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Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs

A Multi-Discipline Peer-Reviewed Journal of
Virtual Reality, Roleplaying, Fiction,
Scenario-Based Theatre-Style Interactive Drama
Freeform Live Action Roleplaying Games

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From Parlor to Browser

Reimagining Salon LARP as Virtual Interactive Theatre

Alice Fenwick

Abstract

This essay examines the adaptation of salon live action roleplaying into Virtual Tabletop Interactive Drama. It argues that theatricality emerges through reciprocal character enactment and recognized fictional consequences rather than through visual realism or physical proximity alone. Comparing physical salons, conventional tabletop sessions, online theatre, and VTT supported freeform performance, it develops a vocabulary for liveness, mediated embodiment, dramatic space, participant agency, and distributed narrative authority. Particular attention falls on voice and token relationships, simultaneous scenes, character motivation, hidden information, and persistent artifacts. A hypothetical diplomatic reception demonstrates how the same dramatic premise changes across four arrangements. The essay then proposes comparative research attentive to access, participant experience, and incomplete evidence. Virtual tabletop drama emerges as a distinct configuration within existing participatory and networked performance traditions, whose possibilities depend on negotiated conventions and consequential encounters.

Keywords

Virtual Tabletop Interactive Drama, salon LARP, networked participatory theatre, digital embodiment, distributed narrative authority, reciprocal availability

Reimagining the Salon as a Networked Performance

A salon LARP becomes virtual interactive theatre when its participants use a mediated fictional environment to perform consequential relationships for one another. This claim concerns the organization of dramatic action rather than the sophistication of the software. A browser does not produce theatre simply by displaying a castle, and a character portrait does not become a performance merely because somebody moves it. The theatrical event emerges when participants address others as characters, interpret their responses, and allow those exchanges to change a shared situation. Virtual tabletop technology can support that event by making locations, objects, identities, and permissions available for collective reference. Its contribution is substantial, but it remains inseparable from the conventions through which participants recognize what their actions mean.

The movement from parlor to browser is consequently a problem of adaptation. An ordinary room can function as a fictional ballroom because participants accept that its furnishings, entrances, and social distances stand for something beyond their everyday use. A digital floor plan requires a comparable agreement, although its relationships to bodies and actions differ. In a physical salon, entering a conversation may involve approaching a visible group. In an online session, the equivalent action may require moving a token, joining an audio channel, and establishing that the character has arrived. The dramatic purpose can survive while the practical sequence changes. Adaptation becomes

intelligible when we distinguish what an action accomplishes within the fiction from the material means by which it becomes perceptible.

This essay proposes Virtual Tabletop Interactive Drama as an analytical designation for a particular arrangement of participatory performance. Participants maintain character perspectives, initiate substantially unscripted encounters, and exercise recognized authority over actions that affect a shared fictional situation. A virtual tabletop supplies a common representational surface, while communication systems enable the encounters through which the drama develops. No claim of historical invention follows from this designation. It identifies a configuration whose components already have extensive histories in roleplaying and networked performance. Its value depends on whether it helps explain the relations among those components more precisely than either online gaming or digital theatre alone.

The relevant theatrical tradition is already visible in Brian David Phillips's account of interactive drama as scenario based, theatre style freeform roleplaying. His public description connects the practice with critical discussion, scenario design, and the study of roleplays as drama rather than treating it solely as an entertainment format (Phillips, n.d.). That connection establishes a useful starting point without settling the present argument. A virtual adaptation must still explain how character performance remains available to others, how fictional actions acquire consequences, and how participants negotiate an environment they encounter through different devices and channels. The question is not whether an existing label can be transferred

unchanged. It is what that transfer reveals and what it conceals.

Four neighboring arrangements will serve as comparative models. The physical salon organizes encounters through a shared material location. A conventional tabletop session commonly coordinates action through a central conversation and a facilitator, although actual tabletop practices vary widely. Online theatre may present remote performers to an audience whose control over fictional events remains limited, though participatory productions complicate that distinction. Virtual tabletop drama combines a common visual environment with character interaction that can proceed independently across several conversations. These are analytical models, not mutually exclusive boxes. A production can move among them during a single evening, and a useful framework must account for those movements without declaring every change a new art form.

The central proposition is that theatricality depends on reciprocal enactment under conditions of fictional consequence. Reciprocity means that another participant can recognize, interpret, and answer an action. Enactment means that a person performs a situated character rather than only discussing a possible story. Consequence means that an accepted action alters what somebody may subsequently know, believe, attempt, or demand. These conditions do not establish a universal definition of theatre. They provide working criteria for examining this particular adaptation. They also permit an online roleplaying session to be both a game and a theatrical performance, since strategic objectives and dramatic interpretation can organize the same encounter.

The argument proceeds through conceptual comparison and an explicitly hypothetical design example rather than reporting an experimental study. It examines the continuities of character motivation and social conflict, the transformations of embodiment and space, and the possibilities introduced by selective communication and persistent artifacts. It then considers facilitation, access, and comparative research. The resulting framework treats virtual tabletop drama as a practice whose form arises from negotiated relationships among people, representations, and permissions. Its distinctive achievement is neither the elimination of distance nor the reproduction of a physical room. It is the creation of a workable dramatic situation across that distance, with enough shared understanding for participants to surprise one another meaningfully.

A Comparative Vocabulary for Roleplay and Theatre

Comparisons become misleading when tabletop gaming is reduced to dice, LARP to costumes, and theatre to an audience sitting quietly in darkness. Each field contains practices that depart from those familiar images. The present inquiry instead compares how an event allocates character identity, attention, spatial reference, and decision making. Those arrangements can be observed without assuming that a particular community owns improvisation, emotional involvement, or collaborative storytelling. Such a vocabulary also avoids the familiar prestige contest in which an activity supposedly becomes important only after somebody calls it

theatre. The point is to describe how it works and what kinds of experience its organization makes possible.

Markus Montola offers a concise foundation by identifying an imagined world, a power structure, and personified characters as central elements of roleplaying (Montola, 2008). His framework matters here because representation alone cannot explain play. A map becomes part of a roleplaying event only through agreements about who may establish its meaning and how characters can act within it. The following analysis extends that insight toward performance without claiming that Montola supplies its theatrical criteria. Power concerns the acceptance of fictional contributions; theatricality concerns how those contributions become situated, expressive encounters. They overlap whenever an accusation, refusal, or confession simultaneously depicts a character and changes another participant's options.

Character identity supplies the first comparative dimension. A participant may inhabit one character continuously, alternate among several figures, or describe a character from an external position. Continuous identification does not require unbroken emotional absorption. A player can consult a note, ask a procedural question, and return to a role without destroying the performance. What matters is whether others can identify the position from which a contribution is made. In a virtual salon, a stable name, portrait, or vocal introduction may support this continuity. Confusion becomes consequential when a procedural comment is mistaken for a fictional statement or a participant's private opinion is attributed to the character.

The second dimension concerns how attention is organized. A common tabletop conversation usually makes at least some events available to the whole group, even when their characters are elsewhere. A salon can support several encounters at once, leaving each participant with a partial experience. Online theatre may organize attention through camera selection or a stream, while a virtual salon can distribute it across channels. These differences are tendencies rather than essential properties. A tabletop group can divide, a physical LARP can gather everyone into a single hearing, and a digital production can alternate between private scenes and public assemblies. The framework asks which arrangement governs a particular moment.

Spatial reference provides a third dimension. Physical proximity, spoken description, diagrams, and digital coordinates offer different answers to the question of where a character is. None automatically determines what the character can perceive. A participant may see an entire map while the character knows only one room; a voice channel may include people whose tokens are positioned far apart. The production must establish which source carries authority when these representations diverge. Otherwise participants expend energy resolving an interface puzzle that has little relation to the intended dramatic problem. A clear spatial convention enables conflict by making the conditions of encounter understandable.

Decision making forms the fourth dimension. In a tightly coordinated session, many proposed actions pass through one facilitator. A distributed salon can allow participants to negotiate most ordinary interactions themselves. Neither

arrangement is inherently more artistic or more democratic. Central coordination can provide clarity, pacing, and support; distributed authority can provide autonomy, simultaneity, and productive uncertainty. Their consequences depend on scale, participant expectations, and the kinds of action the scenario permits. The important distinction concerns where an action gains acceptance and whether other people can understand that acceptance without repeatedly consulting an absent organizer.

These dimensions clarify why game and theatre need not function as competing categories. Consider an ambassador attempting to obtain a signature before a deadline. Securing the signature can satisfy an explicit objective, while the means of obtaining it can expose fear, affection, pride, or divided loyalty. The scene remains playable as a strategic exchange and interpretable as a performance of social relationships. Removing the objective might weaken the encounter rather than purify its theatricality. Conversely, a mechanically successful transaction may produce little drama if nobody attends to the character positions involved. The distinction lies in how the event is enacted and received, not simply in whether it has rules.

The proposed vocabulary also separates participation from agency. Clicking a highlighted location is participation, but its dramatic significance depends on what can follow. Agency requires an accepted capacity to alter some relevant aspect of the fictional situation. That capacity may be small and still matter: declining an invitation can redirect a relationship without changing the fate of an empire. A production that offers many interface actions but permits only one narrative

outcome can be highly interactive at the technical level while narrowly limiting fictional choice. Virtual tabletop drama requires attention to both levels because software responsiveness can easily be mistaken for dramatic freedom.

Comparison should finally remain sensitive to participants' own descriptions. A group may value its event as a LARP, an online freeform, an interactive play, or simply an enjoyable evening with characters. The analyst's designation should illuminate its organization without overriding that self understanding. Virtual Tabletop Interactive Drama is useful where it identifies a relation among shared representation, character enactment, and distributed consequence. It becomes unhelpful if it treats every session using a map as identical or claims that a change of platform erases a community's history. A vocabulary earns its place by sharpening questions, not by winning a naming dispute.

Liveness Through Reciprocal Availability

Physical separation raises a persistent question: can participants be present to one another when they do not share a room? The answer depends on which aspect of presence is under discussion. Sharing material space, receiving a voice immediately, and knowing that another person can answer are related but distinct conditions. A virtual salon lacks the first while potentially sustaining the others. Its liveness cannot be assessed by asking only whether communication occurs at the same clock time. A broadcast and a private negotiation may both be simultaneous with their reception, yet they offer radically different capacities for response. Dramatic presence

involves the practical availability of another participant within an unfolding situation.

Philip Auslander's account challenges the treatment of liveness as an unchanging property secured exclusively by physical proximity. He situates the concept historically in relation to media and examines the experience through which a digitally mediated encounter can be accepted as live (Auslander, 2012). For the present argument, this provides a reason to investigate participant relationships rather than dismiss online performance in advance. It does not prove that every responsive system is theatre or that every networked encounter produces an equivalent experience. The proposed criterion of reciprocal availability is a narrower analytical development: participants must be able to receive and answer consequential character actions while the encounter remains open.

Consider a character who asks whether a former ally betrayed her. An answer delivered tomorrow may carry substantial narrative meaning, but it belongs to a different temporal arrangement from the hesitation that occurs while both participants wait in the same voice conversation. That hesitation can be interpreted, challenged, or interrupted before either party settles its significance. The moment remains open because another contribution can alter its course. This openness supports a form of liveness even when neither participant sees the other's face. It rests on uncertainty about another person's response, combined with enough communicative continuity for that response to matter immediately.

Technical delay modifies this continuity. A pause can indicate doubt, a muted microphone, a connection problem, or deliberate refusal. Participants cannot always determine which interpretation is correct. The solution is neither to interpret every interruption dramatically nor to remove silence from performance. It is to establish modest conventions for distinguishing available silence from communicative absence. A brief procedural signal can indicate that somebody is reconnecting; a spoken confirmation can restore the shared moment. Such repairs reveal that liveness is maintained through work. The participants sustain it by checking that their contributions can reach somebody who remains able to answer.

The distinction between an event and its recording follows from the same reasoning. A recording can preserve the words of a negotiation and permit later analysis of tone and timing. It cannot ordinarily allow its later viewer to enter that negotiation with the same power to redirect it. The preserved sequence retains evidence of a live encounter while offering a different relation to the person who receives it afterward. This distinction does not make the recording aesthetically inferior. It identifies a change in the organization of response, which becomes particularly important when researchers use recordings as evidence of participatory experience.

Reciprocal availability also operates at several scales. Two characters can be available to one another in a private conversation while remaining unavailable to a larger gathering. A public announcement can reconnect those local scenes without making their contents universally known. The whole event remains live through a network of overlapping

opportunities for response rather than through a single conversation attended by everyone. Its temporality resembles a social occasion more closely than a finished film: several things happen at once, and missing one of them is part of occupying a particular position. The shared event does not require identical access to every moment.

This model makes room for different communication modes. Spoken dialogue may support rapid exchange, while typed contributions can permit careful composition or provide access where speech is difficult. A text exchange can be synchronous if participants attend and respond within an agreed scene, and speech can become effectively asynchronous when one participant cannot hear or answer. The relevant analytical question concerns the temporal expectations organizing the encounter. A production should clarify whether a message represents an immediate utterance, a note delivered after travel, or commentary outside the fiction. The same software feature can support several distinct dramatic times.

Networked performance already has a substantial conceptual history. Helen Varley Jamieson's study of cyberformance examines live performance created by remote participants through internet technologies, including questions of audience and purpose built platforms (Jamieson, 2008). That precedent prevents a virtual tabletop account from treating the possibility of remote theatre as its own discovery. The present contribution concerns a more specific organization of participation, in which characters can initiate independent encounters and use a shared tabletop representation to coordinate fictional action. It belongs in conversation with

cyberformance while retaining the particular concerns of roleplaying, including character knowledge and distributed authority.

Liveness, under this account, becomes an achieved relation rather than a guarantee supplied by a connection indicator. People can be technically online while unable to locate one another, determine who is speaking, or influence the scene. They can also produce an intense encounter through a visually modest interface when their contributions remain mutually legible. The design task is to maintain that legibility without regulating every response in advance. A successful virtual salon provides enough continuity for participants to act, enough uncertainty for their actions to be consequential, and enough repair capacity for ordinary technical interruptions to remain manageable. Its theatrical present is made through these ongoing acts of coordination.

Embodiment Across Voice Image and Token

Moving a salon online does not remove the participant's body. It changes which bodily activities are transmitted and which representations become available to other people. Speaking requires breath, timing, articulation, and physical effort; listening occurs from a situated body with its own environment and limitations. The absence of shared floor space does remove important resources, including directly perceived posture, approach, and orientation when cameras are not used. An adequate account must recognize both conditions. Virtual performance is embodied without

reproducing the same field of bodily information as a physical salon. Its expressive resources are redistributed across sound, image, interface action, and imagination.

Michał Mochocki treats LARP as a multimodal medium in which players combine authorship, acting, character perspective, and audience functions. His discussion also distinguishes the prototype of bodily enactment from the broader possibilities created by other media and symbolic conventions (Mochocki, 2018). That distinction is useful because it preserves the significance of physical enactment while permitting careful comparison with mediated forms. The present argument does not redefine all remote roleplay as physically equivalent to LARP. It asks how a practice can adapt salon dramaturgy when the visible character body is distributed among several signs, each carrying different kinds of information.

Voice can carry character identity through patterns of address, pace, hesitation, and emphasis without requiring an elaborate accent. A participant who refuses to say a rival's title can establish a relationship through ordinary speech. Another who repeats a formal phrase while audibly struggling to maintain composure can dramatize a conflict between public obligation and private feeling. These possibilities do not depend on professional acting. They depend on listening and on recognizing that vocal choices address somebody within a situation. The character becomes available through a sequence of responses rather than through a single convincing imitation of an imagined person.

The portrait supplies a different resource. It can establish a stable visual identity and help participants connect a voice

with a fictional figure. It can also impose assumptions about age, status, appearance, or emotional disposition that the performance does not sustain. A smiling image may accompany a confession of grief; a majestic costume may belong to a character whose political authority has collapsed. The image should be understood as a reference rather than an exhaustive report of the character's current state. Otherwise its permanence can flatten an unfolding performance into a fixed impression, giving yesterday's expression unreasonable authority over today's scene.

The token typically performs a more schematic function. Its position can indicate location, availability, proximity, or membership in an encounter. Yet a token has no inherent dramatic meaning outside the convention that governs it. Moving from a doorway toward another figure might represent an approach, an interruption, or merely an attempt to arrange overlapping icons. A production that wants movement to carry consequence must specify when it counts as action. This does not require burdensome realism. A simple rule that entering a room makes the character available to its occupants can give token movement a clear social function.

Token, portrait, and voice can reinforce one another without becoming interchangeable. The token may establish that a character is present; the portrait may identify that character; the voice may reveal an intention. Their division of labor becomes especially important when the signs conflict. A participant might remain audible after moving to another room, or speak under a display name unrelated to the token. Such discrepancies can be repaired through explicit arrival

and departure statements. The purpose is to make enacted relationships intelligible. Dramatic concentration is difficult to sustain when participants must repeatedly investigate whether the person addressing them is fictionally present.

Theatrical masks and puppets provide useful analogies, but neither should become a total explanation. A mask can distinguish a performed identity from the performer, while a puppet can locate agency in an object whose movements are controlled elsewhere. A token shares aspects of both, yet its limited motion and diagrammatic perspective often make it function more like a marker in a collectively interpreted score. The analogies illuminate particular relations rather than establish an essential category. Asking what a token allows participants to infer is more productive than deciding once and for all whether it truly is an avatar, mask, or puppet.

Absence can itself become expressive when its meaning is agreed. A character who remains at the edge of a gathering may signal withdrawal, but only if participants can distinguish that choice from interface difficulty or distraction. Similarly, turning off a camera can be a neutral access decision rather than a performed disappearance. Designers should avoid assigning fictional significance automatically to every bodily or technical condition. Agency requires the ability to choose a meaningful action, and that choice is obscured when an accidental disconnection is treated as betrayal. Clear conventions preserve the difference between acting through an interface and being misrepresented by its failures.

Virtual embodiment is best understood as coordinated attribution. Participants attribute words, positions, and images

to a character because the event supplies a workable relationship among those signs. This coordination permits imaginative identities that do not resemble the participant's physical appearance, but it does not eliminate social interpretation or unequal expectations. Some voices may be granted authority more readily than others, and some images may reinforce familiar stereotypes. The platform offers no automatic correction. A considered design gives participants recognizable identities while leaving room for performance to revise first impressions. The character's dramatic body develops through what others can perceive, answer, and remember across the encounter.

