question rather than a single measurable substance. Participants may report vivid environmental imagery, concentration on character decisions, emotional involvement, a sense of social presence, or sustained attention to an unfolding situation. Those experiences can overlap without being identical. A person can care deeply about a negotiation while imagining little architectural detail. Another can admire a convincing room while remaining detached from its characters. Comparing scenic arrangements requires identifying which

experience is at issue and how evidence for it will be gathered.

Scholarship on immersive theatre provides a broader context for that distinction. Machon's study brings theories of immersion into conversation with practitioners and foregrounds intimacy and immediacy within contemporary performance (Machon, 2013). Its range cautions against reducing immersive practice to one model of elaborate environmental construction. The present essay uses that context to ask a narrower question about salon events: how can an environment support involvement when much of its represented detail is supplied through language and interpretation? The answer must account for bodily encounter and available action, as well as the appearance or imagined richness of the surroundings.

Elaborate physical staging can provide a dense sensory field. Participants may encounter textures, sounds, and spatial relations without needing repeated verbal explanation. Material resistance can also matter: a narrow passage changes actual movement in a way a described passage may not. Imaginative representation cannot be presumed to duplicate those sensations. Its strength lies elsewhere, including the ability to extend scale, alter location, and introduce conditions that would be costly or impossible to build. The comparison should identify what each arrangement supplies and what it asks participants to contribute. Equivalent dramatic purpose does not entail identical sensory experience.

Theatre of the mind can draw attention toward relationships because fewer visual details compete for notice, but that remains a possibility rather than a universal effect. An

undecorated classroom may also continually remind some participants of unrelated routines. A richly dressed room may help one person settle into a role and distract another through uncertainty about which objects matter. These differences suggest a contextual approach. The event's aims, participant familiarity, clarity of orientation, and the nature of the scene can all affect how resources are used. No amount of scenic expenditure guarantees that a fictional decision will become meaningful.

Agency supplies one possible route to involvement. When a participant knows that disclosing a letter can change a relationship, the present choice may command attention even if the setting is only lightly described. The environment supports that attention by making the letter, its audience, and possible consequences intelligible. This is a proposed relationship between action and engagement, not a claim that agency automatically produces immersion. Participants may prefer observation, feel uncertain about a role, or find the choice uninteresting. Design can offer consequential possibilities; it cannot establish their experienced value merely by including them in preparation.

The imagined environment can also benefit from selective ambiguity. A supernatural presence described through uncertain signs may invite participants to develop competing interpretations. A visible representation of the presence might settle some questions prematurely. Conversely, ambiguity can become frustrating when people cannot distinguish a deliberate mystery from a failure to communicate. The designer needs dependable conditions beneath the uncertainty. Participants can wonder what caused a sound while knowing which characters heard it and how they can

investigate. Dramatic openness becomes useful when it concerns the fiction's questions, rather than the basic procedures required to participate.

The desire for immersion should not make practical clarification embarrassing. If participants believe that asking where a room is located counts as breaking the performance, they may continue on incompatible assumptions. A short clarification can preserve the conditions for a much stronger scene. This suggests that continuity of involvement need not mean uninterrupted character speech. A performance can have brief operational exchanges that restore orientation and allow character action to resume. Research should ask how participants experience such moments rather than classifying every procedural intervention as a loss. Some interruptions repair the event's capacity to sustain attention.

Comparability with built environments must also be stated carefully. A participant could report equally strong involvement in two arrangements while describing different sources for it. That would support a bounded comparison of those reports, not an assertion that the productions are interchangeable. A researcher might find that a constructed room supports spatial recall while a sparse version supports attention to dialogue, or might find no such pattern. The theoretical framework should permit different results. Its purpose is to make imaginative scenography a serious object of study, not to predetermine its superiority over another theatrical practice.

The strongest challenge to scenic determinism is modest and specific: elaborate environmental construction is not logically necessary for every form of immersive theatrical

involvement. A performance can supply reasons to attend, respond, and care through shared fictional conditions and actual encounters. Whether particular participants experience that involvement, and whether they compare it favorably with other forms, remains open to investigation. This formulation preserves the proposal's central possibility while avoiding an inflated promise. It recognizes imaginative scenery as a design resource whose value emerges through use, with strengths and limits that can be described in relation to identifiable dramatic tasks.

A Hypothetical Reception Across Three Imagined Settings

Consider an invented reception involving twelve characters gathered to decide whether an absent founder's final instruction should become public. The scenario has no combat. Its action concerns testimony, loyalty, custodianship, and the terms of a shared decision. Three represented locations are available: a public assembly room, a private study, and a place from which characters can observe an approaching visitor. The event takes place in an ordinary classroom. One central table, a cluster of chairs, and a window area supply physical anchors. A sealed document and three location signs provide the main material resources. All developments described here are illustrative possibilities.

In a castle version, the gathering concerns the founder of a scholarly order. The assembly room becomes a great hall, the study becomes an archivist's chamber, and the window area becomes a gallery overlooking the gate. Participants receive a concise description of winter weather and the order's

uncertain future. They also learn the operational relations: the archivist's chamber supports private conversation, the gallery permits observation of arrivals, and a summons brings characters back to the hall. The imagined stonework gives tone, but the spatial arrangements give participants places to pursue their intentions independently.

Character preparation connects those places to different purposes. The archivist knows why the final instruction was withheld. A representative of the order wants public continuity, while a former apprentice wants the founder's dissent acknowledged. A visitor carries corroborating testimony but has not yet entered the reception. Other characters possess partial knowledge, competing commitments, or reasons to delay the decision. None needs to memorize an extensive architectural plan. They need to know whom to approach and where particular encounters can occur. The environment becomes dramatically substantial through those relationships, even though only three locations are represented.

The first scene might begin when the former apprentice asks the archivist for a private exchange. They move to the designated study area and use the agreed privacy convention. Nearby participants may hear their actual voices, but their characters cannot use the conversation unless they enter under the event's stated conditions. The archivist can reveal the instruction, refuse, or ask for a commitment before disclosure. The scene's possibilities arise from character decisions. The imagined walls support those possibilities by regulating fictional access to the exchange, while the available chairs and actual voices support its bodily performance.

At the gallery, another character receives a prepared account of the approaching visitor. The account establishes an arrival at the gate and an identifying emblem, leaving motives unspecified. The character can inform the assembly, seek an ally first, or approach the visitor through an authorized transition. An environmental description has created a decision without dictating its outcome. The visitor's player enters at the appropriate cue and can immediately join existing interactions. The timing need not force a planned revelation. It supplies another source of knowledge whose influence depends on how the ensemble responds to the arrival.

The same structural situation can be translated into a starship setting. The founder becomes the architect of a scientific mission, the hall becomes a briefing lounge, the study becomes a records office, and the gallery becomes an observation station. A transport approaches with the visitor aboard. The classroom anchors remain in the same positions, but the description establishes technological mediation: people observe a display rather than look down toward a gate. That difference can matter if communications may precede arrival. The adaptation should decide whether remote contact is available instead of assuming that changing the setting's vocabulary leaves every action unchanged.

The starship version also needs an account of travel and communication. Participants might declare movement among decks rather than enact the ship's scale. A public announcement can represent a message carried through the vessel, while private conversation remains local. If the fictional ship has recording systems, the scenario must specify their relevant limits. Otherwise, a participant might

reasonably ask why every confidential exchange cannot be recovered later. The imagined technology is part of the world's possibilities, not a decorative layer. Its selected capacities should support the intended inquiry without supplying unannounced solutions or restrictions when participants begin asking questions.

In a haunted mansion version, the founder becomes a missing patron whose instructions have acquired a disturbing reputation. The assembly room becomes a memorial salon, the study remains an archive, and the gallery overlooks an overgrown drive. The visitor's arrival can be introduced through a description of a figure near the gate. A bell may sound without a visible source. Participants know that the sound occurs, but the scenario can leave its cause unresolved. The mysterious atmosphere changes possible interpretations of the instruction without changing the basic relation among document, testimony, and public decision.

This version benefits from resisting compulsory emotion. The bell does not require every character to be frightened. One may regard it as a mechanical fault, another as a sign of the patron, and another as an opportunity to influence the gathering. A simple sound cue could provide a common sensory event, or a brief announcement could establish the same fictional occurrence. Those choices differ in sensation and practicality. If a sound cue is used, an equivalent textual notice can preserve the event's information for participants who do not receive it clearly. Atmospheric interpretation remains open while the occurrence itself stays dependable.

Across the versions, the physical room can acquire a changing dramatic history. Before disclosure, the central table

is the place where the institution maintains its official account. After the instruction is read, it may become the site where that account is challenged. The architecture has not changed, but the place's significance has. A character who once approached the table confidently may now avoid it or demand the right to speak there. Such action demonstrates how scenery can be transformed through social events. The imagined environment is not exhausted by its opening description because participants continually change what its places mean.

The example also exposes possible failures. If the private study is treated as secluded by one group and publicly audible by another, the final dispute can rest on incompatible assumptions. If the approaching visitor never receives a usable entrance cue, a major route for interaction disappears. If the instruction is hidden in an unmarked prop that participants have no reason to examine, the mystery can stall. These are failures of orientation and opportunity rather than failures to decorate convincingly. More elaborate construction might solve some of them, but it would not automatically repair the distribution of information or character permissions.

The three translations preserve a common dramatic problem while changing the environmental conditions that give it form. A gate, a transport, and a haunted drive are not interchangeable images; each suggests different possibilities for arrival and contact. The design must identify which suggestions become operative and which remain atmospheric. That is the work of imaginative scenography. It allows the represented world to exceed the available room while requiring close attention to the details that participants can

use. The classroom can host all three versions because its few physical anchors support a carefully specified pattern of encounters.

Access Portability and the Costs That Remain

Reducing dependence on constructed environments can make a production easier to transport. A set of character materials, a few signs, and selected props may fit into a bag where a constructed palace would require storage, installation, and suitable premises. That is a practical difference in production requirements. It does not mean that the event needs no preparation. The work moves toward scenario writing, orientation, communication, and the rehearsal of conventions. A portable production can be materially light and organizationally demanding. Evaluating its economy requires attention to the labor that remains, including labor carried by participants during play.

The same design can also behave differently in different rooms. A classroom with movable chairs permits arrangements unavailable in a fixed lecture theater. A ballroom may offer generous circulation while making quiet conversation difficult. An ordinary meeting room may have excellent lighting but too little space for several simultaneous scenes. Imaginative representation can loosen the need for architectural resemblance, yet it cannot erase actual acoustic and bodily conditions. Portability involves adaptation of the relationship between physical anchors and fictional locations. Simply carrying identical signs into a new room does not establish that the event will function in the same way.

Accessibility should be considered through specific participation tasks. Participants need to receive setting information, locate scenes, communicate intentions, and follow relevant changes. A design that permits narrated movement can reduce reliance on walking, but a design that communicates every update through speech can increase reliance on hearing and rapid language processing. A visually indicated boundary may need a verbal or tactile alternative. The relevant question is which means of participation are available for each consequential action. Imaginative freedom becomes practically useful when it supports multiple ways to achieve those actions within the same dramatic conventions.

Mental imagery itself should not become an entrance requirement. Zeman, Dewar, and Della Sala's report on congenital aphantasia describes individuals with lifelong reductions in voluntary visual imagery, including participants who used other forms of knowledge in tasks associated with visualization (Zeman et al., 2015). This research does not test Interactive Drama. Its relevance is the narrower caution against equating imagination with a uniform capacity to generate internal pictures. A participant can understand that an archive adjoins a hall and act on that relation without reporting a vivid visual image of either place. The design should not define that participation as deficient.

Instructions can invite several modes of engagement. Rather than asking everyone to see the chamber in precisely the same way, an orientation can establish where the chamber is represented, what can happen there, and which details are available for interpretation. Written descriptions, concise spoken accounts, and simple spatial references can supplement one another. Such support is not a concession that

invalidates theatre of the mind. It makes the shared fiction available through more than one route. The aim is a compatible basis for action, while individual participants remain free to experience that basis through imagery, language, memory, or other forms of understanding.

Language demands require particular attention in educational or multilingual groups. Elaborate descriptive prose can create avoidable difficulty when unfamiliar vocabulary carries essential spatial information. A facilitator might preserve atmospheric language while also providing a plain operational account. Participants can know that the room feels ceremonially austere without needing that phrase to determine where a private conversation is permitted. Repetition, written location names, and time to ask questions can support orientation. These are design possibilities, not guarantees of improved language learning. Their immediate purpose is to make the event's conditions available so that participants can use their language in meaningful encounters.

Creative freedom also has boundaries. A sparse setting can allow a designer to imagine places that could not be built within the available budget. That freedom does not authorize unlimited changes during performance. If one participant can invent a new room whenever a conversation becomes difficult, the setting may lose the dependable constraints that make choices consequential. The event needs a distinction between freedom to imagine descriptive detail and authority to alter shared conditions. This permits expansive worlds without making their relations arbitrary. The most useful freedom concerns what can be represented, joined to clarity about how represented facts become established.

Preparation costs can be assessed concretely. A production record can document time spent writing location materials, checking character knowledge, arranging the room, introducing conventions, and resolving confusion during play. Comparing those demands with a more materially constructed version would show where labor has shifted. It might reveal savings in transport but increased needs for orientation. It might also show that a reusable scenic system becomes easier to operate after an initial investment. Such findings should be measured rather than inferred from the small number of props. A lightweight bag does not provide a complete account of the work inside it.

Participants contribute labor too. They remember conventions, distinguish fictional from practical movement, and help newcomers locate an encounter. That contribution can be satisfying because it participates in making the world. It can also become tiring when too many environmental states must be remembered without support. The design should reserve attention for dramatically valuable choices rather than spend it on avoidable procedural uncertainty. Persistent references, stable location names, and selective updates can reduce unnecessary demands. The aim is not an effortless performance, but a deliberate allocation of effort toward the activity participants came to undertake.

The proposal's claims about access and portability are strongest when expressed conditionally and specifically. An imagined staircase can be represented without requiring anyone to climb. A portable archive can be created without constructing walls. Neither achievement proves that the entire event is accessible or inexpensive in every respect. Those broader judgments require an account of the participants,

venue, materials, and labor. Imaginative scenography offers flexibility that designers can use to address such conditions. Its creative potential becomes credible through precise decisions about participation, rather than through a general promise that the imagination removes practical constraints.

Studying Imaginative Scenography in Practice

A research program should begin by defining the scenic task under investigation. Asking whether theatre of the mind is immersive leaves too many different processes inside one question. A study could instead ask how participants establish a private room, how they recognize a change in fictional access, or how they use a described environmental feature in a decision. These questions connect design to observable episodes. Participant interviews can then examine what those episodes meant and how they were experienced. The approach preserves both public interaction and subjective interpretation without assuming that either provides a complete account of the performance.

One possible comparative study would use versions of the invented reception with the same character relationships and decision problem. A sparse version could employ verbal description, signs, and the essential document. A second version could add scenic dressing and material room divisions. The study would need to document exactly what changed, because adding partitions may alter acoustics and routes as well as appearance. An apparent effect of scenic realism might instead reflect differences in who could hear whom. The comparison becomes meaningful through a

careful account of those relations rather than through labels such as minimal and immersive.

Participant familiarity also needs consideration. People accustomed to salon conventions may interpret a represented door quickly, while newcomers may need practice. Repeating the same mystery with the same participants introduces knowledge of secrets and relationships that can change later decisions. Using different groups avoids that particular problem while introducing differences among groups. Neither choice makes comparison useless. Both require a modest interpretation of the evidence. A study can describe what happened under specified conditions and identify plausible influences without claiming that one scenic arrangement universally causes a particular level of involvement.

Observation should follow consequential use of the setting. A researcher might record when a participant asks for directions, crosses a represented boundary, announces travel, or refers to an absent feature. The record should distinguish ordinary procedural questions from breakdowns that prevent a scene from continuing. It should also note repairs that succeed. A brief clarification followed by sustained interaction differs from repeated incompatible assumptions that force a decision to be abandoned. These distinctions help avoid treating every mention of the real room as failure. Operational awareness can be part of maintaining the fictional environment rather than evidence that it has collapsed.

Interviews can ask participants to reconstruct particular moments instead of offering only general ratings. Someone might describe why moving into the study changed a conversation, whether the imagined window mattered to an

observation, or what helped them follow a public announcement. Such questions produce evidence about the resources actually used. Participants should also be able to report that a described detail had no importance or that the setting remained difficult to follow. The inquiry should not reward agreement with the designer's ambition. A framework becomes useful when it can explain limitations and unanticipated experiences alongside successful scenes.

Research on shared orientation does not require proving identical mental pictures. Participants could be asked to describe relevant routes or explain who could hear a selected exchange. Their accounts would reveal compatibility in consequential relations. Differences in incidental imagery could be recorded without automatically classifying them as mistakes. A drawing exercise might be informative for some questions, but it would privilege visual representation if treated as the sole test of understanding. The method should match the scenic function being studied. Knowledge of access, for example, can be expressed verbally or demonstrated through a choice about where to begin a conversation.

The record should include preparation as well as performance. Location descriptions, character briefs, prop conventions, and opening instructions establish what the design offered. They do not prove what participants received or used. Comparing prepared conditions with observed action can reveal a gap between intended and available scenery. A crucial room may be clearly described in a handout that few people consult during play. Another may become prominent through a participant's repeated invitation. The difference

helps identify how the environment is maintained in practice, including contributions that the designer did not anticipate.

Claims about emotional involvement need participant evidence and careful attribution. A long silence may reflect tension, uncertainty about procedure, difficulty finding words, or something else. The visible action alone does not decide which explanation is correct. Interviews, immediate reflections, and contextual observation can contribute different kinds of evidence. They can also disagree. A participant may later interpret a scene differently after hearing what occurred elsewhere. That change is relevant to the performance's meaning, but it should not be substituted silently for the person's reported experience during the scene. Time belongs inside the account of interpretation.

Practical feasibility can be studied through ordinary production records. Setup time, transport requirements, number of clarifications, and the availability of participation alternatives can be documented. These measures answer bounded questions about resources and operation. They do not stand in for aesthetic value. A version requiring more setup may offer experiences participants consider worthwhile, while a very portable version may meet a particular educational or festival need more effectively. Evaluation should relate effort to purpose and describe tradeoffs in terms the production actually faced. Counting objects alone cannot decide whether a scenographic arrangement accomplished its dramatic aims.

Documentation also needs permission appropriate to the encounters being studied. Agreement to portray a secret does not automatically make every private conversation available

for publication. Researchers should establish the scope of observation and recording before performance, including how participants can withhold personal reflections. An unrecorded scene can remain a legitimate limit of the account rather than a gap filled by speculation. The method can combine authorized observation with participant descriptions while identifying the source of each claim. This protects the distinction between what was witnessed, what was later reported, and what the analyst inferred. It also makes the study more precise by preventing an apparently comprehensive reconstruction from concealing differences in access to evidence. Such boundaries should be documented alongside the production conditions, because they shape the available account.

The strongest resulting evidence would connect a design choice, an identifiable use, and participants' accounts of its significance. For example, a stable study marker might support a confidential exchange whose participants explain that the change of represented location made disclosure possible. That would justify a claim about that scene under those conditions. It would also suggest further questions about alternative representations and groups. A cumulative research program can build from such bounded findings. It need not begin by proving the imagination superior to construction. It begins by taking seriously the specific theatrical work that imaginative arrangements can perform.

The Environment Made Through Participation

The room that is not there becomes a theatrical environment when participants can orient themselves within it and act in ways others can meaningfully answer. This account treats theatre of the mind as an arrangement of scenic resources rather than an escape from material conditions. Speech establishes absent features; bodies give encounters presence; objects preserve selected facts; conventions connect what people perceive to what their characters may know and do. The resulting setting exceeds the classroom without ceasing to depend on it. Its achievement lies in the sustained relationship between a represented world and the people performing together.

The comparison with tabletop roleplaying clarifies both inheritance and transformation. Verbal description supplies environments beyond what is built, but simultaneous embodied performance creates multiple local centers of attention. Scenic information must reach people through more than a single continuing narrative voice. Participants can maintain much of that information through movement, conversation, and reference to stable anchors. The facilitator's work includes preparing those conditions and helping resolve uncertainties that would otherwise undermine action. The environment becomes durable enough for independent scenes because its consequential relations remain recognizable across different encounters.

The comparison with immersive theatre resists a simple scale from sparse to elaborate. A constructed environment and an imagined environment can support related dramatic purposes

through different sensory and social means. Neither guarantees involvement. Their values depend on what participants are invited to perceive, interpret, and decide, and on the resources available for doing so. Imaginative scenography deserves recognition because it can supply situated opportunities for performance without comprehensive physical reproduction. Its claims become stronger when they specify those opportunities and leave questions of experienced immersion open to careful investigation.

The hypothetical reception demonstrates the practical stakes. A castle, starship, and haunted mansion can use the same ordinary room while offering distinct routes for arrival, knowledge, and contact. Their descriptions matter when they shape what characters can undertake. A few physical anchors can help preserve those relations, and participants can transform their meaning through the scenes they create. Such a design remains demanding: it requires clear orientation, dependable conventions, proportionate support, and attention to differences in participation. Material simplicity does not reduce the need for thoughtful scenic work. It changes where that work occurs.

The proposal's most productive implication is a shift in the question asked of a theatrical setting. Instead of asking only how convincingly a room resembles another room, designers can ask what this arrangement allows people to do together. An imagined gallery may be valuable because it creates the conditions for a confidence, a challenge, or an unexpected reconciliation. Its scenic force appears in the encounter and in the place participants recognize afterward. The powerful set is not merely hidden inside individual minds. It is made

available among participants through the ways they establish, inhabit, and change a world together.

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agreement. She argues that a room imagined by twenty players may have more dramatic flexibility than an elaborate physical set. Holloway regularly experiments with lighting, sound, and small symbolic objects to establish environments without dictating every detail. Away from the rehearsal room, she restores discarded furniture and collects unusual keys. None opens anything important, which she considers an excellent beginning for a story.

Who Controls the Story

Narrative Authority from the Tabletop Game Master to the Interactive Drama Ensemble

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Abstract

This essay examines narrative authority as roleplaying moves from tabletop mediation into embodied, simultaneous Interactive Drama. It argues that authorship becomes distributed through recognized permissions governing description, character response, information, outcomes, and procedure. Comparisons among game masters, playwrights, directors, dramaturgs, and facilitators identify responsibilities that remain distinct even when one person performs several functions. The analysis shows how character relationships, resources, and deadlines can provide dramatic structure without prescribing a sequence of events. A hypothetical archive assembly follows private negotiations into a collective decision. Further sections address intervention, accountability, retrospective storytelling, and evaluation. The central contribution is a functional account of generative scenarios: designers author conditions for consequential interaction, while ensembles create events and interpretations that preparation enables without fully determining.

Keywords

narrative authority, distributed authorship, Interactive Drama, salon LARP, emergent dramaturgy, scenario design

A Situation Designed to Generate Stories

An Interactive Drama scenario can be carefully authored without containing the story that participants eventually produce. The designer establishes characters, relationships, resources, and pressures. Participants decide whom to trust, what to disclose, and which commitments to make. A facilitator maintains the conditions under which those choices become consequential. The resulting performance has several sources of authorship whose contributions occur at different times and operate at different levels. Asking who controls the story is useful only if control is separated into those distinct responsibilities. A person can author the situation without possessing legitimate authority to determine every event that emerges from it.

The principal argument is that narrative authority in salon performance becomes distributed through recognized permissions, rather than simply passing from one controlling individual to an unrestricted ensemble. A participant may control a character's response while lacking permission to invent another character's past. A facilitator may establish a public development while leaving its interpretation open. A scenario may fix an institution's imminent closure while allowing participants to decide what closure will mean for their relationships. These arrangements give structure to improvisation. They allow consequences to remain dependable without requiring a predetermined sequence of scenes or a preferred resolution.

The comparison with tabletop roleplaying begins from functional variation. Tychsen and colleagues treat game mastering as a collection of functions whose configuration

differs across platforms (Tychsen et al., 2005). That approach is more useful here than assuming that all tabletop games have an omnipotent narrator. Some groups distribute extensive creative authority, while others assign most environmental definition and adjudication to one person. The present comparison follows selected responsibilities as they move into embodied, simultaneous play. It examines what participants can establish, how a contribution acquires standing, and what happens when commitments made in separate scenes affect the same world.

The comparison with theatre requires similar precision. A playwright's authorship of a script differs from a director's interpretation of it and a performer's realization of a role. Those distinctions do not imply that theatrical work is rigid or that performers contribute nothing creative. They identify different objects of authorship. In a salon scenario, a participant may invent an event that no written dialogue specifies, while still portraying a role designed by someone else. That combination makes the participant neither merely the executor of a completed story nor the unbounded author of an independent fiction. The role operates within a shared arrangement.

Interactive Drama is used here for the salon form specified in the proposal: participants portray characters with private concerns and engage in consequential dialogue within a prepared situation. Several scenes can proceed at once. The facilitator need not hear every exchange, and combat is unnecessary to the argument. Promises, refusals, access, disclosure, and collective decisions provide the main examples. This scope permits a close analysis of authority while avoiding a claim that every event called Interactive

Drama follows one method. The distinctions can also be applied elsewhere when the relevant differences in practice remain visible.

The essay develops a conceptual framework rather than reporting a completed experiment. Its hypothetical archive scenario demonstrates how different contributions could combine in one performance. It does not establish that a proposed arrangement reliably produces particular experiences. Evaluation would require observation, participant accounts, and an adequate record of the conditions offered. The framework is intended to make those inquiries more precise. A general impression of freedom cannot show which decisions were actually available, just as a quiet facilitator cannot by itself demonstrate that participants exercised meaningful authority.

The distinction between designed experience and generative situation is central. An experience can be organized around encountering a prepared succession of events. A generative situation instead gives participants reasons and means to produce developments whose sequence remains unsettled. Actual events can combine both arrangements. A scheduled assembly may be fixed while the arguments brought to it emerge through private scenes. The appropriate question concerns which parts of the structure are settled, which are open, and how participants learn the difference before making decisions. Unstated restrictions can undermine the very agency the event appears to invite.

Distributed authorship also extends beyond the moment of action. Participants interpret events afterward, connecting scenes they witnessed with accounts supplied by others. Their

resulting stories need not coincide. One may describe the archive's transfer as reconciliation, another as surrender, and another as a practical compromise. These interpretations can be compatible with agreement about what occurred. The facilitator can protect the standing of accepted events without declaring a single authoritative account of their emotional or ethical meaning. A shared performance can generate several coherent stories because people occupy different positions within it.

The essay proceeds by distinguishing powers, comparing creative roles, and explaining how structure can organize possibility. Character design and local encounters show how authority operates through actual decisions. A hypothetical assembly then follows contributions across private and public scenes. Intervention, accountability, and evaluation address the responsibilities that persist when narration becomes less centralized. The resulting account treats narrative authority as a practical relation among people, materials, and procedures. A story belongs to their contributions in different senses, and responsible facilitation begins by making those senses intelligible.

Game Master Playwright Director and Facilitator

The tabletop game master commonly mediates between a prepared world and players' declared intentions. This person may describe environments, portray supporting characters, and resolve uncertainty through agreed procedures. That combination can offer continuity and immediate clarification. It can also create a point at which several participants must

wait for attention. Neither possibility establishes an essential feature of every tabletop game. The role is best analyzed through what it does in a particular arrangement. A facilitator who describes less may still reserve decisive authority over outcomes, while a talkative narrator may invite participants to establish substantial parts of the world.

A playwright working on a conventional dramatic script establishes language and events before their public enactment. The script can specify a betrayal, a confession, or an ending that performers realize through interpretive choices. A salon designer more often establishes a betrayal's background or the possibility of confession while leaving present decisions open. The difference concerns what has already been decided, not whether writing is involved. Character briefs, private objectives, resource rules, and scheduled pressures are all forms of dramaturgical preparation. They organize the field in which performers will create events without necessarily supplying those events in advance.

A theatrical director coordinates interpretation and relationships among performers and production elements. The Royal Shakespeare Company's account of rehearsal emphasizes collaboration over questions of plot, character, themes, and language (Royal Shakespeare Company, n.d.-a). This institutional example prevents the comparison from making a centralized caricature of theatre. Salon facilitation also includes interpretive coordination, especially when introducing a world or clarifying a convention. Its distinctive difficulty is that the relevant events may not yet exist. The facilitator prepares participants to answer developments that will become apparent only through the performance itself.

A dramaturg can support interpretation by connecting circumstances, themes, and the developing work. The Interactive Drama facilitator may exercise a comparable function when identifying relationships that could sustain action or helping clarify the implications of a premise. The comparison should remain functional rather than become a claim that all dramaturgs or facilitators perform identical jobs. During a salon event, interpretation must also be bounded by participant authorship. Explaining that two characters have competing claims differs from instructing their players which claim ought to prevail. The first supports the dramatic situation; the second may settle a choice intended to remain open.

A referee resolves questions under accepted procedures. This function can be necessary even in a drama without dice or combat. Two characters may claim exclusive custody of the same document, or two groups may submit incompatible uses of one public resource. A ruling can establish the shared condition required for continuation. It need not supply a character's feelings about that condition. Refereeing becomes restrictive when the procedure is replaced by an unannounced preference for a particular plot. Its legitimacy depends on the authority participants were offered and the account given of how that authority applies.

Performance coordination is another function. The Royal Shakespeare Company's description of stage management identifies communication and cueing among its responsibilities (Royal Shakespeare Company, n.d.-b). A salon facilitator who announces a break, begins an assembly, or signals the arrival of a prepared event is performing coordinating work even when the announcement changes the

situation. Keeping this function visible helps explain why some central organization can support rather than undermine participant creation. An ensemble needs to know when a shared opportunity is available. The coordinator can make the opportunity clear while leaving its use to the participants.

The facilitator may occupy several of these roles within minutes. A factual clarification can be followed by a performed messenger, an adjudication, and a time announcement. Participants need recognizable signals for the status of each contribution. Otherwise, fictional advocacy can be mistaken for an instruction, or a procedural statement can be treated as character knowledge. The solution does not require elaborate terminology during every exchange. A consistent distinction between character speech and operational clarification can often do the necessary work. The important requirement is that a contribution's standing be understandable to those expected to respond.

The ensemble supplies forms of authorship that no facilitator can replace by preparing more extensively. Participants choose the wording and timing of responses, decide which concerns become urgent, and interpret one another's gestures. Their contributions can establish new relationships that the designer never outlined. They also witness selectively, becoming the immediate audience for particular encounters. Such creation remains relational. A participant can offer a reconciliation but cannot unilaterally author its acceptance when another person controls the affected character. The event's dramaturgy emerges through these linked offers and responses, with uncertainty located partly in another person's legitimate creative choice.

The role comparisons should not end with a single new title intended to capture everything. Author, director, referee, dramaturg, and coordinator each identify a useful responsibility. None alone describes the facilitator's relation to a simultaneously developing ensemble. A more precise account names the responsibility being exercised at a particular moment and asks what remains with participants. This makes authority discussable without treating every intervention as control or every absence as freedom. The facilitator becomes answerable for the arrangement while the ensemble retains authorship of the events that arrangement permits it to create.

Separating the Powers That Shape the Fiction

Descriptive authority establishes features of the fictional world. A participant might describe a courtyard, a letter, or a character's clothing. The permitted scope can vary: everyone may add incidental atmosphere, while consequential resources require a specific procedure. This arrangement allows expressive detail without giving each speaker unlimited power to alter shared conditions. A candle on a table can enrich a scene; an unannounced document that settles the central dispute can change other participants' available choices. Both are descriptions, but they make different commitments. Distribution needs to distinguish their effects rather than treating all additions as equivalent.

Character authority concerns what a portrayed individual intends, says, and attempts. A player may usually decide that the character refuses an invitation or wishes to leave. That

permission does not necessarily include deciding that another character feels persuaded, follows willingly, or reveals a secret. These effects involve additional participants. A useful convention distinguishes the offered action from the affected character's response. It allows someone to make a strong dramatic contribution while preserving another person's opportunity to answer. Character authority can be extensive within its recognized scope without becoming authority over the entire encounter.

Outcome authority determines what an attempted action accomplishes when its effect is uncertain or contested. The group might assign the decision to a rule, a designated participant, the affected person, or a facilitator. Different actions can use different arrangements. An ordinary conversation may need no external resolution, while exclusive possession of a shared resource may require confirmation. The relevant design question is what kind of uncertainty the procedure settles. A method for determining whether a message arrives should not silently decide whether its recipient agrees with the message or what the recipient subsequently chooses to do.

Information authority concerns which statements enter play with a particular status. A character's claim can be deliberately false, while an administrative notice may establish a shared condition. A private brief can tell a participant what the character knows without making that knowledge public. Distribution requires these statuses to remain recognizable. Otherwise, participants may mistake testimony for an authoritative update or treat a rumor as a rule clarification. The facilitator's task includes making the distinction usable, especially when several documents use

similar-looking text. The visual form of a message cannot by itself explain the authority its author is entitled to exercise.

Procedural authority organizes entry, timing, requests for clarification, and the handling of conflicts. These decisions shape dramatic opportunity even when they add no fictional content. A rule that all new encounters require approval creates dependence on whoever grants approval. A rule allowing announced entry can make encounters more responsive while raising questions about interruption. The appropriate arrangement follows the intended activity and its participants. Procedural choices should be evaluated as part of narrative organization because they affect which contributions can enter the event and when other people can answer them.

Interpretive judgment has a different status. Participants decide what a gesture means to their characters and how they understand the event afterward. A facilitator can clarify that an action occurred without imposing a single interpretation of its motive or emotional importance. One character can read a refusal as prudence while another experiences it as betrayal. Such differences can sustain coherent drama when the underlying event is shared. Treating every disagreement as a problem for centralized resolution would eliminate an important part of participant creation. The distribution of meaning is broader than the allocation of permission to establish facts.

Montola's account identifies a power structure governing roleplaying alongside an imaginary world and personified characters (Montola, 2008). This framework makes an important point for the present analysis: removing a

continuously speaking game master does not remove the organization of authority. Power remains in the permissions and procedures through which contributions acquire standing. It can be written into a character brief, embedded in a default convention, or exercised through a person asked to settle a conflict. The analytical task is to identify that organization rather than describe a less visible arrangement as automatically free of direction.

Authority can also change across phases. During preparation, the designer may establish a character's past and initial obligations. During play, the participant develops responses within those conditions. At an agreed stopping point, further fictional developments may cease while reflective interpretation continues. The transition should be clear enough that a late administrative explanation does not unexpectedly rewrite a completed character decision. Phase distinctions make the event's promises more dependable. They also explain how a tightly designed beginning can support open developments without requiring the facilitator to surrender every responsibility at every stage.

Distribution is best understood as an arrangement of bounded permissions connected by procedures. The boundaries need not be expressed in elaborate terminology during play. A simple statement that participants may describe ordinary surroundings but must check before adding a decisive resource can do useful work. What matters is whether the arrangement resolves the questions that arise. Precision should be proportionate to consequence: incidental detail can remain flexible, while a contribution that constrains others needs a clear basis. This account permits creativity without

assuming either constant approval or unlimited individual control.

Dramatic Structure Without a Predetermined Sequence

Structure can reside in relationships rather than in a list of scenes. A scenario can connect a resource holder, someone who needs the resource, and a third person whose cooperation complicates the exchange. That arrangement supplies pressure and possible consequences without deciding who approaches first. It can also survive a refusal because the refusal changes what other characters may try. Such a structure is neither an absence of design nor a covert script. It is a prepared system of dependencies through which participants generate developments. Its quality depends on whether those dependencies are intelligible and offer usable alternatives.

Time can organize the situation without prescribing its content. An archive may close at a scheduled hour, creating urgency around the disposition of its collection. Participants still decide whether to bargain privately, demand a public hearing, or refuse an offered arrangement. A fixed deadline establishes a condition under which decisions matter. It becomes a disguised script if the facilitator uses the deadline to force one prepared resolution regardless of authorized choices. The distinction concerns whether participants can change consequential relations before and at the stopping point. Temporal structure can concentrate agency when it gives that agency a meaningful occasion.

Resources also provide structure. An endorsement, a record, or the right to convene a meeting can make one role important to several others. The effect depends on the resource's actual standing. If a character possesses a ceremonial endorsement that nobody needs, the apparent importance may generate little action. If the resource can only be exercised after the facilitator's secret approval, the role's authority is weaker than its brief suggests. Design should connect resources to consequences that other characters can understand and answer. The resource becomes a means of interaction rather than a decorative possession.

Information produces another kind of dependency. A participant can possess a fact relevant to someone else's choice while retaining the decision whether to disclose it. Other routes of inquiry can keep the event active if disclosure is refused. The design should distinguish this openness from changing historical facts whenever participants approach an unwanted conclusion. A mystery can have a fixed past and an open present. Discovering what happened does not determine whether people forgive, cooperate, or make the discovery public. The structure gains depth when resolution of one uncertainty creates another consequential decision.

Different roles need different kinds of openness. One character may begin with a strong obligation whose interpretation remains uncertain. Another may have several explicit objectives and freedom to abandon them. Another may control a public procedure while privately questioning the institution it serves. Equal authorship does not require identical roles. It requires an honest account of what each participant is offered and a workable means to exercise that role. A person assigned a highly constrained witness can still

contribute creatively through testimony, but should not be promised the same range of institutional decisions as the person controlling the vote.

The distinction between character failure and dramatic failure is especially important. A negotiation that ends without agreement can produce valuable consequences if participants understand the refusal and retain opportunities to respond. A scene becomes practically blocked when people do not know what they may do or cannot receive an essential contribution. A facilitator who treats every unsuccessful character objective as a problem may continually rescue the fiction at the expense of participant authorship. A better diagnosis asks whether failure has become meaningful material or whether the conditions for participation have ceased to function.

Convergence can also remain open. A scheduled assembly can bring private developments into a shared forum without requiring every character to tell the same story. Some may reveal an alliance, others conceal a bargain, and others challenge the assembly's legitimacy. The public scene then draws on events the facilitator did not fully witness. Preparation should specify how decisions acquire shared standing without demanding complete disclosure of every earlier exchange. A coherent ending can leave several motives unresolved. Closure concerns the event's stopping conditions and selected commitments, not necessarily the elimination of all interpretive difference.

One useful design test is to imagine several departures from the most obvious route. If an important witness refuses to speak, can anyone else pursue the issue? If opposing factions reconcile early, does the event still contain decisions worth

making? If a resource is transferred immediately, do other relationships remain available? These questions examine the structure's resilience. They do not require a branching script that predicts every response. The designer needs enough connected opportunities that participants can change the dramatic direction without making the entire arrangement unintelligible.

The distinction between structure and sequence also clarifies retrospective storytelling. After play, participants may arrange events into a compelling account with a beginning, turning point, and ending. That account does not prove that the scenario secretly prescribed the sequence. It shows that people can interpret an emergent history narratively. Different participants may choose different turning points because their scenes and knowledge differed. The design can make such histories possible through shared conditions while leaving their subsequent organization plural. Authorship continues as interpretation, alongside the earlier authorship of conditions and actions.

The strongest generative scenario makes its constraints productive. Participants can understand what cannot be changed, recognize what remains open, and see why their responses matter. A fixed closure can support a flexible struggle over inheritance. A prepared secret can support several forms of disclosure. A public procedure can bring conflicting values into relation without deciding their moral ranking. Dramatic structure is present in those organized possibilities. The ensemble does not need to invent a world from nothing, and the designer does not need to supply a story that everyone merely discovers in the intended order.