Space as an Agreement About Possible Encounters

A virtual tabletop offers a visible environment, but visibility alone does not produce a dramatic place. A floor plan becomes theatrical when its relationships organize what characters can attempt and whom they can encounter. A doorway can promise access, a corridor can expose a private meeting, and a council chamber can make a disagreement public. These possibilities depend partly on visual design and partly on the conventions connecting representation with action. The map provides a common reference; participants supply the activity through which that reference acquires social meaning. Without that connection, the environment remains an illustration beside the performance rather than an active component of it.

Three spatial layers should be distinguished. Interface space contains windows, controls, channels, and the visible tabletop. Fictional space contains the locations characters inhabit and the routes they can plausibly take. Dramatic space contains the relationships of access, exposure, exclusion, and encounter through which conflict develops. A locked study can occupy a small portion of the map while dominating dramatic space because several people need to enter it. Conversely, an impressive courtyard can remain dramatically inactive if nothing makes meeting there consequential. Separating these layers helps explain why a visually elaborate environment may support little interaction while a plain diagram can sustain a compelling evening.

The relationship among the layers must be designed rather than presumed. Suppose two characters occupy adjoining rooms on a map but communicate through separate audio channels. Can they hear raised voices through the wall? Can either interrupt without permission? Does the connecting door remain open? A physically shared room provides some of this information through ordinary perception. A digital arrangement requires either technical support or an agreed procedure. One production might make all adjacent conversations audible; another might permit a spoken request to overhear. Both can support drama, but they produce different opportunities. Participants need to know which spatial relationships the interface actually represents.

Movement becomes dramatically relevant when it changes exposure or access. A character who leaves a hearing may refuse public scrutiny; one who enters a private chamber may threaten a secret. If token motion has no relation to who can

speak or listen, these possibilities must be carried entirely through dialogue. That can work, but the map then has a limited coordinating role. If movement controls encounters, it should remain comprehensible and accessible. Precision measured in tiny distances is rarely necessary for a social salon unless a particular scene depends on it. Clear room membership can accomplish more than exact coordinates when the principal actions are negotiations, disclosures, and refusals.

The map also creates a tension between overview and situated knowledge. A participant may see every room and token while the character knows only what has been encountered or reported. This broader view can help players find opportunities without authorizing their characters to act on everything visible. The difference should be explicit. Otherwise a useful convenience becomes a source of disputes over inappropriate knowledge. Productions can reduce the tension by hiding information, by trusting participants to separate perspectives, or by designing a fiction in which the overview has an explanation. Each choice alters both the cognitive demands of play and the structure of dramatic uncertainty.

Theatre of the mind remains essential even in a detailed environment. A static image cannot fully display changing light, shifting attention, emotional atmosphere, or the consequences of every action. Participants must imagine beyond what is rendered. The visual surface can anchor their interpretations without dictating every feature of the world. A character might describe curtains stirring beside an open window even when the map shows no animation. Such

contributions require a convention concerning who may establish incidental details. When that authority is clear, the image supports invention. When it is unclear, participants may treat every unpictured element as forbidden or every private description as universally binding.

Scenic adaptation should preserve functions more carefully than appearances. A physical scenario may depend on accidental encounters near a refreshment table because characters repeatedly pass through that area. Copying the table's appearance online will not reproduce that function if participants never need to approach it. The designer might instead place a public notice, shared resource, or scheduled announcement there. The adaptation changes the practical reason for movement while retaining the opportunity for encounters. This example illustrates a general principle: dramatic space arises through patterns of use. A faithful adaptation may require changing the visible environment to preserve how it brings people together.

Thresholds deserve particular attention because they regulate transitions between social situations. Joining a voice channel can be interpreted as entering a room, but an arrival should become perceptible before the newcomer acts on private information. A brief introduction or a designated waiting position can supply that threshold. Departure requires similar clarity, especially when leaving changes who can witness an agreement. These procedures may appear mundane, yet they perform work analogous to entrances and exits on a stage. They establish who belongs to the scene and when the situation has changed. The dramatic value lies in their consequences, not in the number of controls involved.

Space can finally acquire meaning through accumulated history. A room that initially functions as neutral territory may become associated with betrayal after a confrontation. Nothing in its artwork needs to change for participants to approach it differently. This temporal accumulation shows that the environment is coauthored through use. Designers provide a structure of possible encounters; participants transform that structure by acting within it. Virtual tabletop drama becomes distinctive where a persistent spatial representation remains available while its social meanings change. The most consequential feature on the map may be one whose importance no organizer could have specified before the first conversation began.

Character Motivation and the Emergence of Dramatic Action

The strongest continuity between a physical salon and its virtual adaptation lies in motivated relationships. A character needs reasons to address particular people, withhold information, revise loyalties, or take a risk. These reasons can survive a change of medium even when the means of expressing them change substantially. A browser cannot rescue a scenario in which nobody has a reason to speak. Conversely, a compelling conflict can remain playable through modest visual resources when characters understand what matters and why others can affect it. The design problem begins with interdependence rather than with the selection of a picturesque environment.

A character brief can operate as a preparation for improvisation rather than as a miniature script. It establishes prior circumstances, commitments, vulnerabilities, and expectations while leaving the actual wording and sequence of encounters open. Its effectiveness depends on the relationships it makes actionable. Knowing that a character admires music may enrich characterization; knowing that another participant holds the only letter capable of protecting the character's sibling creates an immediate reason for interaction. Not every detail must serve an objective, but the brief should connect identity with opportunities to act. Otherwise personality becomes decorative information that participants struggle to translate into scenes.

Objectives produce stronger drama when they admit several meaningful responses. A demand to obtain one document can encourage a useful encounter, yet a scenario becomes brittle if the only successful action is discovering a predetermined password. The same document might instead be requested, traded, stolen through an agreed noncombat procedure, exposed publicly, or destroyed at a relational cost. Each route changes what the action means. The goal supplies pressure without prescribing the scene. This design supports agency by allowing participants to choose among consequences rather than merely searching for the organizer's preferred sequence of moves.

Interdependence also distributes initiative. If every important answer belongs to the facilitator, players repeatedly leave their encounters to seek authorization. If characters hold different resources, memories, and forms of influence, they become reasons for one another's participation. The

distribution should create multiple possible contacts rather than a single chain that fails when one person is absent. Redundancy is valuable where access matters; uniqueness is valuable where a particular relationship deserves weight. Balancing the two requires examining the network of dependencies. A character should be distinctive without becoming the only functioning doorway through which the entire event must pass.

Conflict need not involve combat or a universally agreed villain. Competing obligations can generate pressure through incompatible promises, limited resources, or different interpretations of a shared problem. A council deciding whether to reveal a dangerous discovery can produce dramatic action through persuasion and concealment alone. The absence of combat focuses attention on what participants can actually perform together: address, refusal, testimony, alliance, and judgment. A noncombat salon should make the consequences of those actions explicit enough that participants do not seek significance only through simulated physical force. Social action needs stakes that the scenario will recognize.

Emergence does not mean that structure disappears. The designer establishes an initial situation and a field of permissible change; participants produce particular events through their choices. Some developments may be scheduled, such as the arrival of a message or the expiration of a claim. Their function should be to alter the situation in which choices occur rather than secretly replace those choices with a fixed ending. A deadline can intensify a negotiation because the parties must decide under pressure. An announcement that

cancels every negotiated agreement simply to restore a planned finale removes the significance of what the participants have done.

Character knowledge must be distinguished from objective truth. A brief can report what a person remembers, suspects, believes, or has been told without making every statement an authoritative description of the world. This distinction permits disagreement that produces interpretation rather than procedural confusion. Two characters can sincerely remember the same event differently, but the scenario should indicate whether such divergence is intended. Otherwise participants may waste their energy correcting what they assume is an editorial mistake. Clear framing allows uncertainty within the fiction while maintaining trust in the event's materials. The designer can withhold answers without making the basic conditions of participation unreliable.

The virtual format changes how character material can be accessed. Searchable documents can make details easier to retrieve, while switching among windows can draw attention away from a conversation. A short public identity and a manageable private brief may support more responsive play than a large dossier whose important dependencies are difficult to locate. This is a question of usability rather than a universal preference for brevity. Complex roles can reward substantial preparation when participants want it. The important test is whether a character's information can become action at the moment it matters, with reasonable demands on memory and interface navigation.

Motivation also develops during performance. A character may begin with a political objective and discover that an

unexpected friendship has become more important. Such revision need not indicate failure to play the role. It may show that the character has encountered a situation capable of changing commitments. The framework should distinguish arbitrary abandonment from an intelligible transformation produced through encounters. When participants can recognize the reasons for a changed allegiance, the performance creates its own dramatic development. The scenario supplies the conditions of possibility, but the actual shape of a character's trajectory belongs to the decisions and responses that occur during play.

Simultaneous Scenes and the Participant as Audience

Simultaneity changes the relationship between a dramatic event and any person's experience of it. Several conversations can develop at once, each producing consequences that later enter other scenes. No participant necessarily sees the whole. This condition is familiar in physical salons, but digital channels give it a different organization. Walls of attention become explicit permissions, and moving between encounters can require a deliberate interface action. The resulting performance is distributed both spatially and epistemically. Its unity cannot depend on everybody receiving the same sequence of scenes, because that sequence does not exist during the event.

The participant functions as an audience through engagement in the scene. Listening is already an interpretive activity: a person judges another character's sincerity, recognizes a

concealed motive, or notices a change in address. A response can make that interpretation consequential. This audience position differs from watching a completed performance without the power to intervene, although it does not eliminate moments of quiet observation. A character attending a council may listen for a long interval before speaking. The significant distinction is that the capacity to act remains part of the situation. Reception and contribution alternate within a shared dramatic relationship.

Partial experience should not be confused with an incomplete version of an otherwise perfect, total story. A private promise may matter precisely because most characters do not witness it. If the organizer immediately broadcasts every secret for the benefit of an imagined universal audience, the production destroys the conditions that gave the promise its force. Coherence can instead arise from compatible consequences. The characters who made the agreement act on it; others encounter its effects through later behavior, rumor, or disclosure. The event becomes understandable through the relations among local scenes even when nobody can reconstruct every exchange while it is happening.

Digital separation can nevertheless make scenes excessively sealed. A physical group may notice a nearby disturbance or attract someone walking past. Separate channels can remove these peripheral cues unless another mechanism provides them. The designer must decide whether accidental encounters are important and how to support them. A public gathering space, an agreed interruption convention, or visible indications of room occupancy can provide opportunities without making private dialogue universally audible. These

are dramaturgical decisions because they determine how scenes connect. An environment organized entirely as invitation only meetings will produce a different social texture from one in which characters can regularly encounter unplanned company.

Attention becomes a resource whose distribution affects participation. A highly connected character may receive repeated invitations while another waits without a clear route into an encounter. Providing every participant with a detailed biography does not solve this problem if the interaction network remains uneven. Designers can examine whether each role has credible reasons to approach several others and whether each possesses something others may seek. Facilitators can also observe patterns of isolation without treating silence automatically as dissatisfaction. Some participants enjoy listening or planning. The relevant question is whether they retain a usable choice about how to participate.

Public scenes can reconnect fragmented action. A hearing, election, ceremony, or shared announcement gives characters a reason to bring local developments into a common forum. The gathering should not require a complete report of everything that has happened. Instead, it can place new pressure on private arrangements: a secret alliance must decide whether to appear united, or a concealed witness must choose whether to speak. Public scenes work best when they transform the relations among prior encounters. They can provide rhythm and orientation while preserving the unequal knowledge through which participants continue to act.

Debriefing offers another form of assembly after fictional action has concluded. Participants can explain what they attempted, what they misunderstood, and what remained invisible from their positions. The resulting account is a reconstruction produced through comparison rather than the recovery of one perfectly recorded narrative. Differences in interpretation can be informative without needing to be resolved into a single verdict. A conversation experienced as threatening by one character may have been intended as an offer of protection by another. Discussing that gap can reveal the event's dramatic complexity, provided the distinction between character intention and participant experience remains available.

Research should avoid assuming that more witnessed scenes mean a better event. A participant who experiences fewer encounters may find them unusually consequential, while another can move constantly without forming a sustained relationship. The quantity of activity is one indicator among several. It should be considered alongside perceived agency, opportunities for response, clarity of fictional consequence, and the participant's own aims. This caution matters because digital systems can make some forms of behavior easy to count. The visible movement of tokens may produce an attractive dataset while saying little about the quality of the conversations associated with that movement.

Distributed performance invites a different standard of collective coherence. The event needs enough common conditions for actions in one scene to matter in another, but it does not need universal awareness of those actions. A useful image is a gathering whose conversations share a social world

while maintaining distinct histories. Virtual tabletop drama makes the connections among those histories available through locations, messages, and recurring characters. Its audience is distributed among the people who are also creating it. The resulting form is theatrical because interpretation becomes part of action, and collective because nobody's perspective alone exhausts what the performance has made.

Facilitation and the Distribution of Narrative Authority

The facilitator's role changes when participants can initiate encounters without waiting for a central narrator. Preparation must carry some of the coordinating work that would otherwise occur through continuous explanation. Characters need usable motivations, locations need clear conventions, and ordinary actions need predictable routes to acceptance. This shift does not make the organizer unnecessary. It relocates authority from constant narration toward the maintenance of conditions under which participants can act. The facilitator remains responsible for the framework even when the most consequential scenes unfold beyond direct observation. Absence from a conversation is different from absence of responsibility for the event.

Narrative authority contains several distinct powers. Someone may establish facts about the setting, interpret a character's intentions, authorize an action, resolve a contested consequence, or determine what becomes publicly known. These powers need not belong to one person. Participants can

control their characters' ordinary speech while a facilitator manages changes to shared environmental conditions. A designated procedure can govern the transfer of a scarce object. Distinguishing the powers prevents vague promises that everyone may contribute equally from concealing unequal or uncertain arrangements. People need to understand which contributions they can make directly and which require another form of acknowledgment.

Authority becomes usable when its limits are visible. A participant might be free to invent an incidental memory but unable to declare another character guilty of a crime as an uncontested fact. The distinction is not between creativity and restriction. It concerns whose options a contribution changes and how that change gains legitimacy. Inventing that the ballroom smells of flowers imposes relatively little; inventing that every exit has vanished can reorganize the whole event. A clear framework can permit broad local invention while reserving major shared alterations for collective agreement or facilitator review. The degree of restriction should match the consequence of the claim.

The virtual environment can support this distribution by making some information persistent. A public notice can state a deadline without the organizer repeating it in every conversation. A shared map can establish recognized locations, and a clearly identified object can track possession where the chosen platform and procedures permit it. These resources reduce some forms of repeated explanation, but they do not interpret themselves. A symbol whose meaning is unclear can multiply questions. The facilitator's work includes ensuring that representational shortcuts remain

understandable and that technical permissions correspond reasonably to the authority participants are expected to exercise within the fiction.

Intervention is most defensible when it restores a meaningful choice or clarifies a shared condition. A participant who cannot enter any conversation may need help locating an opportunity. Two groups claiming the same unique object may need a ruling that preserves intelligible continuity. Intervention becomes more problematic when it silently reverses legitimate decisions because the resulting story differs from the organizer's preference. A director of virtual interactive drama should be able to distinguish support for the event's conditions from authorship of its desired outcome. The distinction is practical: it concerns whether participants can trust the consequences of actions already accepted.

Scaling the event intensifies this requirement. More participants can create richer networks of relationship, but they also increase the number of interactions an organizer cannot monitor. Simply multiplying character briefs does not create a workable large ensemble. The event needs procedures that permit ordinary scenes to proceed without centralized approval and a clear route for exceptional questions. Assistance can be divided among facilitators if resources allow, though additional staff introduce their own coordination demands. The principle remains the same at any scale: authority must be distributed deliberately enough that participants can act and disputes can be resolved without erasing the event's continuity.

The organizer also needs information that does not require total surveillance. A short request for help can identify a

stalled interaction without demanding recordings of every private exchange. Occasional public check ins can reveal whether a major development has reached the people who need to respond. A facilitator may occupy a clearly separate support channel so procedural questions do not automatically enter the fiction. Such arrangements should remain proportionate to the production. Monitoring every conversation can consume attention while undermining the experience of autonomous scenes. Good facilitation seeks the information required to keep participation workable, not an impossible mastery of every dramatic detail.

Distributed authority is not equivalent to the absence of unequal power. Experienced participants may shape interpretation more confidently, socially central players may attract attention, and technical expertise may become an informal source of control. Rules that appear neutral can favor people who already understand the interface. A facilitator should examine how authority operates in practice rather than assuming that the removal of a continuous narrator creates equality. Training, transparent procedures, and multiple routes into significant encounters can improve the distribution. Their value should be judged by whether participants gain usable opportunities, not by whether the event describes itself as collaborative.

The facilitator ultimately serves as a designer and custodian of dramatic possibilities. This formulation acknowledges creative preparation while refusing the idea that the completed event must reproduce a private plot. Custodianship includes maintaining intelligible conditions, supporting access, and protecting the significance of accepted choices. It

also requires restraint, since participants may create relationships or resolutions the organizer did not anticipate. Virtual tabletop technology can assist by providing a stable representational framework, but it cannot decide how much intervention a scene needs. That judgment belongs to the ongoing craft of enabling people to create a performance together without reducing their actions to decorative variation.

Hidden Information and the Persistence of Dramatic Artifacts

Virtual tabletop drama organizes not only where characters can go but also what they can know and demonstrate. A room may be visible to everyone while its significance remains concealed. A letter can be available to one character, misquoted by another, and dismissed by a third. These differences establish an informational environment more complex than the map. They also reveal why geographical concealment and dramatic suspense should be analyzed separately. Not knowing what lies behind a door is one source of uncertainty. Knowing exactly where a rival stands while remaining unable to interpret the rival's intentions can create another, equally consequential form.

Information has several possible statuses within a scenario. A fact can be true in the fictional world, believed by a character, visible to a participant, or accepted as public knowledge. These statuses overlap without necessarily coinciding. A player might receive an instruction that a character's memory is unreliable, while other characters interpret the memory as

testimony. Another participant might know a secret from preparation without possessing permission to use it in character. A clear design identifies these differences where they affect action. Confusion within the fiction can create drama; confusion about what the instructions authorize can make the interaction unworkable.

Concealment tools should follow the intended uncertainty rather than define it. Hiding a room may support discovery if entering it reveals evidence unavailable elsewhere. The same concealment may add little when the central conflict concerns whether that evidence should be trusted. A production can expose the full floor plan and still sustain mystery through motives, mistaken identities, and competing obligations. Conversely, a visually concealed environment can be dramatically predictable if every revelation confirms the same obvious account. The analytical question concerns which uncertainty a feature creates and whether that uncertainty gives participants meaningful choices. More hidden pixels do not necessarily produce a stronger mystery.

Persistent artifacts alter the relation between speech and evidence. An improvised promise may survive only through memory unless somebody records it as an agreed document. A digital treaty can remain available for later inspection, allowing participants to argue about wording or authenticity. Persistence does not remove interpretation. A document can be genuine but misleading, accurate but incomplete, or significant for reasons its holder does not understand. The artifact becomes dramatic through its circulation and use. Its technical stability can support a changing social meaning,

particularly when characters invoke the same wording for incompatible purposes.

The difference between possession and access deserves explicit treatment. A file shared with every participant may fictionally belong to one character. If participants can consult it at will, the event depends on a convention separating technical visibility from authorized knowledge. If access is restricted, the organizer must ensure that legitimate transfers remain possible without unnecessary delay. Neither solution is universally preferable. The first places more responsibility on participants to maintain perspective; the second places more responsibility on technical permissions and administration. Design should choose the arrangement that best supports the intended interactions and the practical capacities of the group.

Written channels can also change the balance of evidence. A typed statement preserves exact wording more readily than an unrecorded spoken exchange, potentially favoring participants who can produce and manage documents quickly. This consequence should not be mistaken for neutral realism. The fictional world may contain limited literacy, slow correspondence, or institutions that privilege oral testimony. The production needs a decision about how the communication medium relates to that world. A private message might represent a whispered remark, a physical note, or a letter delivered through a messenger. Those different meanings produce different expectations about copying, interception, and later proof.

Digital communication extends beyond the formal performance window. Sara Bjärstorp and Petra Ragnerstam

examine how social media affordances shape preparation, continuing interaction, and reflection around a LARP event, including persistence, visibility, editability, and associability (Bjärstorp and Ragnerstam, 2023). Their study concerns a particular event and its surrounding communication rather than the virtual salon proposed here. It nevertheless supports attention to the boundaries of the event. The present framework asks when a conversation counts as fictional action, when a document becomes authoritative, and whether material created after the closing scene can revise what participants understood to have occurred.

Temporal boundaries matter because a persistent platform can invite continued play after some participants have left. If later messages alter an election or expose a secret, those absent may lose opportunities they reasonably believed the completed event had secured. A production can permit an epilogue, but its authority should be stated. Participants might agree that later discussion interprets outcomes without changing them, or that a scheduled continuation reopens particular decisions. Clear closure protects the significance of participation during the shared window. Persistence becomes a resource when its relation to dramatic time is understood, rather than an accidental mechanism for extending the event indefinitely.

Artifacts also complicate documentation. A surviving map and collection of messages may look like a comprehensive record while omitting the tone, timing, and private responses that made them meaningful. A researcher should identify what each item can support. A treaty establishes a recorded formulation, but it does not by itself prove that every

signatory understood it identically. A token position establishes a represented location at a particular moment, but not necessarily the conversation occurring there. Virtual tabletop drama leaves useful traces without turning the whole performance into a transparent dataset. Its informational architecture shapes both what can happen and what can later be known about it.

Adapting a Hypothetical Salon Across Four Arrangements

A hypothetical scenario can make the framework concrete without pretending to supply empirical findings. Imagine a diplomatic reception aboard a research station after the discovery of an archive that could invalidate a treaty. Participants portray delegates, station personnel, custodians of the archive, and people whose families would be affected by disclosure. The event contains no combat. Its conflicts concern access, testimony, public responsibility, and incompatible promises. Before a final assembly, the characters must decide whether to publish the archive, restrict it, or authorize further investigation. These possibilities provide shared pressure while leaving the relationships and final decision open to performance.

The initial character network would distribute reasons for conversation. One delegate needs the treaty preserved to protect a vulnerable community. An archivist believes that suppressing the documents would repeat an earlier injustice. A station technician can explain gaps in the archive's chronology but wants recognition for neglected work.

Another character possesses a private account that challenges the archive without proving it false. None has enough authority or information to settle the issue alone. Each can contribute something consequential, and several routes lead toward the final assembly. The design creates interdependence without making one absent participant capable of stopping every other person's story.

In a physical salon, the room might contain marked areas for the reception, archive desk, private office, and assembly. Participants could approach one another directly, notice visible groups, and respond to raised voices. Physical letters or badges might establish possession and status. The organizer would need conventions for access to the archive and for any actions that ordinary bodily behavior could not adequately represent. The material environment would provide many incidental cues, but it would not guarantee that everyone understood the political situation. The character network and the significance of evidence would still require preparation. Physical proximity supplies resources for interaction without supplying the drama automatically.

In a conventional tabletop arrangement, the same premise could become a sequence of scenes coordinated through a common conversation. The facilitator might describe the reception, invite characters to act, and alternate between encounters. Participants could hear scenes their characters do not witness, using that knowledge to appreciate dramatic irony while maintaining character perspective. This arrangement would make collective orientation relatively straightforward, but simultaneous negotiations would require turn allocation or separate communication. The result could

remain intensely theatrical. It would simply organize attention differently, with the group more often receiving the performance together rather than occupying independent local scenes for extended periods.

As online theatre, the premise could become a performed hearing presented through selected screens or a broadcast. A prepared cast might stage competing testimonies while viewers submit questions or vote on the archive's fate. Such an event would provide a legible sequence for its audience and could make remote performance central to its aesthetic. Its degree of agency would depend on what the questions and votes could actually change. If the cast were required to reach the same conclusion regardless of audience input, the participation would have a limited narrative function. If responses could redirect testimony or decision, a more substantial participatory relationship would emerge.

In the virtual tabletop adaptation, the map would show a small number of socially distinct locations. The reception would provide an open meeting place, while the archive and office would support more selective encounters. Voice channels would correspond to those areas under an explicit arrival convention. Participants could approach other characters, exchange information, and negotiate without waiting for a facilitator to narrate each movement. A public notice would state the assembly time. The design would avoid detailed movement measurement because the relevant spatial question is who can encounter whom. The interface would make the station navigable while dialogue established its political atmosphere.

One possible scene would involve the archivist asking the technician to support public disclosure. The technician might agree only if an omitted record of labor is acknowledged. A delegate entering at that moment could interpret the negotiation as evidence that the archive has been manipulated. The scene's consequence would depend on what participants say and accept, not on a predetermined revelation. The token establishes the delegate's arrival, the voice performance establishes the accusation, and the character network gives that accusation stakes. This example shows how representational coordination can support a dramatic event that none of the prepared documents contains in finished form.

The virtual arrangement would require decisions about overhearing and documents. If the office is private, an arriving character should not hear its conversation before the occupants recognize the arrival. If the archive can be copied, the rules should explain whether sharing a file transfers evidence or merely communicates a claim. These decisions do not need to imitate every material detail of a research station. They need to support clear consequences. A simple procedure can be theatrically effective when participants understand what it enables. Complexity becomes useful only where it produces distinctions that matter to the intended conflict rather than delaying every attempted interaction.

The final assembly would bring local histories into a shared decision. Characters could present evidence, expose a promise, challenge a witness, or propose an unexpected compromise. The event should recognize legitimate outcomes even when they frustrate the organizer's preferred resolution.

An agreement to delay publication might represent prudent responsibility to one character and political cowardice to another. That difference can remain unresolved while the decision itself becomes clear. The production's coherence would come from acknowledged consequences and compatible shared facts. It would not require every participant to adopt the same interpretation of what the evening meant.

The four arrangements would produce related but nonidentical performances. The physical salon would offer bodily proximity and peripheral perception. The tabletop arrangement would make shared reception and facilitated sequencing prominent. The online theatrical version would organize presentation around a more clearly differentiated audience relationship. The virtual salon would combine persistent spatial reference with participant initiated encounters and distributed attention. These comparisons are hypotheses about affordances, not measured rankings of quality. Their purpose is to identify what a comparative study should observe: how people find scenes, establish presence, exercise authority, interpret evidence, and experience the consequences of choices made under each arrangement.

Access Evaluation and a Comparative Research Agenda

A theoretical framework becomes more useful when it identifies observations capable of challenging its claims. If reciprocal enactment, shared consequence, and distributed authority distinguish the proposed form, research should

examine whether participants actually experience and exercise those conditions. A production may describe itself as open while requiring organizer approval for almost every action. Another may provide elaborate spatial tools that participants largely ignore. Such findings would not automatically show failure. They would reveal which elements organize the event in practice and whether the proposed vocabulary captures them. The framework should remain revisable in response to performance rather than making every outcome confirm its premises.

A comparative study could adapt a modest scenario across selected arrangements while retaining its central relationships, stakes, and decision points. Perfect equivalence would be neither achievable nor desirable, since each adaptation must function in its medium. Researchers should record what is held constant and what is deliberately changed. A private office might become a separate channel online, while the physical version uses distance or a marked area. Those differences are part of the object of study. Treating them as procedural noise would obscure the very adaptations the comparison seeks to understand. The analysis should examine their consequences rather than claim that the settings are interchangeable.

Participant recruitment and prior experience would require particular care. Familiarity with roleplaying, confidence in speaking, technical comfort, and existing social relationships can all shape what people attempt. A group of experienced friends may make an unfamiliar interface workable through conventions developed elsewhere. New participants may struggle even with an apparently simple design. Repeating the

scenario with the same people introduces learning and knowledge of hidden information; using different groups introduces differences among participants. A defensible study would acknowledge these tradeoffs and document them. It would seek interpretable comparisons rather than an implausibly pure measurement of the medium alone.

Observation should combine several kinds of evidence. Facilitator notes can identify interruptions, requests for clarification, and interventions. Participant accounts can describe perceived agency, missed opportunities, and meaningful encounters. With appropriate agreement, selected recordings or text logs can support close analysis of how actions were recognized and answered. Scenario documents can reveal the opportunities intended by the designer. None of these sources provides a complete view. Their value increases when researchers compare them, especially where an intended feature remained unused or a participant found significance in a minor encounter. Discrepancies can explain the event more effectively than a single satisfaction score.

Several measures could be operationalized without reducing theatrical quality to activity counts. Researchers could examine how often participants initiate encounters without facilitator prompting, how contested actions acquire acceptance, and whether consequences established in one scene remain intelligible elsewhere. Interviews could ask participants to identify decisions they believe they could have made differently and explain what followed from their actual choices. These questions connect perceived agency with particular events. They avoid assuming that movement, speaking time, or technical interaction necessarily equals

meaningful participation. Quantitative descriptions can support the analysis when their relationship to the theoretical claims is made explicit.

Access must be treated as part of form rather than as an external administrative concern. A design organized entirely around rapid speech can exclude or disadvantage people for whom that pace is difficult. A heavily visual map may be poorly suited to some participants, while text laden interfaces can create different barriers. Network quality, available equipment, and private space also affect who can remain available for scenes. These conditions do not disappear because the event is online. The relevant question is how its procedures distribute practical opportunities to participate. Access decisions shape the available rhythms, channels, and relationships of the performance itself.

Multiple modes can help, but providing them is not sufficient unless their fictional authority is clear. If spoken statements count immediately while typed statements are noticed only after a scene closes, the second mode offers unequal power. A production might pause briefly to recognize a typed contribution, appoint a participant to relay it with permission, or structure scenes to allow deliberate turn taking. The appropriate arrangement depends on the group. The principle is equivalence of meaningful opportunity rather than identical behavior. Different means of contribution can support the same consequential role when the event recognizes them consistently.

Cross linguistic participation provides a related research question. A virtual salon can make written references and private preparation readily available, but navigating them

during dialogue may increase demands on attention. Participants using an additional language might benefit from predictable terms, clear identity displays, and opportunities to request clarification. These are design propositions to investigate, not evidence that the format automatically improves language proficiency. A study of educational outcomes would need its own objectives, measures, and comparison. The theatrical framework can identify communicative conditions without converting every lively conversation into a demonstrated learning effect.

Documentation should remain proportionate to the inquiry and the participants' expectations. Recording every channel may create an appearance of completeness while increasing technical and interpretive complexity. Selected scenes, consented accounts, and carefully timed observations can answer some questions more effectively. Researchers should distinguish what they witnessed, what participants reported, and what they infer from artifacts. This distinction is particularly important when reconstructing simultaneous events. An absence in one record does not establish that an action never occurred. The research account should preserve uncertainty where the evidence cannot resolve competing versions rather than manufacture a total story for analytical convenience.

The most informative evaluation would connect formal arrangements with particular experiences. A participant's account of an interrupted confession could be compared with the channel convention, the facilitator's notes, and the other participant's recollection. Such analysis could reveal whether a technical threshold enabled suspense, caused confusion, or

had little effect. Repeated cases might support broader conclusions about design, with appropriate limits. This approach respects the event as a performance while making its organization examinable. Virtual tabletop drama becomes a credible research object when its claims are tested through specific relations among procedures, actions, interpretations, and consequences, rather than through technological enthusiasm alone.

A Distinct Configuration of Participatory Theatre

Virtual Tabletop Interactive Drama is best understood as a distinct configuration within overlapping traditions rather than as a form created from nothing. Its components include character based roleplaying, salon dramaturgy, mediated representation, and networked performance. What merits focused analysis is their organization: participants can inhabit a shared fictional situation through persistent spatial reference while initiating encounters whose consequences circulate beyond any single scene. That configuration may be sufficiently stable to support a useful name without requiring a claim that all its elements are unprecedented. Distinctiveness can reside in relationships among familiar practices as much as in an entirely unfamiliar technology.

The framework developed here identifies reciprocal availability as a condition of the event's theatrical present. Participants must be able to recognize that another person can answer an action while its consequences remain open. It identifies coordinated attribution as a condition of mediated

embodiment, linking voice, image, and token to an intelligible character position. It treats dramatic space as an arrangement of possible encounters and considers agency through the accepted consequences of participant decisions. These concepts are offered as analytical tools. Their usefulness lies in the questions they make answerable about a particular performance, including performances that complicate or resist the proposed model.

The adaptation preserves some salon functions while transforming their means. Character motivations can continue to generate encounters, but approach may require an explicit digital threshold. Simultaneous scenes can continue to produce partial perspectives, but their connections may need deliberate support. A character's emotional expression can remain immediate, while its visible body becomes distributed among signs. The facilitator can retain responsibility for coherent conditions while relinquishing continuous narration. None of these changes is inherently an improvement or a decline. Each creates a set of choices whose value depends on the intended experience and the people who must make the arrangement work.

The virtual form also makes certain combinations easier to organize under suitable conditions. Selective channels can provide clearly bounded encounters; persistent documents can carry agreements between scenes; a shared map can remain available while participants occupy separate physical locations. These possibilities do not guarantee privacy, clarity, or participation on every platform. They identify functions that a production can implement and evaluate. Their artistic significance appears when they support relationships

that would be awkward, costly, or differently experienced elsewhere. A new capability becomes dramaturgically important through what participants can do with it, not through its presence in a feature description.

The game and theatre question can now be answered without demanding a ceremonial crossing of a boundary. An online roleplaying session becomes theatrically available when character actions are enacted for interpretation and response within a consequential fictional situation. It can retain objectives, procedures, and strategic uncertainty throughout. A virtual tabletop session may contain such encounters briefly or organize the whole event around them. The degree of theatrical emphasis is an object of analysis rather than a title awarded by the software. The same browser can host a tactical exercise, a narrated adventure, a participatory hearing, or a distributed salon, depending on the relationships participants establish.

The hypothetical research station demonstrates why those relationships deserve priority in design. The archive matters because characters can invoke it, contest it, conceal it, or allow it to change their obligations. The station matters because its locations organize encounters in which those choices become perceptible. The final assembly matters because local actions acquire public consequences. Elaborate images could enrich that production, but they would not supply its underlying structure. Its dramatic life would arise from people who have reasons to act and sufficient freedom to make those reasons conflict in ways nobody has fully written beforehand.

One practical consequence follows for future productions. Designers should test a short encounter before building an extensive virtual venue. If participants cannot identify who is present, what they may establish, and how a decision changes the situation, additional artwork will not resolve the problem. If those relationships work, even a limited environment can support sustained performance. Development should begin with that encounter and expand from its demands.

The browser can become a venue for theatre when participants make one another consequentially present. Its screen supplies neither an inadequate substitute for every physical resource nor an automatic advance beyond embodied performance. It supplies a particular arrangement of possibilities, whose limits become as important as its conveniences. Studying that arrangement requires attention to ordinary procedures as well as extraordinary moments: an arrival recognized, a promise preserved, a silence clarified, a decision allowed to stand. Through those practices, a dispersed group can create a shared event whose meaning exceeds any map, token, or individual account. The performance exists in the relationships they make and the changes they accept together.

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Alice Fenwick

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The Map Is Not the Territory

Theatre of the Mind and the Paradox of Visual Representation in Virtual Tabletop Drama

Oliver Bramwell

Abstract

This essay investigates how visual maps support and constrain imaginative participation in virtual tabletop drama. It argues that a map's dramatic value depends on its selective commitments, recognized authority, and capacity to accommodate fictional change rather than on visual realism alone. Drawing on research into external representations, narrative involvement, and mediated experience, the essay distinguishes orientation, presence, imaginative latitude, and consequential agency. It examines static images, dynamic scenes, subjective perspectives, dialogue, and access before comparing three hypothetical presentations of a haunted mansion salon: no shared spatial map, a simplified plan, and an elaborate illustrated environment. A proposed comparative study addresses informational equivalence, ensemble effects, observation, and participant accounts. The essay concludes that effective visual design clarifies relationships needed for action while leaving room for accountable imaginative development through performance.