Designing Characters Who Can Generate Their Own Scenes

Independent action begins with a usable relationship between a character's concerns and the available world. A participant needs to understand whom the character might approach, what could be asked for, and why a response would matter. A detailed personal history can support portrayal, but it does not automatically supply an opening. The design should connect past circumstances to present opportunities. A character who regrets an earlier decision might seek acknowledgment from someone who remembers it differently. That relationship invites action while leaving the form and outcome of the encounter open to its participants.

Fatland analyzes incentives as dramaturgical methods for encouraging interactions and considers how they can be organized into connected structures (Fatland, 2005). This practitioner framework gives preparation a concrete role in generating activity. The present application treats an objective, relationship, or resource as a possible reason to engage rather than as a guaranteed cause of a particular scene. Participants interpret those reasons and may discover other concerns during play. The director's preparation supports a range of consequential encounters when it establishes pressures people can act upon without dictating the response each pressure must produce.

A public identity can provide an immediately usable basis for contact. A participant knows that another character manages a collection, represents a community, or remembers a disputed event. Private information can complicate that identity by establishing a concealed obligation or a reason for hesitation.

The two layers should remain connected to present choices. A secret with no possible effect may enrich private imagination but contribute little to interaction. Conversely, a secret designed only as a compulsory revelation can narrow a participant's role. The useful design question is which opportunities the information creates and who can respond when it becomes relevant.

Goals can create pressure without specifying a single successful path. A character seeking recognition might pursue a public statement, a private apology, or a new cooperative action. Several routes allow the participant to interpret the concern through actual encounters. An objective that can be completed only after a facilitator supplies one exact clue creates a different dependence. That arrangement can be intentional, but it should be recognized as such. Distribution becomes more workable when ordinary progress does not require repeated authorization or the discovery of a designer's one preferred sequence.

Relationships should support more than isolated pairs when the intended cast is large. A character may need information from one person, cooperation from another, and an audience for a proposal. These connections create opportunities to move between encounters and carry consequences onward. The design need not make every role equally central or equally informed. It should examine whether each participant has enough routes to meaningful action if one conversation becomes unavailable. A single essential partner can generate an intense relationship, but it can also leave a role stranded if that partner withdraws or spends the event elsewhere.

Resources create negotiating possibilities when their scope is clear. A character might control access to a record, offer an endorsement, or decide whether to disclose a memory. Such resources give others reasons to approach. Their fictional authority should match the role's stated permissions. A participant told that the character can authorize a meeting should be able to make that decision through an understood procedure. If every exercise of the resource requires an undisclosed approval, the apparent authority is misleading. The director should align written promises with what participants can actually establish during play.

Character briefs can also make knowledge attributable. A participant may know an event the character personally witnessed, hold a belief that may be mistaken, or possess a report from another source. Distinguishing these statuses helps participants contribute without assuming that every sentence in a brief establishes universal truth. The director can preserve mystery while making the participant's available basis for action clear. This is a distribution of interpretive resources as well as information. It allows players to decide how confidently to speak and how to respond when another character offers a conflicting account.

Independent objectives need limits where their pursuit could remove other participants' promised opportunities. A character might try to discredit a rival through fictional argument, while lacking permission to declare that the rival can no longer speak. The design can allow forceful conflict without granting unilateral control of another player's contribution. Such boundaries should be explained through the actions likely to arise. Abstract assurances of freedom are less useful than knowing how an attempted exclusion,

accusation, or refusal will be handled. A participant can then choose boldly within a comprehensible arrangement.

The director's aesthetic influence remains present in the selection of concerns. A scenario built around reconciliation makes some encounters more likely; one built around competing institutional loyalties invites others. Distributing immediate decisions does not erase this shaping work. It moves part of the composition into the relationships that participants receive and reinterpret. Evaluation should recognize both contributions. The designer creates pressures and possibilities; participants decide which become active and what follows. A strong scenario can survive the discovery that its most compelling scene arose from a connection the designer had considered incidental.

Preparation can be tested through possible departures from the expected route. If a character refuses the obvious invitation, what else remains available? If a secret stays private, can the role still matter? If a resource changes hands early, do other participants retain reasons to act? These questions examine the resilience of the arrangement without requiring a script for every contingency. The goal is a world with several usable relationships and bounded procedures. Participants can generate their own scenes when the starting conditions support decisions whose consequences other people are both able and entitled to answer.

Private Encounters and Local Narrative Decisions

A private conversation can proceed without a facilitator when its participants possess the relevant authority and understand

the shared conditions. One character asks for cooperation, another refuses, and a third proposes an alternative. The exchange can generate a new alliance or deepen a conflict through decisions that need no external announcement while they occur. This independence changes the director's function. The facilitator has prepared the conditions and remains available for particular questions, but the immediate scene is composed through participants' actions. Its legitimacy does not depend on the director hearing every line.

Mochocki's account of live action roleplaying brings together the participant's roles as author, actor, character, and audience (Mochocki, 2018). This combination helps explain local scene creation. Participants do more than submit decisions to a central narrator: they portray actions, interpret contributions, and answer one another. The present application concerns how those activities can operate within assigned permissions in embodied salon drama. It does not assume that all participants possess equal authority over every fact. The scene becomes jointly produced through the particular contributions each person is entitled to make and the responses that recognize them.

Most dialogue can establish its own immediate consequences. If a participant's character promises support, the promise has been made when the relevant participants understand it as such. Whether the promise will be fulfilled remains open. The group does not usually need a facilitator to certify every sincere or deceptive statement. It may need clarification when the statement claims to transfer a shared resource or bind an absent person's action. The distinction keeps routine conversation independent while identifying contributions whose effects extend beyond the local participants' authority.

Local authorship should also distinguish acceptance from assent. Another participant can acknowledge that a threat was spoken without agreeing that the character feels intimidated. A demand can enter the drama and still be refused. These responses preserve meaningful uncertainty in interpersonal conflict. If the director determines every emotional effect, participants lose an important part of portraying their characters. If a player determines every effect on others, the same problem appears through a different source. A distributed arrangement lets an offered action become consequential through an answer whose authorship remains appropriately placed.

Not every outcome needs to be competitive. Participants may collaborate in establishing that their characters remember a shared incident differently or agree on a minor event from the past. The permission to add such material should be clear when it affects existing briefs or other characters. A harmless invented detail can support responsiveness; a new past event that assigns another character responsibility for a central wrong can constrain absent participants. The significance of the addition determines the need for confirmation. Distribution works through this attention to consequences rather than through a blanket permission to invent or a blanket requirement to ask.

Private decisions need a route into shared conditions when their effects extend outward. A character may disclose that an endorsement has been withdrawn, update a resource record, or carry a report to another scene. The director need not become the conduit for every change. The procedure can assign the update to a relevant participant or make acknowledgment part of the action. What matters is that

people whose choices depend on the consequence can encounter it under the scenario's rules. Independence within a room should remain connected to accountability beyond it.

The facilitator's incomplete view makes retrospective clarification important. If two accounts conflict, the director should ask what each participant proposed, understood, and accepted before deciding what requires repair. An unfamiliar outcome is not necessarily an unauthorized one. The scenario may have allowed exactly the kind of surprising alliance or refusal that occurred. The director's role as custodian includes protecting legitimate participant developments from being overwritten merely because they diverge from an expected trajectory. Intervention should identify the relevant permission or shared condition, making its basis explainable to those affected.

Local scenes can fail to reach agreement without requiring rescue. Characters may leave dissatisfied, a negotiation may collapse, or an important secret may remain undisclosed. These outcomes can generate subsequent action if the roles and world still offer usable possibilities. The director should distinguish fictional failure from a breakdown in participation. A participant who understands the refusal and can choose what to do next remains active. Someone whose contribution is repeatedly ignored because of an unsupported communication mode faces a different problem. The appropriate response follows the condition that actually prevents meaningful action.

The distribution of local narrative decisions changes what the director must be prepared to accept. Scenes can create commitments that were never planned and leave anticipated

revelations unused. The resulting event may have a different center of interest from the scenario outline. That difference is compatible with successful direction when the contributions remain authorized and the shared world remains workable. A director who promises independent agency must make room for these developments. The continuing craft lies in sustaining the conditions under which participants can answer their consequences, including the unexpected ones.

A Hypothetical Assembly at the Last Archive

The Last Archive is an invented salon scenario for twenty-four participants. A community's archive must distribute its collection before its lease expires at the end of the evening. Four groups hold different claims: custodians who maintained it, families represented in the records, scholars seeking public access, and a neighborhood council responsible for future accommodation. Individual characters have relationships that cross those groups. The physical venue is a classroom with a public assembly table and three designated conversation areas. The scenario establishes the expiration as a premise. It leaves the distribution, conditions of access, and future relationships to participant decisions.

The designer fixes several facts before play. The collection exists, some records concern disputed events, and no group has unilateral authority over the entire archive. A public decision requires endorsements from three groups, while particular families retain control over access to specified personal materials. These are fictional procedures rather than claims about real archival law. They are explained openly

because participants need to know which decisions can carry force. Private briefs distribute memories and commitments, including conflicting interpretations of why earlier access was restricted. The event begins with a situation rich in disagreement but without a required outcome.

A custodian named Mara wants the collection preserved intact. A scholar named Elias seeks access to records concerning an earlier exclusion. Lian represents a family whose private correspondence could clarify that exclusion, while Tomas, a council representative, can offer a new meeting space. None controls all the resources necessary for a settlement. Mara may protect continuity without preventing every discussion. Elias can advocate disclosure without compelling Lian to release the letters. Tomas can offer space but cannot define what the other characters must value. These boundaries distribute authority through relationships that give each role reasons to approach the others.

An early private encounter might bring Elias and Lian together. Elias asks to quote a letter at the assembly. Lian offers a limited account while withholding the original. The exchange establishes an offered condition and a response, not a predetermined revelation. Elias can accept, negotiate, or seek another source. The facilitator does not need to certify the conversation simply because it changes the likelihood of a public disclosure. If the participants agree on a transfer of a represented document, the stated custody procedure records that change. Their choices then become conditions for later scenes.

Meanwhile, Mara and Tomas discuss accommodation. Tomas offers a room only if the archive creates a shared access

committee. Mara worries that the committee will weaken the custodians' role. A third participant proposes a rotating arrangement that neither brief required. This is a new development authored through the encounter. It remains legitimate if the participants control the relevant commitments and the proposal does not bind absent groups without their agreement. The facilitator can explain the applicable endorsement rule if asked, leaving the desirability of the arrangement with the characters who must answer it.

A scheduled announcement marks the approach of the final assembly. Its function is coordination: the participants receive a shared opportunity to bring their developments together. The announcement does not declare that compromise is now mandatory. Characters may arrive with an agreement, rival proposals, or unresolved objections. The facilitator may know only part of the private history that produced those positions. That incomplete knowledge is compatible with responsible facilitation. What matters is whether the public procedure can recognize commitments within its scope and whether uncertainty about a claim can be clarified through the relevant participants.

At the assembly, Elias might overstate what Lian agreed to release. Lian can challenge the claim within the fiction. The facilitator need not immediately determine who is morally right or whether the disagreement was intended deception. If the dispute concerns actual custody of the prop, the facilitator can establish the procedural fact. If it concerns the meaning of a spoken promise, the characters may continue to disagree. Distinguishing those questions protects interpretive conflict. A stable record of who holds the letter can coexist with a contested account of whether its holder has behaved loyally.

Suppose three groups endorse the rotating committee while a fourth refuses. The outcome follows the established decision rule, but it does not determine every character's response. Mara may accept reluctantly, resign, or demand a public acknowledgment of custodial labor. Lian may retain restrictions over the family's letters under the separate rule that governs them. The resulting arrangement has several sources: the designer supplied the decision structure, participants proposed its content, and the ensemble's responses gave it force. No single author created every relevant feature of the outcome, even though the event has a recognizable resolution.

Another performance might end without a collective agreement. The deadline could arrive while participants remain divided, requiring distribution under a publicly established fallback procedure. That outcome should not be silently replaced by the facilitator's preferred compromise. A failure to agree can be an authorized conclusion when the scenario has made its consequences intelligible. Participants may interpret it as institutional collapse, principled refusal, or the beginning of a different future. Those accounts need not agree. The performance can end coherently without establishing that every character achieved an objective or that one interpretation defeats all others.

The example makes the distinction between generative structure and programmed experience concrete. The designer selected the archive, lease, groups, resources, and procedures. Those choices shaped what could happen. The participants selected approaches, language, concessions, and commitments that the preparation did not determine. The facilitator sustained compatibility and a shared stopping

point. A study would need to examine whether these opportunities were actually usable and how participants experienced them. The hypothetical case offers an arrangement to investigate, not evidence that distribution automatically produces fairness, engagement, or a satisfying story.

Intervention That Sustains Momentum and Agency

The amount of intervention needed cannot be specified as one ideal frequency. It depends on what participants can already do, which uncertainties have arisen, and whether the event's procedures remain usable. A helpful intervention addresses a condition that blocks meaningful action. An unnecessary intervention may settle a choice participants could have made or redirect an outcome because the facilitator prefers another. The distinction concerns purpose and effect. A director should be able to explain what problem the intervention addresses and which decisions remain with participants after it occurs.

Silence needs interpretation before intervention. A group may be thinking, enjoying a restrained encounter, reading information, or waiting for an unavailable response. These conditions can look similar from outside. Entering with a dramatic surprise may energize one scene while disrupting another that was proceeding deliberately. A brief administrative inquiry can establish whether assistance is wanted or required. This is especially useful when the facilitator lacks the conversation's history. Asking about the participation condition can preserve the fictional uncertainty

that the participants are already using, while supplying information necessary for an informed response.

Momentum should refer to the availability of consequential next actions rather than constant visible activity. A character can remain silent while making a meaningful refusal; an animated conversation can repeat without changing anyone's possibilities. The facilitator needs to distinguish pace from movement in the dramatic situation. If participants know what is at stake and can choose how to answer, a quiet scene may require no help. If they cannot discover any relevant person or understand their permissions, the event may need repair even when the room contains plenty of speech.

Clarification is often a limited intervention. The facilitator can explain that a character has permission to invite others, that a designated area is publicly accessible, or that an attempted transfer requires acknowledgment. These contributions restore or specify existing conditions. They need not supply a preferred character decision. Their legitimacy depends on consistency with what participants were told and on making consequential changes clear. If the director introduces a new rule while calling it clarification, participants may lose the basis on which they made earlier choices. An actual revision should be recognizable as a revision.

Information can be supplied without resolving its interpretation. A participant may be missing a brief that establishes the character's available knowledge. Restoring that information gives the player the resource originally promised. It does not require explaining what the character should conclude or whom to trust. The distinction preserves

the participant's interpretive work. It also limits a common source of accidental control: answering a factual question with an unsolicited account of the role's correct strategy. A director can make the circumstances intelligible while leaving the response open.

An opportunity can be introduced when the design permits new developments. A public request, an arriving message, or an available meeting can give participants another route into action. Such a contribution should connect to established concerns and allow several possible responses. Its value declines if it merely disguises a command to follow one path. The director can ask whether participants may ignore the invitation, negotiate its terms, or pursue a consequence the facilitator did not plan. These possibilities provide a practical test of whether the intervention expands meaningful action or chiefly restores a preferred sequence.

Adjudication is different from offering an opportunity. When two scenes make incompatible claims about a shared resource, the event may need a decision under its procedures. The director should identify the conflict, hear the relevant accounts, and apply the agreed authority. The resulting decision can constrain fictional action without becoming an instruction about motive or emotion. A ruling that a document remained with one character determines possession; it need not decide that another character feels humiliated. Keeping the scope clear preserves the participant's remaining creative role after the shared condition has been settled.

Intervention can also restore access to participation. A person might be unable to enter a room, receive a crucial notice, or communicate through the assumed mode. The appropriate

assistance concerns the actual barrier. Delegating the handling of an object or repeating a relevant announcement can make an intended opportunity available without awarding a fictional success. This distinction permits support without confusing it with favoritism toward a character. The event can preserve unequal fictional resources while ensuring that participants have the practical means to exercise the permissions their roles provide.

Timing affects an intervention's consequences. Interrupting before a choice can shape the alternatives; clarifying after a misunderstanding may require revisiting an action already taken. The director should consider how much depends on the uncertain fact and whether a brief pause can prevent a larger repair. Not every minor ambiguity needs to halt the event. A consequential uncertainty about who may authorize a departure has different implications from two harmless descriptions of wall color. Proportionate timing follows the significance of the commitment, keeping routine variation from generating constant central supervision.

A facilitator can make an intervention legible without creating an extended administrative scene. A short explanation identifies the applicable convention and the immediate effect, followed by a return to character decisions. Participants should know whether fictional time has advanced and whether earlier statements remain valid. This clarity helps prevent procedural speech from becoming unintended character information. It also makes intervention accountable to those affected. The director's authority is easier to understand when its exercise names the specific responsibility being used rather than relying on an unexplained claim to control everything.

The director should be prepared to accept outcomes that reduce a planned source of tension. Participants may reconcile early, reject a proposed competition, or cooperate across a designed division. If the choices are authorized, restoring conflict simply because the scenario expected it would restrict the agency the event promised. The remaining world may still contain other concerns. If the design genuinely becomes unplayable, the facilitator can discuss an adjustment openly. The need for adjustment does not justify pretending that a legitimate contribution never occurred or assigning characters motives their players did not choose.

Effective intervention leaves a usable event behind it. Participants understand the clarified condition, retain relevant decisions, and can proceed without needing the director to narrate each next step. Some interventions will still have imperfect effects, and their success should be examined through the following play rather than assumed from the facilitator's intention. The guiding principle is a limited, explainable response to an identified need. This principle supports dramatic momentum while recognizing that agency includes the freedom to hesitate, refuse, cooperate unexpectedly, and produce a scene whose importance the director discovers only afterward.

Accountability and the Limits of Delegation

Distribution can make authority harder to see. A facilitator who speaks rarely may still have determined which roles hold resources, which concerns receive prominence, and which actions the system permits. These decisions shape the event before participants begin. Accountability requires examining

that preparation as well as visible intervention. It also requires recognizing legitimate participant authorship afterward. The director cannot claim credit for every compelling development while treating unexpected outcomes as mistakes by the players. A distributed performance has several sources of creation whose contributions should remain distinguishable.

The promise of agency needs a practical meaning. Participants should know which decisions they can make, how those decisions enter the fiction, and what limits apply when they affect others. The event need not guarantee success or equal fictional power. It should avoid offering choices whose outcomes are secretly fixed by a facilitator's unannounced preference. If a decision is constrained by the premise, that constraint can be part of the shared starting conditions. If its outcome is open, the director should be prepared to recognize a permitted choice even when it complicates the planned trajectory.

Delegation also transfers labor. Participants may be asked to update records, acknowledge messages, or help maintain scene boundaries. These tasks can support independence, but they should be proportionate to the dramatic activity. A player who spends much of the event administering other people's choices may have less opportunity to pursue the assigned role. The arrangement can make that responsibility explicit, share it, or move some work to support personnel. Describing labor as empowerment does not explain whether the person performing it actually received the kind of participation the event promised.

Informal influence remains important. Participants with strong speaking confidence or familiarity with the system may shape how ambiguous permissions are interpreted. Others may defer even when the written procedure grants them a decision. The director should attend to the difference between formal allocation and usable authority. A clear clarification route can help participants invoke the agreed procedure without having to win a fictional argument first. The goal is dependable access to one's role, while leaving differences among characters available as material for dramatic conflict.

Delegation has limits where local decisions create broad commitments. A participant can choose that a character resigns from an office, but the event needs a procedure for the vacancy's consequences if several roles depend on it. A group can agree on a private memory, but changing another character's established past may require that participant's involvement. These boundaries protect distributed authorship rather than negate it. They make clear which decisions belong locally and which require coordination. The director's continuing responsibility includes maintaining that distinction when new cases arise during play.

Correction should be possible without making every decision provisional forever. Participants need confidence that accepted contributions will retain their standing, alongside a route to address an actual misunderstanding or exceeded permission. A repair can identify the disputed commitment, hear the relevant accounts, and settle only what continuation requires. The reason should be understandable to those affected. If the facilitator changes a convention, the event should acknowledge the change and consider its

consequences for earlier choices. Predictable recourse supports bold contribution because participants know how the arrangement handles uncertainty.

The director may occupy several positions at once, including designer, facilitator, coordinator, and occasional performer. These positions can create conflicts of responsibility within the event. A character portrayed by the director might advocate for an outcome that the facilitator must adjudicate. Clear separation of the contribution's status helps, and another agreed person can handle a particular ruling when appropriate. The relevant issue is how authority is exercised in that moment. A title alone cannot explain whether a statement is fictional persuasion, a descriptive fact, or an administrative decision.

A further question concerns decisions that challenge the scenario's frame. At the fictional archive considered here, participants might propose retaining the collection instead of deciding its distribution. The director needs to distinguish a character's proposal from an authorized change to the event's premise. If distribution is an agreed starting condition, the proposal can still become dramatic speech without automatically rewriting the world. If the design permits changing that condition, participants need a route for doing so that accounts for the other roles and their commitments. The boundary should be understandable before the facilitator uses it to reject an unexpected outcome. Otherwise, a purportedly open event may reveal its most consequential restrictions only when someone tries to exercise the promised freedom. A stated premise can support strong agency within a situation; an undisclosed preference can turn the same boundary into arbitrary control.

Changing a shared procedure raises a related issue. A local group may discover a more useful way to record transfers, but adopting it immediately could leave other participants relying on the earlier convention. The improvement needs coordination because the procedure organizes several people's contributions. The facilitator can explain the proposal, identify its effective point, and preserve decisions already accepted under the prior arrangement. Participants may also prefer to defer the change until another performance. This example locates a limit of local delegation without granting the director unlimited authorship. Someone must maintain compatibility across the event, but that responsibility can be exercised through explanation and bounded revision. Custodianship is answerable to the activity's established promises, including the expectation that changes affecting several roles will become available to the people expected to follow them. The revised convention then supports later actions without silently displacing previously accepted contributions.

The limits of delegation should remain connected to the event's purposes. A highly structured exercise may reserve more decisions than an open dramatic scenario. A novice group may need more examples and immediate support, while an experienced group may prefer broader local permissions. These are design choices to explain and evaluate. They do not justify assuming that less intervention always means greater agency or that more procedure always means greater fairness. The arrangement succeeds when its promises, practical operation, and participants' consequential opportunities align closely enough to support the intended form of play.

Evaluating a Director Who Speaks Less

Evaluation should begin with the particular responsibility claimed to have changed. If location markers are intended to carry routine spatial orientation, the inquiry can examine whether participants independently identify relevant locations and approach encounters. If local dialogue is intended to generate consequences, it can follow how proposals receive responses and establish commitments. If the director reserves exceptional adjudication, it can examine whether those questions reach a usable resolution. These inquiries require different evidence. A general report that the session felt free or efficient cannot by itself explain which responsibility was successfully redistributed.

A proposed observational study could distinguish routine clarification from consequential intervention. It might document a request about an already represented location, a question about authority, or a conflict over a shared resource. The categories should be defined through what the contribution establishes and what response follows. Counting every facilitator utterance together would obscure differences between announcing a break and deciding a fictional outcome. The analysis can examine whether an intervention restores participants' ability to act or substitutes the facilitator's decision for a choice the participants were supposed to retain.

The absence of a request is also ambiguous. Participants may understand the convention, avoid an opportunity because they do not understand it, or ask someone other than the facilitator. Observation should follow the relevant action where possible. Interviews can ask what the participant believed was

permitted and why a particular route was chosen. This combination helps distinguish successful independence from silent uncertainty. The study should remain open to evidence that an apparently smooth scene depended on unrecorded assistance or that a quiet participant made a deliberate and consequential character choice.

Participant accounts can identify the practical meaning of agency. Questions might ask which decision felt open, when another person's response changed the scene, and whether a ruling left the participant with usable options. Concrete episodes offer a stronger basis for interpretation than asking whether the director was generally controlling. They also allow conflicting experiences to remain visible. One participant may value a clarifying intervention that another experienced as an interruption. The analysis can examine their different positions and the contribution's effects without assuming that one global judgment must settle the event's quality.

Comparisons between configurations need to identify what actually varies. A study might compare continuous facilitator description with a marked physical arrangement while keeping the scenario and relevant permissions similar. It might instead compare two allocations of local authority using the same physical arrangement. Combining every change at once would make a broad outcome difficult to explain. Repeated participation creates learning about both the scenario and the procedure, while different groups introduce other differences. These limitations narrow the claim rather than eliminate the value of inquiry. The account should specify the arrangement readers are being asked to assess.

Scale can be investigated through dependencies and response opportunities. Researchers could examine which actions proceeded locally, which required shared updates, and which waited for central attention. A delay matters differently if the participant pursued another scene meanwhile or lost the only opportunity to act. Describing that distinction connects coordination to lived participation. Numerical summaries can make patterns inspectable when coverage and categories are clear. They should not turn the number of local decisions into a complete measure of agency, since several inconsequential choices can coexist with one centrally predetermined outcome.

The preparation process deserves attention because authority can move into design rather than disappear. Researchers can examine what briefs promised, which resources roles controlled, and how examples taught the limits of contribution. Comparing those materials with actual play can reveal where participants extended, misunderstood, or could not exercise the intended permissions. The analysis should distinguish a planned possibility from an observed outcome. A well-connected role on paper may remain isolated during the event, while an apparently minor relationship may become a principal source of dramatic development.

Facilitator accounts can explain decisions that observation alone leaves unclear. A director may have withheld intervention because a scene was progressing, lacked information about the encounter, or been occupied by another request. These explanations supply evidence about intention and working conditions. They do not establish the intervention's effect independently of participant experience and subsequent action. The study can compare what the

facilitator meant to support with what remained possible afterward. This comparison keeps evaluation focused on the functioning of the arrangement rather than on either celebrating or blaming the person coordinating it.

Research involving private encounters needs participants' agreement about what material can be observed or used. The method should avoid assuming that a facilitator's organizational access supplies unlimited permission for research. Participants can also decline personal reflection without having to justify the choice through their characters. These conditions matter for interpretation because observation and the expectation of later explanation may affect performance. The relevant point is methodological accountability: claims should follow the contributions and accounts participants agreed to make available, with inaccessible scenes remaining gaps rather than invitations to invent an omniscient account.

Practical review after play can proceed on a smaller scale. The group can identify a decision that worked locally, a shared update that became confusing, and an intervention that changed the available choices. The discussion should connect each case to a procedure or representational feature that can be revised. It can also recognize valuable outcomes that diverged from the original plan. This approach gives the director specific grounds for improvement while preserving participants' authorship. The review becomes another stage of learning about the event's possibilities, rather than an exercise in explaining why the planned story should have occurred.

A director who speaks less should be evaluated through the authority the event makes usable. The proposed framework

asks whether people can understand their permissions, create consequential encounters, maintain relevant shared conditions, and obtain proportionate clarification. It leaves room for different styles and different degrees of supervision. Empirical work could support, refine, or challenge particular recommendations. Until then, the essay offers explicit distinctions and reasoned design principles whose effects can be examined. That modest precision is more useful than declaring continuous narration obsolete or treating procedural complexity as evidence of successful distribution.

The Story Told After the Performance

The ensemble does not necessarily experience one story while the event unfolds. A participant knows the scenes entered, the reports received, and the intentions privately entertained. Others may have acted on information that never reached that participant. The apparent center of the performance can differ sharply across those positions. A facilitator's broad organizational role does not provide complete access to every encounter either. Any later account must select and connect material from a partial record. Narrative authority after play concerns who may make that selection and what kinds of claim the resulting account can support.

The distinction between event and account protects participants' contributions from retrospective erasure. A private promise can be significant even if it never affects the final vote. The people involved may understand the evening through that promise, while a public summary emphasizes the committee arrangement. Both accounts can be valid within their scope. Problems arise when the summary claims to be

the complete performance or treats unwitnessed scenes as though they never occurred. A distributed event needs a conception of significance broad enough to include locally consequential developments that do not become public turning points.

Credit should follow the level at which a contribution was made. The designer can be credited with establishing an archive and its tensions. A participant can be credited with proposing the rotating committee. Others can be credited with the objections and concessions that transformed the proposal into an accepted arrangement. None of those acknowledgments requires a complete ownership claim over the final scene. The value of the distinction is practical: it allows people to describe creative labor accurately and helps designers recognize which possibilities emerged from interaction rather than from the preparation they remember.

Post-performance discussion can collect several accounts without forcing them into one verdict. Participants might first describe scenes they witnessed, then explain the interpretations they formed. Others can supply missing context while distinguishing disclosure of a private intention from correction of a public fact. A character who appeared obstructive may have been protecting a commitment that other participants never knew about. Learning that context can change the later interpretation of the event. It does not rewrite what people knew when they made their choices. The chronology of knowledge remains part of the drama's meaning.

Disagreement about motives deserves a different response from disagreement about procedure. If participants disagree

about whether an endorsement was recorded, a practical account can examine the accepted record and relevant exchanges. If they disagree about whether the endorsement was honorable, neither the record nor the facilitator's title settles the interpretation. A reflective conversation can examine reasons without conferring final authority over everyone's response. This preserves the difference between a common basis for discussion and a required consensus. Distributed authorship would become narrower if the event reopened interpretive freedom only to close it again through an official moral explanation afterward.

The distinction also matters when a designer revises the scenario. A surprising outcome can reveal an unintended dependency, an unclear rule, or a valuable relationship. Revision can strengthen future opportunities without describing the previous participants as having performed incorrectly merely because they departed from expectations. If a contribution exceeded a stated permission, that fact can be identified specifically. If it was permitted but disruptive, the design may need to change its future scope. These are different diagnoses. Learning from emergence requires accepting that the event may expose weaknesses or possibilities in the preparation itself.

Documentation creates another allocation of authority. A written report, edited recording, or published scenario example presents selected material to readers who were absent. The editor decides what to include and how to frame it. That work can be legitimate while remaining distinct from participants' authority during play. A report should identify whether a reconstructed statement comes from an observation, a participant's recollection, or an analytical

inference. It should also avoid presenting an invented connective detail as part of the witnessed event. The apparent smoothness of a narrative is not evidence that every link in it was available.

Participation in a scenario does not automatically authorize every later use of the performance. If private scenes or personal reflections will become research material, the relevant agreement needs to address that use. Participants can discuss a character's fictional decision without having to disclose autobiographical connections that helped shape the portrayal. These conditions concern the available evidence as well as the relationship among participants. An account can remain valuable when some scenes are unavailable for quotation. Its strength lies in describing its actual basis accurately, rather than claiming an omniscience that the event never provided.

Retrospective authorship can also redistribute prominence. A participant skilled at recounting events may become the apparent representative of the whole ensemble, while quieter people contribute little to the public discussion. The facilitator can invite accounts of specific scenes and allow written reflection, making more forms of contribution available. This does not guarantee equal influence or require identical amounts of speaking. It recognizes that the means of recounting a performance affect which experiences become visible. An event designed around plural creation should not evaluate its history solely through the confidence of the people most comfortable telling it.

A written synopsis can preserve disagreement explicitly by attaching each interpretation to its source. Instead of stating

that the assembly restored trust, it can report that some participants described renewed cooperation while others emphasized unresolved grievances. The underlying decision remains available for comparison, and the differences become part of the account rather than errors to remove. This practice also improves later revision: the designer can ask which arrangements supported several experiences and which produced confusion. A plural account provides more useful comparative evidence than a polished consensus assembled after the fact.

The Last Archive might produce several lasting stories. Mara may remember the loss of custodial continuity; Lian may remember successfully separating family privacy from public access; Elias may remember the compromise that allowed an exclusion to be discussed. The rotating committee appears in all three accounts, but its significance differs. The facilitator can recognize that the rule was applied while leaving those evaluations open. This illustrates a further implication of generative dramaturgy: shared consequences do not require shared emotional closure. A performance can connect participants through an event whose meaning remains disputed after it ends.

Authorship across the whole event includes preparation, enactment, coordination, and later interpretation. Those phases influence one another without collapsing into a single source. A designer may learn from participant developments and change a later version. Participants may reinterpret an earlier scene after hearing another account. Researchers may identify a structural pattern that no one experienced directly. Each contribution should be presented with its appropriate standing. Such precision allows a collective performance to

have a history without reducing its many creative acts to the story of the person who wrote the scenario or the person who speaks last.

Authorship as a Relationship Across the Event

The question of who controls the story has no single answer because the event contains several kinds of authorship. A designer establishes circumstances and limits; participants create actions and responses; procedures give selected commitments shared standing; facilitators sustain the conditions for continuation. Retrospective accounts organize the resulting history from different positions. These contributions are connected without becoming interchangeable. Recognizing a designer's influence does not erase participant creation, and recognizing participant agency does not make the preparation irrelevant. Narrative authority becomes intelligible when its particular scope, timing, and consequences can be identified.

The tabletop game master, playwright, director, referee, and dramaturg offer useful comparisons precisely because their responsibilities differ. Interactive Drama combines selected functions while changing their relationship to simultaneous performance. The facilitator may prepare like an author, support interpretation like a director, and resolve a bounded conflict like a referee. Those functions should remain distinguishable in practice. A contribution that clarifies a resource's status should not silently dictate a character's emotion. A public cue should create a usable occasion rather than impose a required conclusion. Authority supports

ensemble creation when its exercise preserves the decisions participants were promised.

Structure remains essential throughout this distribution. Characters need reasons to engage, information needs an interpretable status, and shared resources need dependable procedures. These conditions can organize an event without prescribing its sequence. The Last Archive demonstrates one possible configuration: fixed circumstances and bounded powers support several routes through private negotiation and public decision. The resulting events may surprise the designer while remaining compatible with the scenario. Their legitimacy follows from what participants were entitled to establish, not from whether they match the story someone hoped to see.

Evaluation should follow those actual opportunities. Neither a quiet facilitator nor a busy room establishes successful distribution. Research can examine whether participants understood their authority, whether contributions received consequential responses, and whether interventions restored action or displaced it. Reflection can preserve disagreement about the meaning of the outcome while identifying conditions that need revision. A performance can be collectively authored without every participant possessing equal fictional power or an identical experience. The crucial requirement is a workable relation between the event's promises and the decisions people can actually make.

Interactive Drama is most productively understood as the design of a situation capable of generating stories. The designer's craft lies partly in preparing for outcomes that cannot be specified beforehand. The ensemble's craft lies in

answering one another within the world they sustain. Facilitation connects those contributions by preserving clarity, consequence, and recourse. The resulting story belongs to the event's participants in several different senses, and its strongest moments may arise where one person's prepared possibility meets another person's unforeseen response.

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Graham Wetherell

Graham Wetherell is a lecturer in performance practice and a longtime tabletop game master whose work examines authority, collaboration, and the negotiation of fictional events. He became interested in interactive drama after noticing that his most memorable gaming sessions occurred when players quietly ignored the plot he had prepared. His teaching and writing explore the transition from director-centered performance to ensemble storytelling, including the moments when competing interpretations become productive rather than disruptive. Wetherell also directs amateur theater and occasionally designs convention games for complete strangers, an activity he considers valuable professional development. His notebooks contain detailed plans for stories that, by his own admission, rarely survive first contact with a cast.

When the Dice Go Silent

Rules Uncertainty and Dramatic Freedom in Hybrid Roleplaying

Nathaniel Price

Abstract

This essay investigates how Interactive Drama can retain structure, uncertainty, and consequential choice while reducing reliance on dice and numerical abilities. It distinguishes mechanics, conventions, fictional conditions, and the distribution of authority, arguing that minimal mechanics can perform substantial organizing work. The analysis evaluates functions served by random resolution before examining social uncertainty, hidden information, negotiation, voting, resource exchange, and character-specific permissions. A hypothetical harbor council demonstrates how a small set of procedures can support extended improvisation without resolving every encounter mechanically. Further sections consider character design, success, accessibility, facilitation, and research. The essay proposes selective formalization: establish dependable outcomes where shared certainty is needed while leaving interpretation and authorized character responses available to participants. Simplicity becomes a question of functional fit rather than rule quantity.

Keywords

minimal mechanics, hybrid roleplaying, dramatic freedom, social resolution, uncertainty, salon LARP

Structure After the Dice Are Removed

A roleplaying event does not become unstructured when nobody rolls a die. Participants still need to know what their characters may attempt, which contributions become facts, and how another person can answer an action. Those questions can be settled through numerical procedures, but they can also be organized through conversation, resource custody, voting, and assigned permissions. Interactive Drama makes the distinction particularly visible because much of its action occurs through embodied dialogue among independently motivated characters. Removing a resolution device changes where uncertainty is handled. It does not remove the need for a dependable relationship between intentions, responses, and consequences.

This essay argues that minimal mechanics can sustain substantial dramatic structure when their work is assigned clearly to character design, social conventions, and limited procedures. The claim is not that fewer rules are inherently better. A procedure can make an uncertain action intelligible, give a participant useful authority, or prevent an argument about how the fiction operates. Another procedure can interrupt an exchange without settling anything relevant to it. Evaluation should begin with the task a mechanic performs and the kind of uncertainty it resolves. Counting dice or pages of rules provides little information about either function.

The proposal concerns hybrid roleplaying that draws on tabletop imagination and embodied salon performance. Participants portray characters, pursue concerns, and create developments through interaction within prepared circumstances. The analysis emphasizes negotiation rather

than combat. It does not define tabletop games as uniformly numerical or salon events as uniformly free of formal systems. Both traditions contain many arrangements. The useful comparison follows selected responsibilities across them: establishing fictional facts, distributing authority, maintaining resources, and resolving contested effects. Hybrid design can retain a tabletop procedure when it serves the new arrangement and replace it when another method better fits the intended action.

Montola distinguishes roleplaying as a social process from the written system that can support it and identifies qualitative rules concerning world, authority, and character (Montola, 2008). This provides the essay's theoretical starting point. The absence of quantitative resolution does not entail the absence of recognizable rules. The present argument develops that distinction through specific design problems. A player can be free to choose a response while remaining bound by a rule that prohibits declaring another character's feelings. Such a restriction does not describe physical reality. It organizes authorship and preserves a meaningful encounter between participants.

Uncertainty should also be separated into kinds. Participants may lack information about the past, remain unsure what another character will choose, or face an unresolved procedure for a contested action. A die can settle selected outcomes, but it cannot answer every kind of question appropriately. Rolling to determine whether a letter arrives differs from rolling to determine whether another participant sincerely forgives its sender. The first may concern an external condition; the second may displace a creative

decision that the event assigned to a player. A mechanic should be matched to the authority and uncertainty involved.

Formalization has benefits as well as costs. An explicit procedure can protect an unpopular decision, make a transfer dependable, or preserve opportunity for someone less confident in open negotiation. A lightly specified convention can be flexible while leaving more room for informal dominance. Neither numerical complexity nor verbal simplicity guarantees fairness. The question is whether the arrangement makes promised decisions usable and its limits understandable. This approach allows a critical examination of minimal mechanics without turning informality into an unquestioned artistic virtue. Social negotiation is itself a demanding medium with conditions that design should address.