Keywords

Virtual Tabletop Interactive Drama, theatre of the mind, visual representation, imaginative participation, external cognition, salon LARP

The Representational Paradox of Virtual Tabletop Drama

A virtual tabletop map can strengthen an imagined dramatic world precisely because it leaves most of that world unrepresented. Its lines can establish where characters meet without displaying what their meeting means. A doorway can make an entrance intelligible while speech supplies hesitation, hostility, or relief. This relationship challenges the assumption that a more complete image necessarily produces a more compelling performance. The relevant question concerns the division of work among visible representation, spoken interaction, and participant imagination. A map supports drama when that division makes consequential encounters possible. It can obstruct drama when participants mistake its visible contents for the full range of permissible actions, perceptions, and interpretations.

The problem is particularly important for salon LARP adapted to online performance. Such events can organize their action around conversation, negotiation, secrecy, recognition, and changing loyalties. A virtual environment may represent a spaceship, castle, or mansion, but the principal dramatic activity often concerns relations that no floor plan can display adequately. Two characters standing together might be allies, estranged relatives, or strangers rehearsing a deception. Their positions establish an opportunity for interaction without explaining its stakes. The map becomes theatrically useful through the encounters it helps participants arrange, while the fictional situation develops through what those participants say and accept.

The phrase theatre of the mind is used here to describe collaborative evocation of fictional circumstances that exceed their immediate sensory presentation. It does not require every participant to form an identical internal picture or a vivid mental image. Participants can understand that a room is oppressive, that a character refuses to approach its window, and that an accusation threatens a relationship without imagining matching visual details. The operative achievement is enough shared understanding for actions to remain intelligible. This distinction prevents imaginative participation from being measured against an impossible requirement that everyone privately experience the same scene in precisely the same way.

Visible representation creates a productive tension within that achievement. A map can reduce uncertainty about rooms and routes, leaving attention available for a demanding conversation. It can also establish details that participants treat as binding even when those details are incidental to the drama. A painted table may become the only table anyone believes may be used. An empty area may be interpreted as empty of everything, including objects that the scenario never intended to exclude. Such effects are possibilities to investigate rather than inevitable consequences of illustration. Their occurrence depends on expectations about the authority of images and the permissions attached to invention.

The argument of this essay is that useful visual representation is selective, accountable, and revisable. Selectivity concerns which relationships the image makes available. Accountability concerns what participants may reasonably infer from it. Revisability concerns how accepted fictional

changes supersede an earlier depiction. These qualities do not describe a preferred artistic style. A highly detailed illustration can possess them, while a simple diagram can fail all three. The contrast between sparse and elaborate maps becomes analytically valuable only when it reveals how a representation allocates attention, authority, and imaginative responsibility. Graphic density alone cannot explain those relationships.

The essay compares three presentation conditions: an environment described without a shared spatial map, an environment represented by a simplified plan, and an environment supported by elaborate illustration. The comparison is conceptual and leads to a proposed study rather than reporting experimental findings. Its illustrative mansion scenario is hypothetical. None of the conditions is designated the winner in advance. A map can support orientation and constrain invention at the same time, while an unmapped environment can encourage imaginative variation and impose substantial coordination demands. A defensible account must permit such mixed outcomes and identify the particular task each representation serves.

The theoretical foundation combines research on external representations with distinctions among visual fidelity, spatial presence, and narrative involvement. Zhang and Norman's analysis of distributed cognitive tasks places internal and external representations within a single functional arrangement rather than treating visible materials as incidental supplements to thought (Zhang and Norman, 1994). The application developed here is specific to collaborative drama: a shared display can hold some relations

steady while participants interpret and change others. That application is a proposal, not a finding from their study. It directs attention toward what a map enables people to coordinate during actual performance.

The larger implication concerns the nature of the territory itself. In a fictional performance, the territory is not an independently accessible building that the image imperfectly copies. It is an evolving situation established through descriptions, enacted relationships, and accepted consequences. The map participates in producing that situation while remaining only one of its resources. Understanding this distinction allows designers to ask a more useful question than how much realism they can add. They can ask which visible commitments will help participants imagine, act, and respond together, and which commitments should remain open because the performance has yet to make them.

Maps as Selective Claims About a Fictional World

A map is a set of selective claims, even when its artwork appears richly continuous. A line may claim that a wall separates two spaces. A symbol may claim that a door connects them. A color may distinguish public from restricted territory. None of these claims derives its dramatic authority solely from its appearance. Participants need conventions connecting marks with fictional conditions. An ornate door drawn on a background image might be usable, locked, decorative, or outside the playable area. The image can

prompt an inference, but the event determines whether that inference supports action. This distinction makes the map an instrument of shared interpretation rather than a self sufficient statement of the world.

Selection is not a defect that greater resolution can eliminate. Every map leaves out something, including aspects that a different task might make important. A plan designed to show routes can omit ceiling height. A diagram designed for social encounters can omit precise distances while distinguishing accessible rooms. A dramatic production should decide which omissions are harmless and which create uncertainty about meaningful choices. If nobody needs to calculate the height of a window, leaving it unspecified may preserve useful freedom. If the scenario requires a witness to see through that window, the relevant sight line needs some recognized basis. Completeness is less useful than adequacy to the actions the event permits.

The map also establishes different kinds of claim with different degrees of force. Architectural claims concern stable relationships such as adjacency and enclosure. Situational claims concern current conditions such as occupancy, lighting, or access. Atmospheric suggestions concern qualities that invite interpretation without fixing every fact. A dark palette might suggest unease without establishing that characters cannot read. Problems arise when participants treat a suggestion as a rule or a fixed architectural feature as freely alterable decoration. The distinction need not become an elaborate technical taxonomy. A short explanation of what the map does and does not establish can resolve many uncertainties before they interrupt performance.

Absence is especially ambiguous. If a bookcase is not pictured, it may be absent from the fictional room, omitted for clarity, or available for incidental invention. These possibilities have different consequences. A participant who describes taking a book may be making a harmless atmospheric contribution in one production and inventing an unauthorized source of evidence in another. The designer should connect authority with significance. Incidental objects can be broadly negotiable while objects that resolve major conflicts require stronger grounding. This arrangement protects creative contribution without allowing every unrepresented detail to become an unlimited resource for defeating the scenario's central problem.

Scale introduces another selective commitment. A map may preserve proportions, indicate only relative position, or organize rooms for visual convenience. Participants who assume accurate distance can misinterpret the time required for movement or the likelihood of being overheard. A stylized plan is not misleading if its abstraction is understood. The difficulty appears when visual precision suggests an accuracy the production does not intend to maintain. Decorative measurement grids can create this problem even when no rule uses them. The interface should make important distinctions legible while avoiding an appearance of precision that invites irrelevant disputes about the placement of a token.

Maps can represent conflicting perspectives within the fiction. A character might possess an outdated plan, an incomplete memory, or a deliberately altered document. In that case, the map's uncertainty belongs to the dramatic situation. The event must distinguish that uncertainty from

errors in the shared interface. An unreliable fictional document can be compelling when participants understand that its claims may be challenged. A supposedly authoritative play surface that unexpectedly proves wrong can instead undermine trust in basic coordination. Both involve discrepancy, but they place it at different levels. The first invites characters to investigate; the second may require participants to repair the conditions of participation.

Authorship of the image deserves attention because its apparent neutrality can conceal a particular viewpoint. A floor plan centered on grand public rooms may marginalize service spaces that matter to certain characters. A spaceship diagram organized around command may make labor, maintenance, and habitation seem secondary. These are interpretive possibilities within specific designs, not universal consequences of genre. The practical question is whether the visible environment grants all relevant groups usable places and routes. A representation can express hierarchy deliberately while still providing the characters affected by that hierarchy opportunities to encounter it, contest it, and act within it.

The fictional territory becomes shared through accepted use. Participants refer to a chamber, enter it under the agreed convention, and recognize what happened there as part of the event. The map supports that continuity, but its marks alone do not establish the entire history of the place. After a confession, the same chamber can acquire significance that the image never anticipated. The visible representation remains stable while the world it helps sustain changes. Treating the map as a selective set of claims makes room for

this growth. It anchors what requires common reference without requiring all subsequent meaning to appear graphically.

Theatre of the Mind as Collaborative Interpretation

Theatre of the mind is sometimes described as the absence of visual aids, but that description mistakes a presentation condition for an imaginative process. A vividly illustrated room still requires participants to interpret its atmosphere, anticipate another character's response, and understand the meaning of an action that the image cannot exhaust. Even physical theatrical scenery depends on such interpretation. The relevant distinction concerns what information is supplied through which medium and what participants must infer, negotiate, or invent. An unmapped environment places more spatial coordination in language and memory. A mapped environment redistributes that work while leaving substantial imaginative activity intact.

Collaborative interpretation differs from private fantasy because contributions become available for others to answer. A participant can imagine a secret passage without making it part of the shared world. Describing its discovery may propose a fictional fact, but the proposal gains authority through the event's conventions. Other participants may accept it, question it, or refer it to a facilitator. This process links imagination with social accountability. The issue is not whether invention should occur, since every unfolding scene requires it. The issue is how invention acquires consequences

for people who must rely on a sufficiently stable understanding of what the world contains.

Shared understanding can remain partial without becoming incoherent. Two participants may imagine different wallpaper while agreeing that a conversation occurs in a room with one recognized entrance. Their difference has no necessary effect on the scene. If one imagines an open window through which an accusation can be heard and the other imagines a sealed chamber, the discrepancy can matter immediately. The event needs precision where action depends on it and can tolerate variation elsewhere. This principle permits imaginative freedom without romanticizing confusion. It asks participants to align on consequential relationships rather than spending scarce attention matching every decorative detail.

Description performs several functions within that alignment. It can establish a fact, invite an interpretation, disclose a character's perception, or frame an action for response. Saying that the room is cold differs from saying that a character feels unwelcome there. The first can describe an environmental condition; the second can express a subjective response without requiring everyone to share it. A careful participant can mark the distinction through ordinary language. Such clarity is especially valuable when vivid description risks sounding authoritative. The freedom to evoke a scene should coexist with recognition of which claims affect others and which belong to a particular character's experience.

Theatre of the mind also unfolds through listening. A player who hears another character repeatedly mention a locked cabinet may begin to treat that cabinet as socially significant

even before learning its contents. An object becomes salient through patterns of attention rather than through graphic emphasis alone. This process can develop across several encounters, producing a place whose importance exceeds the information presented at the opening. The map may offer a persistent marker for the cabinet, but its dramatic force comes from use. Participants build the environment by noticing what others care about and deciding whether those concerns deserve a response.

Mochocki's account of LARP as a multimodal medium connects representation with embodied participation and the participant's situated experience (Mochocki, 2018). For the present analysis, that account supports studying several channels together rather than asking whether words or images independently create the fictional world. The extension to VTT drama concerns how these channels coordinate across physical distance. A diagram can establish relative position, speech can perform an invitation, and an accepted convention can determine whether another character hears it. The performance emerges from their relationship. None provides a complete substitute for the others merely by becoming more detailed.

An unmapped environment can make this relationship particularly visible. Participants may ask where they can meet, whether a corridor connects two rooms, or who can see a doorway. Those questions reveal the spatial commitments required for action. They can also interrupt a conversation when the same commitments must be restated repeatedly. Narrative presentation provides no automatic guarantee of flexibility or immersion. It can encourage open description

while concentrating interpretive authority in whoever remembers the environment most confidently. A shared map may reduce that informal advantage by making certain facts inspectable. The value of imagination should not obscure the practical distribution of knowledge and control.

Imaginative variation can itself become part of the fiction when appropriately marked. A haunted room might appear familiar to one character and threatening to another because their histories differ. Such differences need not require separate rendered environments. Private instructions and character speech can support them, provided participants understand that subjective perception does not automatically alter public architecture. This technique allows an ordinary floor plan to sustain psychologically complex scenes. Its success depends less on representing every perception than on providing a workable boundary between the conditions people share and the experiences through which individual characters interpret those conditions.

The collaborative process works best when participants can repair a misunderstanding without treating repair as artistic defeat. A brief clarification about whether a door is open may preserve a scene that would otherwise develop incompatible consequences. Such interventions resemble the ordinary coordination through which any ensemble sustains a shared activity. The aim is not uninterrupted illusion at any cost. It is continued capacity to act meaningfully together. Theatre of the mind remains central to virtual tabletop drama because the performance always exceeds its immediate display, and because participants continually decide how that excess can become available to one another.

Visual Scaffolding and the Distribution of Attention

A shared representation can act as a scaffold by holding selected relationships available while participants direct attention toward changing dramatic demands. A room name, doorway, or token position can spare a group from reconstructing the same arrangement repeatedly through speech. This assistance is functional rather than ornamental. Its value depends on whether the represented relationship matters and whether participants can retrieve it easily. A map crowded with irrelevant features may provide more information while offering less useful support. The appropriate question concerns what work the image carries and what work remains for the people engaged in the performance.

Scaife and Rogers question general assumptions that technologically elaborate graphics necessarily provide cognitive benefits. Their account directs attention to the interaction between external representations, internal processes, and the task being undertaken (Scaife and Rogers, 1996). That argument provides a foundation for testing maps against particular dramatic requirements rather than ranking them by apparent sophistication. It does not establish that sparse graphics are always superior. The inference developed here is conditional: a representation should be evaluated according to the coordination it enables and the demands it introduces within a specific participatory event. A visually attractive display can help, distract, or do both under different circumstances.

Orientation is one possible benefit. A participant seeking an archivist can inspect recognized locations rather than interrupting several conversations to ask where the character might be. This convenience becomes dramatically important if it helps the participant initiate an otherwise missed encounter. The map can also make solitude and gathering perceptible, allowing someone to choose between approaching a group and requesting a private meeting. These opportunities depend on reliable conventions about occupancy. If tokens are routinely left behind while their players change channels, the apparent information becomes unreliable. A scaffold supports action only when participants can reasonably trust the relationships it displays.

Visual salience can redistribute attention in less useful ways. A large, richly decorated chamber may attract exploration even when the scenario's important relationships develop elsewhere. A striking symbol can imply that an object deserves investigation, leading participants to search for a hidden mechanism the organizer never intended. Such responses are understandable because images invite interpretation. The solution is not to remove every attractive feature. It is to examine whether the visual hierarchy matches the intended opportunities. Decorative emphasis can enrich atmosphere, but it should not repeatedly promise consequential interaction that the production cannot recognize or support.

Maps may also change the timing of attention. An image can be inspected before a scene, consulted during it, or revisited afterward. A participant who repeatedly zooms and searches while another person speaks may miss vocal cues that carry

the encounter's emotional direction. Another participant may use the same map to remain oriented and listen more confidently. Neither effect can be inferred from the number of pixels alone. Design should consider the frequency of reference a task requires. Information needed continually should be easy to locate; information relevant only occasionally should not compete constantly with the people whose responses make the drama.

The distribution of attention becomes more complicated across multiple screens and channels. Character notes, private messages, audio controls, and the map can all request immediate notice. Adding a visible environmental change may be useful, but only if participants have a plausible opportunity to register it. A clue that appears silently in a corner of the tabletop may be technically public while remaining effectively unavailable to those engaged in conversation. If noticing it is essential, the event needs a clear notification convention. Otherwise the production turns attention management into an accidental gatekeeper of narrative access, rewarding interface vigilance more than character action.

Scaffolding can support collective rather than merely individual coordination. A shared pointer can establish which doorway a speaker means. A common room label can stabilize references among participants with different descriptive habits. A visible meeting area can provide a dependable return point after simultaneous scenes. These functions do not require photorealism. They require distinguishable features and compatible expectations. In some cases, an abstract label can coordinate more effectively than a

beautifully rendered room whose boundaries are difficult to read. Aesthetic design and functional clarity can cooperate, but their relationship should be demonstrated through use rather than assumed from appearance.

Access conditions affect the same distribution. Small text, low contrast, visually similar rooms, and dependence on subtle color differences can make a map difficult for some participants to use. Simply supplying a verbal description may not create equivalent opportunities if other people can inspect locations continuously. Alternative references need enough persistence and authority to support comparable action. A concise room directory, stable channel names, or an agreed request for orientation can help where appropriate. The design objective is usable access to consequential relationships. Different participants may achieve that access through different representational means without sharing an identical interface experience.

The strongest scaffold leaves participants free to devote effort to the drama they intend to perform. It makes necessary information inspectable without demanding constant inspection, and it distinguishes important possibilities without pretending to display every possible circumstance. Its adequacy can be tested through encounters: can a character find someone, establish presence, understand the available actions, and respond to a changing situation? A map that helps answer those questions earns its place. One that mainly increases the number of things participants must monitor may require revision, even if its artwork would look excellent on a poster outside the theatre.

Visual Realism Presence and Dramatic Involvement

Realism, presence, and dramatic involvement describe different questions that should not be collapsed into a single scale. Realism can concern whether an image resembles a familiar material environment. Presence can concern the experience of being situated somewhere or engaged with responsive others. Dramatic involvement can concern sustained attention to characters, uncertainty, and consequential relationships. A participant may admire a convincing image while remaining indifferent to the scene, or become deeply involved in a negotiation represented by plain circles on a diagram. These possibilities do not prove that realism is irrelevant. They show why its contribution needs to be specified rather than treated as a universal explanation.

Realism itself requires more precise description. Architectural plausibility, surface texture, lighting, visual perspective, and density of depicted objects can vary independently. An elaborate top view may contain abundant texture while remaining highly diagrammatic in perspective. A sparse perspective view may resemble bodily vision while omitting most objects. Researchers should record these properties instead of assuming that elaborate and realistic name the same condition. Designers should likewise identify which quality they want to improve. Adding texture will not necessarily clarify routes, and adding more objects will not necessarily make a room's social function easier to understand. A useful comparison describes the representation before asking what experience it produces.

Slater distinguishes place illusion from plausibility illusion in the context of immersive virtual reality, relating the former to the experience of being somewhere and the latter to the apparent occurrence of a credible scenario (Slater, 2009). A desktop tabletop session differs substantially from the systems he discusses, so his conclusions cannot simply be transferred as findings about salon drama. The distinction remains analytically helpful because it separates spatial experience from the credibility of events. The application proposed here asks whether a map supports orientation and whether the unfolding interaction remains responsive to character action. Neither question is answered merely by inspecting the quality of the artwork.

Marie-Laure Ryan's work places immersion and interactivity in a comparative account spanning narrative and electronic media rather than identifying imaginative absorption exclusively with technological display (Ryan, 2015). That broad perspective supports examining how a participant can remain engaged through language, anticipation, and action. The present essay develops its own narrower distinction between scenic attraction and dramatic investment. Scenic attraction concerns attention to the represented environment; dramatic investment concerns what participants believe matters within an unfolding encounter. They can reinforce one another, but they can also diverge. A research design should allow that divergence to appear instead of treating every favorable response to a picture as evidence of theatrical immersion.

An elaborate room can provide an immediate genre cue. Worn velvet, damaged portraits, and an empty hearth can

suggest a Gothic setting before any character speaks. Such cues may help participants adopt a shared register and reduce the amount of introductory description required. They can also become overly directive if every feature implies the same emotional response. A room depicted as unmistakably sinister may make it harder to perform a character's sincere sense of safety there, unless the production permits subjective interpretation. Realism becomes useful when it supports the range of character perspectives the scenario needs, including perspectives that complicate the image's most obvious invitation.

The contrast with minimal representation should receive equal scrutiny. A plain floor plan can encourage people to supply their own atmosphere, but it can also feel uninviting or difficult to interpret. Participants who lack confidence in the genre may find themselves uncertain about how to begin. A sparse map is not an artistic virtue merely because it leaves gaps. Its omissions need support through preparation, description, or established conventions. Otherwise the apparent freedom may transfer unpaid interpretive labor to participants who did not expect to design the setting while performing their characters. Openness should be usable, not merely available in principle.

Graphic coherence can matter more than resemblance to photography. A stylized environment may communicate boundaries, routes, and social distinctions consistently, while an image composed of realistic elements may obscure which areas are playable. A doorway hidden by dramatic shadows can look persuasive as an illustration and function poorly as an entrance. The relevant standard depends on use. If a scene

requires characters to recognize possible interruptions, the doorway should be legible enough to support that action. The map can remain evocative while making operational relationships clear. Art direction becomes part of dramaturgy when it shapes the actions participants can reasonably anticipate.

More detail may also establish expectations of simulation. A participant who sees individual drawers, tools, and food may assume that each can be examined or manipulated. If the production recognizes only room level movement and dialogue, the display promises a kind of interaction it does not provide. This mismatch can interrupt involvement more sharply than acknowledged abstraction. The problem is a contract between representation and response. A stylized cabinet can work when everyone knows what it signifies; a finely rendered cabinet can disappoint when its apparent invitation leads only to repeated refusals. Fidelity should be coordinated with the production's capacity to answer what participants attempt.

Emotional intensity should not serve as a simple proxy for successful visual design. A participant might report a powerful scene because of a personal association, an especially responsive partner, or an unexpected betrayal. The map may have helped establish the encounter without causing its intensity. Conversely, a quieter session may still provide clear agency and satisfying interpretation. Research needs to ask what participants attribute to particular representational features and compare those accounts with the actions observed. The aim is to understand contribution rather than

attach every memorable experience to the most conspicuous technology in the room.

The hypothesis worth testing is conditional rather than linear. Additional detail may improve involvement where it clarifies relevant possibilities or supplies a useful atmosphere. It may reduce involvement where it competes for attention, implies unsupported interactions, or narrows interpretations the drama needs to keep open. These effects may differ among participants and among moments of the same event. An ideal balance cannot be specified as a universal percentage of illustration. It must be assessed through the relationship between representational commitments and the particular conversations, decisions, and perspectives the production seeks to enable.

Static Images and the Changing State of Performance

A static map presents one arrangement while a performance continually changes what that arrangement means. Doors open, alliances form, documents move, and a room becomes unavailable after a public accusation. Some changes are spatial; others are social or interpretive. A tabletop system may represent selected changes directly, but no practical interface needs to animate every accepted development. The central problem concerns how participants know which state currently governs their actions. A map that remains visually unchanged can support a dynamic world when its authority is properly bounded. Difficulty arises when the visible surface

appears to overrule changes that people have already performed and accepted.

The difference between architecture and state provides a useful starting point. Architecture concerns relatively stable relationships such as the connection between a corridor and a study. State concerns conditions that can change during play, such as whether the study is open, occupied, or under restriction. An illustration may combine these categories without marking their difference. A painted closed door can look like a continuing report of access even after a character has opened it. The production should establish whether the image depicts a starting condition, a general arrangement, or a continuously updated authority. Each is workable, but participants need to understand which convention governs.

Not every change requires a new image. If a character overturns a chair during an argument, the action can remain part of the fiction through acknowledgment and subsequent reference. Updating the map may be useful if the chair blocks an important route. It may be unnecessary if the action's significance lies in anger rather than obstruction. This distinction connects representational effort with consequence. A production that pauses to redraw every incidental change can make its visual record more current while weakening the responsiveness of the scene. A production that never records persistent changes can create incompatible later actions. Selective updating offers a practical middle ground.

An accepted change should have a recognizable path into shared knowledge. A private conversation can establish a promise between its participants without immediately informing everyone else. A structural change affecting access

to the whole mansion requires broader communication. The appropriate notification depends on who must respond, not merely on who technically can receive a message. A public marker, facilitator announcement, or concise scene description can establish the change where necessary. The system should avoid relying on silent alterations that participants are unlikely to notice during dialogue. Availability on screen and practical availability for action are different conditions.

The distinction becomes more demanding when simultaneous scenes establish related facts. One group may report that the gallery is empty while another uses it for a secret meeting. A shared map can help expose such conflicts, but it cannot resolve whether the discrepancy reflects timing, hidden presence, or an error. Participants need a procedure for reconciling consequential contradictions. The procedure should preserve as much accepted action as possible while restoring compatible conditions. A brief agreement that one scene occurred earlier may be sufficient where timing was unspecified. If timing matters, a facilitator may need to clarify which actions were possible and offer a fair opportunity to respond.

Visual persistence can give outdated information an undeserved sense of certainty. A participant returning after several minutes may trust a familiar room image even though the fiction has changed. Simple annotations can distinguish current status from the underlying artwork. Their usefulness depends on clarity and maintenance. Too many overlapping markers can make the environment harder to read, while ambiguous symbols can create new uncertainties. A small,

consistent vocabulary is often easier to coordinate than improvised signs whose meanings vary among rooms. This is a design proposition to test through use, with attention to what participants actually notice and understand.

The performance can also revise the meaning of an unchanged object. A portrait initially read as decoration may become evidence of kinship after a disclosure. Its pixels remain identical, but participants' relations to it change. This is not a failure to update the map. It is a case in which the image supports narrative reinterpretation without changing its represented state. The distinction matters because a visually dynamic interface can still support a static story, while a static image can sustain significant dramatic development. Change should be analyzed at the level of accepted circumstances and interpretations, not measured only through animation or graphical modification.

The map may deliberately lag behind the fiction if it represents an artifact within the world. An old mansion plan can omit a recently sealed entrance, giving characters reasons to compare sources. Such discrepancy works differently from an out of date coordinating display. The former is evidence available for investigation; the latter affects the reliability of participation. Productions can use both, but they should identify their status. Otherwise participants may either dismiss a meaningful inconsistency as a technical oversight or treat an actual oversight as a clue. The distinction protects uncertainty where it serves the drama and clarity where action requires it.

Temporal conventions should remain proportionate to the scenario. Some events need a shared clock because a

departure or announcement creates a deadline. Others can treat travel between nearby rooms as an ordinary transition whose exact duration remains unimportant. A detailed map can tempt participants to infer travel time from scale even where the production has no interest in measuring it. Clear conventions prevent that visual suggestion from becoming an accidental rule. The world can change coherently without simulating every second, provided participants understand which sequences and deadlines carry consequences and which merely support the flow of encounters.

Reconciling a static map with dynamic performance is ultimately a problem of maintaining priority among representations. The latest accepted fictional state should govern relevant action, while the map supplies whatever stable reference remains useful. This priority must be understandable enough that participants can rely on it without continuous adjudication. They should be able to ask whether an apparent discrepancy matters, clarify it quickly, and continue. The image then becomes a durable resource within an evolving event. Its stillness provides continuity without requiring the performance to remain still beside it.

Dialogue and the Making of Dramatic Place

A simple floor plan can become a convincing theatrical environment when dialogue gives its locations histories, obligations, and possibilities for action. Conviction does not require participants to forget that they are looking at a diagram. It requires them to understand why entering a

particular room or approaching a particular person matters within the shared situation. A ballroom becomes more than a labeled rectangle when one character refuses to cross it while another insists on a public apology there. The floor plan makes the relationship locatable. Speech and response make it dramatic by connecting place with motives that can change what participants do.

Dialogue can establish place through address. A host who welcomes someone as an honored guest creates a different encounter from a guard who demands an explanation for the same arrival. The coordinates may be unchanged, but the social meaning of entry differs. A location becomes hospitable, threatening, ceremonial, or contested through the actions people recognize there. The map can support this process through clear thresholds and areas of gathering. It cannot determine the tone or legitimacy of every entrance in advance. Those qualities develop through how characters interpret and answer one another within the available space.

Deictic language connects speech to a shared reference. Expressions such as this door, that table, and the room beyond the gallery can make a scene immediate when participants can identify the intended feature. A pointer or token can assist, but the coordination should not depend on visual access alone. A stable room name can preserve the reference for someone using another mode. The aim is to let language locate action without requiring a prolonged interface negotiation. When reference works, participants can shift attention from discovering what the speaker means spatially to deciding what the speaker's intention demands of their characters.

Place also develops through remembered action. A room where a character was humiliated may remain uncomfortable long after the gathering has ended. Another character can invoke that history in a later confrontation without changing the map. The site becomes a resource for characterization because it holds an accepted event that participants can reinterpret. Repeated use can accumulate several competing associations. A study may represent security to its owner and exclusion to a servant who has never been allowed inside. Dramatic place includes these differences. A shared plan can anchor them without requiring the production to select one emotional meaning as universally correct.

Sound and description can enlarge a place beyond its visible boundaries. A distant bell can imply a wider institution; a report of approaching visitors can make an unseen road consequential. Such additions need not become map extensions unless participants must navigate them. They can establish pressure on the represented environment while leaving its playable area manageable. The distinction between the whole fictional world and the immediate performance space allows a modest plan to support large stakes. A few rooms can hold a conflict about a kingdom or a colony because participants bring those absent institutions into their exchanges through claims, obligations, and decisions.

The most productive environmental descriptions invite response. A character announcing that smoke is entering through a doorway proposes circumstances under which others can act. If that announcement changes public conditions, its authority should follow the agreed procedure. A character saying that the room feels suffocating can

communicate distress without establishing a literal emergency. These different uses of language can coexist when their status is recognizable. The production should permit expressive description while preventing accidental confusion over consequential facts. Clarity about authority supports dramatic confidence by allowing participants to act on what others establish rather than repeatedly questioning whether it counts.

The social organization of place can remain more important than its dimensions. A private office creates different possibilities from a public hall because access and witnessing differ. Participants might need only a clear label and an entry convention to perform that distinction. Greater spatial precision becomes useful when the scenario requires it, such as an overheard conversation near a partly open door. The designer should identify which relationships generate the intended conflict. This approach allows a spaceship, castle, and haunted mansion to share a basic floor plan while becoming different theatrical environments through genre, character relations, and the obligations associated with their rooms.

Conviction can break when descriptions repeatedly contradict available references. If one participant invokes a balcony while another relies on a plan with no exterior opening, the scene may need repair. The important question is whether the discrepancy affects action. If the balcony is an atmospheric recollection, no architectural revision may be necessary. If a character intends to address a gathering from it, the production needs an accepted location and audience relationship. Dialogue can exceed the image without ignoring

its coordinating role. The relationship should permit additions while retaining the shared commitments that make other people's choices intelligible.

Theatrical place emerges where participants can connect location with consequence. The map supports recognition, while dialogue establishes why a threshold matters, why an object is feared, or why returning to a room changes a relationship. This account explains how minimal visual resources can become persuasive without claiming that images are dispensable in every production. A detailed environment may provide valuable texture and shared cues. Its contribution becomes strongest when participants can use those cues in responsive encounters. The place comes alive through what people do there and what others understand those actions to have changed.

Perspective Uncertainty and the Limits of Shared Visibility

A shared map can offer participants more spatial knowledge than their characters possess. The overview is convenient for coordinating play, but it creates a distinction between what a person can inspect and what a character may know. This distinction exists in many roleplaying arrangements and does not make the virtual form uniquely artificial. Its practical consequences deserve attention because a visually explicit display can make knowledge feel immediately available for use. A token in a private room can invite suspicion even when the character has no fictional reason to know it is there. The

production must decide how that invitation relates to legitimate action.

One solution is to align the display closely with character perception. Visibility restrictions can conceal locations or occupants until the character gains access. This arrangement may reduce some demands of perspective management while increasing technical and administrative work. It can also conceal useful opportunities for participants seeking encounters. Another solution is to expose the overview while asking participants to distinguish coordination information from character knowledge. This can support deliberate dramatic irony, provided the expectation is clear and accepted. Neither solution eliminates interpretation. They allocate its demands differently, and their suitability depends on the event's scale, systems, and intended experience.

Geographical certainty can coexist with social uncertainty. Everyone may know the position of the library while disagreeing about why a particular person keeps returning there. Suspense can develop through motives, obligations, and inconsistent testimony without requiring an unexplored map. A production that hides every room may create navigational uncertainty without strengthening the central conflict. The relevant question is what participants need to discover and what that discovery allows them to change. If the mystery concerns a promise, concealing the hallway may be incidental. If the promise could be overheard only from one location, spatial knowledge becomes part of the evidentiary structure.

Detailed imagery can unintentionally disclose interpretive information. A room drawn with ritual symbols may identify

a supernatural association that the scenario intends characters to infer gradually. A conspicuously different floor texture may reveal a concealed passage before any character investigates. Such clues can be deliberate and valuable when the production recognizes visual inference as a legitimate method of discovery. They become problematic when the image supplies evidence that the written scenario treats as unavailable. The designer should review what a reasonable participant could infer from the display, including features introduced for atmosphere whose implications extend beyond the intended visual function.

Minimal representation produces different risks. If the plan gives every room equal visual weight, participants may lack cues about where opportunities exist. A group can maintain suspense while still providing intelligible invitations to explore. Public rumors, character objectives, or scheduled events can direct attention without revealing answers. The absence of pictorial clues need not mean the absence of orientation. The production should distinguish uncertainty that gives characters something to investigate from uncertainty that leaves players unsure how to participate. The first can sustain drama. The second may simply prevent the encounters through which the drama could develop.

Perspective also concerns whose interpretation becomes authoritative. A facilitator's description may override a participant's reading of the image, but frequent reversals can make the display unreliable. Conversely, treating the picture as decisive in every disagreement can silence descriptions that the scenario authorizes. A clear priority convention should identify which source settles consequential facts and

how ambiguous details are negotiated. Participants can then use the map confidently while remaining open to new information. The convention need not prevent disagreement among characters. It should help distinguish a productive fictional dispute from a procedural conflict about which representation governs the scene.

Selective visibility should not be mistaken for automatic privacy. A participant may gain technical access to a message or channel without fictional permission to use its contents, and a system's privacy settings do not necessarily match the social expectations of a production. The present argument concerns dramaturgical boundaries rather than any guarantee offered by a particular platform. Designers should specify how entry, overhearing, and private communication count within the event. This clarity makes concealed knowledge playable. It also prevents the fiction from depending on assumptions that different participants may understand in incompatible ways.

The most useful overview may be deliberately incomplete in one dimension and generous in another. A map can reveal routes while concealing occupancy, identify public locations while withholding private interiors, or display gathering opportunities without naming every participant. These combinations create different distributions of uncertainty. They should be selected for their dramatic functions rather than inherited automatically from adventure gaming conventions. A social mystery may benefit from navigational clarity because participants need to spend their effort interpreting people. Another event may make spatial

discovery its principal source of conflict. The map should support the uncertainty the production actually wants to stage.

Shared visibility is best understood as an allocation of access rather than a complete account of knowledge. Images provide material from which participants infer, remember, and act, while characters occupy perspectives governed by the fiction. A coherent event makes the relation between those levels manageable. It does not require every participant to know the same things or interpret them alike. It requires enough agreement about what can be used, disclosed, and challenged for unequal perspectives to generate consequential scenes. The map can organize those differences without becoming either a universal window onto the world or a substitute for the people whose uncertainty gives it dramatic significance.

A Haunted Mansion in Three Presentation Conditions

Consider a hypothetical noncombat salon called The Last Night at Harrow House. Members of a household, prospective buyers, former employees, and a historian gather before a decision about the estate's future. Some want a private sale, others favor a public institution, and several hope to postpone the decision until an unresolved family claim can be examined. Reports of a haunting complicate their interpretations of the house's history. The scenario does not require everyone to accept a supernatural explanation. Its dramatic pressure comes from relationships among evidence, memory, economic obligation, and loyalty. Participants can

negotiate several outcomes rather than discover one answer that automatically ends the event.

The playable environment contains an entrance hall, gallery, music room, study, kitchen, and conservatory. The gallery connects the public areas, while the study supports more selective conversations. The kitchen matters because a former employee knows a history excluded from the family's official account. The conservatory provides a place where two characters have agreed to exchange a letter. These functions should remain consistent across presentation conditions. The rooms need not contain identical decorative detail in every version, but any feature essential to a character's possible action must be available through an equivalent recognized source. Otherwise the comparison would change the scenario's opportunities while attributing the difference solely to its visual style.

In the condition without a shared spatial map, participants receive a concise verbal introduction to the house and stable names for its conversation spaces. They can ask for orientation and move among the same audio arrangements used in the other conditions. A room directory can remain available without depicting adjacency. The organizer must decide how much repeated description is permitted and record its use. This condition does not remove every visible element or all spatial information. It removes the common spatial image whose contribution is being examined. Distinguishing those claims prevents the comparison from equating the absence of a map with the absence of practical support.

In the simplified condition, the environment appears as labeled rooms connected by clear doorways. Neutral tokens

indicate current location under a consistent convention. A short description supplies the same atmosphere and consequential objects available in the unmapped condition. The plan makes adjacency inspectable while leaving most surfaces and furnishings unspecified. Participants can identify the route from kitchen to gallery without needing to reconstruct it through a conversation. Whether that convenience helps the drama remains a question. It might support more independent encounters, or it might have little effect if the group's principal interactions depend on invitations rather than navigational decisions.