The essay is a conceptual investigation supported by scholarship, documented tabletop practice, and invented examples. It does not report a measured advantage for one system. A fictional harbor council provides a sustained case in which votes, permits, disclosure, and negotiation create consequences without resolving every exchange through chance. The case is used to test relationships among procedures, not to simulate real emergency administration. The broader purpose is to develop distinctions that could guide actual design and research. Claims about participant experience remain questions for observation and participant accounts.

The central proposition can be stated precisely: rules in Interactive Drama need not model the entire imagined world's physics. They can establish the terms under which people

make, recognize, and answer consequential contributions. This gives dramatic freedom a dependable basis. Participants need not ask permission for every ordinary exchange, yet they can rely on procedures when a contribution affects shared resources or another person's assigned authority. The dice can fall silent while the event retains constraints, uncertainty, and consequence. What changes is the location and visibility of the work that the rules perform.

Rules Mechanics Conventions and Fictional Conditions

The word rule can refer to several different things. A fictional law forbidding entry to an archive belongs to the imagined institution. A procedure requiring acknowledgment before a document changes custody belongs to the organization of play. A social agreement that practical clarification takes precedence over character speech belongs to participation. These arrangements can interact, but they do not have the same status. A character can disobey the archive's law without authorizing a player to ignore the custody procedure. Keeping the levels distinct permits fictional transgression without dissolving the shared means of recognizing what occurred.

A mechanic is a specified operation that connects an input to an outcome under a procedure. A vote, a card exchange, and a comparison of numerical values can each function mechanically. The operation can be deterministic or random. A convention can be less algorithmic while still doing essential organizing work. Participants may agree that a spoken refusal establishes a character's refusal without

outside certification. That convention does not calculate an outcome, but it gives a contribution standing. Minimal mechanics often depend on such conventions. They should be examined as part of the structure rather than treated as an invisible absence.

Fictional conditions provide the circumstances within which choices have meaning. A ship departs at an established time; a character controls a key; a public hearing has a recognized chair. Those facts can constrain action even when no die is involved. The designer should distinguish a fixed premise from a condition that participants can change. If the ship's departure is open to negotiation, the event needs a way for that negotiation to matter. If departure is fixed, participants can still make consequential decisions about passengers, messages, and commitments. Freedom within a situation does not require unlimited power to abolish its conditions.

Rules can regulate description as well as action. Participants may be allowed to add incidental details while checking before introducing a resource that could settle the central dispute. A newly described flower and a newly discovered signed confession have different consequences for the shared world. Treating both simply as imagination misses the issue. The relevant boundary concerns the contribution's effect on other people's possibilities. A lightweight rule can preserve spontaneous description while preventing one participant from authoring away an uncertainty others were invited to explore. It distributes creative scope rather than simulating a physical action.

Rules also determine what counts as evidence. A character's confident claim need not establish its truth. A private brief

may describe an accepted memory, a mistaken belief, or a rumor. A public notice may establish a condition with another status. Participants need to recognize those differences if social negotiation is to remain more than competition in confident assertion. Formal mechanics can be minimal while informational conventions remain precise. The event can let characters deceive one another without making players uncertain whether the designer has changed the world's accepted facts. Mystery and procedural confusion should not be conflated.

The amount of written explanation should follow likely consequences. A simple event may need only a few examples of entry, departure, disclosure, and resource transfer. A more elaborate scenario may require specific rules for offices, votes, or shared records. Neither arrangement should be judged solely by document length. A short rule can conceal difficult ambiguities, while a longer example can make a recurring action easy to understand. The useful test is whether participants can apply the convention under actual conditions. Readability and practical availability matter more than achieving an abstract ideal of a nearly empty rules page.

The distinction between rules and application also matters. Participants may understand a procedure differently from its designer, especially when familiar genres suggest unstated assumptions. A rule that documents can be exchanged might leave unclear whether copying is permitted. If the issue becomes consequential, the facilitator needs a proportionate clarification. Revisions should be recognizable rather than presented as though the original wording had already answered the question. A dependable system can accommodate repair while preserving the standing of

decisions reasonably made under the earlier understanding. Minimal structure needs a way to learn from its own ambiguities.

A rule can also define the resolution level. A scene may settle a whole negotiation through one accepted agreement, or divide it into several separately regulated exchanges. Finer detail is not automatically more realistic. It can introduce distinctions that the drama does not need while leaving important relationships unspecified. The designer should choose a level that matches the intended decisions. If the concern is who will endorse a proposal, calculating each conversational advantage may add little. If custody changes several times and matters later, distinguishing those transfers can preserve essential information. Abstraction is a choice about relevance, not simply a reduction in complexity.

The resulting vocabulary makes design comparison more precise. One event may use few mechanics but many conventions. Another may employ numerical abilities while leaving ordinary dialogue entirely open. Another may distribute environmental invention broadly but regulate institutional decisions tightly. These are different configurations of structure, not positions on one simple scale from rules to freedom. The analysis should identify which contribution is regulated, who may invoke the procedure, and what changes when it is used. That information explains the practical organization of play more clearly than whether dice happen to be present.

What Dice and Numerical Abilities Can Accomplish

Random resolution can settle an uncertain fictional event without requiring a participant to win an argument about its outcome. The 2014 Dungeons and Dragons Basic Rules describe an exchange among environmental presentation, players' intended actions, and narrated consequences, using dice for selected uncertain tasks rather than every action (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). This documented example already complicates a contrast between continuous rolling and unrestricted improvisation. A tabletop game can leave ordinary conversation open while formalizing other events. Hybrid design begins by asking which of those functions remains useful when people perform together in an embodied salon.

A die can introduce unpredictability that neither the facilitator nor a participant selects directly. That may suit a chance occurrence or an uncertain attempt whose result the group wants to place outside immediate discretion. It can also create a shared point of attention. The suspense of waiting for the result is different from uncertainty about another person's response. Both can matter, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. A designer who removes dice may need to preserve openness through social decisions or concealed information rather than merely deleting the procedure and assuming uncertainty will survive unchanged.

Numerical abilities can distinguish a character's capacities from the player's practical skills. A participant can portray an expert without personally possessing the expertise. In an embodied drama, this separation can be valuable when the

fiction includes knowledge or institutional permissions that should not depend on performance confidence. The representation need not always be a number. A character-specific permission to identify an official seal can establish a capacity directly. A comparison of values may be useful if degrees of capacity matter. The choice depends on what the activity needs to distinguish and how that distinction will affect encounters.

Formal resolution can also limit facilitator discretion. An agreed operation can make an outcome predictable in its procedure even when uncertain in its result. Participants need not depend entirely on whether a facilitator finds their portrayal persuasive. That can protect a contribution from aesthetic favoritism, although application can still involve judgment. The system must identify who decides that the operation applies and how its inputs are established. A numerical rule whose target changes invisibly in response to preferred outcomes can preserve the appearance of impartiality while retaining arbitrary control. Transparency belongs to the procedure, not to the number alone.

Dice can become less helpful when they settle a question the performance has assigned elsewhere. If a participant controls whether a character accepts an apology, a persuasion roll that compels acceptance changes that allocation. Such a mechanic can be an intentional part of a game, but the promise must be clear. Without that clarity, players may discover that an apparently open relationship is governed by another person's numerical success. The issue is not that feelings are unsuitable for all formalization. It is that different designs distribute authority over feelings differently, and those differences shape what roleplaying asks participants to create.

Interruption is another possible cost. A scene may be developing through pace, hesitation, and changing commitments when a procedure requires consulting values or waiting for adjudication. The interruption might be worthwhile if it settles a consequential uncertainty that cannot otherwise proceed. It might also break the exchange while adding little. Design evaluation should consider what happens before and after the procedure. A brief interruption that restores a usable situation differs from repeated checks that leave participants waiting without new choices. The mere existence of a pause does not decide whether the mechanic helped or hindered engagement.

Numerical abilities can encourage attention to optimization when the design rewards particular outcomes. That may suit the intended game. A salon event focused on conflicting loyalties may instead want participants to choose among values without seeking a mathematically superior response. Removing numbers can reduce one form of optimization, but participants can still pursue strategic advantage through social influence, resource hoarding, or procedural expertise. The broader question concerns what the event rewards and what participants understand as success. A change of resolution device cannot independently determine the creative priorities people bring to play.

Physical enactment creates a related question about what the player must actually demonstrate. A character who searches a fictional cabinet cannot necessarily discover a document by inspecting classroom furniture. The procedure can establish a search through declaration, a prepared clue, or a bounded ability. Requiring real dexterity or unusually sharp visual attention would introduce another resolution system, even if it

involves no dice. The system would then be using player performance to determine character success. That choice may fit a particular event, but it should be deliberate. An embodied setting does not make every possible physical test appropriate to the fiction.

Numbers can summarize preparation, yet they can also obscure what a capacity means. A high investigation value does not explain whether a character can authenticate handwriting, remember an institution's history, or recognize a disguised visitor. A qualitative permission can be clearer when only one of those contributions matters. Conversely, a graded procedure may be useful when several degrees of success have distinct consequences. The design should not preserve a familiar scale simply because a role sheet usually contains one. It should identify the distinctions that participants will use and provide the least cumbersome means that keeps those distinctions dependable.

Retaining a mechanic should involve a clear answer to three related questions: what uncertainty it resolves, whose authority it uses, and what meaningful action follows. These questions need not appear as a checklist during the performance. They guide the designer's reasoning. A die used for a rare external occurrence may fit alongside extensive free dialogue. A character permission may serve expertise more clearly than a numerical scale. A transfer rule may provide certainty where randomness would be irrelevant. Hybrid design is selective: it preserves useful functions while changing the means through which those functions become available.

Uncertainty Without Random Resolution

Uncertainty is not the same as randomness. A participant may know all available rules and still remain unsure whether another character will cooperate. The other participant's decision has not been generated by chance, yet its outcome remains open to the person asking. This social uncertainty is central to negotiation. It can sustain a scene because each response changes what the other person might try. A system that removes dice can preserve considerable unpredictability when participants possess independent authority over consequential responses. The uncertainty comes from another person's agency rather than from a randomizing device.

Hidden information supplies another source. A character may know a relationship that others do not, or possess a document whose significance remains disputed. The relevant historical facts can be fixed before play without making their discovery inevitable. Participants choose whom to ask, how much to disclose, and whether to believe an account. The design needs routes through which inquiry can proceed. Information that nobody can discover or use may provide private atmosphere but little dramatic uncertainty. A secret becomes active through its possible relations to decisions, including the decision to continue withholding it.

Interpretive uncertainty can persist after factual discovery. A letter may establish that a founder left voluntarily while leaving the reasons for secrecy open to debate. A confession may resolve who signed a document without settling whether the action was justified. These uncertainties are not defects in resolution if the event invites participants to interpret and respond. A mechanic that announces one correct moral

meaning could narrow the drama unnecessarily. The design can provide a dependable evidentiary basis while leaving evaluations plural. Participants then face consequential disagreement rather than a puzzle whose final answer explains everything worth discussing.

Future consequences can remain uncertain even when an immediate action succeeds. A character can disclose a secret with no roll required, yet remain unsure how allies will respond. A group can approve a proposal while leaving its effects on personal trust unsettled. This allows procedures to create firm commitments without closing the event's future. The distinction is useful because dramatic momentum often depends on consequences that become opportunities for further action. Resolution should settle the question it addresses, not automatically determine every reaction connected to it. A completed operation can begin another scene.

Scarcity creates uncertainty about allocation rather than physical success. Several characters may seek the same resource, but a custody rule can make clear that it cannot be promised twice. Participants must negotiate, cooperate, or accept a refusal. The resource's importance depends on its relation to their concerns. Scarcity alone does not guarantee rich drama; it can produce repetitive bargaining if every role seeks the same simple advantage. Different values and possible uses can make the allocation interesting. One person may value public access, another recognition, and another the preservation of a confidence.

Timing creates another field of uncertainty. A character may have enough information to act but wait for a conversation

that never occurs before the deadline. Simultaneous scenes make such decisions consequential because attention cannot be everywhere at once. The design should distinguish intended temporal pressure from an operational failure that prevents a participant from receiving an available notice. A person can meaningfully choose to delay, but cannot choose on information that the event mistakenly withheld. Clear timing conventions allow uncertainty about other people's priorities without making the schedule itself an arbitrary surprise.

Indeterminacy in the fiction should be separated from uncertainty for participants. In one design, the culprit or hidden cause is fixed and unknown. In another, participants can establish an explanation through an authorized contribution. In a third, the question remains open permanently. These are different agreements about what inquiry can accomplish. A group expecting to discover a prepared answer may feel misled if the facilitator invents it after hearing a favored theory. A group invited to create the answer may welcome that same contribution. Minimal mechanics still need to communicate which kind of uncertainty the event offers.

The design can combine these sources without requiring constant resolution. Participants may discover a fixed fact, reinterpret its meaning, negotiate a scarce opportunity, and then make an open decision under time pressure. Each stage carries a different relationship to knowledge and authority. The resulting dramatic freedom has structure because the world constrains action and other people can answer it. Dice are one means of producing uncertain outcomes, but they are not the only means of keeping a future unsettled. An

ensemble can surprise itself through decisions whose legitimacy is clear even when their content is unforeseen.

Negotiation and the Limits of Social Resolution

Negotiation can resolve many fictional questions directly because the characters' choices constitute the relevant outcome. When one character offers cooperation and another accepts, the agreement can become part of the fiction through the exchange itself. No separate operation is needed unless the agreement claims authority over something outside the participants' control. A promise to advocate for a proposal differs from a promise that an absent council will approve it. The first concerns a character's commitment; the second makes a broader claim whose standing needs clarification. Social resolution works through those distinctions rather than through conversation alone.

The opportunity to refuse gives negotiation much of its significance. A request matters because the recipient can answer in more than one way. A design that presents refusal as technically possible but continually overturns it may preserve the appearance of dialogue while removing its consequence. Participants should know when a character's response is decisive and when another procedure can affect the result. If a formal ability can compel cooperation, that belongs in the starting agreement. If the event reserves personal assent to the player, a persuasive performance does not independently acquire the right to override it.

Social resolution can preserve characterization by allowing reasons to matter in different ways. A participant may reject a

generous offer because the character values recognition more than material advantage. Another may accept a disadvantageous bargain to protect a relationship. Such choices can be dramatically coherent without being optimal according to one common measure. The role's motivations give the participant material for interpretation, while the encounter supplies circumstances the brief could not fully anticipate. A minimalist system can encourage this work by making several forms of consequence available rather than reducing every exchange to a single score.

Conversation is not automatically an equal field. Familiarity with improvisation, confidence in the language, and comfort with disagreement can affect who proposes and who yields. A design that replaces every formal procedure with unrestricted persuasion may make those differences more consequential. The solution need not be a numerical charisma test. Written offers, time to consider a response, recognized turns in a public assembly, or character-specific control over a resource can give participants dependable means to contribute. The important question is whether people can exercise their assigned authority without having to outperform someone socially before their contribution is recognized.

Fictional status also differs from player authority. A character may be a monarch, a chairperson, or an expert whose words carry institutional weight. That status can organize an encounter, but it should not grant the participant unlimited power over others' portrayal. A monarch can issue an order while another character decides whether to obey under the event's conventions. A chair can recognize speakers while remaining bound by the public procedure. Such boundaries allow social hierarchy to become dramatic material rather

than an unexamined transfer of practical control to whichever player receives the prestigious role.

Negotiation needs a shared account of what can be offered. Participants may trade endorsements, access, information, or future commitments, but those resources should have intelligible limits. A character cannot legitimately exchange a permit already transferred elsewhere unless the fiction deliberately permits fraud and supplies a way to recognize its consequences. A promise of future assistance may remain uncertain in fulfillment, while a physical transfer establishes present custody. Keeping these differences clear lets participants bargain forcefully without making the event's basic conditions unstable. Social creativity becomes more productive when the resources it rearranges have dependable status.

The language of agreement deserves attention. Participants can use a brief operational confirmation to distinguish a completed fictional transfer from an exploratory conversation. This need not turn every scene into contract administration. A clear acknowledgment at the point of consequence may be sufficient. If ambiguity about a promise is intended dramatic material, that ambiguity can remain. If the question concerns whether the only permit changed hands, a dependable confirmation may be necessary. The design should formalize the part of the exchange that requires shared certainty while leaving the surrounding relationship open to performance and interpretation.

Failure to reach agreement can be valuable. A negotiation may expose incompatible values, break an alliance, or send participants toward other relationships. The facilitator should

examine whether useful next actions remain before treating the refusal as a stalled game. A role with several connections can turn a failed exchange into a new approach. A role dependent on one uncooperative partner may lose most available opportunities. That difference points back to scenario design. Social resolution works best when the surrounding network can absorb disagreement rather than requiring every important conversation to end with cooperation.

Negotiation should also retain a route for practical clarification. A participant who asks whether a resource can be transferred is not necessarily portraying uncertainty or surrendering an advantage. The operational question concerns the rules supporting the scene. Treating it as fictional weakness can discourage needed clarification and reward those who guess confidently. Separating the two levels preserves the character conflict. Participants can understand the transfer procedure and still bargain hard about whether to use it. A clear convention gives social uncertainty room to operate because people do not also have to negotiate the existence of the procedure itself.

Social resolution is sufficient for an extended event only when it is supported by suitable conditions. Participants need meaningful authority, usable resources, several routes into interaction, and proportionate recourse when their understandings diverge. Those supports are structural even when they are not expressed as numerical mechanics. The quality of the event depends on the relation among them. Removing dice can make conversational choice more central, but it does not make conversation self-sustaining. The designer's work shifts toward preparing the circumstances in

which an offer, refusal, or compromise can have a clear consequence worth answering.

Voting Resource Exchange and Character Permissions

Voting converts individual contributions into a collective result under a specified rule. It can make institutional decisions legible when free discussion alone cannot establish who has authority to settle them. A vote does not determine whether participants agree morally or feel satisfied afterward. It establishes the outcome of a particular procedure. That distinction can be productive in drama: a proposal may pass while opposition remains intense. The rule supplies a shared condition around which further interaction can develop. It should identify voters, valid proposals, required support, and the treatment of ties or abstentions before the result matters.

Different voting arrangements create different opportunities. A simple majority, unanimity, and endorsement by selected groups allocate influence differently. No procedure is neutral with respect to the scenario's social organization. A unanimity rule gives every recognized party a power to withhold agreement. A majority rule can allow a minority to lose while retaining other forms of influence. The designer should choose according to the dramatic question rather than presume that one procedure always creates better participation. Participants can investigate what their fictional institution permits, provided its operating conditions are intelligible and consistently applied.

Resource exchanges can provide structure between public decisions. A unique permit, key, or endorsement creates a

relationship among custody, use, and possible transfer. Physical representation can make the current holder apparent, but the fictional meaning still depends on a rule. A permit might be transferable, revocable, divisible, or tied to a particular person. These are different designs. The event should explain the properties that affect decisions and avoid inventing new restrictions only after participants find an unexpected use. Stable resource conditions allow creative bargaining precisely because the available material does not change arbitrarily in response to the bargain.

The number of resources affects pressure, but more scarcity is not always better. If every objective requires a resource that only one participant can supply, several people may spend the event waiting at the same bottleneck. If resources have no meaningful limits, exchange may become inconsequential. Design needs to consider dependencies rather than quantity alone. Different resources can open distinct routes, and a participant can hold something useful without becoming the sole gatekeeper for everyone else's activity. The goal is a network of reasons to interact, not merely a pile of objects that look important.

Character-specific permissions can represent expertise without an elaborate ability system. An archivist may authenticate a seal; a translator may interpret an inscription; a steward may authorize a ceremonial meeting. The permission should establish a clear contribution the participant can make. It should not require guessing hidden procedural conditions or receiving discretionary approval every time. The limits are equally important. Authenticating a seal can establish that it matches an official pattern without determining whether the document's author is honest. A narrow capacity can create

useful interaction while leaving other characters with consequential questions and responses.

Permissions can also distribute attention. Someone with recognized authority to convene a hearing has a reason for others to approach and a way to create a shared scene. A character's influence need not depend on speaking most loudly. Such a role can be useful for participation when its holder understands how to exercise it and has practical access to the necessary information. It can fail if the permission is merely decorative or if others ignore it. Evaluation should examine its actual use. A written entitlement is a design offer, not evidence that it became usable authority during play.

Resource rules should consider what happens when materials are misplaced or duplicated accidentally. The event needs to distinguish a practical mistake from fictional theft or forgery. A participant who loses a card under a chair has not necessarily authorized the disappearance of the represented permit. A simple record or facilitator clarification can restore the accepted state. Conversely, if concealment is an intended fictional action, the rules should state how it is performed. Clear handling protects dramatic consequences from being decided by accidents that participants did not understand as part of the game.

Transfer can involve relationships as well as objects. A character may delegate a vote or endorse another person's proposal. The arrangement should specify whether delegation is permitted and how long it lasts. Otherwise, participants may make incompatible assumptions about who can speak for whom. A minimal rule can preserve flexibility by requiring the affected parties' acknowledgment rather than a complex

form. The rule's purpose is to make the commitment visible enough for those who must rely on it. It need not prescribe the motives or emotional significance of the delegation.

These procedures can combine while retaining different scopes. A permit transfer determines custody. A vote determines institutional approval. An expertise permission establishes a bounded fact. None need settle whether a character trusts another participant's account or welcomes the result. Keeping the scopes separate prevents a procedural success from swallowing the surrounding drama. It also makes intervention easier to limit. A facilitator can clarify which vote counted without declaring the winner morally correct, or restore a missing permit without rewarding the character who misplaced it. Minimal mechanics become dependable through such distinctions.

An extended improvisational event can have substantial formal structure through a small number of carefully chosen operations. The quantity matters less than their fit with the intended decisions. If participants understand what a vote establishes, how a resource changes hands, and what a character permission authorizes, much ordinary interaction can proceed independently. The resulting freedom is supported by shared certainty at selected points. Those points give the ensemble a basis from which to disagree, improvise, and accept consequences. A lightweight system works when its limited procedures settle the right questions and leave the right questions open.

Character Design as a Carrier of Rules

Character design can perform work that a more elaborate system assigns to recurring mechanics. A brief can specify what someone knows, what resource the role controls, and which decisions the participant can establish. It can also supply reasons to care about other people's responses. These features shape play before any formal operation occurs. Fatland's account of incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy offers a practitioner vocabulary for preparing connected reasons to interact (Fatland, 2005). The present application treats those reasons as invitations and pressures, whose actual effect depends on participants' interpretation and use.

A biography alone does not necessarily supply playable structure. A character can have a detailed history and still lack any immediate person to approach or decision to make. Effective preparation connects past circumstances to present opportunities. Someone who once withheld a record may now meet the person seeking it. Someone who owes a favor may discover that fulfilling it conflicts with another commitment. The resulting pressure does not dictate a single action. It makes several actions meaningful in relation to the character's situation. This is structural work even though no number appears on the sheet.

Goals should be interpreted according to the event's intended relationship to success. A task list can encourage participants to treat objectives as items to complete, while broader concerns can support changes of priority. Either arrangement can be legitimate if its purpose is clear. A character seeking status might discover that preserving a friendship matters more. If the system treats that choice as simple failure

regardless of the drama produced, it rewards one mode of participation. If objectives are prompts rather than scoring conditions, the event should say so. Removing numerical rewards while retaining an unstated winning standard leaves the design ambiguous.

Private information needs a recognizable status. A brief may establish a personal memory as fictional fact, provide a belief that can be mistaken, or summarize a report from another character. These distinctions affect what the participant may claim with confidence. They can preserve uncertainty without forcing players to guess whether their materials are authoritative. The designer can write a character who is wrong while making that condition clear to the player, or can deliberately withhold the truth under an understood mystery convention. What matters is that the arrangement supports the kind of inquiry and portrayal the event promises.

Resources should connect to more than one possible interaction when the event expects extended independent play. A character holding a single crucial document may become a static dispenser if every visitor simply requests the same fact. The role becomes richer when disclosure affects relationships, when different people seek different uses, and when the holder has concerns beyond guarding the document. A minimal mechanic can establish custody while character design supplies the reasons that custody matters. Neither element substitutes for the other. The rule prevents confusion; the relationships give participants something consequential to negotiate.

The design should examine what happens when a preferred route fails. If the obvious ally refuses, can the character

approach someone else? If a secret is disclosed early, does the role retain decisions? If an objective becomes impossible, can its consequence generate another scene? These questions do not require predicting every event. They test whether the character's opportunities depend on one fragile chain. A system with few recurring mechanics often relies heavily on such resilience. Without it, a participant can exhaust the apparent role while the rest of the ensemble continues, leaving freedom in principle but little usable action.

Character inequality can be dramatically productive without making participation arbitrarily unequal. One role may possess institutional power, another information, and another control over a personal response. Their resources need not be equivalent in kind. The designer should consider whether each participant can affect something that others can answer. A low-status character can be central through testimony or a refusal whose authority is protected. A high-status character can still face uncertainty through dependence on cooperation. This produces conflict through relationships instead of requiring every participant to compete on the same numerical scale.

Briefs also carry boundaries. A character can be intensely ambitious without giving the player permission to silence other participants operationally. A role may seek secrecy without allowing the destruction of materials needed for the event to continue. Such distinctions should be explained through likely actions. General instructions to improvise freely can be less useful than knowing whether a particular disclosure, exclusion, or transfer is permitted. Bounded authority does not weaken characterization. It gives the participant a dependable field within which ambition, loyalty,

hesitation, and refusal can become recognizable contributions rather than disputes over the activity's basic terms.

The distribution of information across briefs should be checked for compatibility. Two memories can conflict intentionally when the design identifies them as subjective or unreliable. Two authoritative statements requiring mutually exclusive facts create a different problem. Participants may spend the event trying to solve a contradiction that the designer introduced accidentally. A minimal system cannot repair that defect simply by encouraging improvisation. Preparation needs to identify which facts are fixed, which interpretations may conflict, and which additions remain open. This work gives social uncertainty a stable basis instead of asking participants to negotiate away every inconsistency.

Character design becomes part of the rules because it allocates knowledge, authority, and dependence. Its success can be examined through what participants do with those allocations. A well-connected brief may support many scenes, or may prove difficult to use under actual conditions. An apparently minor relationship may become central. These possibilities should inform revision without reducing participant creativity to successful execution of the designer's plan. The strongest minimalist design makes its starting conditions usable and remains open to the different stories they generate. It governs contributions sufficiently to let the ensemble create their consequences.

The Harbor Council as a Worked Example

Consider an invented council in a coastal city preparing for a fictional storm. Twelve participants portray two delegates

from each of six districts. Each district represents ten households, giving sixty households in total. The available refuge has room for forty households, represented by eight unique permits worth five places each. The numerical premise is deliberately simple: there are fewer available places than claims upon them. The scenario is not a model of real emergency planning. Its purpose is to examine how a limited set of procedures could organize conflict over allocation without requiring dice for every consequential exchange.

The council's public rule requires seven of the twelve delegates to approve an allocation plan. Each delegate has one vote; abstention does not count as support. A tie or any result below seven fails to pass. The eight permits cannot create more than forty places, regardless of how confidently a character argues. The event also states what happens if no plan passes before the stopping point: no collective allocation is ratified within the scenario, and participants reflect on that outcome afterward. This stopping condition avoids an improvised facilitator rescue disguised as the inevitable correct result.

Individual briefs complicate the shared problem. One delegate seeks equal district recognition, another wants priority for households already displaced, and another owes a personal commitment across district lines. Some participants hold information about transport, local trust, or earlier promises. Those facts can affect argument without changing the total capacity. The scenario should make clear which are established conditions and which are character claims. No participant can invent extra refuge places through incidental description. The preparation preserves scarcity as a common

premise while allowing substantial freedom in proposals, priorities, and alliances.

The first formal mechanism is proposal. Any delegate may submit a written allocation identifying the destination of all eight permits or explicitly leaving some unallocated. The second is endorsement: a recognized public vote determines whether the plan passes. The third is custody: accepted allocations are represented by the actual transfer of unique permits under the agreed convention. These procedures settle different questions. A proposal can be discussed without passing. A passed plan can establish entitlement while practical transfer confirms which representative currently holds the relevant object. The surrounding dialogue remains open to participants' choices.

Private bargaining can proceed without a persuasion roll. A delegate may offer support for a plan in exchange for a public acknowledgment or a change in allocation. The recipient can agree, refuse, or propose another arrangement. A promise creates a fictional commitment whose fulfillment remains a character decision unless the event specifies a binding procedure. This distinction should be explicit. The drama may permit betrayal, but a character's false promise should not allow the player to counterfeit the recorded vote. Fictional dishonesty and operational misrepresentation are different actions with different consequences for the shared event.

Suppose a group proposes allocating two permits to each of two districts and one permit to each of the remaining four. The arithmetic yields eight permits and forty places: twenty places for the first pair of districts and twenty divided among the other four. The proposal addresses capacity while raising

questions of justification. Participants can debate the unequal district allocation, investigate the reasons offered, or seek a different coalition. No calculation decides whether the arrangement is fair. The numerical rule preserves the constraint; the ensemble supplies the political and relational meaning of choosing within it.

If seven delegates endorse the plan, it passes under the stated rule. The five who did not support it retain their characters' perspectives and other authorized choices. They can publicly object, withdraw cooperation on a separate matter, or explain why the outcome damages trust. The vote does not compel satisfaction or reconciliation. It establishes a collective decision within its defined scope. This separation allows a formal operation to advance the drama rather than close every issue. The result becomes a new condition to which characters can respond, preserving uncertainty through their subsequent choices.

An expertise permission might allow one delegate to authenticate a transport notice. The permission establishes that a notice is official without determining whether its author kept a separate promise. Another role might control permission to convene a district meeting. Such capacities can create reasons to approach characters who would otherwise receive less attention. Their limits need to be written clearly. A transport expert does not acquire authority to create extra refuge capacity or dictate another person's vote. Narrow permissions can distribute consequential contributions without constructing a comprehensive numerical model of each character's abilities.

The facilitator intervenes when the shared arrangement requires it. If two people claim the same permit, the facilitator checks the accepted transfer under the custody rule. If a delegate misses a public announcement because of an actual communication problem, the information can be restored without awarding the character additional influence. If a group remains divided about values, no ruling is required merely because agreement would make the event easier to end. The facilitator protects the procedures and participation opportunities, leaving the ensemble to create the fictional success or failure those opportunities permit.

The example can also test an unexpected proposal. Delegates might suggest sharing each permit between districts. If permits represent divisible capacity and the rule permits redistribution, the proposal can be considered. If the fictional arrangement requires groups of five households to travel together, that condition must already be available or introduced as an acknowledged revision. The facilitator should not invent indivisibility merely to block a clever compromise. Unexpected use is an informative test of the preparation. It reveals whether the designer specified a relevant limit or relied on participants to reproduce an assumed pattern without being told that other patterns were forbidden.

A delegate could also propose enlarging the refuge. The event needs to distinguish advocacy within the fiction from authority to change a fixed premise. A character can argue that expansion ought to occur without the player automatically establishing new capacity. If expansion is intended as an available route, the scenario should specify its conditions and how it relates to the other decisions. If

capacity is fixed for this event, that constraint can remain legitimate. The important issue is whether participants know which question they are being invited to address. Creative freedom does not require every proposed solution to alter the world.

The example shows why minimal mechanics can support extended complexity. Eight objects, a proposal convention, a voting threshold, and a few bounded permissions establish dependable points of consequence. Character relationships and information create reasons to use them. The system does not simulate the storm's physics or calculate every social effect. It makes a particular set of decisions available within a shared imagined circumstance. Whether participants find the event compelling would require evidence from actual play. The hypothetical arrangement demonstrates structural sufficiency for specified actions, not an automatic guarantee of immersion, learning, or equitable experience.

Consequence Beyond Winning and Mechanical Optimization

Winning can mean achieving a character objective, satisfying a formal victory condition, or having a rewarding performance. Those meanings can conflict. A participant may enjoy portraying a failed ambition, while a character's successful maneuver may produce a scene the player finds uninteresting. Minimal mechanics should not leave the relationship unspecified. If objectives contribute to a score, that affects how participants may pursue them. If the event values exploration of competing commitments, a change of priority can be a productive development. The system needs

to explain what kind of success it recognizes without prescribing everyone's subjective enjoyment.

Juul's classic game model includes variable, valued outcomes and players' effort and attachment, while examining boundaries around the model (Juul, 2003). It offers a comparison rather than a verdict that all roleplaying must fit one definition. The present argument concerns the organization of uncertainty and consequential choice within a hybrid performance. A salon event may contain clear operations such as votes without making the whole evening reducible to a single ranked outcome. Participants can care about what happens while differing about which outcomes are desirable. The model helps identify that difference instead of resolving it by terminology alone.

A character's objective can be a pressure rather than a command. Someone instructed to seek public recognition may discover a reason to protect another person's privacy instead. The designer can allow that decision if the brief presents the objective as a starting concern. If abandonment is prohibited, the event offers a different kind of portrayal, closer to pursuing a fixed commitment under changing circumstances. Neither arrangement should be concealed. Dramatic freedom depends partly on whether participants understand how much interpretation the role permits. Removing a score does not by itself make objectives flexible.

Consequences can be relational. A refused request may alter trust, create a debt, or change who is willing to meet. These developments do not need numerical measurement to matter. They do need recognition through subsequent action. A declared debt that nobody can invoke may remain a private

idea; a promise that shapes later cooperation becomes a shared condition. The design can support relational consequence through connected roles and opportunities for continuation. It should avoid assuming that every emotionally suggestive exchange automatically changes the drama. The significance appears in what participants make available and how others answer it.

Institutional consequences can coexist with personal disagreement. The harbor vote can establish an allocation while leaving delegates angry, relieved, or uncertain. A public result gives those different responses a common reference. That arrangement differs from a system that announces both the allocation and everyone's emotional resolution. Keeping the scopes separate allows the event to reach a stopping point without claiming that all conflicts have been reconciled. It also permits meaningful loss. A participant whose preferred plan fails can still create a forceful response and understand the evening as a substantial performance rather than a mechanically wasted effort.

Optimization remains possible without numbers. A participant can seek the shortest route to an endorsement, monopolize a conversation partner, or exploit ambiguous wording. Some groups may enjoy strategic play, while others may prefer broader exploration of relationships. The design should make its priorities explicit enough that participants can coordinate expectations. Informal pressure to create good drama can itself become restrictive if nobody knows who defines good. Specific examples are more useful: participants might be encouraged to answer offers, preserve other people's opportunities, and allow character setbacks to develop. These

conventions describe participation without guaranteeing one aesthetic outcome.

The relationship between player and character goals also affects cooperation. Players can support an engaging disagreement while their characters oppose one another. That collaboration does not require planning the outcome together. It can mean giving the other person a clear offer to answer, acknowledging an authorized refusal, or making a concealed intention discoverable through the agreed routes. The event's social framework carries this cooperation. A rulebook may contain no points for it, but the performance depends on participants recognizing the difference between fictional opposition and undermining another person's opportunity to play.

The absence of a single winner can broaden the kinds of closure available. A group may agree on an institutional decision, leave a moral dispute unresolved, and discover a new personal alliance. Another performance may end with failed cooperation but a clearer understanding of the characters' differences. These outcomes can be coherent when the stopping conditions are explicit. A facilitator need not manufacture a final consensus merely to give the event a clean story. Reflective discussion can examine what was settled, what remained open, and how the procedures shaped both. Consequence can persist without a scoreboard.

Evaluation should follow the event's declared purposes. If the aim is a strategic negotiation game, the coherence of incentives and opportunities for effective choice matters. If the aim is exploratory drama, the range and responsiveness of encounters may be more relevant. An educational setting may

require later analysis rather than successful in-character bargaining. These aims can overlap, but they should not be silently substituted for one another after play. A participant should not be told that losing was the real goal only because a promised game failed to provide dependable ways to act.

Minimal mechanics can preserve meaningful consequence when they establish what changes and allow participants to decide what that change means. Their economy should support the intended mode of participation rather than merely remove visible calculation. The result may include strategic success, character failure, mutual discovery, or unresolved disagreement. Those possibilities gain substance from the procedures and relationships that make them answerable. The absence of a universal victory condition does not make the event consequence-free. It makes the connection among rules, values, and interpretation a central part of the design.

Legibility Access and Proportionate Facilitation

A rule is usable only when participants can find, understand, and invoke it. A minimal system can fail if its few essential conventions are hidden in lengthy character histories or explained once in a crowded room. Preparation should distinguish operational information from fictional secrets. Participants can know how a vote works while their characters remain uncertain about who will support them. A concise common reference can preserve that distinction. The goal is not exhaustive documentation of every possible action, but dependable access to the conventions on which consequential choices rely.

Examples often communicate scope more clearly than abstract assurances. A short demonstration can show that one character may offer a permit, another may refuse it, and transfer requires acknowledgment. Another can show that a public vote establishes institutional approval without compelling personal agreement. These examples teach how the system handles boundaries among contributions. They should include a refusal or contested case, since participants need to understand how disagreement proceeds. An orientation that demonstrates only smooth cooperation can leave the most important conventions unclear until the first consequential conflict occurs.

Participation modes deserve explicit consideration. A rule that relies on standing in a particular location, reading small print, or speaking rapidly places practical demands on players. Alternative ways to submit a proposal, receive an announcement, or indicate a vote can preserve the same fictional authority. These alternatives do not have to change the character's resources. They make the operation available through more than one means. The distinction matters because practical assistance should not be confused with fictional advantage. A participant can receive help handling a permit while retaining the same bounded decision as everyone else.

Language differences can shape how social resolution operates. In a multilingual classroom, an open-ended negotiation may demand more processing time than a brief written proposal. Participants can use preparatory notes, clear resource labels, or a pause to formulate a response. These supports can preserve rather than replace dramatic engagement. Their effects on language development would

require separate research. The immediate design concern is whether participants can understand the offered action and supply a meaningful answer. Minimal mechanics should not make speed of verbal improvisation the unannounced measure of every character's capability.

The facilitator needs an intelligible intervention scope. Clarifying a rule, restoring missing information, offering a new opportunity, and deciding a contested resource are different acts. The appropriate response follows the actual problem. A tense silence does not automatically require a new event, and an unpopular character choice does not automatically require correction. The facilitator should ask what condition prevents continuation and what decisions remain with participants after intervention. This approach preserves creative freedom while recognizing that a supposedly hands-off event can fail when nobody is available to settle a genuine procedural conflict.

Consistency does not require refusing all revision. A rule may prove ambiguous or create an unforeseen problem. The facilitator can acknowledge a change, explain its effective point, and consider decisions already made under the earlier understanding. Calling every new restriction a clarification obscures the change and can make participants' previous choices seem illegitimate after the fact. A transparent repair protects the system's credibility. Minimal procedures are often easier to revise than extensive rules, but their importance to the event makes careful communication especially necessary. A small rule can govern many people's opportunities.

Informal norms need attention alongside formal text. Participants may defer to a confident speaker even when the written rule gives someone else a decision. A fictional office may be treated as practical authority beyond its stated scope. A group may assume that a refusal is rude and pressure the player to reverse it. These patterns cannot be solved solely by deleting or adding dice. The facilitator can make the agreed permissions available and support their exercise. Observation and participant reflection can then reveal where the formal arrangement and actual social practice diverge.

The system should preserve recourse without keeping every contribution provisional indefinitely. Participants need confidence that accepted actions will retain standing, together with a route for correcting actual mistakes or exceeded permissions. A repair can identify the disputed fact and settle only what is needed for continuation. It need not reopen every emotional interpretation. Once custody of a permit is clarified, characters can continue to disagree about why it changed hands. Bounded recourse protects the shared world while leaving meaningful conflict available within it. That is a form of dramatic support rather than an exception to freedom.