In the elaborate condition, the same topology and playable area receive a detailed illustrated treatment. Portraits, worn rugs, plants, instruments, and architectural textures make the house visually distinctive. Important doorways remain legible, and decorative objects are governed by the same invention rules as in the other versions. The image should not silently add a clue that changes the available evidence. If visual inference itself is part of the intended comparison, that additional information must be acknowledged as a feature of the presentation package. The study would then examine the combined effect of illustration and its interpretive cues rather than claim to isolate detail alone.

A possible encounter begins when the former employee asks the historian to meet in the kitchen. The employee wants a promise that household labor will appear in any public exhibition. The historian needs access to a letter and is tempted to treat that request as a condition attached to evidence. In an unmapped session, the kitchen becomes consequential through description and the choice to meet

there. A simple plan can emphasize its relationship to public rooms. Elaborate imagery might reinforce its status through visible work surfaces and equipment. The negotiation's force still depends on whether the participants recognize the obligation and choose how to answer it.

Another possible scene concerns a portrait in the gallery. A character asks that it be covered before the final gathering because its public display threatens a concealed relationship. The relevant action can occur through an accepted verbal declaration in all three conditions. In the elaborate version, the unchanged portrait may remain visible beneath a marker indicating its covering. Participants must then reconcile a persistent image with a new fictional state. In the simplified version, a label or note can establish the same change. In the unmapped version, the action survives through acknowledgment and subsequent reference. These arrangements expose different representational demands without requiring a different dramatic conflict.

The conservatory meeting can illustrate imaginative variation. One character remembers it as a childhood refuge; another associates it with exclusion from the household. An elaborate image might provide strong atmospheric cues, while a plain plan allows the two histories to remain visually unspecified. Neither condition should require matching emotional interpretation. The meaningful comparison asks whether participants can express their distinct perspectives and whether others recognize them as part of the scene. The same location can support several experiences while remaining sufficiently stable for a letter to change hands and for that transfer to affect the final decision.

The final gathering would test how local encounters enter a public forum. Characters could disclose the letter, challenge the proposed exhibition, or reinterpret the haunting as an unresolved social history. The map might help participants find the assembly or display who has arrived. It would not decide what a promise requires or which account deserves trust. A persuasive outcome could arise in any condition, and difficulties could appear in all three. Those possibilities are essential to the example's analytical value. The comparison examines how representation contributes to making scenes available, coherent, and open to consequential interpretation, without supplying an imaginary result in place of a study.

Designing a Comparative Study of Representation and Performance

A comparative study should begin by deciding what its three conditions are meant to test. One question concerns complete presentation packages: how do participants experience an unmapped environment, a simplified plan, and a detailed illustrated setting as those arrangements would ordinarily be used? Another question concerns visual elaboration under closely matched informational conditions. The first permits each condition to employ its characteristic supports and examines their combined effects. The second attempts to hold more features constant to isolate a narrower difference. Both are legitimate, but they support different conclusions. A study cannot freely alter atmosphere, clues, and procedures and then attribute every observed difference to graphic realism alone.

The central scenario should be documented as a network of opportunities rather than only as a story synopsis. Researchers need to identify which characters have reasons to meet, which objects can affect decisions, which locations regulate access, and which developments can change public conditions. This account permits comparison of what each version makes available. A room's position, a private letter, or an overhearing convention may influence action more directly than the number of decorative details. Recording these dependencies before observation helps distinguish intended representational differences from accidental changes in the scenario. It also provides a basis for recognizing opportunities that participants create without designer anticipation.

Random assignment, where feasible, should occur at the level appropriate to the intervention. Participants in one performance affect one another, so their accounts cannot simply be treated as independent repetitions of the condition. Several ensembles in each arrangement would provide a stronger basis for comparative claims than one group per condition. The required number depends on the intended analysis, plausible variation, and practical resources; it should be justified rather than selected for a convenient round total. A small exploratory study can still be valuable if it describes itself accurately and focuses on mechanisms and feasibility rather than overstating general effects.

Repeating the same scenario with the same people introduces learning that matters especially in a mystery. Participants remember hidden relationships, locations, and possible outcomes. Changing only the image does not restore the

original uncertainty. Separate groups avoid some carryover but introduce differences in prior experience and social dynamics. Matched or structurally similar scenarios could support repeated participation, although equivalence would require argument rather than assumption. A study should choose its tradeoff openly. The claim that all versions use the same scenario is useful for some controls, but it does not by itself solve the problem of comparing experiences whose meaning depends on discovery.

Preparation should assess relevant experience without turning a participant profile into an explanation for everything. Familiarity with VTTs, salon roleplay, the genre, and the other participants can shape how quickly a group establishes workable conventions. Technical access and preferred modes of communication can affect opportunity as well. Researchers should use this information to interpret patterns and, where the design permits, balance conditions. The goal is to understand how representation functions for particular people. An experienced ensemble that fills every gap through established habits may conceal demands that a novice group encounters immediately. Both experiences belong within the inquiry's scope if claims extend to both populations.

The study should distinguish orientation, perceived involvement, imaginative latitude, and consequential agency before collecting evidence. Orientation concerns locating places, people, and recognized routes. Involvement concerns attention to and investment in the unfolding situation. Imaginative latitude concerns what participants believe they can contribute beyond the display. Agency concerns their capacity to make accepted choices that alter relevant

circumstances. These dimensions may move differently across conditions. A detailed map could improve orientation while narrowing perceived invention, or help one participant become involved while distracting another. Combining them into one score would obscure relationships the proposal specifically seeks to explain.

Participant generated sketches could provide another source of evidence if used without turning drawing ability into a test of imagination. After the event, participants might indicate remembered routes or significant locations through simple marks, spoken explanation, or another accessible method. These materials could reveal which spatial relationships became important, including relationships that differed from the displayed plan. They should not be treated as direct photographs of an internal world. Recollection, expressive preference, and the circumstances of the task affect what is produced. Their value lies in comparison with specific actions and accounts. They can help distinguish remembering the artwork from understanding the environment well enough to arrange an encounter or explain why a place mattered.

Observation can connect those dimensions with particular events. Researchers could record requests for spatial clarification, unsuccessful attempts to locate an encounter, disputes involving pictured or omitted objects, and repairs after the fiction changes. They could examine whether a contribution beyond the map is accepted, redirected, or rejected and what explanation accompanies that response. These observations should be defined with examples before coding. A request for clarification is not necessarily evidence of failure; it may indicate careful coordination that protects a

meaningful scene. Interpretation requires attention to what prompted the request and whether the response restored opportunities for action.

Participant reflection should ask for episodes rather than relying only on global impressions. Someone reporting that a map felt restrictive could identify an object they wanted to introduce or an interpretation they believed the image excluded. Someone who found the image helpful could describe an encounter made possible by recognizing a route or gathering. These accounts can be compared with observations and the relevant materials. Disagreement is informative: a participant may experience a restriction that the designer never intended, or attribute help to a feature that others ignored. The analysis should preserve such differences rather than forcing every account into a unanimous verdict about the condition.

Recordings, where agreed, can support close analysis of selected scenes, but they do not make the performance wholly observable. Separate channels may omit relevant private communication, and screen recordings may show what was available without establishing what a participant noticed. Interviews can recover interpretations while introducing the limits of retrospective explanation. Facilitator notes can document interventions while reflecting a position that misses unsupervised exchanges. The strongest account compares sources according to what each can support. A discrepancy between record and recollection should prompt investigation into timing, access, and interpretation rather than an automatic decision that one source contains the entire truth.

Analysis should respect the nesting of scenes within participants and ensembles. Counts can describe clarification or movement, but a large number of token moves does not independently establish dramatic quality. If the sample supports statistical modeling, the analysis should account for group structure and specify the outcomes in advance. A qualitative analysis can examine mechanisms across contrasting cases, including scenes that contradict the expected pattern. Researchers should also distinguish preference from performance: participants may prefer an elaborate image even when it does not improve orientation, or favor a minimal plan because it matches familiar practice. Both responses matter, but they answer different questions.

The study's conclusions should remain conditional on its scenario, participants, procedures, and implementations. Evidence that one detailed map produced confusion would justify revising that map and examining the mechanism, not rejecting illustrated environments as a class. Evidence that a simple plan supported fluent encounters would not prove that every production needs less detail. The more durable contribution would identify relations among design features and observable consequences, such as decorative cues implying unsupported actions or stable labels reducing repeated orientation requests. Such findings could guide later tests and practical revisions while retaining the complexity of drama as a shared, improvised activity.

Choosing Visual Detail Through Dramatic Requirements

The question of an ideal balance between representation and imagination becomes manageable when it is recast as a set of dramatic requirements. A designer can begin with the encounters the production needs to make possible. If characters must find private company, the environment should provide legible opportunities for privacy. If a public accusation must be interruptible, participants need a clear way to recognize and enter its audience. If a changing room condition affects access, the current state must be recoverable. These requirements do not determine an artistic style. They establish functions against which a proposed map can be examined before substantial time is spent illustrating it.

The first design decision concerns what should remain stable. Routes, room identities, and agreed thresholds often benefit from persistent reference because participants use them repeatedly. Their clarity can reduce the need for procedural explanation while leaving speech available for performance. Other elements can remain open because their exact form does not affect the scenario's action. A room may need a recognized entrance without needing every chair positioned in advance. The distinction should follow consequence rather than an abstract commitment to minimalism. Some productions depend on precise objects or sight lines, and those details deserve representation proportionate to their role.

The next decision concerns the authority of detail. Participants should know whether pictured objects are exhaustive, illustrative, or negotiable. A general rule can permit ordinary incidental additions while reserving consequential discoveries for the scenario's evidence procedures. This gives imaginative contribution a usable scope. It also prevents a participant from solving a conflict by inventing an unearned document merely because an unpictured desk could contain one. The map need not carry the entire rule system. A concise statement of its authority can allow the image and improvisation to cooperate without requiring every attempted addition to become a dispute.

The handling of change should be planned with similar care. Designers can identify which developments require visible updates and which can remain in dialogue or notes. A blocked room may need a status marker, while a changed allegiance may be represented more effectively through speech and behavior. Updating everything can burden facilitation; updating nothing can make later action unreliable. The appropriate practice preserves changes that people need to inspect. It also states which source takes priority if the original illustration no longer matches an accepted event. This convention allows a static background to remain useful without forcing the fiction to obey an outdated picture.

Access should inform early decisions about contrast, labels, navigation, and alternative references. A visually rich environment can remain accessible when important information is distinguishable and available through workable routes. A sparse map can remain inaccessible if its symbols

are unexplained or its room names require difficult visual search. The relevant test concerns meaningful opportunity to use the environment during the intended pace of play. Providing alternatives after the design is complete may help, but it can also reveal that consequential information was tied unnecessarily to one mode. Planning access early can improve coherence for the whole ensemble.

A short rehearsal can test the map through actions rather than impressions. Participants can attempt to arrange a private meeting, enter a public scene, introduce an incidental object, and respond to an accepted environmental change. Observing these tasks can reveal ambiguous thresholds, misleading visual emphasis, or an unclear relation between image and description. Such a rehearsal does not predict every dramatic development. It tests the coordinating conventions on which those developments depend. Revisions can then address actual points of friction before the organizer commits to more elaborate artwork. The aim is to make the environment playable in the ways the scenario requires.

Visual detail can be added where it earns a dramatic function. A portrait may establish an important relationship, a damaged instrument may invite a character's recollection, or a distinctive public room may help participants return to an assembly. Some detail can also provide aesthetic pleasure without serving a direct plot purpose. That pleasure is legitimate, provided its implications remain compatible with play. Designers need not justify every ornament as a clue. They should be alert to ornaments that reasonable participants are likely to treat as clues, obstacles, or available actions.

Responsible selectivity concerns the promises an image makes, including promises made unintentionally.

Participant annotation offers a further design choice. Allowing people to mark agreements, rename a meeting place, or indicate an accepted change can make the shared surface responsive to performance. The permission also requires boundaries: a private interpretation should not become public fact merely because someone can edit the map. Productions can distinguish personal notes from shared markers and clarify who confirms changes that affect others. This arrangement gives participants a practical role in maintaining the environment while preserving the difference between proposing a detail and establishing it. Editable representation can support imaginative agency when the authority of an edit remains legible. The map can then become a record of selected collective decisions, while participants retain other aspects of the encounter in dialogue, memory, and private interpretation throughout the performance.

The resulting balance is local and revisable. A production may need a detailed public environment and schematic private rooms, or a simple general plan with selected close views when particular objects become relevant. Such combinations resist a single scale from imagination to representation because they distribute different functions across different resources. The designer's task is to keep the arrangement coherent. Participants should understand when an image supplies evidence, when it provides atmosphere, and when it offers only orientation. Visual richness can then support imaginative freedom by settling the right questions

while leaving consequential interpretation in the hands of the people performing the drama.

The Territory Made Through Shared Performance

The paradox of visual representation in virtual tabletop drama arises because the map both supports and participates in the construction of a world it cannot exhaust. It gives participants a common surface through which they can locate encounters, recognize boundaries, and maintain selected facts. The fictional territory develops beyond that surface as characters make promises, challenge accounts, and revise the significance of places. A static diagram can support this development because continuity and change belong to different aspects of the event. Its usefulness depends on whether participants understand which relations remain fixed and how performance can establish something new.

The distinction between visual density and representational authority explains why the choice cannot be reduced to more or fewer pictures. A detailed environment may leave substantial freedom when its decorative status is understood and its important features remain legible. A minimal diagram may restrict interpretation when every omission is treated as prohibition. Imagination also requires support: an unmapped environment can become demanding when people must repeatedly reconstruct routes or depend on another person's memory. The strongest design makes its commitments explicit enough to guide action and limited enough to permit the encounters through which the world acquires meaning.

The comparison among three presentation conditions provides a research agenda rather than a result. It invites examination of orientation, involvement, imaginative latitude, and accepted consequence as related but distinct outcomes. It requires attention to information equivalence, ensemble effects, prior experience, access, and the limits of retrospective accounts. A worthwhile study could discover that a feature helps one task while hindering another. That finding would improve the framework by identifying where its claims hold. The ambition is not to prove that imagination defeats technology or that technology completes imagination. It is to understand their division of work within an actual performance.

The haunted mansion illustrates the principle at a practical scale. Six rooms can support a convincing event when participants have reasons to seek one another, when entrances and private meetings have recognizable conditions, and when spoken actions can alter what happens next. A letter can change the house's future, and a covered portrait can change the meaning of a public gathering, without requiring either event to be fully animated. A detailed image might enrich those scenes. A plain plan might coordinate them effectively. The decisive issue is how each representation helps the participants make their actions available for interpretation and response.

The map is useful because it is selective, and the performance is possible because that selection remains open to accountable imaginative development. Designers should preserve clarity where coordination requires it, provide texture where texture contributes, and permit revision where accepted action

changes the world. Participants can then inhabit a setting whose meaning is larger than its visible contents without losing the shared reference needed to act together. The territory of virtual tabletop drama is made through that relationship: what the map establishes, what the participants contribute, and what their encounters allow one another to understand and change.

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Oliver Bramwell

Oliver Bramwell is a cartographic illustrator and urban planning consultant who has spent much of his free time creating maps for tabletop campaigns. His fascination with virtual tabletops began with a practical puzzle: why do detailed maps sometimes make players imagine less? He studies the relationship between visual precision, spatial freedom, and the stories participants construct around a digital image. Bramwell contributes encounter maps and practical design advice to independent gaming communities, but prefers work that leaves room for discovery and reinterpretation. He enjoys old railway diagrams, walking unfamiliar cities without navigation software, and drawing fictional floor plans on restaurant napkins. His friends have learned that asking for directions may produce an illustrated essay.

The Character, the Player, and the Token

Digital Embodiment in Theatre of the Mind Roleplaying

Tessa Caldwell

Abstract

This essay examines digital embodiment in theatre-of-the-mind roleplaying through the relationship among player, character, and visible token. It argues that dramatic presence emerges when voice, described gesture, imagined action, and visual representation become publicly answerable contributions. The analysis distinguishes fictional authority from interface control and separates identification, agency, bodily ownership, and social recognition. It evaluates tokens as avatars, masks, puppets, and visual anchors, explaining the strengths and limits of each analogy. Realistic portraits, stylization, and abstraction distribute information differently without guaranteeing particular psychological effects. A hypothetical gatehouse encounter demonstrates how conventions, misunderstanding, and repair shape consequential action. The essay concludes with a proposed research approach and design principles for accessible participation. Digital embodiment is presented as coordinated expressive practice rather than a property automatically supplied by an image.

Keywords

digital embodiment, theatre of the mind, virtual tabletop roleplaying, character identification, vocal performance, character tokens

Embodiment as a Relationship Among Participants

A character in a virtual tabletop drama can speak through a participant whose body is elsewhere, occupy a room through a movable token, and perform a gesture that nobody sees. These circumstances make embodiment a question of relationships among different resources. The participant supplies choices, physical effort, and expression. A portrait offers a recognizable appearance. Spoken or written description establishes actions beyond the image. Other participants connect these contributions when they address, interpret, and respond to the character. The resulting dramatic presence depends on this coordination. A token becomes a character's visible representative through a practice of recognition that no image can accomplish independently.

This essay argues that embodiment in theatre-of-the-mind roleplaying is distributed across the player's living body, the character's imagined body, and publicly available representations. Distributed embodiment names an analytical relationship here, rather than a measured psychological state. A participant can experience a character intensely while feeling no bodily ownership of the token. Another participant can understand the character's position perfectly while remaining emotionally distant. The distinction matters because the proposal's questions concern several different outcomes: expressive capacity, recognizable identity, consequential action, and personal identification. Treating these outcomes as interchangeable would make almost any

engaging performance appear to demonstrate the same phenomenon.

The discussion concerns synchronous, socially organized dramatic play conducted through voice or text with a shared visual tabletop. Its central examples resemble salon roleplaying: participants portray individuals with conflicting commitments, converse in imagined locations, and produce consequences through decisions. Combat and precise movement measurement are optional. Theatre of the mind refers to the substantial role of verbal description and participant imagination in establishing the fictional scene. A visible token remains compatible with this practice when the display leaves posture, gesture, sensation, and much of the surrounding world unspecified. Different groups can combine these resources differently without belonging to a single uniform genre.

The contrast with bodily performance requires care. Mochocki describes live action roleplaying as a multimodal form in which participants' bodies both experience events and represent characters, while players combine creative and audience roles (Mochocki, 2018). This account offers a useful starting point, although the present argument concerns an altered arrangement of representational resources. In a conventional salon setting, a participant's turn toward another person can also be a character's turn. On a virtual tabletop, the corresponding action might require a verbal statement, a token adjustment, or an agreed combination. The difference concerns how actions become available to others, rather than whether bodies matter at all.

The participant's body remains involved even when it is not displayed. Speaking requires bodily activity; listening occurs under actual environmental conditions; using a pointer involves movement and attention. Fatigue, pain, available space, and connection equipment can affect participation. None of these circumstances needs to resemble the character's circumstances. A comfortable participant can portray an exhausted traveler, and a participant who cannot perform a particular movement can establish that the character performs it. Keeping actual bodily conditions separate from fictional capacities supports a more precise account of what representation makes possible.

The token introduces another separation. Its visible shape may resemble the character's face, depict an entire body, or consist only of a name. Its position may indicate an imagined location without showing how the character arrived. Its orientation may be meaningful in one group and irrelevant in another. An observer cannot infer the governing convention from the image alone. Even a richly detailed portrait requires interpretation: the painted smile might represent a habitual manner, an old likeness, or nothing about the current scene. Every claim about the token's dramatic function must identify which features participants actually treat as informative.

The essay develops a conceptual framework through close analysis and hypothetical examples. It makes no claim to report observations from a completed study. Scholarship on roleplaying and digital embodiment supplies bounded points of comparison; proposed applications to tabletop performance remain arguments to be evaluated. The analysis first separates player, character, and representation, then examines voice,

described action, token movement, and competing visual metaphors. It considers identification, channel conflicts, and a sustained dramatic example before proposing research and design principles. The guiding question throughout is what allows an expressive contribution to count as something this character has done before these other participants.

Answering that question changes the practical meaning of successful embodiment. Greater visual detail does not automatically produce more coherent action. A convincing voice does not by itself establish who heard a statement. A moving token does not necessarily indicate an intentional entrance. Dramatic coherence emerges when participants can connect a contribution to its fictional author, understand its relevant circumstances, and answer it. This account leaves room for ambiguity within the fiction, including uncertain motives and deceptive appearances, while requiring enough agreement about representation for those ambiguities to become playable.

Distinguishing Player Character and Visible Representation

The player is the actual participant who interprets instructions, makes decisions, and communicates with others. The character is the fictional individual whose circumstances and actions become part of the shared imagined world. The token is a visible representational object associated with that individual. These definitions identify different kinds of entity. Confusing them can produce errors of attribution. A player may accidentally move the token while intending no character

movement. A character may express an opinion the player rejects. A portrait may suggest an age or expression that the group has never established as fictional fact. Each error begins by allowing one relationship to stand for another without checking the convention.

The separation is analytical rather than an assertion that players maintain complete emotional distance. A player can feel anxious about a character's decision and still recognize that the decision belongs to an invented situation. Likewise, a player can speak in the first person while making an administrative request. The words “I need a moment” might mean that the character hesitates or that the participant needs a break. Participants determine the relevant meaning through context and explicit signals. Distinguishing levels makes emotional involvement intelligible without treating every first-person utterance as evidence that the participant has temporarily become the character.

Roleplaying also depends on authority over fictional facts. Montola's account identifies an imaginary world, personified characters, and a power structure as central features of the activity (Montola, 2008). This framework helps explain why an expressive gesture does not automatically become an accepted event. A participant may control a character's intentions while another procedure determines whether an attempted action succeeds. The present essay applies that distinction to representation: control of the image and authority over the fiction can overlap, but the overlap must be established. Software permission to drag a token does not itself settle the legitimacy of every movement.

A useful distinction separates authorship from execution. A player might declare that the character enters a room while a facilitator moves the token on the player's behalf. The player authors the action; another participant executes its visual representation. Conversely, a facilitator might reposition a token to tidy the display without authoring any fictional travel. Recording only the identity of the person who clicked would confuse these situations. Dramatic attribution concerns whose action was proposed and accepted. Interface operation concerns how its public trace appeared. Both can matter, but they answer different questions.

The character's imagined body also extends beyond the token's depicted features. A circular portrait lacks visible hands, yet the character can carry a cup. An abstract marker has no illustrated face, yet the character can blush when that detail is established. Participants need enough common information to sustain relevant consequences, rather than an exhaustive shared picture. If one imagines a dark coat and another a gray coat, the difference may be harmless until someone identifies the character by clothing. At that point, the description needs clarification because a previously incidental detail has become consequential.

Several representational objects can refer to the same character. The participant's speaking indicator may identify the current voice, a portrait may identify appearance, and a location token may identify presence in a room. A written character sheet may specify obligations and capabilities. These objects perform different tasks even when the interface displays them together. Their agreement can help participants recognize the character quickly. Their disagreement can also

be deliberate: a public portrait may show a disguise while private information records another identity. The important analytical issue is which participant can interpret each object, with what information and authority.

Continuity across scenes does not require every representation to remain unchanged. A token can acquire a new label after a fictional title is granted. A portrait can be replaced when a disguise is removed. Another participant can temporarily voice a character under an agreed arrangement. These changes may preserve continuity if participants understand that the same fictional individual remains the referent. Conversely, an unchanged portrait can represent a different character in a later scenario. Identity persists through acknowledged fictional relationships and events, with images serving as resources for recognition rather than self-sufficient guarantees.

The framework also needs an account of absence. A token left in a room can indicate that the character remains present while the participant attends to something elsewhere. It can instead be an outdated display that should be ignored. A participant who disconnects may leave the character waiting, temporarily unresponsive, or removed from the active scene according to the group's arrangement. None of these interpretations follows inevitably from technical absence. Establishing a default makes the display more legible and prevents other participants from turning a connection problem into an unintended character decision.

Separating the three elements permits a better definition of representational success. The player needs usable ways to express an intended contribution. Other participants need

enough information to attribute and answer it. The character needs continuity within the fiction sufficient for consequences to accumulate. The token succeeds when its actual function supports those conditions, whether it provides a face, marks a location, or keeps a name available. A display can be visually spare and dramatically effective, while an elaborate illustration can remain ornamental if nobody relies on it during play.

Voice as Bodily Expression and Dramatic Address

Voice can make a distant character immediately available to other participants. Its pace, intensity, phrasing, and timing contribute information beyond the propositional content of words. A repeated hesitation may become part of a character's manner; a carefully measured response may establish restraint. These possibilities do not require an unusual accent or theatrical training. A participant speaking in a familiar voice can distinguish a character through decisions about what to say, when to answer, and whom to address. Vocal embodiment concerns the organization of an audible performance, including ordinary speech, rather than conformity to an ideal of professional acting.

The voice remains materially connected to the participant while acquiring a fictional attribution. Listeners hear actual breath and vocal production, yet they may understand a sentence as the character's promise. This double relationship creates both expressive force and possible confusion. A tired voice might be interpreted as fictional grief even when it

reflects the participant's condition. A character's harsh reply might be heard as a participant's interpersonal criticism. Brief clarification can preserve the intended performance. Such clarification demonstrates awareness of the medium's layered attribution rather than a failure to sustain imaginative involvement.

Address is especially important because the audible channel may not specify an imagined direction. Around a physical table, participants can sometimes infer a speaker's intended addressee from orientation, although such inference is never infallible. In a voice channel, several characters may hear the same sentence without knowing which one is being challenged. Naming the addressee, describing a turn, or establishing a conversational convention can supply the missing relation. A line such as “Mara, I am asking you” creates a dramatic target while remaining fully intelligible to participants who cannot see any visual cue.

The relation between voice and token can reinforce address when its use is agreed. A participant might move a token beside another before beginning a private appeal, or select a portrait to indicate the speaker where the interface permits. These actions do not inherently determine audibility or privacy. Their effect depends on how conversation is organized and what the group has established. The distinction prevents a visual suggestion from being mistaken for a technical guarantee. A token's proximity can represent intimacy within the fiction while every participant in the channel continues to hear the actual exchange.

Timing supplies another form of bodily expression. A pause after a request can indicate deliberation, resistance, or shock

if the participants understand it as intentional. Connection delay, muted microphones, and divided attention can produce a similar audible gap. A performance that depends heavily on silence needs a way to distinguish dramatic hesitation from unavailable communication when confusion would change the scene. A short statement that the character remains silent can make the choice public. The participant can still perform the silence through timing, but other players now know which fictional action they are answering.

Vocal scale also changes when domestic environments and microphones mediate performance. An attempt to whisper may become hard to hear; a fictional shout can be described without actual loudness. The character's volume and the participant's output need not match. Saying that the character speaks so everyone in the hall can hear establishes fictional reach without requiring the participant to raise their voice. This separation permits effective portrayal under different physical conditions. It also asks listeners to distinguish acoustic evidence from agreed description when determining which characters received information.

The primary role of voice can shape the allocation of attention. A participant delivering a long, fluent speech may command the channel even when another character has a strong reason to intervene. The problem concerns turn access as well as acting style. A group can agree on brief opportunities for response, explicit requests to enter the exchange, or facilitation when simultaneous speech becomes unintelligible. These arrangements affect embodiment because a character's apparent decisiveness may otherwise depend on the player's ability to secure uninterrupted airtime.

Dramatic status should remain open to portrayal through different speaking rhythms.

Text can carry comparable authority when voice is unavailable or less suitable. A participant may type a declaration that a facilitator or another participant reads aloud, with clear attribution, or the group may treat the written contribution directly as character speech. Such arrangements change timing and expressive resources, but they need not reduce the contribution's fictional force. The relevant standard is whether the communication enters the scene and receives a response. Treating voice as a major instrument in the selected format should not turn vocal fluency into a condition of character agency.

Voice can also become a persistent cue for identity across changing visual arrangements. Participants may recognize a character's guarded diction even when its token is offscreen or when no map is displayed. This continuity can sustain a relationship across scenes. It remains a learned social association, subject to correction when a participant speaks for someone else or changes between character and administrative discussion. Clear naming at transitions is often enough. The goal is dependable attribution under the group's actual conditions, rather than constant emphasis on every representational boundary.

An effective vocal performance leaves room for other people to complete its meaning through response. A restrained answer becomes an insult only if its words and context support that interpretation; a plea becomes dramatically consequential when another character accepts, rejects, or questions it. The participant provides an embodied act of

speaking, but dramatic presence develops through this exchange. The token may keep the speaker recognizable while the voice supplies a changing temporal performance. Their combination is strongest when listeners can understand both who is speaking and what opportunity the contribution creates for the scene.

Described Gesture and the Imagined Body

Verbal description can establish bodily action without showing a moving body. A participant may say that the character folds a letter, places it beyond another person's reach, and keeps a hand on the envelope. The description identifies an object, an action, and a relation that other characters can address. Someone can ask for the letter, accuse the character of concealing it, or attempt to take it according to the agreed procedure. The gesture has dramatic substance because its consequences enter the shared situation. Visible imitation by the participant is one possible resource for such an action, rather than its necessary form.

Description can be selective. The participant does not need to narrate every joint movement involved in placing an envelope on a table. The useful detail is what affects the scene: perhaps the character withdraws the hand slowly, perhaps the letter remains sealed, or perhaps everyone can see the addressee. These details give others something specific to interpret. Excessive physical description can occupy conversational time without adding relevant possibilities. The expressive task is to provide enough information for an answer while leaving room for other participants to imagine and contribute.

An imagined action can combine with actual movement even when the latter is unseen. A participant might stand while making a declaration or hold an object while describing the character's grip. These private actions could help that participant organize performance, but they do not automatically become public fictional facts. Other people cannot respond to an unseen clenched fist unless it is communicated through another resource. Distinguishing private performance preparation from shared representation prevents a participant's vivid internal experience from being mistaken for information already available to the group.

The same distinction applies to imagination itself. One participant may visualize the character leaning against a window while another imagines the character standing near a chair. Both can follow the conversation until posture or position becomes relevant. If a third character closes the window, the uncertain relation needs resolution. Shared fiction does not require identical mental images at all moments. It requires compatible commitments at points where consequences depend on them. This account treats clarification as a normal part of making an imagined body available, rather than demanding a visually complete scene before action can begin.

Attempts and outcomes need different grammatical treatment. Saying “I reach for the letter” proposes an action whose success may remain open. Saying “I take the letter from your hand” may also assert an effect on another character. The group's authority arrangements determine whether the participant can establish that effect directly. A description can preserve agency by specifying an intention and leaving the

affected participant or resolution procedure to answer. This precision matters for bodily encounters because language can otherwise collapse an attempt, another person's reaction, and the final outcome into one unchallengeable statement.

Imagined touch illustrates the issue particularly clearly. A character's offered hand is an invitation; another character's acceptance establishes a shared action. The participants can negotiate the fiction without requiring actual touch or visible imitation. They also need ways to decline a kind of interaction at the participant level. Such a boundary concerns the conditions of play, while a fictional refusal concerns the character's choice. Keeping the distinction available allows an emotionally charged scene to remain intelligible. It avoids treating every administrative limit as additional evidence about the character's feelings or loyalties.

Description can represent bodies that differ substantially from participants' bodies. A character can use wings, move with unfamiliar anatomy, or remain still for reasons unrelated to the participant's capacities. These possibilities expand the range of portrayable action, but they introduce questions about what other characters can perceive and do. An unfamiliar body needs enough shared explanation to support the scene. If wings occupy significant space, their presence may matter when another character approaches. Imaginative freedom works through selective specification of consequential features, without requiring either biological realism or exhaustive rules for every unusual form.

Some descriptions establish sensation or intention rather than publicly observable movement. “She feels the room narrowing around her” can communicate a subjective

experience to players while leaving their characters unaware. “Her hand trembles as she reaches for the cup” offers outward evidence that characters might notice. The difference should remain clear when information affects another character's response. Players can appreciate an internal disclosure without using it as knowledge their characters possess. Described embodiment includes this distinction between what is experienced by the fictional individual and what becomes available to fictional witnesses.

Time also changes through description. A few spoken words can establish a long walk, while a prolonged account can elaborate a brief glance. The group needs to understand whether description advances shared time or suspends action to clarify it. A participant describing a fleeting expression may not intend to prevent anyone else from acting for the entire duration of the narration. Making that relationship legible protects responsiveness. It also explains why literal matching between speech duration and fictional duration would provide a poor measure of how fully the character's body is represented.

Vocal expression, described gesture, and imagined action can support one another without reproducing the complete experience of shared physical presence. A spoken refusal accompanied by a described retreat gives listeners both temporal expression and a fictional bodily relation. It leaves out other possibilities available in a shared room, including much incidental movement. The missing information can matter, but the available combination also permits deliberate emphasis and forms of action that would be difficult to enact physically. The appropriate evaluation asks what the scene

requires and whether the chosen representation makes that action answerable.

When Token Movement Becomes Dramatic Action

A token's movement is first an observable change on a display. It becomes a character's action when participants understand it under an agreed convention and incorporate it into the fiction. Dragging a marker across a room might establish that the character approaches a rival. The same drag might merely make overlapping markers easier to read. Neither interpretation is contained in the pointer movement itself. The distinction between meaningful action and symbolic representation is also misleading if symbolism is assumed to exclude consequence. A symbolic act can be the accepted means by which a consequential fictional event occurs.

The analytical question is what commitment the movement makes. If placement establishes location, moving to a doorway may commit the character to being there. If crossing the doorway also establishes departure, that movement can remove the character from a conversation and alter who can answer an accusation. A group might instead require a spoken announcement before any movement counts. Under that convention, the identical visible transition remains provisional until confirmed. Describing the commitment clarifies the action more effectively than ranking token movement as inherently expressive or inherently mechanical.

Social response gives the movement dramatic significance. A character's retreat becomes an insult when others understand that the departure abandons an obligation or refuses an appeal. Its meaning arises from established relationships and timing. A marker traveling twenty pixels has no stable emotional content outside that situation. A small movement can carry great importance when it crosses a recognized boundary; a large movement can remain inconsequential when it merely reorganizes the interface. Scale on the display is a poor substitute for analysis of what changes in the shared scene.

Intention and recognition can diverge. A player may move the token away from a table to indicate discomfort, while others understand the move as an attempt to leave. The player can clarify that the character remains within the conversation but changes position. This repair does not erase the expressive value of movement. It shows that token action, like speech, can be misunderstood. A useful convention makes consequential transitions easy to identify and leaves room for clarification when the display supports several interpretations. Requiring precision for every tiny adjustment would create unnecessary effort; requiring it at consequential boundaries is more practical.

An action can also be constituted by a change of relation between tokens. Placing two markers together may represent a whispered exchange, a pledge of solidarity, or simply two characters standing nearby. The intended relation needs to be available through convention or accompanying description. The group must also distinguish representing secrecy from actually restricting information. If everyone hears the

exchange, players may need to maintain a difference between their knowledge and their characters' knowledge. The visual arrangement can help track that difference without creating it through proximity alone.

Movement may be authored by someone other than the operator. A participant using text input could request that another person move the token to the entrance after the character finishes speaking. The resulting departure can be fully attributable to the participant's character. An account that equates embodiment with direct pointer control would overlook this agency. The significant relationship runs from an authorized contribution to a publicly understood event. Direct manipulation can make that relationship immediate, but delegated operation can preserve it when attribution and timing remain clear.

Accidental movement requires a different response. Suppose a player drags a token while trying to select it, and another participant begins an accusation based on the apparent approach. The group can restore the earlier location and continue from the clarified action. Treating every interface event as irrevocable fiction would convert technical mistakes into unintended authorship. It could also reward participants for acting quickly on visible errors. A repair convention protects the connection between player contribution and character action while allowing deliberate surprises to remain consequential once they have been communicated.

The timing of a visible move can itself become expressive. A character may begin to leave, stop at the threshold, and return after hearing a name. If the group can see the sequence and treats it as fictional action, it supplies a performance with an

observable rhythm. A participant can make the same sequence available through speech when animation is hard to follow or when the token is outside another person's view. The dramatic event need not depend on everyone perceiving every intermediate screen position. What matters is the shared recognition of the hesitation and return.

Tokens can establish exclusion as well as presence. Moving a marker to a separate area may indicate that the character is outside the active scene. This convention helps participants manage attention, but it can obscure the difference between a character being unavailable and a player being unable to contribute. A participant might want the absent character to send a message, recall a relevant event, or enter by an established route. Scene organization should make these possibilities discussable. A token's placement is a tool for coordinating participation, with its authority bounded by the group's understanding.