Facilitation also involves recognizing when a scene's failure is intentional or useful. A delegate may choose not to compromise, knowing that the vote will fail. If that decision falls within the role's authority, the facilitator should not treat it as defective participation merely because the prepared example expected agreement. The relevant question is whether the player understood the situation and could act within it. A role with no usable options presents another issue. Distinguishing those conditions prevents assistance

from becoming a concealed method of restoring the facilitator's preferred outcome.

The practical reference should also identify a fallback when an authorized operation cannot be completed as intended. A missing card, unreadable notice, or unavailable recorder need not erase an accepted fictional action. A brief confirmation through another available mode can preserve it. Such resilience matters especially in portable events, where venues and materials vary. The fallback should maintain the same authority and informational limits rather than create an unrelated advantage. Planning for variation makes the system easier to trust. Participants can concentrate on their characters' uncertain choices because the means of recording those choices are less fragile.

Legible minimalism is an active design achievement. It gives participants enough shared certainty to improvise without requiring continuous certification. It also provides proportionate support when the arrangement fails to answer a consequential question. The facilitator's presence remains important, but its value is measured through the opportunities maintained rather than the number of rulings issued. A system can be sparse and demanding, accessible in one respect and difficult in another. Its practical quality emerges through the fit among conventions, participants, and the particular event they are trying to create.

Testing Whether a Mechanic Earns Its Place

Evaluation should begin with a mechanic's intended function. A permit rule may aim to keep custody clear. A voting rule

may aim to establish a collective decision. An expertise permission may aim to give one role a bounded contribution independent of the player's specialist knowledge. These functions require different evidence. A general report of enjoyment cannot show that custody remained consistent, and an accurate resource ledger cannot show that participants found the drama meaningful. A comprehensive inquiry can connect operational records with observations and participant accounts while preserving the distinct claim each supports.

A design review can first ask whether participants can explain the procedure before play. They might demonstrate a transfer, identify the voting threshold, or distinguish a proposal from an accepted plan. Such a review checks practical understanding rather than theatrical success. It can reveal ambiguous terminology or missing cases while revision remains inexpensive. The designer should avoid using the review to teach a preferred strategy. Knowing how to submit a plan differs from being told which allocation ought to win. The test concerns the operation's availability, leaving its creative use open.

Observation can follow selected episodes during actual performance. A researcher might record the circumstances that triggered a mechanic, the procedure used, its immediate outcome, and the next actions available. This sequence helps explain whether an interruption settled a consequential question. It also reveals unnecessary operations that repeat without changing possibilities. The same mechanic may help in one scene and hinder another. Close attention to context prevents evaluation from turning into a count of rolls or rulings. The relevant unit is the relation between a procedural intervention and the interaction it supports or displaces.

Participant accounts can address experiences the record cannot establish directly. Interviews might ask what a player believed was open, why a particular rule was invoked, or whether the resulting decision left useful options. Concrete episodes are more informative than asking whether the game felt free. Participants can also describe that a procedure was confusing or had little importance. The study should remain open to disagreement. A ruling experienced as reassurance by one person may feel intrusive to another whose scene was interrupted. Their positions can be analyzed without forcing one global judgment of the whole system.

A comparison between numerical and social resolution needs a well-defined variation. One version might use a formal check for a particular external task, while another assigns that task to a character permission. Another comparison might examine two transfer conventions within the same scenario. Changing setting, cast, resources, and resolution simultaneously would make a broad effect difficult to interpret. Repeated play introduces prior knowledge; separate groups introduce other differences. These limits narrow what can be claimed. They do not eliminate the value of documenting specific arrangements and the contributions they actually enabled.

The harbor scenario offers several bounded questions. Did participants understand that seven votes were required? Could they distinguish a promised vote from a recorded vote? Did the eight unique permits prevent incompatible claims about capacity? Did role-specific permissions create interactions or remain unused? These questions concern the system's operation. A separate inquiry could ask how participants interpreted the allocation and whether losing a vote still left

meaningful participation. Connecting the questions would show how formal certainty and dramatic openness interacted, without treating either as a complete account of the event.

Preparation records can identify where work moved after a mechanic was removed. A simpler resolution procedure may require more detailed character information or a stronger introductory demonstration. A designer might spend less time calculating values but more time checking relationships and access to evidence. Participants might spend less time consulting statistics but more time clarifying social commitments. These shifts should be documented rather than counted automatically as savings. Minimal mechanics can reduce one burden while creating another. A useful evaluation follows the total arrangement needed to sustain the intended activity.

The absence of visible conflict does not prove that a rule worked. Participants may have understood it, avoided invoking it, or deferred to someone else despite uncertainty. Observation should follow relevant opportunities, and interviews can examine why a person did not act. Quiet compliance can reflect a deliberate character choice or a practical barrier. These explanations have different implications for revision. A system should not receive credit for smoothness merely because participants declined to challenge an unclear convention. Evidence of usable authority requires attention to what people understood and could actually do.

Research should also preserve the limits of access. Private negotiations may be unavailable for observation, and later accounts may differ. A method can identify which claims

come from direct records and which depend on recollection. It should not fill unseen scenes with the dialogue that would make the public outcome easiest to explain. Participants can agree to discuss fictional decisions without supplying personal material. These conditions shape the available evidence. An account that states its basis precisely is more useful than a seamless narrative that conceals how much of the performance remained unwitnessed.

Revision can be directed by recurring problems rather than by a general demand for more or fewer rules. If custody repeatedly becomes unclear, a persistent record may help. If a formal check settles a choice participants were meant to retain, its scope may need narrowing. If an important permission remains unused, the issue may lie in character connections rather than the procedure itself. The best revision follows the diagnosed relationship. Adding a mechanic to compensate for every weak scene can create unnecessary complexity, while removing a rule because it is visible can destroy useful shared certainty.

A useful review can compare intended and frequency of use. A procedure prepared for an exceptional dispute may become the event's main activity, suggesting that its labor requirements were underestimated. Another may never be invoked because participants resolved the relevant questions through an understood convention. Neither result alone proves success or failure. The researcher should ask whether unused procedures provided reassurance, whether repeated operations created valuable choices, and whether time spent applying them displaced other promised activity. Frequency becomes informative when connected to function. It cannot

substitute for an account of what the mechanic allowed participants to establish and do next.

Testing a mechanic's place ultimately means examining the work it performs relative to its demands. A procedure earns its place when it makes a relevant consequence dependable, supports a promised contribution, or resolves a genuine barrier to continuation. That judgment remains connected to the event's aims and participants. It is not an abstract ranking of systems by size. A hybrid design can retain a die, replace a statistic with a permission, or formalize a vote without compromising its dramatic ambitions. The question is whether each operation strengthens the particular performance the ensemble is trying to sustain.

Dramatic Freedom Through Dependable Limits

The silence of the dice does not settle the status of a roleplaying event. Structure remains in its fictional conditions, character materials, shared conventions, and procedures for recognizing consequence. Some of that structure can be expressed numerically; much of it cannot. The central design task is to identify what needs certainty and what should remain open. A permit's custody may need a dependable answer while a character's trust remains unsettled. A public vote may establish a decision while its meaning stays disputed. Minimal mechanics can support complexity by keeping those scopes clear.

The comparison with tabletop practice reveals functions worth preserving. Random resolution can place selected outcomes beyond immediate discretion. Numerical or

qualitative abilities can distinguish character capacity from player skill. Explicit operations can protect contributions from arbitrary adjudication. None is universally appropriate to every dramatic question. A hybrid event can retain a useful function while changing its form, giving expertise through a bounded permission or resolving collective authority through a vote. The value lies in the fit between the procedure and the contribution it governs, rather than in loyalty to one inherited apparatus.

Social negotiation supplies substantial uncertainty when participants possess consequential authority over their responses. Hidden information, differing values, scarce resources, and time pressure can keep the future open without requiring chance at every turn. These conditions still need preparation. Relationships must offer usable routes, informational statuses must remain recognizable, and practical barriers must have proportionate remedies. Freedom becomes thin when participants receive permission in principle but no workable means to act. A lightweight system succeeds through the relationships that support its operations as much as through the operations themselves.

The harbor council demonstrates one possible arrangement. A known capacity, eight unique permits, a majority threshold, and selected permissions make decisions legible while leaving bargaining and interpretation with the ensemble. The example also shows why a formal outcome need not become emotional closure. A passed plan can create new conflict, and a failed vote can be a coherent result. Participants can experience character loss while still contributing substantially to the performance. Those possibilities depend on an honest

account of what the event offers and how accepted consequences will be maintained.

The strongest principle is selective formalization. A designer should formalize the point at which shared certainty is necessary and leave surrounding choices available to portrayal and response. The facilitator should intervene to sustain that arrangement, with the scope of intervention made understandable to those affected. Research can then examine what the system actually supports rather than presume that simplicity produces freedom. Rules do not need to imitate every imagined action. They need to make the right actions consequential. When they accomplish that work, silence from the dice can leave a room full of meaningful uncertainty.

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Nathaniel Price is a software quality analyst and serious tabletop roleplaying hobbyist with a particular affection for elegant rules that make room for unexpected human behavior. He has designed experimental house systems, playtested independent games, and facilitated hybrid sessions that shift between dice-based resolution and freely negotiated dramatic action. His writing asks when uncertainty genuinely benefits play and when a procedure merely interrupts a promising scene. Price approaches rules with the patience of a tester and the instincts of an improviser, which can make him an unusually demanding player. He maintains a collection of dice acquired over three decades, despite arguing quite persuasively that sometimes the best roll is the one nobody makes.

Playing Two Realities at Once

Embodiment Character Consciousness and the Theatre of the Mind

Lydia Harcourt

Abstract

This essay examines how Interactive Drama participants coordinate bodily presence with an imagined character and environment. It argues that imagination and embodiment function as complementary resources connected through conventions of attribution and response. The analysis distinguishes participant identity, character perspective, public recognition, described action, and actual enactment. Scholarship on embodied cognition, immersion, and bleed supports a differentiated account of experience rather than an ideal of complete merger with a role. Further sections consider genuine feeling, aesthetic distance, roleplaying alibi, and post-performance reflection. A hypothetical starship council demonstrates how actual gestures and absent circumstances can produce a coherent encounter. The essay proposes research grounded in specific episodes and participant accounts, preserving the distinction among observed action, reported experience, theoretical possibility, and causal claims about lasting effects.

Keywords

embodiment, character consciousness, theatre of the mind, immersion, roleplaying alibi, bleed

Two Realities as One Organized Performance

A participant can stand in a classroom while portraying an envoy aboard an imagined starship. The floor supports the participant's actual weight, while the fiction gives the same position another significance: perhaps the envoy has entered a restricted council chamber. A glance can be both an observable bodily movement and a character's warning. A practical pause can interrupt the scene without becoming an event in the fictional world. These relationships make embodied Interactive Drama a useful setting for examining how people coordinate physical presence, imagined identity, and acknowledged fiction. The participant does not need to confuse the two realities for either to matter.

This essay argues that imagination and embodiment operate as complementary resources within the same dramatic experience. The body supplies movement, speech, sensation, and opportunities for mutual attention. Imagination supplies conditions that exceed the available room, including another identity, a different environment, and events that cannot occur literally. Conventions connect those resources by establishing what an action represents and how another participant may answer it. The resulting performance cannot be understood adequately as either private fantasy or literal enactment alone. It depends on the relation between what participants do physically and what they jointly recognize as occurring fictionally.

The phrase two realities identifies different levels of action rather than two worlds experienced in an identical way. The participant remains a person who can read instructions,

request a break, and interpret the event. The character is a fictional individual with knowledge, relationships, and concerns established through preparation and play. Those levels can influence each other without becoming indistinguishable. A participant's fatigue can affect portrayal; a fictional rejection can prompt a real feeling. Neither direction of influence proves that the participant has lost awareness of the role's fictional status. The analytical task is to describe the relationship precisely.

Interactive Drama here refers to the embodied salon form described in the proposal. Participants portray characters with independent concerns and conduct consequential encounters within a designed situation. Theatre of the mind supplies absent places, actions, and experiences through description and interpretation. The essay does not assume that all larps prioritize the same mode of involvement. Nor does it present tabletop narration as disembodied. Seated players also speak, gesture, attend, and act under physical conditions. The comparison concerns which bodily resources become directly available to others and which fictional conditions require additional representation in each arrangement.

The scholarship provides several useful distinctions. Montola examines roleplaying through a negotiated imaginary world, allocated authority, and personified characters (Montola, 2008). Mochocki treats larp as a multimodal form in which participants combine roles as authors, actors, characters, and audience (Mochocki, 2018). These approaches help locate character experience within public interaction rather than inside an isolated mind. The present essay develops a specific account of how bodily and imaginative contributions become answerable. It does not treat recognition of a character's

action as proof that participants share an identical mental picture or internal experience.

Research and theory on immersion and bleed require equal care. Bowman and Standiford distinguish several objects of immersive involvement, including character and environment (Bowman and Standiford, 2016). Hugaas develops a conceptual model of bleed and its possible relationships to a player's sense of self (Hugaas, 2024). Those contributions do not justify assuming that every intense roleplaying episode has the same mechanism or effect. They provide concepts through which particular experiences can be described and investigated. The analysis will distinguish a theoretical possibility, a participant's reported experience, and a demonstrated causal relationship.

The essay is conceptual rather than an account of a completed participant study. Its hypothetical council scene follows three people whose characters face a disclosure that cannot be reduced to the furniture and bodies present. The example illustrates possible relations among gesture, imagined place, perspective, and emotion. It makes no claim about what actual participants would necessarily feel. The framework also addresses roleplaying alibi, aesthetic distance, and post-performance reflection as ways of organizing the relationship between participant and character. Those concepts are useful when their different functions remain visible rather than becoming interchangeable labels for involvement.

The central question is not whether a participant completely becomes someone else. It is how the person can sustain a publicly recognizable character while remaining able to navigate the activity as a participant. Strong performance can

include reflection, practical adjustment, and deliberate distance. Emotional involvement can coexist with knowledge that an event is invented. An imagined body can exceed what the actual body enacts while still shaping a consequential scene. These possibilities suggest an integrated account: the two realities remain distinct enough to coordinate and connected enough to create experiences that neither supplies independently.

Participant Identity Character Perspective and Shared Recognition

The participant is the actual person making choices within the activity. The character is a fictional individual whose actions become part of a shared world. Character consciousness names an attributed perspective: what the character knows, notices, values, and experiences. It should not imply a second independent mind existing inside the participant. The player interprets the role and supplies contributions through available means. Other participants recognize those contributions under the event's conventions. This distinction allows analysis of intense identification without making an unsupported claim that the character possesses psychological autonomy outside the performance.

The participant can know more than the character. A player may have read the entire scenario or heard a neighboring conversation that the character could not hear. Portraying limited knowledge then requires interpretive discipline. The person does not need to forget the information. The task is to distinguish what may inform a character's action from what remains available only at the player level. This can be a

sophisticated form of participation. It involves coordinating perspectives rather than achieving ignorance. Theatre of the mind often makes that coordination explicit because physical access to a sound or sight does not always determine fictional access.

The reverse difference also occurs. A character may possess expertise or memories that the participant does not share. A brief can establish familiarity with a fictional institution, while a bounded permission supplies a fact when needed. The player portrays the perspective through that support rather than through literal possession of the knowledge. This separation expands the range of roles available. It also shows why credibility cannot depend entirely on the participant's real-world skill. A fictional scholar can know an inscription's meaning even if the player needs to consult a prepared card to communicate it.

Character consistency does not mean that every response is predetermined by the brief. A role can begin with commitments that conflict under new circumstances. The participant then interprets what matters in the present scene. Someone loyal to an institution may choose to disclose its wrongdoing because another commitment becomes more urgent. That development can be coherent without proving that the participant merged with the role. It can arise through reflective judgment about the character, immediate emotional response, or a combination. Research should not infer the participant's internal method solely from the fictional action produced.

Identification includes several relationships. A person may care about a character's fate, imagine events from its

perspective, recognize personal concerns in it, or commit to portraying it convincingly. These relationships can overlap without being identical. A participant can understand an antagonist while rejecting the antagonist's values. Another can enjoy creating a character's failure. An account that asks only whether someone felt like the character leaves these differences unresolved. More precise inquiry asks what the person attended to, what decisions felt available, and how the role's circumstances entered the experience of acting.

Public recognition supplies continuity that private identification alone cannot. Others address the character by name, remember earlier actions, and treat commitments as consequential. That pattern can sustain a clear dramatic presence even when the player reports a detached or analytical stance. The reverse is also possible: someone may imagine a role vividly while others repeatedly overlook or misattribute its contributions. These conditions require different explanations. One concerns the participant's relation to the role; the other concerns how the ensemble recognizes action. Both matter to embodiment because a body becomes dramatically present through the responses it receives.

Attribution can change within a conversation. A participant may speak as the character, clarify a rule, and then resume the scene. The group needs enough signal to recognize those changes. A practical statement that someone needs a chair should not automatically establish that the fictional envoy is exhausted or submissive. A character's harsh criticism should not automatically be treated as the player's personal judgment. Clarification protects the distinction without requiring constant analytical commentary. Once the status is

clear, the performance can continue through ordinary address. Reliable attribution makes more complex portrayal possible.

Identity also remains socially situated. Participants bring languages, histories, bodily capacities, and relationships into the room. A role does not erase those conditions. They can shape what is easy to express, what requires support, and which associations a scene invites. This does not mean that every fictional choice should be explained autobiographically. It means that the participant is never an empty vessel. The most careful account leaves room for both creative interpretation and actual circumstances, allowing participants to describe relevant connections without assuming that an observer can infer them from the role they portray.

The relation between participant and character is best understood as an ongoing practice of perspective and attribution. It permits difference without requiring detachment and connection without requiring identity. The participant can sustain a character whose body, commitments, and circumstances differ greatly from the person's own. Other people make that portrayal answerable by recognizing and responding to it. The shared world supplies limits within which the character's actions acquire consequence. Character consciousness becomes a useful analytical concept when it names that performed and interpreted perspective, rather than a mysterious psychological replacement of the participant.

Voice Gesture and the Body Available to Others

Voice is a bodily event before it acquires a fictional attribution. Breath, pace, intensity, and phrasing contribute to what others hear. A measured reply can suggest restraint, while a hesitation can invite questions about uncertainty. These expressive possibilities do not require an unusual accent or professional acting technique. Participants can distinguish characters through ordinary choices about wording, timing, and address. The actual voice remains connected to the person while becoming the means through which a fictional promise or refusal enters the scene. Its dramatic significance develops through how others understand and answer it.

A physical gesture has a similar double relation. The participant turns, folds a paper, or steps away; the ensemble may recognize a character's dismissal, concealment, or departure. That significance is not contained in the movement alone. The same step can be a practical adjustment to hear better. Context and convention establish which event others are witnessing. A design that treats every bodily movement as fictional can make participation unnecessarily difficult. A design that treats none as authoritative loses much of embodied performance's immediacy. The useful arrangement makes relevant distinctions recognizable without demanding explanation of every incidental movement.

Address coordinates bodies into an encounter. Orientation, names, and conversational context can identify whom a character is challenging. Physical presence supplies cues, but it does not guarantee that everyone interprets them correctly.

A participant looking toward one person may be speaking to the assembly, and someone with different visual access may not receive the cue. Naming an addressee or adding a short description can preserve the relation. Such support does not make the performance less embodied. It connects the bodily act to the audience of participants who need to understand and answer it.

Timing can carry emotional implication while remaining ambiguous in cause. A pause may portray deliberation, reflect difficulty finding words, or result from a missed cue. A group can preserve the difference when it matters through a brief clarification that the character remains silent. The declared action can then be performed through the continuing pause. This distinguishes a character's withholding from a participant's unavailable response. It also cautions against reading every hesitation psychologically. An observer cannot determine from timing alone whether the person felt fear, portrayed it deliberately, or was simply processing the conversation.

Fictional volume need not match actual loudness. A character can whisper within the imagined hall while the player speaks clearly enough for the scene's participants to hear. Conversely, a described public announcement can establish fictional reach without requiring a shout. The event's hearing convention connects those levels. It should identify which characters receive the words, especially when several scenes occur nearby. Actual acoustics remain important to participation, while fictional acoustics can be represented selectively. Their coordination allows an ordinary room to contain encounters whose imagined distances and privacy exceed the venue's literal arrangement.

Bodily enactment can also be partial. A participant can perform a hand movement while describing that the character is floating, winged, or physically transformed. The visible action anchors the exchange, while imagination supplies the unavailable condition. Other participants need enough information to know what their characters can perceive. A described wing can matter when someone approaches, while its feather pattern may remain incidental. The represented body becomes substantial through consequential relations, not through exhaustive simulation. A few precise details can allow others to respond without requiring the performer to reproduce an impossible anatomy.

The body can support a participant privately without establishing public fictional facts. Someone may hold an object to organize a character's emotional state, stand briefly before speaking, or rehearse an expression silently. These acts can be part of the person's performance process. Others cannot automatically use an unseen clenched fist as character knowledge. The distinction between private preparation and public representation matters because vivid involvement can otherwise be mistaken for information already shared. An internal experience becomes answerable through some contribution available to the encounter, whether gesture, voice, description, or another agreed form.

An effective embodied contribution leaves space for another person's authorship. An offered hand does not establish acceptance. A threatening posture does not independently determine fear. A plea can be moving without compelling agreement. These distinctions preserve the relation between a person's act and another participant's response. They also protect emotional complexity. Someone may portray defiance

while feeling moved, or portray calm while experiencing tension. The event can sustain those differences when its conventions specify who controls the outward action and who controls the affected character's interpretation. Embodiment becomes a shared exchange rather than one performer's unilateral declaration.

Voice and gesture make the character temporally responsive. Unlike a fixed description in preparation, the present performance changes in answer to other people. A reply can alter pace, an approach can invite withdrawal, and a visible hesitation can change what someone asks next. Those developments join actual bodies to imagined circumstances. Their value cannot be reduced to how closely the participant resembles the character. A person can portray an unfamiliar body convincingly through a dependable pattern of contributions and responses. The relevant bodily presence is created in the encounter, supported by imagination where literal enactment reaches its limits.

Described Action and the Body That Cannot Be Enacted

Description can establish a bodily action without literal imitation. A participant might say that the character folds a letter, hides it beneath a coat, and keeps a hand over it. The account gives others an object, an action, and a relation they can address. Someone can ask to see the letter or accuse the character of withholding it. The gesture becomes dramatically substantial through those possibilities. Physical enactment is one resource for representation, while description can supply

actions that the room, available props, or participants' capacities do not permit them to perform directly.

Selective detail is essential. Participants do not need an anatomical account of every movement involved in placing an envelope on a table. They need to know what affects the scene: perhaps the seal remains intact, the addressee is visible, or the hand withdraws reluctantly. Such details invite interpretation without deciding it. Excessive description can occupy conversational space while adding little to the available response. The useful standard is whether another participant can understand the relevant condition and act on it. Vividness can help, but specificity should follow dramatic consequence rather than an obligation to picture everything.

Attempt and outcome require different treatment. Saying that a character reaches for the letter proposes an action. Saying that the character takes it from another person's hand may establish an effect on someone else's contribution. The event's authority arrangement determines whether that effect can be declared directly. A participant can preserve the encounter by describing the attempt and allowing the affected person or accepted procedure to answer. The distinction becomes especially important when imagined physical action could otherwise compress intention, another character's reaction, and the completed result into one statement that leaves no room for response.

Imagined touch makes that boundary clear. A character can offer a hand, lean toward an embrace, or describe an attempt to guide someone toward a doorway. The fictional response belongs under the event's agreed procedures, while actual physical contact requires an appropriate participant

agreement. The two levels should remain distinguishable. A practical decision not to enact touch does not establish that a character rejects affection. Description can preserve the intended fictional action through another means. This is one way imagination expands embodiment: it makes a shared event possible without demanding that every represented relation be physically reproduced.

Unusual bodies require enough public specification to support interaction. Wings, supernatural transparency, or unfamiliar size can change how characters approach and perceive one another. Those features need not be simulated through construction. They can be established through a concise description and a convention for their consequences. The designer should identify which effects matter to the event. A winged character's appearance may be sufficient in one scene, while another requires a rule about flight. Imaginative freedom becomes workable through selected commitments. It does not require an exhaustive model of every possible action available to the fictional body.

Subjective sensations have a different informational status from outward movement. A participant may describe the character feeling the room narrow, while another describes a visibly trembling hand. The first can give players access to an internal experience without making it knowledge for their characters. The second supplies an observable sign they might interpret. The distinction permits a richer presentation of character consciousness. Participants can appreciate an internal disclosure without acting as though their characters heard the thought. When the status matters, a clear signal can preserve the difference between shared appreciation and fictional perception.

Imaginative action also changes scale and time. A few words can represent a journey through a long corridor, while a detailed account can expand a fleeting glance. The event should establish whether description advances shared time or temporarily clarifies an instant. Otherwise, someone may assume that the speaker's character remained inactive for the whole duration of narration. Literal matching between speech and fictional duration would impose a poor standard on represented action. The useful relation is whether participants understand when another character can respond and what has occurred before that response becomes possible.

Different mental representations can coexist until a consequential detail requires coordination. One participant may imagine a character beside a window, another near a chair. If the exchange concerns a promise, the difference may be harmless. If someone closes the window or blocks the chair, the location becomes relevant and needs establishment. Shared imagination is a practice of maintaining compatible commitments, not a guarantee that private pictures coincide. Clarification belongs to the performance's normal work. It becomes especially valuable when it preserves a consequential action without demanding that everyone specify incidental details before any scene can begin.

The described body complements the visible body by extending what can become available to others. It permits another scale, anatomy, sensation, or action while retaining the participant's voice and timing as material resources. The combination does not duplicate every experience of literal physical enactment. It creates a particular arrangement of emphasis and response. Evaluation should identify what the scene requires and whether the representation makes that

requirement usable. The absent gesture can become consequential when others can answer it, while the participant's actual body remains present as the means through which the imagined action enters the encounter.

Embodied Cognition Without a Simple Body Mind Divide

The language of embodiment can suggest that thinking and imagination occur in one place while physical action occurs in another. Interactive Drama complicates that picture. A participant reads a brief, arranges posture, listens to a question, and decides how to answer within an evolving situation. The activity combines conceptual interpretation with bodily and environmental resources. It does not require a claim that every thought can be reduced to visible movement. The useful analytical question concerns how those resources contribute to a particular performance and which distinctions are needed to explain their relationship.

Wilson's review separates several claims associated with embodied cognition, including situated cognition, action, and the use of environmental resources, and evaluates them rather than treating embodiment as one undifferentiated proposition (Wilson, 2002). That distinction is valuable here. A claim that room arrangement supports attention differs from a claim about bodily ownership or the basis of mental imagery. The present essay uses embodied cognition as a reason to examine specific relations among action, environment, and interpretation. It does not present roleplaying as proof of every theory gathered under that label.

A participant can use the environment to support characterization. Returning to the same chair may help mark a formal office, while moving to a designated gallery can distinguish a private exchange. The material arrangement supplies continuity that need not be remembered entirely through verbal description. Those resources are not neutral: a crowded passage can affect which encounters are easy to begin, and a central table can attract attention. An account of imaginative performance should include such actual conditions. The fiction may exceed the room, but the room still helps organize how participants think and act within it.

Movement can also change the information available for interpretation. Approaching a group makes its timing, gestures, and responses easier to perceive. Departing can remove those cues while creating another encounter elsewhere. In a salon event, participants choose among simultaneous opportunities with limited attention and time. These decisions are bodily as well as narrative. A character's apparent knowledge can depend on where the player can practically listen, unless the event uses another convention. The analytical task is to distinguish intended fictional limits from unintended barriers produced by the venue or communication arrangement.

Imagination can guide bodily action without requiring a literal sensory match. A participant portraying a formal audience may slow a gesture because the imagined institution gives the action ceremonial weight. Another may describe a retreat rather than move because the room is crowded. Both cases connect imagined circumstances to practical action through interpretation. Neither establishes that the participant experienced the fictional space as physically present in the

same way as the classroom. The relationship can be meaningful without being perceptually identical. Precision about that difference prevents an account of complementary resources from becoming a claim of complete sensory equivalence.

The character's body can be organized through knowledge that exceeds the participant's own bodily experience. A person can portray someone much older, differently situated, or nonhuman by selecting expressive and descriptive resources. The portrayal will not reproduce the entirety of that fictional life. It makes certain relations available within the scene. Those relations should be examined for their coherence and responsiveness rather than judged by a standard of total bodily substitution. A performer can establish a convincing hesitation or approach without acquiring every physical condition attributed to the role.

The participant's actual condition can influence the process. Tiredness may affect pace, background noise may demand greater concentration, and unfamiliar movement may make a scene more effortful. Those influences do not automatically become character facts or evidence of emotional transfer. A researcher needs the participant's account and contextual information before explaining an observed change. The same visible stillness can have several causes. An embodied approach becomes more rigorous when it recognizes these possibilities instead of treating every physical sign as a transparent expression of the role's inner state.

Theatre of the mind can also support participation through representation. An imagined staircase can be traversed by declaration; an expansive landscape can be established

without actual travel. These choices change what the body must physically accomplish while preserving selected fictional consequences. Their usefulness depends on the event's conventions and participants' needs. They do not remove the body from the performance. They reorganize the relation between bodily effort and represented action. The participant remains engaged through attention, expression, and response even when the character's movement is supplied primarily through language.

The resulting account rejects a simple opposition between a bodily larp and an imaginative tabletop game. Both involve actual people acting in material circumstances and interpreting fictional conditions. They differ in which resources are shared directly, how spatial relations are established, and how action becomes public. Interactive Drama can combine direct encounter with explicit description where the fiction exceeds enactment. The comparison is strongest when it follows those functions rather than assigning a fixed degree of embodiment to a genre. Imagination and bodily action become analyzable parts of one organized activity.

Immersion Identification and Deliberate Distance

Immersion can name different forms of involvement, and those differences matter to interpretation. Bowman and Standiford distinguish immersion into activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community in a framework developed in relation to simulation (Bowman and Standiford, 2016). The categories provide a useful vocabulary

without implying that each has the same cause or requires the same evidence. A participant absorbed in solving a procedural problem may not report strong identification with a character. Another may feel deeply involved in a relationship while picturing little of the surrounding architecture. Both experiences deserve precise description.

Character immersion can involve sustained attention to the role's perspective and concerns. It need not be defined as complete loss of participant awareness. Someone can monitor timing, adjust a convention, and return to an intense exchange. The practical intervention may preserve the scene rather than defeat its involvement. Researchers should ask how participants experienced those transitions instead of deciding in advance that every acknowledgment of procedure breaks immersion. The relationship between continuity and reflection is an empirical question in a particular event. A theoretical ideal should not replace the experience participants actually report.

Environmental involvement is another possibility. A participant may become absorbed in the imagined starship's scale, atmosphere, or sense of isolation. That experience can support a scene without determining its emotional or social meaning. The same setting may leave another person unmoved while the character relationship becomes compelling. A scenic design can offer resources for both kinds of attention. It cannot infer success simply because the room was vividly described. Evaluation needs to identify what participants used and what the environment contributed, allowing different relations to remain visible within the same performance.

Aesthetic distance is used here for a participant's capacity to attend to the portrayal as a made performance while remaining involved in it. This is an analytical definition for the essay, not a claim that one psychological measure captures every use of the term. Distance can allow someone to choose a dramatically appropriate failure or portray an objectionable belief without endorsing it. Such work can be detailed and responsive. Defining complete merger as the only successful mode would misdescribe participants who create strong scenes through reflective interpretation. Distance and involvement can operate together rather than cancel one another.

Deliberate distance can also change across a scene. A participant may begin by considering the character analytically and later become emotionally caught up in an exchange. Another may step back after an unexpected development to decide what response fits the role. These transitions need not be linear or uniform. An account of embodiment should permit several trajectories. It should also allow a participant to prefer a relatively steady separation throughout the event. The relevant standard is not conformity to one intensity, but whether the person's mode of participation supports the intended activity and the promised opportunities to act.

Identification can be selective. A participant may recognize a character's ambition while finding its loyalties unfamiliar. The role can invite exploration of that difference without guaranteeing a change in the player's own values. Strong perspective taking can coexist with criticism. In an educational context, that coexistence may be central: the student can understand why a character argues a position

while later evaluating the position against textual evidence. In other contexts, the same distinction supports complex portrayal. Understanding a fictional person's reasons does not require accepting those reasons as one's own.

Social immersion can arise through responsiveness among participants. A person may feel fully engaged because others consistently answer the character's contributions and preserve the scene's stakes. That relationship differs from visual absorption in scenery. It can be supported by a sparse room if the encounters remain compelling, although the room's actual conditions can still help or hinder. The theory should not assign every successful exchange to character merger. A participant's account may emphasize trust in fellow performers, pleasure in shared timing, or commitment to the group. Those are distinct explanations worth retaining.

Immersion should not become a standard that pressures people to claim more involvement than they experienced. A participant can report enjoyment without deep identification, or intense attention without positive emotion. Someone can also find the event confusing or unengaging. Those accounts are important evidence for design. They can reveal that a promised action was unavailable, an informational distinction was unclear, or the scene simply did not matter to that person. A framework that interprets every response as proof of immersion cannot be tested. Useful concepts must leave room for absence, variation, and disagreement.

The practical implication is to design several usable routes into involvement while avoiding a guarantee that any route will work identically for everyone. A clear character concern, an intelligible imagined environment, and responsive

interaction can support different forms of engagement. Reflection can identify which resources mattered. The participant need not choose between being inside the fiction and aware of its making at every instant. The performance can depend on movement between those attentional positions, with deliberate distance serving as part of the craft through which imaginative and embodied involvement remains coherent.

Genuine Feeling in Acknowledged Fiction

A feeling can be real even when its occasion is fictional. A participant can feel apprehension before an imagined accusation, relief after a character's reconciliation, or sadness at an invented farewell while knowing that the events are not literal facts outside the performance. The actual experience belongs to the participant; its represented circumstances belong to the fiction. This distinction avoids treating emotional force as evidence of mistaken belief. It also avoids assuming that awareness of invention must make every response merely pretended. The relationship between portrayal and feeling can be more complex than either alternative suggests.

The word authentic needs careful use. It can mean sincerely experienced, consistent with the character, persuasive to others, or personally meaningful afterward. Those meanings do not automatically coincide. A participant can convincingly portray grief without feeling grief. Another can feel moved while portraying restraint. A scene can matter personally even if fellow participants barely notice the reaction. Evaluation should identify which claim is being made. The visible

quality of a performance does not by itself reveal the participant's internal state, and a reported feeling does not settle every question about the portrayal's effects on others.

An emotional response can have several possible sources. It may involve the fictional relationship, appreciation of another person's performance, memories associated with the topic, or the social experience of being heard. The sources can overlap. A researcher should not infer one mechanism solely because the scene contains a matching character emotion. If a participant cries during a farewell, the observation establishes visible behavior in that context. The person's account can help interpret it, while still remaining an account rather than direct access to every causal process involved. Serious attention to emotion requires this distinction.

The character's emotion and the player's emotion can diverge. A participant may enjoy portraying an angry character, feel anxious while portraying confidence, or remain analytically attentive while the character becomes overwhelmed. These possibilities should be available in the theory. Otherwise, the account would reward only emotional matching and misrepresent skilled portrayal. Divergence can also become material for reflection. A participant might explain that choosing an unfamiliar response made a scene interesting precisely because it differed from what the person would have done. The experience can be meaningful without becoming an autobiographical expression.

The imagined environment can contribute to feeling through its relation to action. A gallery becomes emotionally significant because a confidence was exchanged there, not only because the opening description called it melancholic.

Returning to the same represented location can recall the earlier encounter. That relationship is plausible without guaranteeing a uniform response. Different participants may remember different scenes in the same place. The setting acquires dramatic history through use, and the participant's account can identify what that history contributed. A label such as haunted does not independently establish that anyone felt fear.

Actual social recognition can also have emotional force. Being answered, overlooked, trusted, or challenged in performance occurs among real people, even when the immediate attribution is fictional. The event's conventions help participants interpret those interactions, but they cannot make all social effects vanish by naming them play. This is not a reason to collapse fictional hostility into personal hostility. It is a reason to keep the levels distinguishable and available for clarification. A participant can understand an insult as character speech and still have a response worth discussing afterward without treating that response as proof of failed role separation.

Intensity is not the sole measure of dramatic value. A quiet recognition, a thoughtful disagreement, or a restrained change of allegiance may be central to an event without producing visible emotional display. A performance designed to maximize intensity can neglect the different ways participants engage. Research and reflection should ask what mattered and how, rather than assume that tears or excitement provide the highest score. The proposal's interest in genuine feeling is best served by precision about its forms and significance. Emotional subtlety should remain available alongside strong affect.

Participants also differ in how they prefer to discuss emotions. Some may describe personal connections readily; others may focus on the character or the scene's craft. Reflection can allow both without demanding disclosure as proof of engagement. A person can analyze a fictional choice rigorously while withholding autobiographical material. This matters to research as well as facilitation. The available account should be respected in its stated scope. An observer should not claim that reluctance to discuss a feeling reveals repression, weak participation, or any other unverified psychological explanation.

The relation between fiction and emotion remains a productive question because the levels can be distinct and connected. The participant knows the starship is imagined, yet the exchange with another performer occurs now and requires a response. The character's stakes organize that exchange, while actual attention and expression give it presence. Feelings can emerge within this arrangement without proving total identification or a permanent effect. The strongest interpretation follows the episode, the participant's account, and the relevant conditions, leaving unanswered causal questions open rather than filling them with an attractive general theory.

Bleed as Transfer Across Player and Character

Bleed describes influences that cross the player-character relationship, including movement from player to character and from character experience into the player's life. Hugaas's conceptual model organizes proposed forms of bleed and

explores possible connections to a player's sense of self (Hugaas, 2024). This is a theoretical contribution that supports more precise inquiry. It should not be treated as evidence that every participant undergoes the same transfer or that a particular fictional event reliably changes identity. The present analysis uses the concept to distinguish possible directions and contents of influence while preserving the need for participant evidence.

Bleed into portrayal can occur when a participant's current state shapes the role. Fatigue may make an answer shorter, personal enthusiasm may influence a character's interest, or a familiar concern may supply emotional material. Some influences may be deliberate creative choices; others may be noticed only afterward. Their existence does not automatically invalidate the character. All portrayal draws on available human resources in some way. The useful question is which connection the participant identifies and how it affects the scene, rather than whether a perfectly uncontaminated role could ever exist.

Bleed outward concerns effects associated with fictional experience that persist for the participant. Someone may leave a scene still feeling its tension, continue thinking about a character's choice, or reconsider an assumption after portraying an unfamiliar position. These possibilities differ in duration and content. A lingering mood is not the same as a sustained change in values. Reflection on an event is not automatically identity transformation. The concept becomes more useful when it preserves those distinctions instead of treating every memorable performance as equivalent evidence of a deep psychological change.

The transfer should also be distinguished from ordinary appreciation of art. A participant can be moved by a scene's beauty or admire another person's skill without identifying an effect that crossed through the character relationship. The categories may overlap, but they answer different questions. A research account can ask what the person understood as carried from portrayal into later experience, without presuming that all emotion belongs under bleed. Clear operational questions help connect the concept to an episode. A broad label should not replace the explanation of what changed, for whom, and over what period.

Bowman's exploratory qualitative study of conflict in roleplaying communities provides a context in which participants' accounts and group relations matter (Bowman, 2013). Its findings concern that study and cannot be generalized automatically to every salon event. For the present argument, it reinforces the value of examining how people interpret connections among character conflict, personal response, and community practice. A fictional disagreement can remain productive, become personally significant, or be understood differently by those involved. The relevant explanation needs the event's conventions and participants' perspectives, rather than a simple equation between intense play and interpersonal trouble.

Positive and difficult effects can coexist within a person's account. Someone may value a challenging scene while needing time to interpret it. Another may experience pleasure in portrayal without wanting a lasting effect. The theory should not rank these accounts by how transformative they sound. Nor should it assume that difficult feelings are automatically harmful or valuable. Their meaning depends on

the person's interpretation and the circumstances. A conceptual framework can make distinctions available while leaving evaluation attached to the actual experience described. The event's intended impact does not decide its experienced impact in advance.

Attribution becomes more difficult when several influences operate together. A participant's later confidence may relate to the role, the support of fellow players, prior experience, or events outside the performance. A single favorable reflection cannot isolate the cause. A study seeking stronger claims would need an appropriate design and a proportionate timescale. The present essay does not supply such findings. It identifies why a reported association deserves inquiry and why causal language should remain restrained. The strongest argument for taking roleplaying seriously is compatible with acknowledging what a particular record cannot establish.

The degree to which people notice transfer can also vary. A participant may identify an influence during a scene, recognize it in reflection, or remain unsure whether the connection matters. Research should allow uncertainty rather than require a confident label. An interview can ask for a concrete example and the person's own interpretation. It should avoid supplying the explanation so strongly that the participant merely agrees with it. The purpose is to understand the experienced relationship, including the possibility that the person reports no relevant transfer despite finding the performance engaging.

Design can make transitions between role and participant explicit without promising complete control over feeling. Opening orientation, clear ways to request clarification, and

post-performance reflection can help people identify which level they are discussing. These practices do not guarantee that an emotion stops at an announced ending. Their value lies in supporting interpretation and communication. A participant can name a lingering response without being told that the role has literally continued to exist. The event can recognize connection while preserving the person's capacity to decide how to understand it.

Bleed is most useful here as a differentiated account of influence across a relationship. It makes room for real effects while resisting a romantic image of inevitable transformation through immersion. Hugaas's theoretical work invites further study of those connections; the salon context offers specific episodes in which to investigate them. The participant and character remain distinguishable, and that distinction is what makes transfer a meaningful question. Without it, every feeling would simply be assigned to an undivided self and the particular organization of roleplaying would disappear from analysis.

Roleplaying Alibi and the Boundaries of Attribution

Roleplaying alibi is used here for the shared understanding that a participant's fictional contribution belongs to a role within an agreed activity. The concept helps explain how someone can portray a belief or desire without asserting it personally. The broader transformative roleplaying literature includes alibi among its central concepts alongside identity, immersion, and transfer (Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind, 2025). The present argument develops its specific

function in attribution. It asks how a group distinguishes character action from participant endorsement while retaining the fact that actual people remain responsible for the conditions of participation.

Alibi permits exploration of difference. A participant can portray a cautious official, a disloyal ally, or an ambitious claimant without asking the ensemble to read every line as autobiography. That distance can support complex characterization. It also gives other participants a basis for responding within the fiction rather than judging the player's personal commitments from the role alone. The arrangement depends on mutual recognition. If one person treats an exchange as fictional while another interprets it as personal advocacy, the event needs clarification. The alibi is a social understanding, not a quality supplied automatically by a costume or character sheet.

The distinction does not make every action equally legitimate. A participant can portray a fictional attempt that falls outside the agreed scope of play, or use character status to claim practical control over someone else's participation. The event's conventions still govern what contributions may establish. A character's wish to silence a rival differs from a player's authority to prevent the other participant from speaking. Keeping the levels separate protects fictional conflict. It also prevents the alibi from becoming a universal explanation that excuses any practical consequence simply because someone attaches the phrase in character to it.

Participant boundaries and character boundaries can diverge. A player may be comfortable portraying a refusal while not wanting a particular form of physical enactment. Another

may accept the fictional gesture through description rather than actual touch. The scene can preserve its meaning when the distinction is available. A practical limit should not automatically become evidence that a character lacks affection, courage, or trust. Imagination supplies alternative means of representation, allowing the ensemble to keep the fictional question open while adjusting the actual method. This demonstrates the complementarity of embodiment and descriptive convention in a concrete situation.

Alibi can coexist with emotional consequence. A participant may understand that an accusation belongs to a fictional role and still find the exchange personally affecting. That response does not prove that the alibi failed or that the accusation was secretly personal. It identifies a connection requiring the participant's interpretation. The group can discuss the distinction without demanding that the person deny the feeling or assign it entirely to the character. The theoretical value of alibi lies in preserving attribution, while bleed addresses possible influence across the relationship. Treating them as opposites would simplify a more complex arrangement.

The facilitator can support attribution through clear transitions. An announcement that play has begun establishes one frame, while a recognizable signal for practical clarification temporarily changes the status of speech. At the stopping point, participants can return to discussing the event as people rather than continuing to interpret every statement as character action. These conventions need not dominate the performance. Their purpose is to make changes intelligible when needed. A dependable frame can allow greater expressive freedom because people have a shared means to

identify which level is active and how to ask when the status is uncertain.

Social hierarchy makes the distinction especially important. A participant portraying a monarch may issue commands within the fiction, but the actual person does not acquire unrestricted authority over other players. A teacher facilitating a classroom event retains institutional power even when portraying an apparently minor character. Those relations can affect how freely participants feel able to refuse or clarify. The theory should account for the actual organization of participation alongside the fictional hierarchy. A role does not erase the setting in which it is performed. Alibi becomes more dependable when that setting's authority is recognized rather than assumed away.

Reflection can examine how the alibi was understood without turning the discussion into a judgment of who acted most sincerely. Participants might distinguish the character's intention, the player's portrayal choice, and the effect on another participant. These accounts can reveal that an apparently hostile line was intended as an invitation to a scene, or that a subtle signal was missed. Clarification can improve future coordination while preserving disagreement about fictional motives. The aim is accurate attribution and usable participation. It is not a requirement that everyone agree on one emotional meaning for the encounter.

The boundary between participant and character is a resource for performance. It allows people to explore unfamiliar positions, portray conflict, and recognize that a fictional action can matter without becoming a literal statement of personal identity. Its flexibility also requires care in

explanation. A rigid boundary that denies all influence would make bleed unintelligible; a dissolved boundary would erase the alibi's function. Interactive Drama works through a maintained relation between the levels. Participants can move attention across that relation while retaining the capacity to name which contribution belongs where and how the event should continue.

An Imagined Council Beyond the Visible Room

Consider an invented scene set aboard the diplomatic starship Concordance. Three participants portray Irena, an envoy; Nalin, a keeper of the ship's records; and Sera, an adviser whose earlier decision is described in a sealed testimony. The event occurs in a classroom with a central table and a designated observation area. A paper envelope represents the testimony. The ship's scale, the planet outside, and the records chamber exist through description and agreed conventions. The example is analytical rather than an account of observed participants. Its purpose is to follow how bodily presence and imagination can operate together.

Irena wants the testimony read before a treaty discussion. Nalin controls access but fears that disclosure will destroy a commitment to Sera. Sera knows the testimony's history and can choose whether to explain it. The scenario establishes those initial conditions without prescribing the present responses. Participants know that moving to the observation area marks a private scene. They also know that actual overhearing from elsewhere in the classroom does not automatically become character knowledge. The environment

gives them a usable distinction between public and private encounter even though no wall reproduces the fictional architecture.

Irena approaches Nalin at the central table. The actual movement becomes a character approach through context and recognition. A slight pause before the request may contribute restraint, but its meaning remains open until the encounter develops. Nalin can answer through words, bodily position, or description. If the participant needs to move a chair for practical reasons, that adjustment need not become a fictional retreat. The event's conventions allow a short clarification when the distinction matters. The imagined council remains available because physical actions can carry dramatic meaning without every movement being forced into the fiction.

Nalin might place a hand over the envelope and say that the testimony cannot yet be released. This combines an actual gesture with a fictional custodial relation. Irena can ask why, challenge the restriction, or propose a private exchange. The gesture does not independently establish that Irena feels intimidated or accepts the refusal. Another participant's response supplies that part of the scene. The action becomes consequential through an answer rather than through the gesture's appearance alone. Both the participant's hand and the imagined institution matter to how the moment is understood.

In the observation area, Irena may describe watching a planet turn beneath the ship. Nothing in the classroom literally supplies that view. The description can nonetheless change the scene by giving the characters a shared reference for what

is at stake. Irena might connect the planet to the communities affected by the treaty, while Nalin treats it as a reminder of an earlier promise. Their responses can differ without contradiction. The imagined environment becomes dramatically active through those associations and the decisions they support. Its function exceeds background decoration because the characters can answer what it represents.

Sera arrives and offers to explain the testimony. A participant may know from preparation that Sera is withholding a crucial motive while Irena does not. Portraying Irena's limited knowledge requires maintaining that distinction, not forgetting the brief. The participant can ask a question that fits the character's circumstances while appreciating the larger tension as a player. This is a form of layered attention. It may involve identification, analytical distance, or both. The scene itself cannot establish which internal experience occurred; that question belongs to the participant's account and any appropriate later inquiry.

Suppose the envelope is opened under the agreed procedure. The fictional testimony establishes that Sera once protected a rival, but its significance remains disputed. Nalin may experience the disclosure as release, while Irena may see another reason for distrust. Those are possible character responses, not necessary participant feelings. One player may feel moved by the changing relationship; another may concentrate on portraying a difficult reply. The event can sustain both modes. A theory that requires emotional matching would miss the different ways the same encounter can be performed and experienced.

A participant might later report that the refusal continued to trouble them after the scene ended. That report could be examined as a possible instance of influence across the player-character relationship. It does not establish a specific cause or lasting identity change. Another participant might report no such transfer while valuing the scene as a strong improvisation. Both accounts should remain available. The hypothetical case illustrates why concepts such as immersion, alibi, and bleed need separate questions. They illuminate different relationships and should not all be inferred from one emotionally charged fictional event.

The scene can also reveal practical limits. If the privacy convention is unclear, Irena's later accusation may rest on knowledge the participant heard but the character should not possess. If the envelope's status is ambiguous, participants may disagree about whether it was opened. If the actual room is too noisy, an important response may never be received. These problems concern different aspects of coordination. Stronger visual imagery alone cannot repair them. The event needs dependable means to establish space, object state, and communication while leaving motives and emotional interpretation open to the ensemble.

The Concordance example shows the two realities working through each other. Actual bodies make the conversation immediate; imagined circumstances give its actions another scale and significance. Conventions preserve attribution and selected shared facts. Participants supply interpretations and responses that no opening description determines. The classroom need not disappear, and the characters need not become separate psychological persons. A meaningful dramatic encounter can arise from the organized relation

among those resources. Its experienced effects remain questions for actual participants, whose accounts can confirm, complicate, or challenge the possibilities the design makes available.

Reflection and Research Across the Transition Out of Role

Post-performance reflection can examine the relationship between participant and character without pretending to recover one complete internal truth. The event ends, but participants may continue interpreting scenes, hearing accounts of encounters they missed, and distinguishing what they knew from what their characters knew. A structured discussion can make those differences visible. It can also identify practical ambiguities that shaped performance. The purpose is not to require an emotionally dramatic confession from everyone. It is to create a usable setting for discussing action, interpretation, and any connections participants choose to describe between the role and their own experience.

A first distinction concerns events and interpretations. Participants can describe what their characters said or did, then explain what those actions meant from their positions. Others may supply different accounts of the same moment. A refusal can have been understood as protection by its speaker and rejection by its recipient. The disagreement can remain meaningful after the underlying action is clarified. Reflection should not automatically settle every interpretation through the facilitator's preferred account. The plural record is part of what a simultaneously experienced performance produces. It

can deepen understanding without converting one participant's perspective into the official story.

A second distinction concerns character motive and player process. Someone may explain that a character withheld information out of loyalty while the participant chose the timing to invite a stronger scene. Another may have responded immediately without a deliberate dramaturgical plan. Both forms of contribution can be legitimate. Asking about a concrete episode can reveal these different relationships. It should remain acceptable for a participant not to know exactly how the response arose. Retrospective explanation is evidence of later understanding, not a transparent recording of every thought present during the performance.

Questions about emotion should be equally specific and optional in their personal depth. A participant can discuss what the character seemed to feel, what the player noticed, and whether anything remained afterward. These questions separate portrayal, immediate experience, and later significance. They also allow a person to report no notable emotional connection. A research framework that presumes transfer in every answer risks producing the pattern it expects through its own language. The inquiry should offer clear concepts without making agreement with them the measure of successful participation or reflective sophistication.

Observation contributes another kind of evidence. A researcher can record how a gesture was offered, whether another character answered, and when a practical clarification occurred. Those observations can establish patterns of attribution and response. They cannot by themselves prove

internal identification, emotional authenticity, or bleed. Interviews and reflections can address those experiences in the participants' terms. The combination is strongest when the sources remain distinguishable. A visible hesitation and a later explanation can illuminate one another without being treated as interchangeable measures of the same hidden state.

A study comparing tabletop narration and embodied salon play should specify what actually changes. It might compare how participants communicate a departure, how imagined touch is represented, or how character knowledge is separated from available player information. Changing every feature at once would make a broad difference difficult to explain. Familiarity, group relationships, scenario content, and prior knowledge can all matter. Repeated play offers comparison while introducing learning about the story. Separate groups avoid that repetition while introducing other differences. The method should match the claim rather than promise a universal ranking of forms.

Mental imagery should be investigated without treating visual vividness as the sole measure of imaginative engagement. A participant may understand locations and bodily relations conceptually while reporting limited internal pictures. Another may experience elaborate imagery that contributes little to the particular decision. A study can ask what representations were used and how they supported action. It should not infer failure from a difference in imagery alone. The central question is whether the person could orient, interpret, and contribute within the event, alongside any subjective experiences the study is specifically designed to examine.

Research on bleed needs an appropriate timescale. A reflection immediately after play can describe lingering feeling, while a later interview may address sustained interpretation. Neither alone establishes a permanent change in identity or values. The study should distinguish reported association from a causal conclusion and identify what other evidence would be necessary. Hugaas's conceptual model can help frame questions, but a theoretical category should not be presented as a measured outcome simply because a participant uses related language. The inquiry becomes stronger through precise claims that the available evidence can actually support.

Privacy and permission shape the record. Agreement to perform a secret does not automatically authorize publication of a private scene or personal reflection. The study can establish what material participants are willing to make available and retain unavailable encounters as limits. It should not fill those gaps with invented dialogue that makes the event seem coherent. Participants can also choose to discuss craft rather than autobiography. Those choices are compatible with serious analysis. A bounded record can still reveal important relationships among bodily action, imagined circumstance, and public recognition without claiming access to every private experience.

Reflection can also inform design without requiring a formal research study. Participants might identify a moment when description made an impossible action answerable, a gesture whose status was unclear, or a transition that helped distinguish practical speech from character speech. The facilitator can revise the relevant convention and preserve what worked. This connects theory to specific practice. It

avoids broad prescriptions that every event should intensify immersion or prevent all emotional transfer. Different groups may want different forms of involvement. Design should make its invitation clear and learn from the experiences participants actually report.

The transition out of role does not erase the performance; it changes the status of ongoing contributions. People can continue to care about a fictional relationship while speaking as participants about what occurred. They can recognize an effect without declaring that the character remains an independent presence. They can also leave some experiences uninterpreted. A rigorous framework preserves those possibilities. The task is to understand how imaginative and embodied resources were coordinated, what participants made through them, and which questions remain open. Reflection completes one phase of the event while giving its meaning room to develop afterward.

Limits of Enactment and Interpretation

The complementary account should not imply that description can replace every bodily relation without loss. An actual approach supplies timing, peripheral movement, and changing distance that a short declaration may omit. A narrated approach can specify motive or scale more directly while losing other cues. Those differences may matter to a scene's purpose. A design focused on subtle mutual positioning may need more literal enactment than one focused on a disclosed promise. The framework should describe the tradeoff rather than assume that all representational means are

interchangeable because they can establish the same broad fictional action.

Nor does visible embodiment guarantee clear interpretation. Averted eyes, a smile, or silence can carry different associations across people and circumstances. Participants should not be expected to infer one universal meaning from a gesture. The character's relationship and the scene's language can provide context, while clarification can establish a consequential action when needed. This does not require explaining every expression. It recognizes that ambiguity about motive differs from uncertainty about whether the contribution was meant to be fictional at all. A design can preserve the first while helping resolve the second.

The participant's account also has limits without becoming worthless. People may struggle to describe rapidly changing experience or reinterpret it after learning new information. A later account can reveal what the event has come to mean while differing from what the person noticed during play. Research can retain the timing of each account and compare sources. It should not demand a perfectly stable self-report as the price of taking experience seriously. The relevant discipline is to present recollection as recollection and avoid converting a persuasive retrospective story into direct evidence of an unobserved internal process.

The framework does not imply that stronger bodily enactment always creates stronger character involvement. Some participants may find movement helpful; others may concentrate more effectively through spoken or written representation. A familiar room can support orientation for one person and continually cue unrelated routines for another.

These possibilities call for inquiry rather than a universal preference. The event can provide a clear common basis while allowing different forms of participation. Its success depends on the intended activity and the people involved, not on an abstract scale that places physical resemblance at the top.

The fictional body can also become a site of restrictive expectation. A participant portraying an older character may be expected to use a particular posture, or an unfamiliar species may be reduced to one exaggerated gesture. Such conventions can make roles recognizable while narrowing portrayal. The designer should identify which traits are necessary to the fiction and which remain interpretive choices. A recognizable character can emerge through relationships and decisions as well as appearance. This gives participants room to portray difference without treating bodily stereotypes as authoritative knowledge about personality, capacity, or moral character.

Actual differences in social position remain relevant even when the scene assigns fictional equality. A new participant may hesitate to challenge an experienced organizer, and a student may interpret a teacher's fictional suggestion as an instruction. The roleplaying frame does not automatically remove those relations. A clear opportunity to clarify or refuse can make the intended authority more usable, while observation can examine whether it actually became so. This is another reason to distinguish written permissions from lived participation. The imagined council may be equal in its rules while its actual conversational opportunities remain uneven.

The boundary between practical and fictional action can never be eliminated entirely through advance explanation. New cases arise because participants invent developments. The design needs a repair practice that is brief enough to preserve the scene and clear enough to establish a shared basis for continuation. That practice can itself become skilled through use. A clarification is not necessarily an interruption imposed from outside the real performance. It may be one of the acts through which participants maintain the relationship that makes performance possible. Analysis should follow its effect rather than classify it negatively by form alone.

The strongest theoretical claim remains relational. Imagination can supply what bodies cannot enact, while bodies make imagined circumstances available through actual expression and response. Neither resource determines experience independently. The same description can be used differently, and the same gesture can acquire another meaning in another relationship. An explanation should identify how the resources were coordinated in the episode being discussed. General concepts then help compare episodes without erasing their differences. This approach gives the theory a practical object while avoiding the claim that naming embodiment already explains every effect associated with it.

Such precision also permits disagreement about the framework itself: participants and researchers can identify a case that the proposed distinctions fail to explain, describe the missing relation, and revise the account in response to that available evidence.

These limits sharpen the contribution rather than diminish it. They show which questions can be answered through a record

of public action, which require participant interpretation, and which remain open to further study. They also protect artistic plurality. A restrained, reflective portrayal can be as deliberate as an emotionally intense one, and a described body can support a meaningful encounter without reproducing every sensory feature of literal enactment. The account values the coordination that makes such differences workable. It asks how people sustain a shared fiction together while remaining distinct participants with different resources, perspectives, and experiences.

Complementary Resources in a Shared Dramatic Experience

Playing two realities at once is an organized practice of distinction and connection. The participant remains a bodily present person, while the character acquires a perspective and history within a shared fiction. Imagination supplies conditions that cannot be literally enacted; voice and gesture give contributions immediacy; conventions make their status recognizable to others. The resulting performance does not depend on complete sensory illusion or a merger of identities. It depends on participants' capacity to establish a fictional action and respond to it through the actual resources available in the room.

The comparison with tabletop narration clarifies differences without treating one form as bodiless. Both involve actual people interpreting imagined circumstances. Embodied salon play makes more movement and mutual orientation directly available, while description still carries absent spaces, impossible bodies, and unperformed actions. The relationship

varies by design. A represented departure may use walking, declaration, or both. A fictional embrace may be described rather than enacted. Those choices alter the means of participation while preserving selected dramatic consequences. Imagination extends embodiment instead of serving merely as its substitute.

The conceptual distinctions help explain experience without assuming one ideal mode. Identification, immersion, aesthetic distance, alibi, and bleed name different relationships. A participant can care about a character while maintaining analytical separation, experience genuine feeling while acknowledging fiction, or portray intense emotion without reporting the same feeling personally. Possible transfer across the player-character relation deserves study without becoming an inevitable claim about every event. The strongest account follows particular episodes and participants' interpretations, keeping observed action separate from conclusions that require further evidence.

The hypothetical Concordance council brings those relationships into one scene. Actual bodies approach a table, a described planet gives an absent world significance, and an envelope's opening changes the conditions for response. Participants can know more than their characters, interpret a refusal differently, and later describe distinct forms of involvement. The scene becomes coherent through shared commitments rather than identical private images. Its possibilities emerge from the coordination of physical and fictional resources, with neither level needing to disappear for the other to become meaningful.

Interactive Drama offers a substantial theoretical contribution when it is treated as a practice in which imagination and embodiment work together. The body makes the fiction available among people; the fiction gives bodily action identities, places, and consequences beyond the literal room. Reflection allows participants to examine what that relation produced without reducing its many experiences to a single measure. The character is present through a continuing pattern of recognition and response. Two realities remain distinguishable, and their coordination becomes the source of a shared dramatic experience that participants can inhabit, question, and remember.

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Lydia Harcourt

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Seeing the Story:
AI-Generated Maps, Tokens, and Illustrations as Multimodal Scaffolding for English as a Foreign Language Learning in Online Roleplaying Games

Brian David Phillips

Abstract

This essay examines how artificial-intelligence-generated maps, character portraits, tokens, object illustrations, environmental images, and related visual assets can function as multimodal scaffolding in online roleplaying games used for English as a Foreign Language education. Drawing on cognitive load theory, multimedia learning, dual coding, sociocultural theories of scaffolding, multimodality, task-based language teaching, second-language vocabulary research, and studies of digital game-based language learning, it argues that visual assets are pedagogically valuable when they externalize information while creating reasons for learners to communicate. Maps can scaffold spatial language; portraits can stabilize personal reference; tokens can clarify participation and position; and illustrated objects can stimulate description and inference. The essay also examines cognitive overload, split attention, misleading AI imagery, representational bias, accessibility, and overdependence. It proposes the FAVORS framework for designing functional rather than merely decorative AI-supported visual scaffolds.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, multimodal scaffolding, English as a Foreign Language, roleplaying games, cognitive load, virtual tabletop pedagogy

Introduction: From Imagined Worlds to Shared Reference

Roleplaying games create worlds out of language. A game master describes a ruined temple, a failing spacecraft, an aristocratic court, a haunted hotel, or a city in which something distinctly unpleasant has begun moving through the sewers. Players listen, construct mental images, remember characters and locations, decide what their characters believe, and respond through speech or text. For a proficient speaker, this is already a cognitively demanding activity. For an English as a Foreign Language learner, the same moment may require simultaneous attention to unfamiliar vocabulary, grammatical structures, pronunciation, turn-taking, names, locations, spatial relationships, genre conventions, clues, character objectives, and the conversational problem of deciding what to say next. The learner is not simply imagining a fictional world. The learner is constructing and manipulating that world through a language that may still require substantial conscious processing.

Consider a modest example. During a science-fiction roleplaying session, an instructor tells a group of intermediate EFL learners that Commander Sato is standing outside the auxiliary laboratory beside a sealed pressure door. Doctor Merrow has disappeared. A damaged service robot lies halfway down the corridor. The engineering deck is below them, but the elevator is not functioning, and a maintenance ladder provides the only known route downward. The group has already met six non-player characters, or NPCs, and one player vaguely remembers that somebody said the maintenance section was contaminated. Was it Commander

Sato? Was it the engineer? Was that warning about this deck or another one? While the learner attempts to reconstruct these details, another player asks a question and the game master introduces a new sound coming from behind the door.

Nothing has gone wrong pedagogically. This is simply what an information-rich fictional environment feels like. The same density that makes roleplaying compelling can also make it difficult. Working memory must support comprehension, retrieval, planning, and social interaction at the same time. Baddeley describes working memory as a limited system involved in the temporary storage and manipulation of information required by complex activities such as comprehension, learning, and reasoning. His model distinguishes verbal and visuospatial components while also addressing the integration of information through the episodic buffer (Baddeley, "Working Memory"; Baddeley, "Episodic Buffer"). These ideas immediately suggest an educational question. If some information about an RPG environment can remain visible outside the learner's head, must the learner continually reconstruct all of it from language and memory?

A map could show the relative positions of the laboratory, corridor, ladder, and engineering deck. Portraits could associate names with recurring NPCs. Tokens could indicate who is present in the immediate scene. An illustration of the damaged robot could prompt learners to identify components, describe damage, and hypothesize about what happened. A relationship diagram could record known connections while leaving uncertain relationships unresolved. These visual materials do not eliminate linguistic processing. Properly designed, they can redistribute part of the information burden while creating new reasons to use language. The student does

not need to remember every meter of the corridor to say, “We should go past the laboratory and use the ladder beside the storage room.” The spatial scaffold supports a linguistic act.

The growing accessibility of generative artificial intelligence changes the practical conditions under which such materials can be created. Maps, portraits, symbolic tokens, environmental scenes, object illustrations, handout-like graphics, and conceptual diagrams can be produced and revised rapidly in response to a particular scenario. The educational significance of this development is not that artificial intelligence has somehow discovered pictures. Teachers have been using pictures since long before anybody thought a neural network ought to draw an elf. The important change is the decreasing cost of customization. A teacher can potentially create visual materials matched to a specific fictional setting, language objective, proficiency level, narrative event, or classroom problem rather than searching for an approximately relevant image produced for some unrelated purpose.

This capacity invites a predictable mistake. Because generative systems can produce large quantities of visually appealing material, educators may be tempted to assume that richer visual presentation is inherently better. Research on multimedia learning provides strong reasons to resist that assumption. Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning rests on the propositions that humans process verbal and pictorial information through partly distinct channels, that processing capacity is limited, and that meaningful learning requires active selection, organization, and integration of relevant information (Mayer, *Multimedia Learning*; Mayer, “Cognitive Theory”). Adding images can support learning

when images contribute to those processes. Adding irrelevant or redundant material can instead consume attention and interfere with learning. Mayer, Heiser, and Lonn found that extra verbal and interesting but irrelevant material could reduce understanding under particular multimedia conditions. Mayer and Moreno similarly frame cognitive overload as a central instructional-design problem rather than an unfortunate side issue.

This point changes the central question of the present essay. The question is not whether AI-generated images can make virtual tabletop sessions attractive, atmospheric, or immersive. They plainly can do those things, at least some of the time. Nor is the question whether EFL learners enjoy games. Enjoyment, motivation, and willingness to communicate matter, and game-based language research provides reasons to take them seriously, but enjoyment alone does not demonstrate learning. Reinders and Wattana, for example, found positive changes in affective barriers and willingness to communicate among participants in a digital game-based language program, while Dixon, Dixon, and Jordan's meta-analysis reports overall second-language gains across digital game-based language-learning studies. Those findings support the educational plausibility of game environments, but they do not establish that every game feature or every image is pedagogically useful (Reinders and Wattana; Dixon et al.).

The more productive question is functional: under what conditions can an AI-generated visual asset become a scaffold for second-language comprehension, memory, interaction, and production? That question shifts attention from technology to pedagogy. A map is useful not simply because

it exists but because it helps learners understand or communicate something. A portrait is useful not because it has dramatic lighting and suspiciously excellent cheekbones but because it stabilizes reference, supports recognition, or becomes an object of description and interpretation. An image of a strange device matters when learners must explain what they see, infer how it works, compare hypotheses, or use information in the image to solve a problem. The pedagogical unit is not the picture alone. It is the relationship among the picture, the learner, the language, and the task.

Research in second-language multimedia learning supports this more cautious approach. Chun and Plass found benefits for particular combinations of verbal and pictorial vocabulary annotations in a multimedia German-reading environment. Plass, Chun, Mayer, and Leutner likewise investigated how visual and verbal annotations influenced vocabulary and comprehension. Abraham's meta-analysis found positive effects for computer-mediated glosses on reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning, while Yanguas demonstrated that different gloss conditions could influence comprehension and vocabulary outcomes differently. More recent synthesis strengthens the case for caution rather than simple enthusiasm. Mahdi, Mohsen, and Almanea's second-order meta-analysis synthesized seven earlier meta-analyses incorporating 136 primary studies and found a positive overall effect for glossing but important moderation by proficiency, assessment type, placement, and modality. Notably, more modes were not automatically superior. Some single-mode conditions performed better than more complex combinations (Mahdi et al.).

The implications for RPG design are substantial. If an instructor creates a map, a portrait gallery, a scene illustration, five object cards, twelve tokens, a relationship chart, and an animated background because generative AI makes all of them cheap to produce, the result may not be multimodal scaffolding. It may simply be a very elaborate way of exhausting everybody. A useful framework must account for the possibility that an image can reduce one form of cognitive demand while increasing another. It must also recognize that the value of a scaffold changes with proficiency and expertise. What helps a novice orient herself may become redundant for a more advanced learner. What provides essential support during the first session may be unnecessary by the fourth. Scaffolding, after all, is support for performance and development, not permanent architectural clutter.

Online roleplaying games are particularly useful environments in which to examine these issues because they combine simulation, collaborative narrative, problem solving, and communicative necessity. Peterson's work on computer games, massively multiplayer environments, and virtual worlds has repeatedly emphasized the opportunities these spaces create for target-language interaction, collaborative discourse, and socially situated learning (Peterson, “Computerized Games”; Peterson, “EFL Learner Collaborative Interaction”; Peterson, “Learner Interaction”). Torres-Rodriguez and Martínez-Granada provide a more direct tabletop connection through action research adapting tabletop roleplaying games as task-based activities to encourage EFL oral communication. Such work does not establish a universal causal effect for RPGs, but it

demonstrates that roleplaying can be designed as more than recreational reward. It can become a structure for communicative activity.

This essay argues that AI-generated visual assets can function as multimodal scaffolds in online EFL roleplaying when they are deliberately integrated into communicative tasks. Their central educational functions include externalizing information that would otherwise compete for working-memory resources, stabilizing reference to people and objects, supporting vocabulary and spatial comprehension, aiding retrieval, and creating perceptual objects around which learners can describe, infer, negotiate, narrate, and solve problems. The same assets can fail when they are visually excessive, inaccurate, redundant, culturally stereotyped, inaccessible, or so informationally complete that they remove the need to communicate. The educational value of AI-generated imagery rests less in its capacity to illustrate a fictional world than in its capacity to make carefully chosen aspects of that world cognitively manageable and linguistically productive.

The argument proceeds from definition and theory into application. It first clarifies what counts as an online RPG environment, an AI-generated visual asset, and multimodal scaffolding. It then brings together cognitive theories of multimedia learning, cognitive load, working memory, dual coding, sociocultural scaffolding, multimodality, and task-based language teaching. From there, it examines the distinctive cognitive and linguistic demands of online roleplay and analyzes the functions of maps, portraits, tokens, object illustrations, scene images, timelines, and relationship diagrams. The essay then turns from assets to tasks, because a

classroom image becomes pedagogically interesting when learners must do something with it through language. Later sections address failure conditions, ethical and representational problems, accessibility, and assessment. The essay closes by proposing a practical design framework—FAVORS: Function, Accuracy, Visual Economy, Opportunity for Language, Referential Stability, and Scaffolding Withdrawal—for evaluating whether a generated asset genuinely supports learning.

The larger claim is deliberately modest but consequential. Artificial intelligence does not transform education merely by allowing teachers to manufacture more media. Educational technology has suffered from that sort of excitement before, generally followed by the discovery that twenty-seven new buttons do not constitute a pedagogy. The more durable contribution of generative visual systems may be their ability to let instructors create highly specific external representations at the point where those representations can reduce unnecessary processing and provoke meaningful language use. If the learner can see enough of the fictional world to speak about it with greater precision, confidence, and purpose, the picture is doing educational work.

Defining the Educational Environment

The term "online roleplaying game" covers several related but distinct practices, so conceptual precision matters. In this essay, online RPG refers primarily to synchronous or near-synchronous collaborative roleplaying in which participants assume fictional roles and interact within a shared imagined environment through voice, video, text, or combinations of these modes. The category includes tabletop RPG sessions

conducted through virtual tabletop interfaces, games conducted largely through theatre of the mind but supported by digital handouts, voice-chat roleplaying with shared maps or character portraits, and hybrid forms that alternate among spoken dialogue, written chat, visual reference, and rules-mediated action. The definition is intentionally broader than any individual commercial system because the educational issue is not tied to one rules engine or platform.

Virtual tabletops provide a particularly visible example. Such environments commonly allow participants to display maps, position tokens, reveal areas selectively, share handouts, track characters, and communicate through text or integrated audio-visual systems. Yet an instructor does not need a tactically detailed virtual tabletop for the principles discussed here to apply. A teacher can conduct a largely theatre-of-the-mind mystery through videoconferencing while displaying portraits and occasional evidence images. A fantasy diplomatic scenario may need no spatial map at all but benefit from a relationship diagram showing factions and allegiances. A survival scenario aboard a damaged orbital station may depend heavily on a deck plan. The form of the visual support should follow the informational structure of the task.

Roleplaying differs from many conventional digital games because the fictional world is not completely represented by the software. Even in visually rich virtual tabletops, substantial portions of the environment are produced through language and negotiated imagination. The game master may describe weather, smell, emotional tone, historical context, social convention, or an NPC's hesitation. Players may invent actions not anticipated by the rules or scenario. The world remains partly linguistic and collaborative. This

incompleteness is educationally valuable. If everything is rendered explicitly, the learner may have fewer reasons to describe, ask, clarify, hypothesize, or negotiate. Multimodal scaffolding works best when it supports the linguistic construction of the world rather than replacing it.

The relevant AI-generated assets can be divided conceptually by function without turning the paper into a catalogue of software features. Spatial assets represent physical relationships. They include maps, floor plans, route diagrams, building layouts, starship decks, dungeon plans, landscape maps, or simplified schematic representations. Identity assets stabilize reference to people, groups, and creatures. These include character portraits, tokens, insignia, uniforms, and faction emblems. Object assets represent manipulable or investigable things: clues, tools, artifacts, machinery, evidence, inscriptions, weapons, magical devices, scientific instruments, or unfamiliar objects. Environmental assets depict locations and atmospheres. Conceptual assets organize abstract relationships such as chronology, allegiance, causation, family connections, or investigative hypotheses.

These categories overlap. A character portrait can become an object of description, an aid to memory, or evidence in a mystery. A map can function as a navigation tool, a vocabulary prompt, or a document whose reliability is itself questioned. An illustration of an artifact can support vocabulary, inference, and narrative progression at once. The pedagogical issue lies in the relationship between representation and task. A single image may support several operations, but its usefulness should be evaluated according to what learners are expected to notice, remember, communicate, and accomplish.

The EFL context also requires precision. Learners are not cognitively identical simply because English is not their first language. Proficiency, literacy, familiarity with RPG conventions, prior knowledge, working-memory capacity, visual literacy, cultural knowledge, and comfort with technology all influence performance. An advanced learner who has spent hundreds of hours in online RPGs may require less representational support than an intermediate learner encountering the genre for the first time. A novice player may struggle with token movement and map conventions even when her English proficiency is comparatively high. The label EFL identifies an instructional context, not a single cognitive profile.

Even so, the second-language dimension introduces predictable sources of additional processing. Learners may need more time to recognize lexical items, parse complex syntax, interpret idioms, distinguish similar-sounding names, or formulate responses. Nation's work on vocabulary learning emphasizes that knowing a word involves multiple aspects of form, meaning, and use rather than a binary state of knowing or not knowing (*Learning Vocabulary*). A learner might recognize “corridor” while listening but be unable to retrieve it during speech. Another may understand “adjacent” in writing but not process it rapidly in spoken description. Visual supports can assist in binding language to referents, but they should not be assumed to solve lexical problems automatically.

This distinction becomes particularly important when genre-specific vocabulary enters play. Science fiction introduces terms related to machinery, navigation, engineering, biology, and hypothetical technologies. Fantasy settings may contain

specialized architectural, historical, political, or material vocabulary. Horror scenarios often depend on precise sensory description and uncertainty. A player may understand the core sentence “There is something under the grate” while struggling with “grate,” “ventilation shaft,” or “corroded.” A visual reference can help establish meaning, but the instructor must decide whether immediate comprehension, productive retrieval, or inferential learning is the instructional goal.

The concept of scaffolding offers a productive way to understand this relationship. Wood, Bruner, and Ross used the term to describe tutorial support that enables a learner to perform aspects of a task that would otherwise exceed current capability. Vygotskian perspectives place learning within socially mediated activity and emphasize development through interaction with tools and more capable participants (Vygotsky; Wood et al.). In language education, scaffolding has been extended to peer collaboration, teacher support, linguistic prompts, task sequencing, and material resources. A visual asset can be understood as an external scaffold when it helps the learner participate more effectively in an activity without performing the communicative act on the learner's behalf.

The word “temporary” deserves emphasis. A scaffold is not simply an easier version of the world. If an instructor always labels every object, identifies every NPC, translates every word, displays every relationship, and leaves every prompt visible, students may become dependent on support that reduces the need for retrieval or inference. Cognitive load research includes the related concept of guidance fading, in which support that benefits novices can be reduced as expertise develops (Sweller et al.). The same principle can

apply to RPG visuals. Early sessions might label map locations directly. Later sessions might remove labels and require players to name them. Character portraits might initially include titles and roles, then appear without text during retrieval activities.

Multimodal scaffolding refers here to support distributed across communicative and representational modes. Kress argues that meaning is made through modes with different affordances rather than through language alone, while Kress and van Leeuwen analyze visual design as structured meaning-making rather than transparent representation (Kress; Kress and van Leeuwen). A map does not simply duplicate a verbal description. It represents spatial relationships in a mode that makes some information immediately available and leaves other information unspecified. A portrait presents appearance efficiently while saying little with certainty about personality or motive. A timeline externalizes temporal order while potentially suppressing ambiguity. Each mode makes certain kinds of interpretation easier and others harder.

This perspective prevents a common simplification in educational technology: treating multimodality as the addition of sensory channels. Multimodal scaffolding is not achieved by placing narration, text, image, animation, sound effects, and background music on the screen and congratulating oneself on having used six modes. Ainsworth's DeFT framework for learning with multiple representations emphasizes design, functions, and the cognitive tasks learners must perform when coordinating representations (Ainsworth). Multiple representations may complement one another, constrain interpretation, or support deeper understanding, but

they can also require difficult translation between formats. The educational question concerns the function of each representation and the learner's activity across them.

This gives us an important distinction between decorative and functional visuals. Decorative visuals may increase atmosphere, aesthetic pleasure, genre recognition, or emotional engagement. Those outcomes are not worthless. An ominous illustration of an abandoned station can help establish tone. Yet decoration becomes scaffolding only when it supports some aspect of learning or task performance. A functional map permits navigation or spatial reasoning. A functional portrait stabilizes reference or becomes an object of description. A functional evidence image requires observation and inference. Decorative imagery may coexist with such functions, but the concepts should not be confused. Otherwise every attractive picture becomes “pedagogy” by definitional magic, and academic analysis becomes rather too easy.

Generative AI matters inside this framework because it changes the economics and granularity of representation. Teachers can potentially request a specific scene rather than accept a generic one, revise an image when it conflicts with the scenario, generate several related portraits with controlled features, or create an unfamiliar object designed around a particular lexical field. The technology may make personalization and iteration practical at a scale that was previously difficult. Its value remains conditional. Generation is not curation. The teacher must still determine whether the asset is accurate enough for the task, comprehensible to the learners, necessary at that moment, accessible to all

participants, and likely to produce rather than suppress language.

The proper unit of analysis is consequently not "AI image use" in the abstract. It is a representational intervention within a communicative ecology. We need to ask what information has been externalized, what cognitive operation remains with the learner, what linguistic operation is expected, what ambiguity has been removed, what ambiguity has been retained, and what happens if the image is wrong. These questions lead directly to cognitive theories of multimedia learning and to the limits of working memory.

Theoretical Framework: Why Seeing Can Help and Why It Can Also Get in the Way

The most obvious theoretical foundation for visual support is the cognitive theory of multimedia learning. Mayer's account proposes that learners process visual-pictorial and auditory-verbal material through partly distinct channels, that each channel has limited capacity, and that meaningful learning involves selecting relevant information, organizing it into coherent representations, and integrating those representations with one another and with prior knowledge (Mayer, *Multimedia Learning*; Mayer, "Cognitive Theory"). This is not a claim that words occupy one sealed cognitive chamber while pictures occupy another. It is a model of interacting representational processes constrained by limited capacity. The educational consequence is straightforward: words and pictures can be complementary, but they must be designed so that learners can coordinate them.

In an RPG, a game master's description of a room is transient. The learner hears that the control console stands opposite the airlock, that a storage cabinet is beside the southern wall, and that an access hatch is beneath the central platform. Unless the information is repeated or recorded, it must be retained long enough to construct a spatial representation. A simple diagram can preserve those relationships. The learner no longer needs to rehearse every location verbally. When another player asks how to reach the hatch without approaching the airlock, the learner can inspect the map and formulate a response. The visual support has not supplied the English utterance. It has changed the representational work preceding that utterance.

Cognitive load theory offers a complementary explanation. Sweller's early work emphasized that limited cognitive resources can be consumed by problem-solving processes that do not directly contribute to learning (Sweller). Later formulations distinguish intrinsic demands associated with the complexity of the material and learner knowledge from extraneous demands produced by poor instructional design (Sweller et al.). The language learner in an RPG cannot eliminate all intrinsic complexity. Understanding a negotiation among several characters or planning a route through a damaged facility may genuinely require coordination of many elements. An instructor can, however, reduce demands that are accidental rather than educationally useful.

Suppose students are practicing language for giving directions. If they spend most of their effort remembering an orally described floor plan, memory for the layout may compete with the intended language task. A visible map can

reduce that unnecessary burden. The learner can focus on formulating “Go through the corridor, turn left at the laboratory, and take the stairs beside the medical bay.” The map externalizes space so language can become the focus. Yet if the map contains thirty rooms, decorative labels, animated icons, unexplained symbols, grid coordinates, dynamic lighting, and a lovingly rendered ventilation system that has nothing to do with the task, it can create its own extraneous demands. We have rescued the student from remembering three doors and rewarded her with an interface resembling a spacecraft engineering examination.

Chandler and Sweller's research on split attention is particularly relevant. When learners must mentally integrate separated sources of information, instructional format itself can impose cognitive cost (Chandler and Sweller). Online RPG environments are extremely capable of creating split attention because the player may simultaneously monitor voice chat, text chat, a map, a character sheet, dice results, handouts, portraits, inventory, and possibly video windows. The presence of useful information somewhere on the screen is not enough. The learner must locate it, determine its relevance, and connect it to the unfolding conversation. Visual design should reduce search and unnecessary coordination.

The redundancy effect creates a related problem. Mayer, Heiser, and Lonn demonstrated that adding material can sometimes reduce learning when it duplicates or distracts from more useful information. In an RPG context, a game master might describe a location aloud while displaying the same paragraph as text, presenting an elaborate illustration, and placing labeled map markers on a tactical display. Some

learners may benefit from selective redundancy, especially when language input is difficult, but multiple simultaneous versions are not automatically helpful. The task should determine which information needs persistence and which can remain transient.

Baddeley's working-memory model provides another useful perspective. The phonological loop is associated with speech-based information, while the visuospatial sketchpad supports visual and spatial processing; the later episodic-buffer concept addresses multimodal integration and binding with long-term knowledge (Baddeley, “Working Memory”; Baddeley, “Episodic Buffer”). An RPG asks learners to perform precisely this sort of integration. Spoken descriptions must be linked to remembered events, visual layouts, character identities, and current goals. External representations can support that integration, but they can also compete for visual attention when too many are active at once.

This is where the popular phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” becomes educationally dangerous. Sometimes a picture is worth twenty carefully selected words. Sometimes it is worth no words at all. Sometimes it needs several hundred words before anybody can tell what on earth it is supposed to represent. The relevant issue is not information quantity but information structure. A map is efficient for topology. A portrait is efficient for visible appearance. Spoken language may be better for motive, uncertainty, temporality, or social nuance. Good multimodal design assigns information to modes according to their affordances rather than treating images as universally superior.

Paivio's dual-coding theory offers another explanation for potential benefits of pairing verbal and nonverbal representations. The theory proposes functionally distinct but interconnected representational systems, allowing information to be encoded verbally and imagistically (Paivio). In vocabulary learning, this suggests why an image associated with a lexical item may provide another retrieval path. The classic multimedia vocabulary research of Chun and Plass found that picture-plus-text annotations could support vocabulary acquisition in their German-language learning environment (Chun and Plass). Plass and colleagues later investigated relationships among visual and verbal annotations, preferences, vocabulary, and comprehension (Plass et al.).

The evidence does not support indiscriminate picture use. Yanguas's study of textual, pictorial, and combined multimedia glosses illustrates that comprehension, noticing, and vocabulary learning interact with presentation conditions in complex ways. Abraham's meta-analysis found meaningful benefits from computer-mediated glosses while also showing variation across studies. Mahdi, Mohsen, and Almanea's much more recent second-order meta-analysis provides an especially useful warning for AI-rich instruction. Across the meta-analytic literature they synthesized, glosses were beneficial overall, yet the effects were moderated by learner level, assessment type, text type, placement, and modality. Their findings challenge a naïve assumption that adding more representational modes necessarily strengthens learning (Mahdi et al.).

This matters for an AI-supported RPG because generative systems encourage abundance. When image production was

expensive, scarcity itself imposed restraint. If creating twelve NPC portraits required commissioning twelve illustrations, an instructor had a powerful reason to ask whether all twelve were necessary. When generation is rapid, the restraint must become pedagogical rather than economic. Multimedia theory supplies that restraint. An asset should earn its place by supporting selection, organization, integration, retrieval, or communication.

Ainsworth's DeFT framework sharpens this argument by treating multiple representations according to their design, functions, and the tasks required to coordinate them. Different representations may complement each other by providing different kinds of information, constrain interpretation by making certain relations explicit, or help learners construct deeper knowledge by integrating representations (Ainsworth). In an RPG, a verbal description and map may complement each other: the map preserves spatial relationships while language conveys danger, uncertainty, history, and sensory detail. A portrait and witness statement may constrain each other: the learner must connect the testimony to the correct person. A relationship diagram and dialogue transcript may support deeper inference about motives.

The social dimension of scaffolding extends the analysis beyond individual processing. Vygotsky emphasizes that higher psychological processes develop through socially mediated activity and the use of cultural tools (Vygotsky). Wood, Bruner, and Ross describe scaffolding as support that helps a learner accomplish tasks otherwise beyond unaided performance (Wood et al.). In a collaborative RPG, a map or portrait is not only an individual memory aid. It becomes part of the shared environment around which participants

coordinate action. Players point, refer, correct, negotiate, and align interpretations.

Imagine four learners looking at a station map. One says, "We should go here," but "here" is ambiguous. Another asks, "Do you mean the storage room or the room above it?" A third clarifies, "The room above storage is the laboratory." The fourth adds, "But the security camera is in the corridor between them." The map has become an interactional object. It supports deictic language, spatial language, clarification, repair, and collective reasoning. Its value lies partly in the fact that everybody can orient to the same external representation.

Peterson's study of EFL learner interaction in Second Life similarly highlights collaborative behaviors including lexical scaffolding, correction, positive politeness, and sustained target-language production in a virtual environment (Peterson, "EFL Learner Collaborative Interaction"). His later analysis of intermediate EFL learners in an MMORPG likewise found collaborative social interaction conducted in the target language and features associated with sociocultural competence (Peterson, "Learner Interaction"). These studies concern virtual environments rather than teacher-generated RPG assets, but they demonstrate why shared representational spaces can be understood socially as well as cognitively.

Multimodality adds another layer. Kress argues that modes differ in their meaning-making affordances. Speech unfolds in time. Writing can remain available for rereading. Images present many spatial relations simultaneously. Maps selectively encode location and relation. Gesture and gaze can direct attention. Kress and van Leeuwen show that visual

communication has its own compositional and representational conventions rather than functioning as a transparent window onto reality (Kress; Kress and van Leeuwen). This insight is crucial for AI-generated materials. Students do not simply receive an objective visual version of the fictional world. They interpret a designed representation.

A portrait, for example, makes claims through clothing, lighting, expression, framing, color, posture, and style. If a generated portrait depicts the "scientist" as a white man in a laboratory coat, the image participates in social meaning even if the teacher never specified ethnicity or gender. If every noble character receives elegant European-inspired clothing while "tribal" fantasy societies receive homogenized exotic imagery, the system embeds cultural associations. Visual literacy requires learners and teachers to recognize that generated imagery is constructed, selective, and potentially biased.

This point is especially relevant because recent text-to-image research documents systematic representational problems. Bianchi and colleagues found that broadly accessible text-to-image generation could amplify demographic stereotypes across prompts involving occupations, traits, and social roles (Bianchi et al.). Luccioni and colleagues likewise identified patterns of underrepresentation and social bias in diffusion-model outputs (Luccioni et al.). Alon, Hadar Shoval, and Levkovich's 2026 systematic review of educational text-to-image research identified recurring gender, racial, cultural, age, body, and disability biases across the studies reviewed (Alon et al.). These findings mean that teacher curation must address not only factual consistency but visual social meaning.

The final theoretical pillar is task-based language teaching. Ellis describes tasks as activities in which language is used primarily to achieve an outcome, with meaning occupying a central role (*Task-Based Language Learning*). An RPG naturally produces goal-oriented situations, but the presence of a fictional goal does not automatically create a good language task. A learner may move a token silently, choose an option from a menu, or allow a more fluent peer to do all the speaking. The instructor must construct communicative necessity.

Torres-Rodriguez and Martínez-Granada provide a useful example of connecting tabletop RPG activity with task-based principles in an EFL classroom. Their action-research project moved learners from conventional roleplay toward tabletop roleplaying activities intended to encourage L2 oral communication (Torres-Rodriguez and Martínez-Granada). The study should not be treated as decisive evidence for every RPG context, but it demonstrates a key pedagogical possibility: the fictional problem can organize a communicative task rather than merely decorate it.

The strongest version of multimodal RPG pedagogy consequently combines three design ideas. First, external representation should reduce processing demands that are not central to the learning objective. Second, the representation should preserve enough uncertainty or incompleteness to require active interpretation. Third, the task should make communication instrumental to achieving an outcome. If a map shows everything and the game permits silent token movement, the map may support navigation without supporting language. If the map contains incomplete information distributed among players who must plan a route

together, it becomes both a cognitive scaffold and a communicative engine.

This framework also clarifies why generative AI is secondary to the educational argument. Artificial intelligence accelerates production, revision, customization, and variation. It can help an instructor create an abandoned station plan, six related portraits, or three visual states of a damaged machine. Yet the learning mechanism still resides in human cognition and interaction. The map must be read. The portrait must be associated with a name. The object must be described. The players must negotiate. The teacher must decide what the image reveals and what it withholds. AI produces representational material; pedagogy turns that material into scaffolding.

The Cognitive and Linguistic Demands of Online Roleplaying

Online RPGs are unusually dense communicative environments because players maintain a continuously changing situation model. They must understand who is present, where events occur, what has happened, what each participant knows, what remains uncertain, what goals matter, and what consequences may follow from an action. Unlike a conventional reading passage, the fictional world responds to decisions. Information is not merely comprehended and stored; it is used to select actions that generate new information. The learner's representation must remain flexible.

This dynamic structure makes referential continuity especially important. A conventional classroom dialogue may

introduce two speakers and conclude within a page. A roleplaying scenario can contain ten or twenty recurring NPCs across several sessions. Each may have a name, role, affiliation, history, motive, voice, and relationship to the players. Native speakers can become confused under these conditions. For EFL learners, unfamiliar naming conventions may make the problem worse. A portrait gallery with concise labels can externalize identity information, leaving the learner freer to attend to what the character says and why it matters.

The problem is not limited to names. Pronouns and definite references depend on shared situational knowledge. “She told us to bring it there before they arrive” is perfectly ordinary conversational English and an excellent little disaster if nobody remembers which woman, which object, which destination, or which threatening group the speaker means. Visual referents can stabilize the discourse context. A portrait can answer who; a map can answer where; an object card can answer what. Language remains necessary to explain intention, timing, motive, evidence, and uncertainty.

Spatial complexity is another defining demand. Roleplaying worlds often require navigation through buildings, streets, landscapes, ships, ruins, forests, or abstract networks. Spatial language is itself a valuable EFL domain: prepositions, directional expressions, imperatives, relative location, distance, sequencing, and route descriptions all arise naturally. Yet spatial language is difficult to practice communicatively if the spatial world exists only in the teacher's private notes. A shared map creates a common referential field.

Narrative complexity adds a temporal dimension. Players must connect earlier events to present evidence and future plans. Mystery and horror scenarios are especially demanding because apparently minor details may become relevant much later. Learners may need to distinguish what definitely happened from what a witness claimed happened, what their characters infer, and what the players themselves suspect. This creates opportunities for past-tense narration, reported speech, modality, evidential language, and hypothesis. It also creates memory demands that can overwhelm the linguistic objective.

Roleplaying also requires social-pragmatic judgment. Players make requests, negotiate, apologize, threaten, persuade, reassure, deceive, disagree, and repair misunderstandings. Reinders and Wattana's work on digital game-based learning highlights willingness to communicate as an important affective dimension, while Peterson's virtual-world studies demonstrate collaborative target-language interaction in game-like environments (Reinders and Wattana; Peterson, "EFL Learner Collaborative Interaction"). A well-designed RPG can give learners something many textbook dialogues struggle to provide: a reason to care whether another person accepts the utterance.

The online medium introduces its own demands. Participants may need to interpret interface conventions while listening to other players. Visual information may compete with chat messages. Audio quality can vary. Players may speak over one another because network communication provides fewer subtle turn-taking cues than face-to-face conversation. Learners may monitor written chat for vocabulary while also watching the map. The educational designer should not

assume that putting everything on one screen simplifies the situation. Sometimes it simply gathers all the complexity into a convenient rectangle.

Genre knowledge affects processing as well. Experienced roleplayers recognize common conventions: a token represents a character; a grayed-out region may be unexplored; a portrait can stand for an NPC who is not literally posing for a photograph; a map is schematic rather than perfectly scaled. New players may spend cognitive resources learning these conventions. Teachers should introduce representational systems gradually rather than assuming game literacy. A beautifully designed map is not a scaffold if half the class cannot interpret its symbols.

Learner proficiency interacts with these demands. Beginners may benefit from explicit labels and repeated visual-verbal associations. Intermediate learners may benefit from partial support that encourages productive retrieval. Advanced learners may gain more from ambiguous images requiring interpretation than from fully labeled references. Mahdi, Mohsen, and Almanea's findings that proficiency moderates multimedia-gloss effects reinforce the broader principle that support should be calibrated to learners rather than treated as universally optimal (Mahdi et al.).

Prior knowledge of the fictional domain matters too. A learner familiar with science fiction may immediately understand “airlock,” “reactor,” “docking bay,” and “life support,” while another must learn both language and concept. A fantasy enthusiast may know “battlement,” “portcullis,” and “guild,” but struggle with legal vocabulary during a courtroom scenario. AI-generated visuals may be

especially useful when they make unfamiliar conceptual domains inspectable, but they can also falsely suggest that a fictional object has a single obvious interpretation. The teacher must decide whether the goal is to teach a word, invite inference, or preserve uncertainty.

These demands suggest that an RPG should be understood as a task ecology rather than a single task. A session contains nested activities: identifying a person, understanding a location, deciding what evidence matters, negotiating a plan, describing an object, questioning a witness, reporting an event, and revising a hypothesis. Visual assets can be matched to different nodes in this ecology. The key is not maximal support across every node. It is selective support where the cognitive burden threatens to interfere with meaningful language use.

This is why the following analysis treats visual assets according to enduring functions—mapping, identification, spatialization, visualization, reference, inference, retrieval, and communication—rather than according to particular AI products. Interfaces will change. Models will improve, disappear, merge, or acquire exciting new names invented by marketing departments. The cognitive and communicative problems will remain recognizable. Learners will still need to know where they are, whom they are speaking to, what they have discovered, and what they want to say about it.

Pedagogical Functions of AI-Generated Visual Assets

Among AI-generated assets, maps offer perhaps the clearest example of functional multimodal scaffolding because spatial

relationships are difficult to maintain from transient verbal description but readily externalized visually. A map can represent adjacency, distance, containment, routes, obstacles, zones, elevation, and access. These relations correspond directly to useful linguistic functions. Learners can practice prepositions, directional language, sequence markers, commands, comparisons, route descriptions, and questions about location while acting toward a fictional goal.

Consider an abandoned research station. The visible deck plan contains a medical bay, central corridor, laboratory, storage room, engineering section, reactor chamber, and two damaged access routes. A conventional exercise might ask students to complete sentences using "next to," "opposite," or "between." The RPG version embeds the same linguistic resources inside a problem. The players must reach engineering without entering an area marked as contaminated. One learner asks, "Can we go through the laboratory?" Another replies, "No, because the laboratory connects to the contaminated corridor." A third proposes, "We could go past the medical bay and use the maintenance stairs." Spatial language becomes instrumental.

The map reduces one burden while preserving another. Students do not need to memorize the station layout from a long spoken explanation, but they must still interpret the map, formulate a plan, and communicate it. That division of labor is precisely what makes the visual useful. If the teacher instead displays a glowing line showing the correct route, complete with arrows and numbered steps, the map stops being a reasoning scaffold and becomes an answer sheet. The design question is not whether spatial information should be

visible. It is how much should be visible and what language-dependent work should remain.

Maps become even more powerful when they contain information gaps. Each player can receive a slightly different representation of the same environment. The engineer sees maintenance access. The security officer sees cameras and locked doors. The scientist sees contamination data. No single learner has enough information to solve the route problem. They must exchange information. One says, “There is a service tunnel behind the laboratory.” Another responds, “I can see it, but the security map shows a locked gate.” A third adds, “The contaminated area ends before that gate.” The map now supports collaborative reasoning through language rather than individual navigation.

Such tasks fit well with task-based language teaching because the communication has a nonlinguistic outcome: selecting a route. Ellis emphasizes meaning-focused language use and outcome-oriented activity as central characteristics of tasks (Ellis). The teacher may still have language objectives, but learners are not merely demonstrating prepositions for the teacher's benefit. They are trying to avoid fictional radiation poisoning. Pedagogically speaking, this tends to focus the mind wonderfully.

Map-based tasks can also target clarification and repair. A learner may say, “Go to the room beside engineering,” and another can ask, “Do you mean storage or the reactor control room?” Deictic and spatial ambiguity becomes a reason for negotiation of meaning. The teacher can design maps with repeated visual features or partially obscured labels precisely to encourage more specific descriptions. Learners may need

to say “the smaller room north of engineering” rather than “that room.”

AI generation makes bespoke spatial situations easier to produce, but generated maps require careful inspection. A map that depicts an impossible corridor, inconsistent doors, unreadable labels, duplicate rooms, or decorative staircases leading nowhere can create false information. This is not merely an aesthetic defect. Students may build linguistic interpretations around the error. When the verbal description says there is one exit and the image shows three, the learner faces a source-conflict problem the teacher may never have intended.

Some contradictions can be pedagogically useful when designed deliberately. A reconnaissance map might be outdated. The players discover that a corridor shown as open is actually blocked. They must explain the discrepancy: “The map says this passage should connect to engineering, but the wall has collapsed.” A security diagram may omit a hidden maintenance route. Learners can compare representations and evaluate reliability. Here inconsistency becomes evidence. The crucial distinction is between designed contradiction and accidental contradiction.

Portraits serve a different function. They stabilize identity and reference in socially dense scenarios. If a game introduces Lord Vaelorn, Ambassador Seris, Doctor Yao, Captain Ren, Magistrate Damar, and Engineer Kest within twenty minutes, learners may have difficulty binding names to roles. A labeled portrait panel provides persistent identity cues. When the game master says, “Vaelorn enters the room,” the learner

can connect the name with a known person rather than rebuilding the association from memory.

The value of portrait support extends beyond recognition. A portrait can prompt descriptive language. Learners can discuss clothing, age, expression, apparent mood, visible objects, posture, and social cues. A teacher can ask, “How would you describe this person to someone who has never met him?” This creates productive language involving adjectives, relative clauses, comparatives, and physical description. If the scenario includes witness testimony, one learner might need to identify a person from several portraits based solely on another learner's description.

Portraits can also support retrieval. At the beginning of a later session, the teacher can display a character without a name and ask, “Who is this? Where did you meet her? What did she tell you? Do you trust her?” The image becomes a retrieval cue for narrative and linguistic information. A scaffold used during comprehension has been repurposed for recall and production. This transition from support to retrieval is especially valuable because it prevents the visual from remaining a permanent crutch.

Yet portraits introduce interpretive risks. Visual appearance can invite learners to infer personality, morality, nationality, status, or competence from stereotyped cues. A darkly lit portrait with angular features may be read as “villainous” even when the narrative offers no such evidence. Rather than ignoring this tendency, teachers can sometimes make it explicit. “What can we actually know from this picture?” is a useful critical question. Students can distinguish observation from inference: “She is wearing a uniform” is different from

"She is trustworthy." Such distinctions are valuable in both visual literacy and evidential language.

Generated portrait sets also require consistency. If the same recurring NPC appears with different hair, age, clothing, or apparent ethnicity in later images, the visual scaffold becomes a source of confusion. Identity assets require referential stability. This is one area where fewer images may be better. A single stable portrait can support memory more effectively than a gallery of stylistically impressive but inconsistent variations.

Tokens simplify identity even further. A token is often a small symbolic representation rather than a detailed portrait. Its reduced informational density can be an advantage. Tokens can indicate who is present, where characters are positioned, which group they belong to, whose turn is active, or which character is affected by an event. In a complex scene, this can reduce referential ambiguity. The sentence "The technician beside the eastern door is injured" becomes easier to process when the learner can locate that technician immediately.

Token movement can support deictic and spatial language. Learners can use "here," "there," "this side," "behind," "next to," "between," and "across from" while coordinating visible positions. Yet token systems create a temptation toward silent interaction. If a learner can drag a token from one room to another without speaking, the visual interface may replace the intended language task. A simple pedagogical rule can preserve communication: movement must be described or negotiated before it occurs. The map is not a substitute for

speech; it is the shared object about which speech is produced.

Tokens can also represent information state rather than physical position. Color or symbol changes might indicate suspected, confirmed, missing, injured, allied, or unknown status. Here visual encoding becomes an organizational scaffold. Such systems should remain simple and explicitly taught. A dashboard containing twelve colors and seven miniature icons is less a scaffold than a hobby in interface archaeology.

Object illustrations are especially powerful for vocabulary and inferential language because objects can be shown before they are named. Imagine that students encounter an alien device: a metallic oval frame surrounding a translucent core, with three articulated arms and lines of symbols around its edge. If the teacher immediately announces, “This is a quantum navigation calibrator,” the image provides a referent for a label but produces little communicative work. If the teacher first asks learners to describe what they observe, the object becomes a language generator.

Students can identify shape, size, color, material, texture, components, symmetry, damage, and visible relationships. They might say, “It looks metallic,” “The center is transparent,” “There are three arms around the outside,” or “The symbols seem to repeat.” The teacher can support lexical development through recasts, selective glosses, or later review. Nation's account of vocabulary knowledge reminds us that lexical learning involves form, meaning, and use, so one encounter with an image should not be treated as

complete acquisition (Nation). The visual provides a meaningful encounter, not lexical immortality.

The same object can then prompt modality and hypothesis. “It might be a communication device.” “The arms could control the central part.” “Maybe the symbols show coordinates.” “It cannot be a weapon because there is no power source.” Such discourse naturally elicits modal verbs, hedging, evidential expressions, causal explanation, and disagreement. The object is educationally productive because its meaning is incomplete. Learners must bridge perception and interpretation through language.

Science fiction and fantasy are particularly useful here because unfamiliar objects prevent easy lexical labeling. If students see an ordinary chair, the communicative need may disappear once someone says “chair.” A fictional device can sustain descriptive and inferential discourse because there is no single familiar label. Horror works similarly through partial visibility and uncertainty. A distorted photograph, strange footprint, damaged object, or impossible shadow can prompt careful observation and competing explanations.

This is one point at which AI generation offers something more than convenience. The teacher can create objects that do not exist and tailor their features to target language. A lesson focusing on materials might use an artifact combining metal, glass, fabric, and organic textures. A lesson focusing on part-whole vocabulary might use a machine with clearly distinguishable components. A lesson focusing on comparison might present two related objects with meaningful differences. Custom generation can align visual properties with linguistic objectives.

The image still needs validation. Text-to-image systems are capable of producing plausible nonsense. An object may contain physically impossible joints, inconsistent shadows, pseudo-text, or components that merge into one another. In a surreal horror game, some of that may be a feature. In a technical description task, it may be noise. The teacher must decide which irregularities support interpretation and which undermine it.

Environmental illustrations operate at a broader scale. A scene image of a ruined laboratory, crowded marketplace, haunted library, alien landscape, or orbital docking bay can establish setting and provide a dense field for observation. Used poorly, it is wallpaper. Used well, it becomes an environment to interrogate. The teacher can ask, "What do you notice first?" "What seems out of place?" "Where would you search?" "What evidence suggests someone has been here recently?" "Which area looks dangerous?" The learners move from perception to description, then inference, then decision.

This sequence—observation, description, inference, action—is pedagogically powerful because it separates levels of certainty. Students can learn to distinguish "There is a broken window" from "Someone entered through the window." The first is an observation; the second is an inference. Mystery and horror scenarios make the distinction meaningful. Players who confuse evidence and interpretation may make bad decisions. Language forms such as "seems," "appears," "might," "must have," and "probably" become tools for calibrating certainty.

Environmental images can support narrative reconstruction as well. Learners might see a room before and after an event and explain what changed. Several images can represent moments whose sequence is unknown. Students must establish chronology and causation. Such tasks naturally elicit past tense, past perfect, temporal connectors, and causal language. The visual material provides common evidence while leaving narrative structure to be produced through discussion.

Relationship diagrams and timelines are less immersive but often more valuable than decorative artwork. Intrigue-heavy RPGs can contain alliances, rivalries, family relationships, debts, suspicions, and conflicting reports. A simple diagram can externalize known relationships. Importantly, the diagram should distinguish certainty levels. A solid line might represent confirmed affiliation, while a dotted line represents suspicion. The visual organization supports learners in saying, "We know that Vaelorn works with the Northern Court, but we only suspect that he contacted the rebels."

Timelines similarly externalize temporal structure. A murder mystery might involve ten events between 8:00 and midnight. Learners can place witness statements, movements, and discoveries on a shared timeline. This reduces memory burden and encourages contradiction detection. "If the guard saw her in the library at 9:30, she could not have been at the station at the same time." Grammar and logic become intertwined.

AI-assisted generation of such conceptual assets should be approached differently from illustrative generation. Relationship charts and timelines require precision. An attractive but inaccurate diagram is worse than a plain correct

one because visual authority can conceal errors. In practice, the teacher may use AI to assist with layout or symbolic design while manually verifying every relationship. The more an asset functions as authoritative information, the higher the required standard of accuracy.

Visual assets can also support vocabulary retrieval after play. The teacher can show the station map without labels and ask learners to reconstruct location names. A portrait can prompt recollection of dialogue. An artifact illustration can trigger explanation of what the group originally believed and what they later discovered. A scene image can support retelling. Retrieval practice transforms the asset from comprehension support into assessment and consolidation material.

This shift is educationally important because it addresses a central problem with scaffolding: support can become dependency. If the map always contains labels, learners may rely on recognition without developing recall. If portraits always display names and roles, learners may never retrieve those associations independently. Visual scaffolding should change across time. A fully labeled asset can become partially labeled, then unlabeled. A detailed relationship chart can become a blank framework learners reconstruct. The scaffold gradually becomes a prompt rather than an answer.

The strongest visual materials are often deliberately incomplete. A map does not need every room. A portrait need not explain personality. An object need not reveal function. An environmental illustration need not identify the important clue. This incompleteness preserves the central role of language. Students use the visible world as evidence, not as a substitute for communication. The image gives them

something to talk about; it should rarely do all the talking for them.

The distinction can be summarized through function. Mapping externalizes space. Identification stabilizes people and entities. Spatialization makes relationships navigable. Visualization makes unfamiliar objects available for description. Reference anchors pronouns and names. Inference turns visible evidence into hypotheses. Retrieval uses visual cues to reconstruct language and narrative memory. Communication binds all of these functions into social activity. AI is useful because it can generate the raw materials for these functions with considerable specificity. The educational work begins after generation.

From Visual Asset to Communicative Task

A visual asset becomes pedagogically meaningful when it participates in a task. One useful formulation is: visual asset plus information structure plus communicative need produces a pedagogical activity. A map by itself is a representation. A map containing incomplete routes, combined with a shared destination and distributed player knowledge, becomes a negotiation task. A portrait by itself is a depiction. A set of portraits combined with witness descriptions becomes an identification task. An unfamiliar object combined with uncertain function and a mission requiring its use becomes a hypothesis task.

This formula matters because teachers can easily overestimate the instructional value of prepared material. Preparation feels like teaching because it requires effort. One can spend two hours generating the perfect haunted

observatory and emerge emotionally convinced that learning has occurred somewhere. Yet no student has done anything. The educational design begins by asking what learners will need to say, understand, negotiate, retrieve, or decide when the image appears.

Observation before explanation is one useful principle. Teachers often remove the communicative potential of an image by naming and interpreting it immediately. If the instructor says, "This is a damaged navigation console with three broken circuits," the learners receive both object and analysis. If the instructor displays the image and asks what they can determine, students must produce the description. The teacher can supply vocabulary selectively when communication requires it, but the image remains an object of inquiry.

This sequence is particularly useful for vocabulary because it can create a need for lexical forms. A learner who wants to describe a component but lacks the word may ask, "What do you call this part?" or use circumlocution: "the small metal piece connecting these two sections." Such moments are communicatively authentic within the task. The teacher can provide the lexical item, ask another learner, or allow the group to negotiate meaning. Vocabulary enters because learners need it.

Description tasks can be controlled or open-ended. At lower proficiency levels, learners may receive sentence frames such as "There is…," "It is next to…," or "It looks like…." More advanced learners can be asked to produce precise technical descriptions, distinguish observation from interpretation, or describe an image so another group can reconstruct it.

Scaffolding can occur at both visual and linguistic levels. The image supports content; sentence frames support form.

Information-gap design is particularly powerful because it creates communicative necessity. Two learners can receive different versions of a map. One sees the physical layout; the other sees security hazards. They cannot simply point silently because neither possesses the complete solution. They must describe information across representations. A third player might hold a text document containing access codes or maintenance warnings. The activity becomes genuinely multimodal: spatial, visual, textual, and spoken information must be integrated through collaboration.

Such tasks align well with Ainsworth's account of multiple representations because learners must coordinate representations serving different functions (Ainsworth). They also reflect sociocultural scaffolding because participants provide information and linguistic support to one another. The teacher is not the sole source of assistance. A learner who understands the map can help another learner interpret it, while a learner with stronger vocabulary can provide a needed term. Peterson's virtual-world research observed similar collaborative behaviors, including lexical support and correction (Peterson, “EFL Learner Collaborative Interaction”).

Decision-making tasks add consequence. A descriptive task asks what is visible. A decision task asks what should be done about it. The group might choose which route to take, which suspect to question, which object to examine, which room to search, or which plan to recommend. Decisions stimulate justification. “We should use the lower corridor because the

cameras are disabled there." "I think we should question Merrow first because she is connected to both victims." The language has argumentative function.

Visual ambiguity can be designed deliberately to support inference. A photograph may show an indistinct figure. A map may include an unexplained symbol. An artifact may have several plausible uses. The teacher should calibrate ambiguity so that multiple interpretations are defensible but not arbitrary. If the image is simply incomprehensible, students are not engaging in inference; they are guessing. Productive ambiguity provides evidence that constrains possibilities without determining a single answer.

Modal verbs and epistemic expressions emerge naturally from this design. Students can distinguish "It is a weapon" from "It might be a weapon," "It must be damaged," "It could have been moved," and "It cannot be the same object because the markings are different." These distinctions have communicative stakes when the group must act under uncertainty. Grammar becomes a resource for managing knowledge rather than a set of isolated forms.

Narrative reconstruction tasks extend the principle into time. The instructor can present several images connected to an event without revealing their order. Learners discuss what probably happened first, what evidence supports the sequence, and what remains unexplained. Alternatively, different learners may possess different images. They must describe them and construct a shared chronology. Such tasks support past tense, temporal clauses, causation, and reported speech.

A mystery scenario provides especially fertile ground. One player sees an image of a broken laboratory window. Another has a portrait of a technician carrying a tool case. A third has a map showing a service route. A fourth has a written witness statement. None of these elements proves guilt. The group must synthesize them. Visual materials become evidence within a discourse process rather than illustrations accompanying a prewritten story.

Learner-generated AI imagery extends the pedagogical model in a different direction. Instead of receiving all visuals from the teacher, students can formulate prompts in English to represent a location, character, object, or remembered event. Prompt revision can require unusually precise descriptive language. A learner who receives an image that does not match the intended meaning must diagnose the mismatch and reformulate the description.

Hwang, Lee, and Shin's recent study of generative AI image creation in EFL vocabulary learning is especially relevant. Korean university learners iteratively refined prompts while attempting to align generated images with intended word meanings. The researchers describe prompt iteration as a metacognitive and strategic process involving planning, monitoring, evaluation, and revision (Hwang et al.). Although their study is not about RPGs, it shows that text-to-image generation can become a language activity rather than a teacher-only production tool.

In an RPG context, learners might generate a portrait from a textual character description and evaluate whether the image accurately represents the text. They might attempt to visualize a creature described by the game master, then compare results

and identify which linguistic details caused differences. They might create an image of a location after listening to a description, then explain what they understood and what they misinterpreted. Generation becomes a comprehension check.

Prompting can also teach semantic precision. “A big old building” may generate something vaguely appropriate. If the learner wants a specific structure, more precise language becomes useful: “a three-story stone observatory with a circular dome, narrow arched windows, and a damaged wooden entrance.” The motivation for lexical specificity is immediate because changes in language alter visible output. The process can make adjective order, spatial relations, material vocabulary, and noun modification functionally meaningful.

The teacher must be careful not to turn prompt writing into a fetishized technical skill detached from language learning. The goal is not to produce professional prompt engineers. The educational value lies in description, revision, comparison, and semantic negotiation. If learners spend most of the lesson experimenting with stylistic parameters unrelated to linguistic objectives, the technology has captured the curriculum rather than served it.

Role assignment can support differentiation. In a mixed-proficiency group, one learner may receive a more explicit visual aid, while another receives a less supported version. A beginner might see a labeled map. An intermediate learner might see the same map without labels but with a vocabulary bank. An advanced learner might receive a schematic requiring inference. All participants can occupy the same

fictional world while working at different levels of linguistic independence.

Differentiation should not translate into unequal narrative importance. Lower-proficiency learners should not always play characters whose job is to say simple sentences while advanced learners control every consequential decision. Visual scaffolding can help distribute meaningful agency more fairly. A learner with limited English might receive unique visual information that the group needs. Sentence support enables that learner to communicate strategically important content. The scaffold expands participation rather than reducing the learner to a peripheral role.

Timing is another important design variable. A visual can appear before, during, or after verbal input. Showing a map before a description may provide anticipatory structure. Revealing it afterward may test comprehension. Showing an object before naming it encourages inference. Showing it after vocabulary instruction supports consolidation. Reusing it later supports retrieval. The same asset can serve different functions depending on temporal placement.

Selective revelation can reduce overload. Instead of showing an entire complex map at the beginning, the instructor can reveal regions as players explore. Instead of presenting twelve portraits simultaneously, display only characters relevant to the current scene, while keeping a separate reference gallery available when needed. This respects limited processing capacity and reduces visual search. It also mirrors narrative discovery.

Learners should sometimes choose when to consult a visual scaffold. Optional access can support autonomy and provide information about reliance. One group may check the map frequently; another may attempt to navigate from memory. The teacher can observe whether visual consultation supports communication or interrupts it. Such patterns can become data for classroom research.

Visual assets can also facilitate repair after misunderstanding. If two learners interpret a spoken description differently, the teacher might reveal a simplified diagram and ask them to restate the situation. This use treats visualization as contingent scaffolding rather than default presentation. It appears when communication breaks down and can be withdrawn once shared understanding is restored.

Post-task reflection should connect the fictional activity back to language. Students can revisit the map and identify spatial expressions they used, examine object images and recall vocabulary, or compare early hypotheses with later information. A portrait can prompt reported speech: “What did she tell us?” A scene image can prompt narrative retelling: “What happened here before we arrived?” The same visual environment becomes an archive of communicative experience.

Assessment can be embedded without destroying immersion. The teacher may record target expressions, negotiation episodes, or recurring lexical gaps during play and address them afterward. Students can annotate screenshots or reconstruct maps from memory. They can describe an image to a partner who cannot see it. Such activities measure

productive control more meaningfully than asking whether students enjoyed the picture.

The larger principle is that functional integration should precede asset generation. Teachers should begin with communicative objectives, then identify information that might overload or confuse learners, then determine whether external visual representation would help. Only after those decisions should the image be produced. Reversing the sequence—generating impressive material first and inventing a lesson around it later—is possible, but it encourages decorative excess.

The design process can be expressed through four questions. What must learners understand? What should they not have to keep entirely in memory? What should remain uncertain enough to require language? What must learners accomplish together? A useful visual scaffold occupies the space between these questions. It makes selected information available while preserving the need for interpretation and communication.

This balance separates scaffold from substitution. A scaffold helps the learner perform a language-rich activity. A substitution performs part of the language activity for the learner. A relationship map that reminds students who belongs to which faction may support discussion. A relationship map that labels every motive, secret alliance, and likely culprit may eliminate discussion. The question is not whether the representation contains information. It is whether the remaining cognitive and linguistic work is the work students are meant to learn.

When Visual Scaffolding Fails

Any argument for multimodal support must take failure conditions seriously. The easiest failure is visual overload. Generative AI can make media abundant, and abundance can look like educational richness. Yet multimedia-learning research repeatedly demonstrates that irrelevant or redundant content can impose costs. Mayer and Moreno's account of cognitive overload emphasizes the relationship between processing demands and available capacity, while Mayer, Heiser, and Lonn show that presenting extra material can reduce understanding under certain conditions (Mayer and Moreno; Mayer et al.). A richly illustrated interface may be less usable than a plain one.

In an online RPG, overload can arise from accumulation rather than any single bad asset. The map is useful. The portrait is useful. The inventory icons are useful. The character sheet is useful. The written transcript is useful. The status display is useful. The relationship chart is useful. Put all of them on screen at once and the learner may spend more attention managing resources than participating in the scene. The problem is not that one scaffold failed but that the scaffolds began competing.

Visual economy is consequently a core design principle. The instructor should show the minimum representation sufficient for the current task. This does not require ugly or joyless design. It requires hierarchy. The most relevant information should be easy to locate, while optional detail should remain secondary or hidden. A map used for route planning does not need decorative text describing the architectural history of

every room. That information can exist elsewhere if it matters later.

Split attention is especially dangerous during synchronous speech. A learner reading labels may miss part of the game master's oral description. A player searching a portrait gallery may fail to hear another player's question. The instructor can reduce this problem through timing: pause before revealing complex visuals, allow inspection time, signal which region matters, and avoid requiring learners to read dense text while simultaneously processing new speech. Chandler and Sweller's work on instructional format provides a theoretical basis for treating this coordination cost seriously (Chandler and Sweller).

Redundancy can create similar trouble. If the teacher reads a full textual description aloud while learners read the same paragraph and inspect a detailed image, the learner may divide visual attention between written language and picture while also processing narration. Selective redundancy can be valuable for EFL learners, particularly when written support compensates for listening difficulty, but redundancy should be purposeful. The instructor might provide key terms rather than a full transcript or allow the transcript to appear after the first listening.

AI-generated contradictions create a more distinctive problem. A visual may conflict with scenario information because the generation system misunderstood a prompt, introduced extra elements, or failed to preserve continuity. Imagine that a mystery depends on a room having a single window, but the generated scene contains two. If students notice the second window, they may construct a theory

around an accidental artifact. The teacher then faces an unpleasant choice: break immersion by announcing an AI error or redesign the scenario around a window that was never supposed to exist.

This illustrates the difference between visual plausibility and informational accuracy. An image can look persuasive while being wrong. Alon, Hadar Shoval, and Levkovich's systematic review of educational text-to-image research highlights tensions between visual appeal and factual or representational accuracy, while their work in medical education likewise identifies fidelity problems in generated educational imagery (Alon et al.). RPGs are fictional, but fiction does not eliminate the need for internal accuracy. If the image functions as evidence, its details matter.

Teachers should consequently classify assets by required fidelity. Atmospheric scene art may tolerate minor inconsistency. A clue image requires close validation. A map used for navigation requires structural coherence. A relationship diagram requires exact accuracy. The more learners are expected to infer from visual detail, the more rigorously that detail must be checked. This principle can prevent a great deal of pedagogical grief.

Productive ambiguity should also be distinguished from accidental ambiguity. A blurry security image can deliberately support uncertain identification. A malformed hand accidentally produced by image generation is simply an error unless the scenario happens to involve eldritch body horror, in which case the instructor has received a rather specialized gift. Ambiguity is pedagogical only when it aligns with the intended inference problem.

Representational bias presents deeper concerns. Text-to-image systems learn statistical associations from large datasets and can reproduce or amplify stereotypes. Bianchi and colleagues document demographic stereotyping across text-to-image generation, and Luccioni and colleagues identify representational imbalances in diffusion models (Bianchi et al.; Luccioni et al.). Alon and colleagues' systematic review finds recurring biases involving gender, race, culture, age, body representation, and disability in educational contexts (Alon et al.).

For RPG education, such biases can shape fictional worlds silently. If prompts for "scientist," "captain," "noble," "criminal," "healer," or "tribal leader" repeatedly produce stereotyped demographic patterns, learners encounter cultural associations alongside vocabulary. Genre conventions can compound the problem. Fantasy and science fiction have their own visual histories, some of which reproduce colonial, racialized, gendered, or ableist imagery. AI generation may intensify familiar patterns because statistically common depictions are easy for models to reproduce.

Teacher review must address this representational layer. The solution is not mechanical demographic balancing divorced from context, nor is it pretending images are neutral. Teachers should consider what social meanings a portrait set creates collectively. Who appears authoritative? Who appears dangerous? Who is sexualized? Who is represented as disabled, old, powerful, scholarly, or technologically competent? Does the visual world narrow possibilities that the written scenario leaves open?

Visual bias can sometimes become an object of critical language education. Learners might compare several generated depictions of "a brilliant scientist" and discuss recurring assumptions. They might identify which prompt details were specified and which the system supplied. Such activities connect AI literacy, visual literacy, and language. They should be used when appropriate to the learning context rather than inserted artificially into every adventure, but they demonstrate that problematic output can become analyzable rather than merely discarded.

Accessibility must also shape design. A visual scaffold that contains essential information unavailable in any other mode excludes learners who cannot access it. Color-coded maps may be difficult for some forms of color-vision deficiency. Small text may be unreadable on mobile devices. Complex images may present difficulties for learners with particular visual-processing needs. Low-bandwidth users may receive images slowly or at reduced quality. Multimodality should provide complementary access paths rather than make vision mandatory.

The principle of complementarity is useful here. Important information can be available through concise text or oral description even when images support the task. The teacher can provide alt-text-like descriptions, high-contrast versions, simplified diagrams, or textual location lists. Accessibility adaptations need not destroy the information gap if they are designed as equivalent representations of the same relevant information.

Technical literacy is another possible source of inequity. Experienced gamers may interpret maps and tokens

immediately, while others struggle with zoom controls, layers, or symbolic conventions. If the educational objective is English communication, interface mastery should not become an unintended prerequisite. Training sessions, simplified interfaces, and consistent conventions can reduce this burden.

Visual scaffolding can fail by being too helpful. If a portrait always appears beside every spoken line, learners may stop attending to names. If the map automatically calculates movement, learners may stop producing directions. If object labels remain visible, vocabulary retrieval may never occur. If an AI-generated summary diagram explains every relationship, learners may have little need to synthesize information themselves. Support can remove desirable difficulty along with undesirable difficulty.

The expertise-reversal and guidance-fading principles in cognitive load theory are relevant here. Support useful to novices can become unnecessary or even interfering as learners gain expertise (Sweller et al.). RPG scaffolding should consequently change across sessions. Labels disappear. Maps become less explicit. Portraits lose captions. Learners reconstruct relationship diagrams rather than receiving completed ones. The teacher can deliberately transfer informational responsibility back to the learners.

Overreliance on AI generation can also distort teacher preparation. Because image production is engaging, instructors may spend disproportionate time refining art while neglecting task design, linguistic objectives, assessment, or accessibility. This is not a hypothetical risk; anyone who has ever adjusted a fantasy map for forty minutes instead of

writing tomorrow's lesson plan will recognize the species of problem. Generative systems can save preparation time only if teachers stop generating once the instructional need has been met.

Privacy and governance matter when generation involves student data or likenesses. UNESCO's *Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research* emphasizes human-centered use, privacy, validation, age appropriateness, and institutional responsibility (Miao and Holmes). Teachers should be cautious about uploading student photographs, personal information, or identifiable educational data to generation services. The safest visual asset is often fictional from the beginning.

Copyright and intellectual-property questions may also arise when teachers attempt to reproduce protected fictional universes or recognizable artistic styles. These legal questions vary by jurisdiction and platform and can change rapidly. They are not the central subject of this essay, but they reinforce the wisdom of designing pedagogical assets around fictional functions rather than dependence on a particular commercial franchise. An instructor does not need an exact copy of a famous starship to practice spatial language aboard a starship.

The broad lesson from these failure modes is not that AI-generated visuals are too risky for education. It is that the word “scaffold” describes a relationship, not an object. The same image can help one learner, distract another, mislead a third, and become unnecessary for all three later. Effective use requires calibration, validation, timing, and withdrawal. Technology creates representational possibilities;

instructional design determines whether those possibilities become support or noise.

The FAVORS Framework for Practical Design

A practical framework can help teachers decide whether an AI-generated asset deserves a place in an EFL roleplaying session. The FAVORS framework proposed here evaluates six dimensions: Function, Accuracy, Visual Economy, Opportunity for Language, Referential Stability, and Scaffolding Withdrawal. The acronym is intentionally memorable because design principles are more useful when teachers can remember them five minutes before class while wondering why the starship map has generated a staircase into outer space.

Function asks what educational or task-related purpose the asset serves. The answer should be more specific than "immersion." A map may support route planning and spatial prepositions. A portrait may stabilize reference and prompt character description. An object illustration may elicit material vocabulary and modal speculation. A timeline may support narrative reconstruction. If no function can be identified beyond visual attractiveness, the asset should be classified as decoration and evaluated accordingly.

Accuracy asks whether learners can safely treat relevant details as meaningful. This does not require photographic realism. A stylized map can be accurate if the relationships that matter are correct. A surreal artifact can be accurate to the fictional specification. Accuracy is task-relative. Decorative clouds in the background need little verification;

the number of exits in an escape-room scenario needs a great deal.

Visual Economy asks whether the representation contains only as much complexity as the learner needs. This principle derives from multimedia-learning and cognitive-load research. Extra information is not free merely because it fits on the screen. Teachers should remove decorative labels, irrelevant symbols, unnecessary UI elements, and competing images when they interfere with the task. Visual economy favors legibility over spectacle.

Opportunity for Language asks what learners must communicate because the asset exists. This is the framework's most explicitly language-pedagogical criterion. A map that lets students solve the task silently may need redesign. Perhaps information should be distributed. Perhaps movement should require verbal planning. Perhaps one learner sees the map while another controls the token. The asset should create, support, or clarify communication rather than simply replace verbal work.

Referential Stability asks whether the asset remains consistent enough to support memory and shared understanding. Recurring characters should look recognizably consistent. Map symbols should retain their meaning. Colors should not shift arbitrarily between scenes. Labels should use stable terminology. Referential stability is particularly important for EFL learners because inconsistent representation adds avoidable lexical and cognitive demands.

Scaffolding Withdrawal asks how the support can be reduced, transformed, or repurposed as learners gain competence. A

labeled map can become unlabeled. A portrait with name and occupation can later appear alone. Vocabulary prompts can disappear. Students can reconstruct a timeline from memory. Withdrawal prevents the scaffold from becoming a permanent substitute for retrieval.

The framework can be illustrated through a hypothetical scenario, *Derelict Station Eos*. Intermediate EFL learners play members of a rescue team boarding an abandoned orbital research facility. Their goals are to locate missing personnel, determine why communications failed, and restore enough power to escape before the station's orbit decays. The scenario requires spatial navigation, technical description, hypothesis, witness reconstruction, negotiation, and reporting.

The first asset is a simplified deck plan. Its Function is route planning and spatial-language practice. Its Accuracy requirement is high because room connections matter. Visual Economy suggests showing only the relevant deck rather than the entire station. Opportunity for Language is created by giving different players information about hazards and access routes. Referential Stability requires room names to remain consistent throughout the game. Scaffolding Withdrawal occurs when labels are removed during a post-game route-retelling activity.

The second asset is a portrait set representing six missing researchers. Its Function is identity tracking and reported speech. Accuracy means portraits must match scenario-relevant features, including uniforms or visible injuries. Visual Economy argues against elaborate backgrounds that distract from faces. Opportunity for Language comes from witness descriptions and identification tasks. Referential

Stability is critical because each researcher recurs. Withdrawal occurs when names disappear and students recall them from the portraits.

The third asset is an illustration of a damaged machine. Its Function is object description and hypothesis. Accuracy is moderate to high because visible damage forms part of the evidence. Visual Economy requires clear components rather than decorative clutter. Opportunity for Language is strong because players must describe the damage to an off-site engineer who cannot see it. Referential Stability matters if the machine appears again. Withdrawal might involve removing vocabulary support during a later explanation.

The fourth asset is an image of an unfamiliar organism found in the ventilation system. Here the pedagogical value lies partly in ambiguity. Learners compare it with known biological categories, describe its structure, and speculate about danger. Accuracy means the image should consistently display features relevant to later discoveries. Opportunity for Language includes comparatives, modal verbs, and evidential expressions. The image does not need a label because naming it too early would reduce descriptive work.

The fifth asset is a security-camera still. Its Function is narrative reconstruction. Learners must identify what can and cannot be concluded from the image. Visual Economy favors one or two meaningful details. Accuracy must be extremely high because the picture functions as evidence. The instructor can ask learners to separate observation from inference. “There is a person near the airlock” is observable; “Doctor Merrow sabotaged the station” is not.

The sixth asset is a relationship diagram created gradually during play. Rather than receiving a completed chart, players add confirmed connections themselves. This reverses the usual scaffold. The diagram becomes an external collective memory constructed through language. It supports retrieval and synthesis while preserving epistemic responsibility. Learners must decide whether a connection is confirmed, suspected, or disproven.

Before play, the instructor should identify language objectives and communicative outcomes before generating assets. If the target is spatial language, map design matters more than atmospheric portraiture. If the target is inferential modality, ambiguous evidence objects may be more useful than detailed floor plans. The sequence protects the lesson from being driven by whatever image happened to be entertaining to generate.

During play, the teacher observes how learners actually use the scaffold. Do they refer to the map verbally or move tokens silently? Do portraits reduce name confusion? Does an object image stimulate description or produce only one-word labels? Do learners repeatedly consult a diagram because it is helpful, or because the scenario is too complex? Scaffolding should be responsive. An unused asset may be unnecessary. An overused one may indicate either successful support or dependency.

After play, the instructor can repurpose assets for retrieval and reflection. Students reconstruct the route, retell events from images, identify characters, explain changed hypotheses, and describe objects without vocabulary prompts. This stage provides evidence about what learners can do

when support is reduced. It also turns the game session into a coherent language-learning cycle rather than a self-contained entertainment event.

FAVORS is not an empirically validated scale. It is a pedagogical synthesis derived from multimedia learning, cognitive-load principles, scaffolding, multimodality, and task-based language teaching. Its value should be tested rather than assumed. Yet it provides a practical way to shift teacher attention from "Can I generate this?" to "Why should learners see this, what will they do with it, and when can I take it away?" Those are healthier educational questions.

Assessment and a Research Agenda

The direct evidence base for AI-generated visual scaffolding in EFL online RPGs remains limited. Research supports many components of the argument separately: multimedia learning, cognitive load, visual-verbal vocabulary support, task-based language teaching, digital game-based language learning, virtual-world interaction, tabletop roleplaying in EFL, and emerging text-to-image language activities. It would be methodologically careless to combine those literatures and announce that the complete intervention has already been proven. The present argument is a theoretically grounded synthesis and design proposal that requires direct empirical testing.

Future research should first separate the effect of visualization from the effect of generative AI. A useful experimental design could compare three conditions. Learners in one condition receive verbal descriptions only. Learners in a second receive verbal descriptions plus

conventional teacher-selected visuals. Learners in a third receive verbal descriptions plus customized AI-generated visuals designed specifically for the scenario and linguistic objectives. If both visual conditions outperform the verbal-only condition, visualization may explain much of the effect. If customized generation produces further benefits, researchers can investigate why.

Researchers should measure more than enjoyment. Motivation and engagement matter, but educational claims require learning and performance outcomes. Relevant measures include vocabulary recognition and recall, productive lexical use, spatial-language accuracy, comprehension, referential accuracy, speaking time, turn distribution, clarification requests, repair sequences, lexical diversity, delayed retention, task completion, perceived cognitive load, and willingness to communicate. Different measures may tell different stories.

The multimedia-gloss literature offers a cautionary example. Mahdi, Mohsen, and Almanea show that effects differ depending on recognition versus recall measures, proficiency, and presentation conditions (Mahdi et al.). A visual RPG scaffold might improve immediate recognition of an NPC without improving later name recall. A map might improve task performance without producing durable spatial-language learning. Such distinctions should be measured rather than hidden inside broad claims about "effectiveness."

Cognitive load can be assessed through subjective ratings, dual-task methods, behavioral indicators, or carefully designed performance measures, though each method has limitations. Researchers should test whether maps reduce

perceived effort during spatial tasks and whether complex visual interfaces reverse that benefit. The relationship may not be linear. A simple map could reduce load, while a detailed tactical map increases it again.

Eye-tracking research could investigate attention distribution among map, text chat, portraits, and video windows, though such studies would require controlled environments. Screen-recording and interaction logs offer more accessible alternatives. Researchers could examine how often learners consult visual assets, how long they remain there, and what linguistic activity immediately follows consultation.

Discourse analysis is particularly important because the central claim concerns communication. Researchers can examine whether visual assets increase deictic language, spatial expressions, clarification, hypothesis, repair, negotiation, or collaborative scaffolding. Peterson's sociocultural discourse analyses provide useful precedent for examining interaction rather than relying only on test scores (Peterson, “Learner Interaction”; Peterson, “EFL Learner Collaborative Interaction”).

Individual differences deserve systematic investigation. Beginner learners may benefit from explicit labels that advanced learners find redundant. Experienced gamers may navigate symbolic maps more easily than novices. Learners with high visual literacy may extract useful structure from complex diagrams that confuse others. Anxiety, willingness to communicate, working-memory capacity, and genre familiarity may moderate effects. Averages can conceal these differences.

Researchers should also compare asset types. Maps may affect spatial language differently from portraits, and portraits may affect referential memory differently from object illustrations. Treating all "AI images" as one independent variable would blur important mechanisms. The functional categories proposed in this essay provide a more precise research structure.

Learner-generated visuals deserve separate investigation from teacher-generated visuals. Hwang, Lee, and Shin's work suggests that iterative text-to-image prompting can become a metacognitive vocabulary activity (Hwang et al.). In RPG contexts, learners might generate representations from listening input, refine images from descriptive feedback, or compare generated interpretations of the same passage. These tasks test comprehension and expressive precision in ways that passive viewing does not.

Longitudinal research is needed because scaffolding is fundamentally developmental. A one-session experiment can show immediate performance effects but cannot show whether learners become dependent on visuals or learn to operate with reduced support. Studies across several weeks could fade labels, simplify prompts, and measure whether learners transfer language skills to less supported contexts.

Comparative genre research may also be revealing. Horror scenarios encourage uncertainty and evidential language. Science fiction invites technical description and speculation. Fantasy often supports social, political, and spatial vocabulary. Mystery emphasizes evidence, chronology, and inference. The visual functions may remain stable while linguistic opportunities change with genre.

Research should examine teacher workload as well. Generative AI is often justified through claims of efficiency, but customization can become a new form of labor. Teachers may spend time generating, rejecting, revising, validating, organizing, and uploading images. A classroom intervention that produces small learning gains at enormous preparation cost may be unsustainable. Efficiency should be measured, not merely advertised.

Ethical evaluation belongs inside the research design rather than as an appendix. Studies should document how images were checked for bias, whether essential information was accessible through alternative modes, how student data were handled, and how generated errors were managed. Alon and colleagues' review demonstrates that representational bias is already an educational issue for text-to-image systems, not a distant theoretical possibility (Alon et al.).

The field would benefit from design-based research in which teachers iteratively refine visual-scaffolding practices with learners. Such research can capture classroom complexity better than tightly controlled experiments alone. Controlled studies can establish causal relationships; qualitative and design-based work can explain why particular configurations succeed or fail. The two approaches should complement each other.

The strongest future research will resist asking whether "AI works." That question is too broad to be useful. AI generates a map; the map supports a particular task; the task creates a certain kind of interaction; the learners possess particular levels of knowledge; the teacher provides particular forms of support; and outcomes are measured in particular ways.

Research should locate effects within that chain. The educational mechanism deserves more attention than the technological label.

Conclusion: Seeing in Order to Speak

Online roleplaying places unusual demands on EFL learners because language is used to construct, remember, negotiate, and alter an imagined world. Players must track people, places, objects, events, relationships, intentions, and uncertainties while simultaneously understanding input and producing responses. These demands make RPGs rich environments for communication, but richness can become overload. Multimodal scaffolding offers one way to manage the tension.

AI-generated maps can externalize spatial relationships and support route language. Portraits can stabilize identity and prompt description. Tokens can clarify presence, position, and reference. Object illustrations can elicit vocabulary, comparison, and hypothesis. Environmental scenes can move learners from observation through inference to action. Timelines and relationship diagrams can externalize temporal and social complexity. Each asset is useful only to the extent that it supports a learning process or communicative task.

The theoretical basis for this claim comes from several intersecting traditions. Cognitive load theory explains why working-memory demands must be managed. Multimedia-learning theory explains why verbal and pictorial representations can support one another when designed around limited cognitive capacity. Dual coding provides a basis for considering verbal-imagistic association.

Sociocultural theories of scaffolding emphasize mediated participation. Multimodality reminds us that visual representations make meaning rather than simply reproduce reality. Task-based language teaching places communicative outcomes at the center of classroom activity.

Research in L2 multimedia learning offers cautious support for visual-verbal scaffolding while warning against simplistic assumptions. Multimedia glosses can support vocabulary and comprehension, but effects depend on proficiency, modality, task, and measurement. Research in digital game-based language learning and virtual worlds suggests that game environments can support target-language interaction and willingness to communicate. Tabletop RPG research in EFL demonstrates the feasibility of adapting narrative roleplay to task-based oral communication. Emerging studies of text-to-image activity indicate that generative visual systems can become part of metacognitive language work rather than functioning only as content generators.

None of this means that every generated image deserves classroom use. Visual overload, split attention, redundancy, inconsistency, fabricated detail, representational bias, accessibility barriers, and over-scaffolding can undermine the intended benefit. Recent research on text-to-image systems provides especially strong reasons for teacher validation and critical visual literacy. A realistic image can be wrong. An attractive portrait can encode stereotypes. A convenient map can create confusion. Generative capacity increases the need for curation rather than removing it.

The FAVORS framework offers one way to discipline that curation. Teachers can ask about Function, Accuracy, Visual

Economy, Opportunity for Language, Referential Stability, and Scaffolding Withdrawal. These criteria move attention away from the novelty of AI generation and toward the enduring educational problem: how external representations interact with cognition and communication.

The deepest promise of generative visual AI in EFL roleplaying is not that teachers can make prettier adventures. It is that teachers can create specific representations at moments when those representations help learners participate in language-rich activity. A student who no longer needs to remember every corridor can explain a route. A student who can recognize a recurring NPC can concentrate on what that character said. A student who can inspect an unfamiliar artifact can describe it, compare it, question it, and argue about what it might do.

That distinction gives us a useful final test. If an image merely invites the learner to look, it may be enjoyable, atmospheric, or beautiful. If it helps the learner look closely enough to understand something and then creates a reason to describe, question, negotiate, infer, remember, or decide in English, it has begun to function as multimodal scaffolding. The goal is not simply to let students see the story. The goal is to help them see enough of the story that they can speak themselves into it.

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Entering the Story

Combining Tabletop Imagination and Salon LARP for Literary Interpretation and Critical Education

Felicity Marsh

Abstract

This essay develops a framework for using Interactive Drama in university literature, theatre, and EFL classrooms. It combines imaginative staging with embodied dialogue while requiring explicit connections among textual reading, scenario design, performance, reflection, and formal criticism. The argument distinguishes source facts, interpretive premises, and participant choices, showing how counterfactual outcomes can sharpen attention to an author's particular arrangement. A proposed adaptation of A Doll's House demonstrates character preparation, selective scenery, and open decisions around the letterbox. Further sections address language support, assessment, and classroom research. The essay treats participation as a means of generating questions and comparative evidence rather than proof of a literary interpretation. Educational claims remain tied to specified learning objectives and appropriate evidence, preserving critical disagreement about both the source and the teaching method.

Keywords

literary interpretation, educational roleplaying, Interactive Drama, theatre of the mind, EFL interaction, reflective learning

From Reading a Story to Investigating a Situation

Interactive Drama can turn literary interpretation into an inquiry conducted through character decisions, provided the resulting performance is connected back to textual evidence. Students can read a situation, assume roles, encounter competing motives, and discover what a particular interpretation makes possible. The activity does not establish the meaning of a literary work simply because a scene feels convincing. It creates material for analysis: choices, assumptions, disagreements, and alternative outcomes that can be compared with the text. Its educational value depends on that movement between reading, participation, and criticism. Performance becomes a method of asking questions rather than a substitute for answering them rigorously.

This essay proposes a framework combining tabletop roleplaying's descriptive flexibility with salon LARP's embodied dialogue and distributed decisions. A classroom can represent a historical drawing room or a supernatural landscape without comprehensive construction. Students can negotiate within it as characters whose concerns arise from a text. The teacher prepares the conditions and maintains workable participation while leaving selected decisions open. Afterward, students examine what the adaptation preserved, changed, or invented. The central argument is that literary learning becomes stronger as a design proposition when the relationship between those phases is explicit and the claims made from experience remain accountable to evidence.

The relevant unit is not simply an entertaining roleplay followed by a generic discussion. A learning objective should

shape the textual passage selected, the authority assigned to characters, the information distributed, and the reflective task. If the question concerns unequal access to knowledge, the scenario should make knowledge consequential. If the question concerns narrative closure, students need an opportunity to compare their generated ending with the author's arrangement. The design should not assume that any activity involving fictional names teaches the same thing. Educational purpose becomes concrete through the decisions students are asked to interpret and the evidence they later use.

The scholarship supplies useful starting points. Torner proposes larp design as a mode of interpreting literature, discussing student adaptations in a German literature context (Torner, 2016). Westborg distinguishes educational arrangements through dimensions including setting, purpose, framing, processing, and learning objectives (Westborg, 2023). These contributions support an account that joins play to its academic framing. The present essay develops a specific university classroom model rather than claiming that the cited work has already tested this exact combination. The framework remains open to revision through participant experience and evidence about the learning tasks it supports.

Transformative Role-playing Game Design presents educational roleplaying among several forms of transformative practice and addresses framing, design, and research (Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind, 2025). Its relevance here is the integration of intended impact with the conditions surrounding play. A classroom adaptation should not infer transformation from enthusiasm alone. A student may enjoy an event without revising an interpretation, or develop a stronger argument while finding the performance

difficult. These are different outcomes. The proposed framework distinguishes engagement, participation, literary analysis, and language use so that an apparent success in one area does not become unsupported evidence in another.

The extended example adapts a situation from Ibsen's A Doll's House. Students begin from the period after Krogstad's letter enters the locked letterbox and before Helmer reads it. The published play remains the source against which choices and consequences are examined. The classroom event openly permits a counterfactual gathering and alternative decisions. It does not pretend to reconstruct a missing scene that Ibsen wrote. This distinction allows students to explore agency and constraint while preserving the difference between the literary text and the scenario constructed for inquiry. Alternative action becomes analytically useful through its stated relation to the source.

The approach also addresses English as a Foreign Language settings. Character-based interaction can give requests, disagreement, clarification, and persuasion immediate purposes within a shared task. That is a design opportunity, not a demonstrated learning effect in the absence of research. Students need accessible orientation, usable language support, and assessment that does not confuse theatrical confidence with literary understanding. The framework treats language as a means of interpreting and acting with others while retaining opportunities for later revision. A fluent performance and a well-supported critical argument can overlap, but neither should be assumed from the other.

The essay is theoretical and practice-oriented. Its examples and proposed classroom procedures are not reports of an

implemented study. It develops a sequence from textual question to scenario, then through participation, reflection, assessment, and research. The governing principle is evidentiary return: students use the experience to formulate and test claims about the text, and they identify where the scenario's own design shaped what happened. Entering the story becomes academically productive when students can also step outside their generated version and explain the relationship among authorial choices, interpretive assumptions, and the possibilities they explored together.

Literary Interpretation Adaptation and Evidence

Literary interpretation makes claims about a work through attention to its language, structure, characterization, and contexts. Interactive Drama adds a form of practical exploration, but it does not remove those obligations. A student who portrays Nora can discover that one reading of her motives produces a difficult decision. The discovery becomes an interpretive claim only when connected to relevant passages and alternative explanations. The student should ask what the role made salient, which textual details support the portrayal, and which assumptions came from the scenario or personal response. The experience supplies a question and a perspective, not automatic proof.

Rosenblatt's transactional account treats literary reading as an event involving reader and text within particular circumstances (Rosenblatt, 1978). This provides a useful comparison for participatory interpretation without making classroom roleplay identical to reading. Students bring prior

knowledge and concerns to a text, and the activity gives those contributions another public form. Their responses remain in relation to textual constraints. An interpretation can be personally meaningful and still require argument. The present framework uses that relationship to keep participation active while avoiding the view that every generated outcome is equally warranted as an account of the original work.

An adaptation necessarily selects. It chooses which characters become roles, what point in the story remains open, and which information participants receive. Those decisions are themselves interpretations. A scenario focused on Nora's debt foregrounds different relations from one focused on theatrical spectatorship or the play's recurring domestic language. The teacher should identify the selection and invite students to examine it. Otherwise, the event can present one interpretation as though it were the text itself. Making the adaptation's choices visible turns design into part of the academic inquiry rather than an invisible authority behind the students' conclusions.

The distinction between source fact and interpretive premise is essential. The text can establish that a letter has been posted, while its motive and significance may remain open to argument. A character brief might summarize a reading of loyalty or fear, but that summary should be marked as an interpretive prompt when other readings are plausible. Students need to know which conditions they must preserve and which they may explore. Without that distinction, the role can make a disputed interpretation seem compulsory. The later essay may then repeat the teacher's premise without realizing that it has not independently established it.

Performance can test plausibility within the adaptation. A scene may reveal that a supposedly simple solution depends on knowledge a character does not possess, cooperation another character has reason to refuse, or institutional power unavailable at that moment. Such findings can sharpen reading. They do not prove that the original characters had no other possible choices. The scenario's rules and cast can also create the difficulty. Students should distinguish what the source constrains from what the classroom model imposed. A convincing activity is still a constructed model whose implications need interpretation.

Evidence from play and evidence from the text support different claims. An observation that a student withheld the letter can show how that participant interpreted the role under the scenario's conditions. It cannot establish that Nora would necessarily behave the same way. A textual passage can support an argument about Nora's presented expectations without revealing what a real student felt during portrayal. Keeping these evidentiary levels distinct strengthens both forms of inquiry. The student can write about the experiment in interpretation while remaining precise about its relationship to the literary work and the participant experience.

Comparison among groups can make this distinction visible. Several ensembles using the same starting situation may generate different disclosures, alliances, and endings. Students can ask whether the variation arose from role interpretation, conversational developments, or differences in how a procedure was understood. The exercise can demonstrate underdetermination within the activity, but should not be described as evidence that the source text lacks

structure. The original work selects one sequence and arranges readers' access to it. The generated alternatives become a means of noticing that selection and investigating what its particular form accomplishes.

Critical interpretation also includes disagreement that performance does not resolve. Students may agree that a character faced pressure while disagreeing about whether the response reproduces or challenges an institution. A class can examine those claims through passages and reasoning rather than vote on the correct meaning. The roleplay's public decision and the seminar's critical argument have different procedures. A majority can settle an action inside the fiction if the scenario permits it. A majority does not independently validate a claim about the literary work. Academic discussion needs evidence that remains available for challenge.

Prose fiction adds another adaptation problem because a narrator may organize access to a character's consciousness in ways direct dialogue cannot reproduce. A scenario that turns narrated uncertainty into a private fact changes the reader's relation to the character. Students should identify that change rather than assume that transferring plot events preserves every feature of the work. A later commentary can compare narrative voice, withheld information, and the authority of description. The roleplay may illuminate a relationship while simplifying the form through which the novel presents it. Recognizing that limit can itself become an important result of the interpretive experiment.

Interactive Drama becomes a critical method when it makes interpretation explicit at several stages. Reading establishes the question, adaptation turns assumptions into playable

conditions, performance produces consequences within those conditions, and reflection returns to the source. Students can revise both their reading and their account of the model. The resulting essay should explain where the experience illuminated a passage and where it exposed the limits of the adaptation. Such a method gives participation intellectual force without treating emotional conviction, theatrical success, or an appealing alternative ending as substitutes for literary argument.

Selecting the Textual Moment and Critical Question

A classroom scenario should begin from a question narrow enough to investigate through decisions. Themes such as freedom, identity, or justice are too broad on their own. A more useful question asks how a particular arrangement of knowledge and authority constrains a character's options at a selected moment. In A Doll's House, one possible inquiry concerns what Nora expects from disclosure and how the play stages her ability to control it. The question connects dialogue, letterbox, relationships, and timing. It can guide preparation and later close reading without demanding that the whole play be reproduced in one activity.

The selected moment needs both textual density and playable openness. A situation with no remaining decision may invite only reenactment, while an entirely invented beginning may lose contact with the work. A point before a consequential disclosure often offers several possible approaches under recognizable constraints. The teacher can specify what has already happened and what remains open in the adaptation.

Students then know the boundary of their experiment. They are not being asked to guess the author's next line, but to explore choices whose relation to that line can later become an object of criticism.

Text selection also depends on the course's aims. A literature seminar may examine focalization, dramatic irony, or narrative closure. A theatre course may attend to staging and the distribution of audience knowledge. A language course may use the same passage to examine how characters manage requests or disagreement while retaining literary interpretation as part of reflection. The activity can support more than one aim, but each needs an appropriate task. Combining every possible objective can make the event difficult to assess. The design should identify which learning claims are central and which are secondary opportunities.

The critical frame should shape the questions rather than dictate the answers. A feminist approach can ask how domestic authority and gendered expectations organize possible action. A materialist approach can examine dependence, employment, and access to money as presented in the work. A narrative approach can ask how delayed disclosure produces meaning. Students can investigate more than one frame, but they need enough conceptual orientation to use each precisely. Simply assigning a theory's name to a character does not create critical inquiry. The frame becomes useful through the relationships it directs students to notice and the claims it enables them to test.

Historical context should be distinguished from what characters say about it. Krogstad's account of law in A Doll's House belongs to a dramatic exchange and supports analysis

of the play's representation of legal authority. It should not be treated without further research as a complete description of actual legal practice. The classroom can establish the fictional constraints needed for its scenario and label them accordingly. If historical accuracy is a learning objective, students need appropriate sources beyond the play. The distinction prevents roleplay from converting a character's interested claim into an unexamined historical fact.

The assigned reading should give students access to relevant evidence before play. A short excerpt can focus attention, but the class may also need surrounding scenes to understand what participants are being asked to preserve. Summaries can support orientation while remaining distinguishable from the source language. Students should know which edition or translation they are using so that quotations can be located consistently. Different translations may shape wording and tone. That issue can become part of advanced inquiry, but should not be hidden inside a supposedly transparent character summary that silently blends several textual versions.

Preparation can include a provisional interpretive claim. Students might explain what a selected character wants and identify two passages that support the account. They can also name an uncertainty or competing reading. This provides a baseline for reflection without requiring an answer the activity is designed to confirm. The teacher should avoid framing the roleplay as a device that will reveal the one correct interpretation already embedded in the materials. A genuine inquiry permits the possibility that the student's initial claim remains persuasive, becomes more nuanced, or is challenged by the relationship between play and text.

The event should fit the available class period without reducing reflection to the last few minutes. An illustrative ninety-minute session might reserve fifteen minutes for orientation and practice, thirty-five for play, twenty for discussion, and twenty for a first analytical response. The allocation is a design example, not an empirically established optimum. A longer course can separate the phases across meetings. The important principle is that academic processing receives real time. If the performance consumes the entire session, students may remember a vivid encounter without having an opportunity to examine its interpretive basis.

A historical scenario requires another distinction between investigating a literary representation and claiming to inhabit a past society accurately. Students can explore an author's presentation of an institution while recognizing that the work selects and shapes its material. Background research can expand the inquiry, but it should not be replaced by confident improvisation. The teacher can identify which contextual premises come from scholarship and which are fictional conveniences. This gives historical imagination a disciplined role. Participants may develop questions about the past through play, while answers to those questions remain accountable to sources appropriate to historical rather than fictional claims.

The selected moment becomes educationally effective when question, evidence, and playable decision align. Students need enough textual understanding to act purposefully and enough openness to discover consequences not fully specified in preparation. They also need a later task that returns to the same question at a more reflective level. This continuity distinguishes a literary inquiry from a roleplay that merely

borrows familiar names. The dramatic situation is designed to make an academic problem tangible, while the original work remains available to support, complicate, or resist the interpretation generated through participation.

Characters as Linked Interpretive Positions

Character materials translate a reading into opportunities for action. A usable role needs more than a biography. It needs present concerns, relevant knowledge, relationships, and some decision the participant can make. Those elements should be traceable to the text or identified as additions. If the teacher supplies a motive that the work leaves ambiguous, the brief can present it as one possible interpretation for exploration. This gives the role coherence without pretending that the interpretation has already been proved. Students can later examine how that premise shaped what they did and what alternatives it obscured.

Public and private information can reproduce selected relations of dramatic knowledge. Everyone may know a character's social position, while only the role's participant receives a particular concern. The design should distinguish an established fact from a belief or memory open to challenge. Students can then portray uncertainty without becoming uncertain about the status of their own materials. This matters especially in literature, where the source may already give readers access unavailable to a character. The player can know the whole work while acting within a more limited character perspective. The resulting difference becomes material for later analysis of dramatic irony.

Objectives should allow interpretation when the learning aim concerns character motivation. A brief might ask Nora to manage disclosure while protecting what she currently values, rather than require a specific sentence or ending. Another role might seek acknowledgment or preserve institutional standing through several possible approaches. Such prompts create pressure without determining a sequence. If exact reenactment is the objective, the design should say so and use different assessment. Open roleplay and faithful performance of a script are related but distinct activities. A task becomes confusing when it promises choice and then grades students for departing from the original plot.

Relationships should create routes into scenes. A student portraying a minor character can receive a relevant question, a memory from the text, or a bounded opportunity to challenge a claim. The purpose is not to inflate every role into equal fictional power. It is to provide each participant with an academically meaningful position from which to investigate the situation. A character can lack institutional authority while possessing a perspective others need to hear. The teacher should examine whether the role has several opportunities to act if one partner becomes unavailable. This makes participation more resilient without dictating its content.

Role-specific permissions can represent knowledge that students cannot literally perform. A character may be allowed to identify a letter, describe a household routine, or recall a textual event. These permissions need not become elaborate numerical abilities. Their purpose is to make an interpretive resource available through the role. The limits should remain clear: knowing who wrote a letter does not establish the

writer's entire motive. Students can use expertise to create questions for others rather than to end inquiry unilaterally. The design distributes opportunities for meaningful contribution while preserving uncertainty in the surrounding relationships.

Character materials should also distinguish portrayal from endorsement. Students may need to voice a position they reject in order to examine how it operates within the work. They should not be assessed as though every fictional statement reveals their personal beliefs. At the same time, the role does not grant unlimited practical authority over classmates. A fictional superior cannot remove another student's participation opportunities merely by issuing an order. Clear conventions preserve the difference between conflict inside the scene and the actual conditions of learning. This allows critical exploration without requiring personal confession or agreement with the assigned role.

The assignment can use interpretive variation deliberately. Two groups might receive the same textual evidence but different provisional readings of a character's motive. After play, they can compare which decisions those readings encouraged. The teacher should identify the variation rather than pretend the materials were identical. Such a design makes adaptation's interpretive work visible. It also gives students a basis for arguing that a premise was productive, too restrictive, or insufficiently supported. The exercise tests how a reading operates as a model. It does not establish its truth simply because a group followed the prompt coherently.

Writing character sheets can itself become an advanced learning task. Students can select passages, distinguish public

identity from private concern, and explain why a resource or relationship creates an opportunity for interpretation. Another group can then play the scenario and report where the design was clear or ambiguous. The original designers remain accountable for textual claims while learning from the ensemble's unexpected responses. This connects scholarly reasoning with practical composition. A later design commentary can analyze how the scenario embodies an argument about the work and what the resulting performance revealed about that argument's limits.

The teacher's role is to maintain the relationship between inquiry and participation. This includes checking that materials are compatible, that students understand their authority, and that important textual distinctions remain available. It does not require supplying the correct character decision at every turn. An unexpected refusal can become valuable analytical material if it falls within the scenario's scope. A procedural misunderstanding requires another response. Distinguishing the two prevents facilitation from silently forcing the activity back toward the teacher's preferred reading. The event can remain academically focused while allowing the students' decisions to change its dramatic direction.

Linked interpretive positions give the adaptation a structure capable of generating evidence for reflection. Students begin with partial perspectives, encounter claims they can answer, and experience the consequences of their chosen reading within the model. Their roles remain connected to the source through identifiable premises. Afterward, they can compare the character they performed with the character the text presents. This movement makes authorship visible at several

levels: the literary author selects events, the adapter selects conditions, and participants create responses. Learning develops when students can explain those differences rather than blending them into one apparently seamless story.

Imagining Literary Environments Without Rebuilding Them

Theatre of the mind allows a classroom to represent a literary environment through language, agreed locations, and selective physical resources. A door sign can mark a study, a table can organize public conversation, and an envelope can represent a consequential letter. These resources do not need to reproduce the work's environment comprehensively. They need to preserve the relations relevant to the inquiry. If access to a letterbox matters, students must understand its location, custody, and conditions of opening. The color of an imagined carpet can remain unspecified unless the interpretive question makes it important.

This approach treats scenery as part of analysis. Literary environments organize who can meet, what can be seen or heard, and which actions become possible. An adaptation can make those relations tangible without confusing them with literal architecture. In A Doll's House, the domestic interior and its doors can be investigated through the distribution of privacy and access described in the stage directions. A classroom marker cannot reproduce every sensation of a staged room. It can support a question about how a threshold structures knowledge or delays an encounter. The representational choice follows the academic task.

An opening orientation should establish actionable relations before atmosphere. Students need to know where scenes occur, how fictional movement is indicated, and which conversations their characters can hear. A brief evocative description can then supply scale, weather, or tone. The teacher should not require uniform mental pictures. Students can understand that a study adjoins a shared room without imagining the same furniture. Compatible commitments matter when consequences depend on them. This standard accommodates different ways of imagining while keeping the shared situation dependable enough for independent dialogue.

Selective props can preserve information across scenes. A single envelope makes custody available for reference, while a key card can represent authority over opening it. Their rules should be clear. Students need to know whether the envelope may be copied, whether it can be destroyed fictionally, and how any such action would be established. Actual mishandling should not automatically become a character event. A misplaced prop can be restored under a practical convention. This preserves the interpretive experiment from being decided accidentally by classroom logistics rather than the choices the activity was designed to examine.

The imagined environment can exceed what the body can enact. Students can cross a fictional city through declaration, observe an absent landscape through description, or refer to a past encounter represented in their materials. These devices broaden possible texts without requiring expensive staging. They also impose communicative work. A declared journey needs an understood relation to time and availability for other scenes. A remembered event needs a clear status as fact, belief, or interpretation. The absence of construction does not

remove design. It shifts work toward specifying the relations students need to understand and use.

The approach can support portability across teaching spaces, but rooms still differ. Fixed seating, noise, lighting, and the ability to gather in small groups affect actual participation. A design may need to replace physical circulation with announced transitions or use written exchanges for part of a scene. Those adaptations should preserve the learning objective and make any changed fictional conditions visible. A classroom with fewer scenic resources is not automatically inferior, just as a decorated space is not automatically effective. The relevant question is whether students can receive, interpret, and answer the contributions the inquiry requires.

Scenic description should avoid prescribing emotion. Telling students that a room is tense can establish an intended atmosphere, but it should not determine what every character feels. A public silence, a locked box, or an approaching visitor can create conditions for response. Students then interpret those conditions through their roles. This preserves the distinction between a designer's cue and a participant's contribution. It also supplies material for later reflection. Students can examine why the same space appeared protective to one character and restrictive to another without assuming that the discrepancy proves someone performed incorrectly.

The activity can invite criticism of its own environment. After play, students might ask what changed because the classroom represented privacy through convention rather than actual walls. Did this make dramatic irony more visible? Did it

permit accidental player knowledge? Did the prop make the letter seem more central than it does in a particular reading of the play? Such questions connect practical representation to interpretation. They prevent theatre of the mind from being treated only as a budget solution. The method becomes a way to investigate how environments and objects organize literary action and how an adaptation's choices shape that investigation.

Imaginative staging earns its place when it makes a relevant relation available for inquiry. The classroom need not become visually indistinguishable from the fictional setting. It needs a dependable means for students to inhabit selected conditions and later analyze them. A modest arrangement can support sophisticated questions if its operational distinctions are clear. The teacher can reserve material resources for the objects and boundaries that carry important consequences, using description elsewhere. This turns scenic economy into a deliberate pedagogical choice: the environment is built to support interpretation through action, rather than to imitate every detail of a literary world.

A Doll House as an Open Classroom Situation

The proposed adaptation begins after Krogstad has placed his letter in the Helmers' letterbox and before Torvald reads it. In Ibsen's play, Nora recognizes the danger of the letter and Mrs. Linde initially considers seeking its return. Torvald controls the key. Later, Mrs. Linde's decision about disclosure contributes to the movement toward the final confrontation (Ibsen, A Doll's House, Acts II–III). The classroom scenario

selects this interval because knowledge, access, and expectation are distributed unevenly. It opens a counterfactual opportunity for several characters to speak together rather than requiring students to reproduce the published sequence.

Six roles form one small ensemble: Nora, Torvald, Krogstad, Mrs. Linde, Doctor Rank, and Anne-Marie. The scenario explicitly changes the opportunities for encounter by allowing these characters to enter a shared discussion during the interval. Their joint availability is an adaptation choice, not a claim that this gathering occurs in the play. In a class of twenty-four, four independent groups could explore the same materials. The numbers describe a possible teaching arrangement. A teacher with another class size can revise the cast or use rotating observers, provided each student's academic task remains meaningful and the comparison records the changes.

The central question concerns the relation between disclosure and autonomy. Students investigate what each character believes can be preserved, repaired, or lost if the letter is read. Nora's player receives relevant passages about the loan, the forged signature, and her expectations of Torvald. Torvald's player receives passages about borrowing, reputation, and domestic authority. Krogstad's materials connect his actions to employment and social standing. Mrs. Linde's connect disclosure to her developing relationship with Krogstad and her judgment about the Helmers. The other roles provide perspectives grounded in their textual relationships, while any new authority is identified as a classroom addition.

The scenario fixes the existence and location of the letter, the fact that Torvald holds the represented key, and the relevant

events already established before the selected interval. It does not allow students to invent a convenient document that cancels the problem. They can request, argue, disclose, delay, or offer commitments within the stated scope. A participant can propose a change that another character refuses. The facilitator settles questions about the scenario's procedures, leaving motives and responses with the students. This preserves uncertainty without depending on a hidden correct route that everyone must discover.

The room contains a shared conversation area, a study marker, and a designated space for private exchange. The letterbox is represented by a labeled envelope container, with a separate key card identifying its access rule. Students do not need a detailed recreation of a nineteenth-century home. They need to know which relations matter to this inquiry. If privacy is represented by convention, the teacher explains the difference between actual hearing and character knowledge. Students can then appreciate dramatic irony as players while deciding what their characters may legitimately infer from the information available to them.

An early scene might involve Nora asking Mrs. Linde to intervene. The request can lead to agreement, refusal, or a demand for fuller explanation. None is marked in advance as the correct educational outcome. The later task is to compare the response with the source and ask what assumptions made it plausible. If the group chooses to reveal the secret immediately, students can examine which pressures that decision removes and which conflicts remain. If the secret stays concealed, they can examine what enabled the delay. The activity creates a particular interpretive history whose premises can be analyzed.

Krogstad and Mrs. Linde might negotiate a different relation from the one produced by their classmates elsewhere. Their scene should not be reduced to a mechanical exchange in which reconciliation automatically erases all other concerns. The original play gives their conversation a particular sequence and significance. The classroom permits alternatives so students can notice that arrangement more sharply. Afterward, they can ask why Ibsen allows a possibility of the letter's return and then moves toward disclosure. The generated version helps formulate the question, while the textual sequence supplies the evidence needed to answer it.

Doctor Rank and Anne-Marie require careful design because the selected question could otherwise leave them peripheral. Their roles can draw attention to forms of dependence, care, and knowledge represented in the play. The teacher should avoid inventing implausibly decisive powers merely to equalize influence. Instead, a role can have a relevant person to approach, a textual perspective to bring into discussion, and an opportunity to challenge an assumption. If the adaptation gives a character information or access unavailable in the source, that change should be recorded. The later analysis can then examine what the addition made possible and what it distorted.

The activity can end at a fixed point, such as a declared decision about opening the letter or the expiry of the play period. It does not need to produce a complete alternative ending to the marriage. A limited stopping condition keeps the inquiry focused and leaves time for criticism. Students can record what was decided, what remained uncertain, and which information each character possessed at the end. That

record becomes a basis for comparison across groups. It should distinguish accepted events from participants' interpretations, preserving uncertainty about motives where the performance did not resolve it.

The published ending then becomes an object of renewed attention. Torvald's response to disclosure, the arrival of the later letter, and Nora's subsequent explanation of her position form a sequence students can analyze rather than merely remember as a famous departure. The class can ask what the sequence reveals that its own version prevented, accelerated, or displaced. A group whose Torvald responds differently has not disproved Ibsen's characterization. It has created a comparison requiring argument about textual support. The educational payoff lies in specifying the difference and examining its consequences for the work's meaning.

The case illustrates a complete interpretive cycle. A question selects a moment, passages support roles, conventions make action possible, and students generate a history within the adaptation. Reflection identifies the history's assumptions and returns to the play. No outcome is presented as an actual classroom finding here. The framework supplies a proposal for practice and research. Its value would need evaluation through students' participation and analytical work, including evidence that the activity complicated or clarified reading rather than simply making the plot feel more familiar.

Counterfactual Decisions and the Force of the Original

Allowing students to depart from a plot can reveal the force of an author's decisions. A familiar ending may seem

inevitable until an alternative sequence is attempted. Students can then identify which conditions the original preserves and how those conditions direct attention. The exercise should not imply that every alternative is equally consistent with the work. It makes the question of consistency discussable. A generated reconciliation may require a different reading of Torvald, while an early disclosure may change the significance of Nora's delay. Those differences become claims to explain through the text.

Counterfactual inquiry needs a declared point of divergence. Events before that point can remain fixed unless the task explicitly asks students to revise them. Otherwise, participants may solve a difficulty by changing the very circumstances under investigation. A group might declare that the loan never occurred or that the letter contains nothing important. Such invention could belong to another creative assignment, but it would evade the selected interpretive problem. The teacher should make the boundary clear before play. Constraints become productive when students know which relations they are being asked to explore rather than erase.

The difference between a plausible character choice and a permitted scenario choice also matters. A classroom may allow a character to attend a meeting that the play never stages. That permission makes the experiment possible, but it does not establish that the attendance is textually likely. Students should record the difference. In later criticism, they can explain that the adaptation brought a perspective into the room to test a question. This gives creative invention an honest academic status. The addition can be useful without

becoming evidence that the source already contained the resulting encounter.

Several critical frames can interpret the same divergence. A feminist reading might examine whether an alternative preserves domestic dependence while changing only the husband's immediate response. A materialist reading might ask how financial and employment pressures remain after the letter is removed. A narrative reading might consider what happens to delayed recognition when disclosure occurs early. These are analytical possibilities, not conclusions guaranteed by the activity. Students need to apply the frame to specific textual and scenario details. The value of a lens appears in what it helps explain and what objections it can answer.

An apparently successful solution can be especially revealing. Students may prevent the immediate crisis by persuading Krogstad to withdraw the letter. The later analysis can ask which underlying relationships remain unchanged and which aspects of the play's final argument become unavailable. The point is not to punish the students for solving the scenario. It is to distinguish practical resolution within the model from interpretation of the original. A successful fictional bargain can generate an important critical question precisely because it removes a confrontation the author chooses to retain. The counterfactual becomes a tool for noticing form.

An unsuccessful group can produce equally useful material. If no one secures cooperation, students can examine the assumptions and informational limits that shaped the failure. They should not infer that the play's outcome was historically or psychologically unavoidable simply because their attempt failed. The scenario may have imposed additional constraints

or the participants may have chosen one limited strategy. A rigorous comparison identifies those conditions. Failure becomes evidence about the experiment conducted, which can inform a reading when its relationship to the source is carefully argued. It is not a universal test of what fictional people could ever have done.

The activity can also distinguish ethical judgment from narrative explanation. Students may believe that a character ought to act differently while recognizing why the work presents the action it does. Roleplay can make the practical tension tangible, but criticism still needs to explain representation. A statement that Nora should communicate earlier differs from an argument about what delayed communication reveals in Ibsen's dramatic structure. The teacher can invite both questions while making their relation clear. The academic task should not collapse into a vote on whether students approve of the characters.

Counterfactual comparison can resist a simple lesson about empathy. Understanding a character's pressures may produce sympathy, criticism, or a more divided response. None should be prescribed as the required emotional outcome. Students can demonstrate strong understanding by explaining a position they reject and identifying evidence for their judgment. The activity's value lies in the quality of that account, not in whether everyone becomes more favorable toward a particular character. This preserves critical education as inquiry into reasons, structures, and effects rather than an exercise designed to produce one approved sentiment.

The original work gains renewed specificity when students can say what their version changes. They can compare access to knowledge, order of disclosure, forms of dependence, and the language through which characters frame obligation. The alternative remains available as a creative product, while the source retains its particular form. The relationship is reciprocal: the text constrains the experiment, and the experiment sharpens questions about the text. Entering the story is productive because students subsequently recognize that the story they entered was already an interpretation, and that its differences from the original require critical explanation.

Language Learning Through Purposeful Character Interaction

In an EFL classroom, the scenario can give spoken English a purpose within an unfolding relationship. A request seeks access, a clarification changes understanding, and a refusal creates another decision. Students have reasons to listen because another person's response affects what they can attempt next. This is a design rationale, not proof that the activity improves proficiency. A learning claim would need evidence appropriate to the language feature and timescale. The framework begins by identifying what communicative work the scenario invites and how students will receive support before, during, and after the interaction.

Language preparation should match the likely actions without scripting the whole scene. Students might practice asking for reasons, qualifying a claim, requesting clarification, or disagreeing while preserving an exchange. Several possible

expressions can serve each function. The aim is to expand available means, not require every student to recite the same formula. A character brief can include a concise glossary of essential institutional or literary terms. The teacher should distinguish vocabulary needed for orientation from language that can be explored during play. Unnecessary lexical density can obstruct the inquiry without adding interpretive value.

Students need time to process role materials. A short silent reading period and an opportunity for practical questions can prevent confusion from being mistaken for character hesitation. Pair rehearsal of a simple exchange can teach the conventions before the full scenario begins. This scaffolding should not disclose every secret or plan the preferred outcome. It gives students a workable means to enter the activity. The difference matters because a student who cannot understand the task has not yet made a meaningful choice to remain quiet. Participation depends on access to the situation as well as willingness to speak.

Fluency and interpretive sophistication should remain distinguishable. A student may speak rapidly while offering a weak textual reading. Another may need pauses while producing a carefully reasoned response to the role's circumstances. Assessment should not let performance confidence stand in for literary understanding. The teacher can evaluate communicative effectiveness through specific evidence and provide another route for analytical work. Written reflection or a revised spoken commentary can allow students to demonstrate reasoning that did not emerge fluently during the event. Different tasks reveal different aspects of learning and should be named accordingly.

The scenario should not require accent imitation as evidence of character. Students can portray social position and motivation through word choice, stance, timing, and decisions in accessible English. If the course studies register, the teacher can introduce relevant distinctions with textual examples. The learning objective should explain why a language choice matters. A generalized demand to sound historical can create anxiety or encourage caricature without advancing interpretation. The emphasis belongs on making contributions intelligible and responsive, while allowing students to experiment with expressive possibilities appropriate to their proficiency and the role.

Errors during play need a proportionate response. Constant correction can interrupt the exchange and turn attention toward avoiding mistakes. Ignoring every misunderstanding can leave the fictional situation incoherent. A teacher can clarify language when meaning is blocked and collect selected recurring issues for later practice. The approach should fit the course's stated priorities rather than assume one universal correction policy. Students can also use clarification strategies with one another. The central question is whether language support preserves opportunities to communicate and interpret, with later revision providing room to examine forms more closely.

Multilingual resources can be used deliberately when appropriate to the course. A brief practical clarification in another language may restore understanding, while the main character exchange remains in English under the assignment's conditions. A glossary can connect difficult concepts to familiar terms. The teacher should state the arrangement rather than leave students guessing whether seeking such

support counts as failure. If English-only interaction is a specific learning goal, the design needs enough accessible preparation to make it feasible. The policy should serve the intended learning task instead of becoming an unexamined test of endurance.

The distribution of roles affects speaking opportunities. A character with no reason to approach anyone may remain quiet regardless of proficiency. A central gatekeeper can receive more interaction than the student can manage. The teacher should examine relationships and provide several routes for contribution. Observers, when used, need a substantial analytical assignment rather than being treated as students who did not perform. They can follow a selected language function or compare stated motives with responses, then contribute evidence to reflection. Role design is part of the communicative environment, not merely a literary packaging choice.

Follow-up can connect spontaneous use to deliberate improvement. Students can select a moment when they struggled to make an offer or qualify a claim, reconstruct the intended meaning, and revise the language. They can explain how the revised expression might change the character interaction. This joins language analysis to the drama's actual purposes. The task should not require a perfect transcript of an unrecorded scene. Students can distinguish a recalled example from a direct quotation and focus on the communicative problem. Revision becomes a continuation of learning rather than a retrospective judgment of every imperfection.

Literary language can also become an object of comparison after improvised speech. Students may communicate a request effectively in their own words, then examine how the source expresses a similar intention through metaphor, address, repetition, or evasion. The difference need not imply that spontaneous English is inadequate. It identifies the author's particular use of language as another choice requiring analysis. A student can revise an improvised line in several registers and explain which best fits the textual relationship. This connects communicative practice to close reading, giving the original wording significance after students have attempted to perform its underlying social action.

The EFL application is strongest when its ambitions remain specific. Interactive Drama can provide conditions for extended interaction, but time spent speaking does not by itself prove learning. A study might examine clarification strategies, argument development, or students' later ability to discuss the text. Each outcome needs suitable evidence. The method's promise lies in integrating communicative purpose with interpretive stakes: students use language to make decisions with others, then examine both their reading and their means of expression. The classroom story becomes a setting for purposeful language use and a source of material for reflective academic work.

From Debriefing to Formal Critical Argument

Reflection should begin by distinguishing the generated event from the source. Students can record a few consequential actions, identify who knew what, and note where their

version departed from the play. The account need not reconstruct every conversation. It should preserve enough detail to support later reasoning and identify whether a claim is observed, recalled, or inferred. This prevents a polished retrospective story from being treated as a complete transcript. The activity becomes academically useful when students can examine the basis of their account as well as its interpretation. Documentation is a resource for criticism, not an automatic guarantee of accuracy.

Atwater's review distinguishes forms of debriefing and considers larp debriefs as transitional practices, cautioning against simple generalizations from other settings (Atwater, 2016). Its relevance here is the need to specify the purpose of classroom processing. The proposed debrief supports interpretation and a return to academic discussion. It is not presented as a guarantee of personal transformation or an all-purpose remedy for any experience. Students can discuss character decisions, practical conventions, and textual questions without being required to disclose personal connections. The intellectual task remains available through several levels of reflection.

A first round can establish events and informational positions. Students might explain when the letter became public, whether a promise was made, and which characters had access to relevant evidence. A second round can compare interpretations. Did a refusal seem protective, evasive, or controlling, and why? The teacher should keep those questions distinct. A disagreement about whether the envelope was opened may require factual clarification within the scenario. A disagreement about what the opening meant can remain productive. This distinction teaches students to

identify the object of a critical dispute before trying to resolve it.

The next movement returns to passages. Students can locate a moment that supports their performed reading and another that complicates it. This requirement helps prevent the activity from becoming a search for confirmation. A participant who portrayed Torvald sympathetically might examine both his stated concern for Nora and the language through which he defines her position. Someone who portrayed Nora as strategically confident might consider passages that reveal uncertainty or divided expectations. The aim is not to overturn every initial interpretation. It is to make the argument answerable to evidence that may resist the most comfortable account.

A model claim might argue that controlling the letterbox stages an unequal distribution of access, but that access alone does not explain the final confrontation. In the classroom version, an early negotiated opening may remove the delay. The published play instead coordinates the letter's reading, Torvald's response, the later document, and Nora's reconsideration of the marriage. A student can analyze how that sequence changes what disclosure reveals. The classroom experience supplies a comparison, while the textual arrangement supports the claim about Ibsen's dramatic method. The argument becomes stronger when it explains why the difference matters rather than merely reporting that the versions ended differently.

Another possible claim could examine Mrs. Linde's refusal to have the letter recalled. A group may initially treat her as a convenient rescuer whose role is to prevent exposure.

Returning to Act III complicates that premise because she explicitly presses for disclosure. The student can investigate how the play connects her judgment to the surrounding relationships and what the choice makes possible for the final scene. The roleplay does not prove that her decision is right. It reveals an assumption the class can now test against the work. Critical inquiry develops through that correction of the adaptation's own simplification.

Formal writing should move beyond chronological report. A student can introduce a claim, explain the relevant textual feature, analyze a brief episode from the adaptation, and assess the comparison's limits. The paper should distinguish dialogue actually recorded from a reconstructed example. It should also identify invented scenario premises. This gives experiential material a clear evidentiary role. A sentence such as our group reconciled successfully is descriptive; an argument about what conditions made reconciliation possible and how those conditions differ from the play is analytical. The transition between them is a central learning task.

Critical lenses can help organize that transition. A feminist analysis can examine who has authority to define duty and whose interpretation of domestic life receives recognition. A materialist analysis can follow money, work, and dependence without reducing every motive to economic calculation. A narrative analysis can examine timing and the order in which knowledge becomes available. Students should not use the lens as a label attached after the story is told. It should guide the questions asked of both the text and adaptation, with specific details demonstrating what the approach helps explain and where another reading may be needed.

Reflection should permit disagreement among students who portrayed the same role. Their performances may have been based on different emphases or unexpected exchanges. The seminar can compare evidence without assigning authenticity to whichever student felt the most intense identification. A portrayal can be compelling and still rely on a weak premise. An awkward scene can reveal an important interpretive tension. Keeping craft, experience, and argument distinguishable allows the class to learn from several kinds of outcome. The teacher's response should reward precision and revision rather than conformity to the emotional tone the activity was expected to produce.

The final critical essay can include an account of revision. Students can explain what they initially believed, what the activity made difficult or visible, and how rereading affected the claim. A change of mind is not required for a strong response. A more carefully supported version of the original argument can demonstrate learning. The decisive issue is whether the student can explain the relationship among interpretation, action, and evidence. Debriefing becomes academically substantial when it leads into this work rather than remaining a celebration of participation or a brief exchange of impressions before the class moves on.

Assessing Interpretation Participation and Language Separately

Assessment should reflect the learning objectives declared before play. If the principal aim is literary analysis, students need to be assessed through claims, textual evidence, reasoning, and attention to alternative explanations. If spoken

interaction is also an objective, its criteria should be specified separately. A student should not receive a weak interpretation mark merely for portraying a socially unsuccessful character, nor a strong one merely for speaking confidently. The activity creates several forms of performance, and assessment becomes more credible when each has an appropriate basis. Transparency allows students to understand what the task asks them to learn and demonstrate.

The in-character outcome should rarely function as a direct proxy for academic success. A character may fail because another participant makes a legitimate refusal. A group may avoid disclosure by changing the dramatic problem in a way that later proves analytically revealing. Neither result alone determines the quality of the students' reading. The assessment can instead examine how participants used their role's information, recognized others' contributions, and later explained the consequences. This preserves the freedom the activity promises. If students know they must achieve the teacher's preferred ending to receive credit, their apparent choices become an exercise in compliance.

Participation criteria can focus on available, observable practices. Students can make a relevant contribution, answer another person's offer, use a clarification when needed, and respect the agreed attribution of character and practical speech. The criteria should allow different rhythms of interaction. A quieter participant may make a consequential refusal or supply carefully prepared evidence. A more vocal participant may dominate without responding. Quantity of speech is not sufficient on its own. The teacher should account for the role's opportunities and the actual conditions

of participation, rather than compare all students through one undifferentiated impression of energy.

Literary assessment can examine the relation between the adaptation and source. A strong response identifies a particular passage, explains a performed assumption, and assesses what the comparison reveals. It recognizes where the scenario changed access, timing, or authority. It also engages a plausible objection. A weaker response may retell the activity, claim that personal feeling proves the character's motive, or attribute an invented event to Ibsen. These distinctions are academically meaningful and can be taught through examples. They avoid making theatrical polish the gate through which students must pass before demonstrating interpretive understanding.

Language assessment needs similarly bounded evidence. The teacher might focus on intelligible requests, reasons supporting disagreement, clarification strategies, or adaptation of phrasing after a misunderstanding. Accuracy can be evaluated in relation to the course's aims without treating every spontaneous error as equally consequential. A later revised commentary may reveal learning that a one-time performance does not capture. The assessment should state whether it concerns the immediate interaction, the revision, or both. This allows students to take communicative risks while understanding how evidence of improvement or effective use will be recognized.

Alternative participation tasks can preserve intellectual demand. An observer can track access to knowledge, compare two characters' interpretations, or examine the relationship between language and authority. A student using written

contributions can still author decisions and receive responses under the event's conventions. The alternatives should not become easier substitutes with vague expectations, nor be described as inferior by default. Their requirements should connect to the same central inquiry while recognizing differences in evidence. A literature course can sustain rigorous interpretation through several modes of participation when the task and its assessment remain aligned.

Feedback should identify the kind of claim that needs development. A teacher might note that a student has identified an interesting divergence but needs a passage explaining its significance. Another response might need to distinguish the character's belief from a historical claim. Another might need clearer language for qualifying an inference. Such feedback supports revision because it names a concrete relationship. A general judgment that the roleplay was effective or the student lacked immersion provides less guidance. Assessment should help students understand how to move from an experience to a more defensible academic argument.

Group and individual assessment need careful relation. The ensemble creates the event collectively, but individual students may have different access to scenes and different opportunities to act. A shared account can document the group's sequence, while an individual analysis examines a selected question. This arrangement avoids assuming that every participant witnessed the same evidence. It also allows students to disagree responsibly about interpretation. The teacher should explain how collaborative preparation and individual reasoning contribute to the final assessment. The

division should reflect the course's purpose rather than simply reward the group that produced the most polished ending.

Assessment can include design criticism. Students may argue that a rule distorted the source, that a role lacked usable authority, or that an informational prompt prejudged a disputed interpretation. Those critiques can be strong evidence of learning when supported by specific comparison. The teacher should not require students to praise the method in order to succeed. A student can demonstrate sophisticated literary reasoning by explaining why a particular adaptation failed to illuminate the work. That possibility makes the activity an object of inquiry as well as a teaching instrument and gives critical independence a practical place in the assignment.

The resulting assessment framework protects the method's intellectual ambitions. It recognizes participation, language use, and literary argument without allowing one to stand automatically for the others. It also makes room for revision and principled criticism. Students can learn from fictional success or failure because the academic task concerns explanation and evidence. The teacher gains a clearer basis for judging what the activity supported and what remains uncertain. A performance can be lively and educationally thin, or restrained and analytically productive. Assessment should be capable of recognizing the difference through the work students actually produce.

Classroom Research and the Limits of Educational Claims

A classroom research project should begin with a specific learning question. Asking whether Interactive Drama works leaves too many possible outcomes inside one phrase. A study could examine whether students' interpretations become more attentive to character knowledge, whether their arguments distinguish textual facts from adaptation choices, or how they use clarification in English. Each question needs an appropriate source of evidence. Enjoyment surveys can address experience but cannot independently demonstrate stronger literary analysis. Written work can show argument quality but may not reveal how the interaction felt. The design should connect each claim to the evidence capable of supporting it.

Existing scholarship offers grounds for investigation without settling this proposed application. Jordan reports a classroom case involving roleplaying techniques and students' study of The Crucible, including improved grades within that study and acknowledged limitations (Jordan, 2016). Its secondary-school setting and comparison cannot simply establish the effects of the university model proposed here. Torner's literary adaptation work offers another kind of contribution, focused on design as interpretation. The framework should preserve the differences among a case study, a theoretical proposition, and evidence from a new implementation. Their value increases when their actual scope remains clear.

A useful baseline could ask students to make an interpretive claim about the selected moment and support it with passages before the activity. A later task could address the same central

question while allowing a different conclusion. The comparison can examine specificity, use of evidence, treatment of alternative readings, and awareness of the adaptation's premises. Tasks should be sufficiently comparable for the intended analysis. A longer, better-supported final essay may reflect additional reading time or feedback as well as the roleplay. The study must account for the full instructional sequence instead of attributing every improvement to performance alone.

Qualitative analysis can follow changes in reasoning. A student may move from describing Nora as simply irrational to explaining a conflict among expectations, knowledge, and dependence. Another may retain the initial claim while supplying more precise evidence. The researcher should examine actual work rather than presume that change always means improvement. A newly complex statement can still be unsupported. Clear analytical categories and examples can make judgments inspectable. If several assessors are available, independent reading and discussion can help identify where the criteria are ambiguous. The process should be reported in relation to the study's scale and purpose.

Observation can examine how the scenario was used. Records might follow a disclosure, a request for access, or a practical clarification that changed what students could do. The coverage should be stated, especially when several groups perform at once. A teacher cannot infer every private exchange from the final outcome. Participant accounts can add information while remaining distinguishable from direct observation. The study should not invent connective scenes to create a complete narrative. Gaps in the record are limits to

the claim, and recognizing them can reveal how distributed the learning activity actually was.

Language research needs comparable attention to evidence. A study of clarification strategies might examine recorded exchanges with appropriate permission and a defined coding scheme. A study of later discussion could compare how students explain an interpretation before and after the unit. The number of words spoken or the apparent confidence of a group would not independently establish proficiency growth. A short intervention may support immediate use without demonstrating durable change. The claim should match the timescale and task. This permits valuable bounded findings without turning one successful class into a general promise about language learning.

Comparison conditions can help when feasible, but they introduce practical questions. One group might study the same passages through seminar discussion while another uses the adaptation and reflective writing. The instructional time and access to materials would need consideration. Differences among students, teachers, and group relationships can affect results. Reusing the activity with the same students introduces knowledge of secrets and procedures. None of these issues makes inquiry pointless. They identify what must be documented and what cannot be isolated by a small classroom design. The study can remain useful through precise description and restrained interpretation.

Student reflections can explain experiences that performance records leave unclear. A student may report that the role made an institutional pressure tangible, that the language demands limited participation, or that the activity distracted

from close reading. The inquiry should make disagreement welcome. If students believe praise affects their grades, favorable accounts become harder to interpret. Assessment of academic work should be separated as far as practical from evaluation of the method. Participation in research and access to personal reflections require appropriate agreement. The teacher's authority is part of the research setting and should not disappear from its account.

The study should distinguish critical understanding from emotional identification. A student can sympathize more strongly with a character while producing an argument no better supported than before. Another can develop a more complex analysis without reporting deeper sympathy. If both outcomes matter, both need evidence. The same applies to confidence, collaboration, and enjoyment. A comprehensive framework can examine their relationship without combining them into one undifferentiated score. Westborg's attention to framing, processing, and learning objectives helps keep the educational arrangement explicit (Westborg, 2023). The researcher still needs to show what happened in the particular course.

Research through successive design can connect findings to revision. If students repeatedly attribute invented events to the source, the adaptation may need clearer framing and a stronger return-to-text task. If roles remain isolated, the relationship network may need adjustment. If discussion produces rich observations but weak essays, the transition to formal argument may need more support. These are different problems requiring different responses. Adding more dramatic intensity would not necessarily address them. The value of the research lies in tracing the relation between a

design choice, its actual use, and the learning evidence produced afterward.

The strongest educational claim would identify a particular development under specified conditions. For example, students might become better at distinguishing what a character knows from what an audience knows in their analysis of selected passages. Such a finding would support further investigation rather than prove that all literary study should become roleplay. The framework can accommodate limited, mixed, or unfavorable results. It becomes credible by allowing the method to be challenged through evidence. Interactive Drama deserves serious study as a form of interpretive inquiry precisely because its effects can be examined rather than assumed from the appeal of participation.

Entering Returning and Reading More Precisely

Interactive Drama can make literary situations available for active inquiry when its design connects participation to textual interpretation. Students receive roles grounded in evidence, act within selected constraints, and discover consequences through one another's responses. Theatre of the mind extends the classroom's representational range, while embodied dialogue gives the inquiry immediate social form. Neither feature guarantees learning. Their educational value depends on the questions asked, the support available, and the reflective work that returns students to the source. The performance becomes one phase in a larger process of reading and critical explanation.

The central distinction is between generating an outcome and interpreting a work. A group can create an effective reconciliation while leaving Ibsen's particular sequence unexplained. Another can fail to prevent disclosure and still develop a strong account of knowledge and authority. Academic learning emerges when students compare those experiences with passages, identify the adaptation's additions, and explain what the differences reveal. Counterfactual freedom can sharpen attention to authorial choice because the original no longer appears to be the only imaginable sequence. Its specific form becomes a decision worth analyzing rather than a plot merely to remember.

The proposed A Doll's House unit demonstrates a complete cycle. A focused question selects the interval around the letterbox. Character materials distribute perspectives and opportunities. A sparse environment preserves the relations needed for action. Students generate decisions, document selected events, and return through discussion to formal criticism. The model can support EFL interaction through purposeful requests, reasons, and clarification, while language and literary outcomes remain separately assessable. It can also be criticized: students may identify where its rules distort the source or where the performance adds little to interpretation. That critical possibility belongs inside the method.

Assessment and research keep the framework answerable. They distinguish experience from learning, fictional success from academic quality, and a plausible rationale from an observed effect. A teacher can examine how students use evidence, revise claims, and understand the relation between source and adaptation. The classroom activity does not need

to replace seminar discussion or close reading. It offers another means of generating questions those practices can investigate. Its strongest contribution is the organized movement among them, giving students opportunities to act, reconsider, and explain with increasing precision.

Entering the story matters because students eventually return from the version they created. They can then recognize how circumstances, representation, and other people's choices shaped their interpretation. The literary work remains distinct, available to resist their assumptions and support new claims. A powerful classroom performance is not the end of criticism. It is a carefully framed occasion for reading again, with a more exact understanding of what was given, what was chosen, and what still needs to be argued.

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Felicity Marsh

Felicity Marsh teaches literature and creative writing and develops participatory activities that encourage readers to argue, interpret, and make decisions from within fictional worlds. Her interest in interactive drama grew from classroom experiments in which students adopted conflicting perspectives from the same text. She now designs short salon scenarios based on literary dilemmas, allowing participants to test interpretations through conversation rather than simply report them in essays. Marsh writes about the relationship between imaginative commitment, critical distance, and the sometimes surprising confidence of reluctant speakers. She also runs informal reading gatherings where guests may be asked to defend a fictional villain. Attendance remains strong, although several guests have learned to distrust the invitations.

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Originality
Soundness of research, methodology, and/or argumentation Logical coherence of its organization

Relevance and appropriateness of contribution (within a wide scope) Flow and clarity of the language
Completeness

Creative pieces, such as full-length or mini scenarios, should be judged more loosely in terms of rigor but must be considered positive contributions:

Significance and contribution

Originality
Completeness in content and thought Designer's Notes
All necessary instructions
Other scenario-based considerations

Scenarios should be clear and complete with an appropriate introduction that spells out the appropriate age and context for performance as well as how many players of what genders. A cast list should be included. Persons reading the scenario should be able to print it off and run the interactive drama scenario as is with a full and complete understanding of everything that is required, including special rules or special events.

Please place the article in one of these two categories:

1. Accept for Publication
2. Reject

For submissions you mark as *Reject*, you may choose to write some brief comments to the author in regard to what the weaknesses of the piece are and how they might improve it, but you are not required in any way to do so. Most reviewers do not leave comments, but they are welcome if you choose to write them. Do keep in mind that our vetting system does not require detailed review and we do not have a revision policy for submissions so at no time are you obligated to provide detailed comments. Our editorial decisions for publication are based solely upon your recommendation of *Accept for Publication* or *Rejection*.

Each submission is vetted by two reviewers in a blind peer process so that reviewers are never aware of the identity of the author of any piece they are asked to judge. If both reviewers give a judgment of accept for publication, the piece is accepted. If one accepts while the other rejects,

the piece is rejected. If both reviewers reject, then the piece is rejected. Reviewers need only provide their own judgment of the piece, they are not provided with notification of the final result for any particular piece. Your active and confidential participation in this process is appreciated.

Members of the Editorial Board of this journal are respected scholars who work within the specialties of the publication. As such, they are welcome to submit their own work for consideration. In the case of an editor or member of the editorial board submitting a piece for consideration, the blind review process is safeguarded. In the event a submissions editor has a piece up for review, the editor hands off duties for assigning reviewers to another member of the board who ensures the blind review process and confidentiality is maintained.

Once you have finished with a piece, please send your review decision and any comments immediately to the submissions editor in the shortform format provided when assigned the piece to brian@briandavidphillips.com as the editor will compile results and notify contributors. The editor will also prepare new open submissions for vetting and review and send them to reviewers as they come in.

The duties of Submissions Editor of the journal are shifted periodically with a different member of the Editorial Board taking on the responsibilities so address correspondence to the position rather than a particular member.

Thank you once again. We look forward to receiving your comments soon.

Submissions Editor,
Journal of Interactive Literature and Drama Submissions E-mail:
brian@briandavidphillips.com
Journal Webpage: http://www.interactivedramas.info/journal.htm

Questions regarding the journal can be addressed to
brian@briandavidphillips.com.


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