Persistent position can create a misleading appearance of continuous action. A token beside a cabinet does not prove that the character has been searching it throughout a long conversation. A token at a doorway may remain there because nobody updated it. The group should identify which features of the display remain reliable over time. Where location is authoritative, updates need an accessible practice; where the map is approximate, participants should know that description can refine it. This distinction keeps the visual record from silently acquiring more evidentiary force than the players intended.

Meaningful token action can now be defined more precisely. The movement needs an intelligible fictional attribution, an

established or clarified convention, and uptake sufficient for relevant consequences. It need not imitate bodily locomotion or display facial expression. A simple marker can make an entrance unmistakable, and an elaborate image can move without changing anything in the drama. The assessment concerns the relationship among representation, authority, and response. Under suitable conventions, moving a token is one of the ways participants perform a character before an audience that is also helping to create the event.

Avatars Masks Puppets and Visual Anchors

Calling the token an avatar emphasizes its relation to a participant's capacity to act through a digital representative. The term can be useful if its intended scope is clear. Klevjer distinguishes a playable fictional persona from a vehicle of embodied agency and presence, developing the latter through the idea of prosthetic telepresence in computer games (Klevjer, 2012). This distinction cautions against treating every picture associated with a character as the same kind of embodied interface. A static portrait can identify a fictional person without providing the perceptual and action relationships central to that account. Applying the avatar metaphor to tabletop play requires analysis of those actual relationships.

Some token practices support a limited avatar interpretation. Participants may act through a marker that occupies a location, can be approached by other markers, and mediates access to scenes. The marker serves as a public representative

through which certain actions are established. Other practices use the token only as an illustrated label while all consequential action occurs in conversation. Both may reasonably use the word avatar in everyday language, but the analytical claims differ. The label alone cannot demonstrate bodily self-location, ownership, or a particular degree of immersive experience.

The theatrical mask analogy emphasizes the relation between a visible character identity and a performer who supplies changing expression. A portrait can offer a stable face while the participant's voice makes it appear by turns threatening, uncertain, or affectionate in the listener's interpretation. The image itself remains unchanged. Its apparent animation comes from the temporal performance and the audience's attribution. This analogy explains why a fixed image need not prevent expressive variety. Participants can understand that the face represents the character while treating current affect as something established through speech and action.

The comparison also has limits. A theatrical mask is worn by a body that can orient, move, and share space with spectators. A tabletop portrait may sit in a corner of the display while the participant remains invisible. Its fixed smile is not physically redirected through changing head position. Some listeners may attend closely to the portrait; others may primarily read text or listen to voice. The mask analogy identifies an interpretive arrangement rather than an equivalent sensory experience. It helps explain performed identity while leaving these differences in bodily and spatial relation visible.

The puppet analogy draws attention to manipulation and attributed agency. A player can move an object while other

participants understand the movement as a fictional individual's action. The visible object does not need to move autonomously for the character to appear intentional. A departure can be performed through an obviously controlled token, just as openly acknowledged manipulation need not prevent audiences from following a represented agent. This observation concerns a possibility of theatrical attribution. It does not establish that every token user experiences the object as a puppet or adopts the practices of any particular puppetry tradition.

Digital tokens often permit less articulated movement than physical puppets. A marker may translate across the screen without changing posture, and its movement might jump immediately between locations. The participant can supply missing articulation through description or timing. Conversely, the digital representation can change labels or appearance in ways unrelated to the mechanics of a physical object. The useful part of the puppet analogy is the relationship among operator, represented agent, and witnessing participants. Literal resemblance to a small manipulated body is optional, and the metaphor should not dictate which technical features count as dramatic expression.

The visual anchor analogy gives the token a more modest but important role. A recognizable image or name helps participants keep a character available in attention and connect contributions across scenes. This function can operate without meaningful token movement. A portrait on a shared character board may help listeners associate a voice with an imagined individual and recall a relationship. Calling it an anchor does not mean that the image guarantees memory

or identification. It describes the representational task the group assigns to it, which can be tested by examining when participants actually consult or refer to the image.

An anchor can support imaginative openness because it stabilizes only selected information. A name marker may establish who is present while leaving appearance largely undescribed. A portrait may fix a face while leaving clothing, posture, and surrounding space available to narration. The amount of information is a design choice with consequences for what participants must negotiate elsewhere. The image's incompleteness can be productive when it leaves meaningful room for characterization. It becomes troublesome when participants assume that an unspecified feature is both visually settled and shared by everyone.

These analogies can coexist in a single session. A token may act as an anchor during a discussion, as a puppet during a carefully timed departure, and as an avatar in a convention that links its location to access. It may also present a masklike stable appearance throughout. Choosing one metaphor as the token's essential identity would obscure changes in use. The better analytical practice names the function relevant to a particular episode and explains what the comparison illuminates. It also states what the metaphor leaves unresolved, especially when claims shift from public representation to private experience.

The metaphors suggest different evaluative questions. An avatar account asks how action and perspective are mediated. A mask account asks how stable appearance combines with performed expression. A puppet account examines manipulation and attributed intention. An anchor account

examines recognition and continuity. These questions can guide close analysis without creating a hierarchy in which one function represents a more advanced form of play. A modest label may suit an intricate conversation, while a movable portrait may suit an entrance whose timing matters. The scene's representational needs provide the reason for choosing among them.

Realistic Portraits Stylization and Abstraction

A realistic portrait provides comparatively specific cues about an imagined face. Participants can refer to visible hair, clothing, or expression when those details belong to the fiction. This specificity may help establish a recognizable individual, but it also creates commitments that the player might not have intended. A painted uniform can suggest an affiliation; a conspicuous smile can suggest a manner. The group needs to distinguish details accepted as character facts from incidental features of a convenient image. The richer the illustration, the more opportunities there are for useful recognition and for unsupported inference.

Realistic appearance should not be confused with current responsiveness. A portrait does not necessarily change when the character becomes frightened, relaxes, or disguises an emotion. Participants may learn to ignore the image's fixed expression while following the changing performance. Someone encountering the portrait for the first time may give that expression greater weight. The interpretive relationship can vary within the same group. Describing the image as a

likeness rather than a continuously updated view gives participants a clear reason to treat current speech and action as more authoritative about temporary states.

Stylized images can make a character visually distinct through selected features, exaggerated shapes, or a consistent artistic vocabulary. They can support a scenario's tone without claiming photographic precision. A sharply angular portrait might suit a world presented through graphic illustration, but its shape does not establish the character's morality or personality. Participants bring different associations to visual styles. A design argument should specify the intended informational function, such as making several characters distinguishable, rather than assuming that a particular aesthetic communicates one universal emotional meaning.

Abstraction leaves more of the body to description and imagination. A name within a circle can represent a person without specifying facial appearance. An emblem might indicate a public role while withholding individual features. These representations can suit a drama in which appearance is unimportant or deliberately uncertain. They can also require more verbal work when bodily details become relevant. An abstract token does not eliminate embodiment; it relocates the task of specifying the imagined body. The important question is whether participants have usable ways to establish the details that matter to their interactions.

No simple progression connects abstraction, realism, and identification. A participant may identify strongly with a character represented by an initial because the character's decisions and relationships matter. Another may find a

chosen portrait helpful in maintaining a consistent imagined appearance. A third may feel constrained by a portrait that conflicts with their interpretation. These are plausible possibilities, rather than findings from the present essay. Their coexistence shows why a claim that realistic images necessarily produce stronger identification would require evidence about particular participants, tasks, and definitions of identification.

Research on the Proteus effect provides a bounded comparison. Yee and Bailenson examined how transformed digital self-representations related to behavior in two experimental studies involving immersive virtual environments, including manipulations of avatar attractiveness and height (Yee and Bailenson, 2007). Their findings make it reasonable to investigate representation as a possible influence, but they do not demonstrate equivalent effects for static tabletop portraits. A portrait lacks important features of those experimental arrangements. The defensible application is a research question about how tabletop representations are interpreted and used, with the relevant differences specified before any causal claim is made.

Portrait selection also distributes creative authority. An assigned image can help establish a coherent scenario, while a participant-selected image can provide control over appearance. Either arrangement can work, depending on the purpose and available negotiation. Problems arise when the image imposes an unannounced identity claim or when a participant changes a consequential feature without informing those who rely on it. A useful practice identifies which features are fixed by the scenario and which remain open.

Participants can then make choices with an understanding of their fictional significance.

Visual representation deserves attention to the assumptions attached to bodies. Facial features, apparent age, clothing, and bodily difference should not be treated as reliable indicators of honesty, intelligence, social worth, or moral character. A drama can portray characters who hold prejudiced beliefs without asking participants to adopt those beliefs as the interpretive rule of play. The distinction needs particular care when images appear before character information. Providing motivations and relationships gives players alternatives to reading personality directly from appearance. This is a design principle for accountable characterization, rather than a claim that images can be made culturally neutral.

Consistency and recognizability can matter more than artistic detail during an active scene. If two portraits become indistinguishable at the displayed size, participants may confuse their owners despite the images' richness when viewed closely. A clear name can resolve the problem. If images change frequently, continuity may need explicit announcement. These are questions about the relationship between visual presentation and use. The essay does not prescribe one optimal token size or assume identical visual access. It recommends testing whether the actual representation allows participants to identify the relevant character under their conditions of participation.

An image can deliberately mislead within the fiction when that possibility is established. A ceremonial portrait may show a younger version of a character; a public emblem may conceal an individual's private commitments. Such

discrepancies can support dramatic discovery. They differ from accidental confusion because the game provides a way to understand the relation between image and person. A participant should be able to learn that the portrait is historical or that the emblem represents an official role. Otherwise, visual ambiguity risks becoming arbitrary contradiction rather than interpretable complexity.

Changing a representation can itself become an event. Replacing a masked portrait with an uncovered face may make a revelation public, provided participants understand what the replacement establishes. The new image need not reveal every relevant fact. Recognition can remain uncertain for particular characters even when players understand the representational change. This possibility shows how visual style connects to authority and information, rather than operating only through aesthetic preference. The strongest design choice is the one that makes the intended relationship playable while leaving unsupported psychological effects open to investigation.

Identification Agency Ownership and Social Recognition

Identification can refer to several relationships between a participant and a character. A player may imagine events from the character's perspective, care about the character's fate, recognize aspects of personal experience, or commit to portraying the character consistently. These relationships can overlap without being identical. A participant can understand an antagonist's perspective while rejecting the character's

values. Another can care deeply about a character while choosing actions that create fictional loss. An account of embodiment needs to specify the relationship under discussion before claiming that a token strengthens or weakens it.

The same precision is necessary when borrowing the language of bodily experience. Kilteni, Groten, and Slater distinguish self-location, agency, and body ownership in their account of the sense of embodiment in virtual reality (Kilteni, Groten, and Slater, 2012). These categories provide a useful warning against collapsing distinct experiences. Their framework addresses virtual bodily experience and does not establish that a tabletop participant experiences a portrait as part of their own body. The present analysis uses the distinctions cautiously: controlling a token, imagining a location, and experiencing ownership of a virtual body are different propositions, each requiring appropriate evidence.

Agency in tabletop drama includes a socially organized capacity to propose actions and have them considered under the group's procedures. A participant who declares an attempted reconciliation may exercise agency even if the other character refuses it. Success and agency are distinct. The refusal can demonstrate that the proposal entered the drama and met another participant's meaningful choice. If the proposal is never heard or is disregarded because it arrived through an unsupported channel, the problem concerns access to consequential participation. Token control alone cannot resolve that problem.

An intention can also be represented accurately while its effect remains uncertain. A player may understand perfectly

how to move a token and still misunderstand whether the move constitutes an entrance. Technical competence does not supply a shared fictional convention. Conversely, someone who struggles with the interface can exercise clear dramatic agency by asking another participant to carry out an announced move. Analysis should separate confidence with controls from the experience of authoring a character's action. These relationships might affect each other, but their association should be investigated rather than assumed.

Perspective taking concerns what the participant attends to and understands through the character's circumstances. The player can ask what this individual knows, fears, or values without needing a visual experience from the character's eyes. A map viewed from above may even coexist with strong commitment to limited character knowledge. The relevant imaginative labor involves distinguishing available player information from the character's position within the world. A token can remind the participant of location, but perspective taking also depends on narrative information and chosen interpretive discipline.

Emotional involvement needs equally careful interpretation. A player can feel moved by a scene because another participant performed it effectively, because a relationship developed unexpectedly, or because the fiction resonates with personal concerns. These possibilities do not establish bodily ownership of the token. A participant's own account can identify what the image contributed, although recollection still represents a report about experience. Researchers should not infer a particular mechanism solely from tears, laughter, or enthusiastic description. The emotional force of play

deserves serious attention without being turned into evidence for every theory of embodiment at once.

Social recognition supplies another dimension. Other participants may consistently address the character, remember its actions, and treat its commitments as consequential. This public continuity can support a convincing dramatic presence even when the player describes a relatively detached experience. The reverse is also possible: a participant may imagine a character vividly while others repeatedly confuse its identity or overlook its contributions. These situations require different remedies. One concerns the participant's relationship to the character; the other concerns how the shared performance attributes action and allocates attention.

A sense of authorship can be affected when representations appear to act without the player's intention. Automatic movement, mistaken operator changes, or facilitator intervention may make it unclear whether the participant still controls a character's choices. The actual significance depends on the agreed arrangement. A player can willingly delegate routine movement while retaining authority over consequential decisions. A temporary change in control can also be a deliberate feature of a scenario. The relevant question is whether the arrangement is understood and preserves the participant's promised role, rather than whether all assistance necessarily weakens embodiment.

Identity continuity is also compatible with deliberate distance. A player might portray a difficult character by maintaining a clear analytical separation from the role. The portrayal can still be detailed, responsive, and credible. Treating complete psychological merger as the ideal would misdescribe this

practice and could pressure participants to report experiences they do not have. An adequate theory recognizes several ways of sustaining a character. Their value can be assessed through the aims of the activity and the participant's own account, without defining one preferred intensity as the universal standard.

These distinctions have practical consequences for evaluation. A questionnaire asking whether a participant “felt like the character” leaves too much unspecified. A more informative inquiry asks about imagined viewpoint, control over consequential choices, recognition by others, and the role of the visible representation. Observing the scene can show whether contributions receive responses, while interviews can address experiences that observation cannot establish. The framework supports a set of related questions rather than a single score that claims to measure the total presence of a character. That separation makes disagreement interpretable and future research more useful.

Conflicting Channels and the Repair of Presence

The visible image, spoken performance, written description, and actual participant can communicate different things at the same moment. A portrait may smile while the player describes the character as grieving. A token may remain in a room after the character has announced departure. A participant may laugh because of an event outside the game while portraying solemnity. These differences do not all constitute contradictions. The group needs to know which

channel establishes which kind of fact. A stable portrait can identify a person while current description establishes an expression, with no conflict once the relationship is understood.

A useful account distinguishes fictional ambiguity from representational uncertainty. Fictional ambiguity occurs when participants agree about an event but disagree about its meaning: the character smiled, yet the reason remains unclear. Representational uncertainty occurs when participants do not know whether the smile belongs to the current scene at all. The former can sustain dramatic tension. The latter may prevent a fair response because players are interpreting different events. Clarifying the representational convention can preserve uncertainty about motive rather than explaining it away. Precision about the medium creates room for ambiguity within the drama.

Channel priorities should follow the intended function and remain open to correction. A group might treat announced location as authoritative when a token has not yet been updated, while relying on token position during a scene organized entirely through movement. The priority can vary with context if the transition is clear. Problems arise when participants silently apply different rules. One assumes a verbal departure has taken effect; another insists that the marker remains visible. A short clarification restores a common event sequence and prevents the dispute from being mistaken for a conflict between characters.

Camera use introduces another representational relationship where video is available. A participant's visible face may help listeners follow turn taking, or the group may treat the camera

image as part of character performance. These uses need not coincide. The participant might wear ordinary clothing while the character wears ceremonial dress, and a glance away from the camera might reflect reading rather than fictional avoidance. Video can add expressive information, but it does not automatically settle attribution. Participants should understand whether actual movements are offered as character actions and which administrative signals remain outside the fiction.

The presence of several visual faces can divide attention. A listener might watch the player's camera while another looks at the character portrait, and a third reads text without attending to either. Their available cues differ. A consequential gesture that appears only on camera may need a brief description so that everyone can respond. The point is not to duplicate every expressive detail across every medium. It is to communicate the event adequately when a missing cue would change another participant's available choices or understanding of the situation.

Technical interruption can resemble fictional refusal. A character who fails to answer may appear evasive when the player has lost audio. A token that stops moving may look indecisive when the interface is unresponsive. The group can establish an administrative signal for uncertainty and pause consequences when the communication status is unclear. Once the problem is resolved, participants can return to the last understood action. This repair preserves dramatic accountability by ensuring that a character's decisions remain attributable to an actual contribution, including an intentionally communicated choice to remain silent.

Repair also has a temporal dimension. If a missed statement changed the interpretation of several later actions, repeating only the statement may be insufficient. Participants may need to revisit the affected exchange and decide which consequences remain. This is ordinary collaborative maintenance, although it should be proportionate to the importance of the misunderstanding. A minor mistaken location can often be corrected immediately. A missed revelation that caused a character to make an irreversible fictional commitment may require a broader adjustment. The governing aim is an intelligible shared sequence rather than strict preservation of every interface trace.

The burden of repair should not fall continually on the participant whose access differs from the presumed default. If important actions repeatedly appear only as tiny visual movements, a participant relying on text or audio must constantly ask what happened. Changing the convention may provide a better solution than repeating individual clarifications. The group can announce consequential movement while leaving incidental adjustment unspoken. This distributes the work of making the scene available. It also demonstrates that embodiment depends on the conditions of recognition, rather than on visual display considered in isolation.

Successful repair need not reduce dramatic involvement. A brief administrative clarification can establish that an offered hand was visible to everyone, after which the characters continue negotiating whether to accept it. The intervention protects the choice's significance. Participants can distinguish the moment spent coordinating representation from the

fictional time of hesitation. This capacity to maintain several levels of activity is part of the medium's expressive competence. A theory that equates presence with uninterrupted illusion would overlook the collaborative work that allows a distant, partly imagined body to remain consequential.

A Hypothetical Audience at the Closed Gate

Consider an invented scene involving three characters in a gatehouse. Irena, an envoy, needs access to a sealed chamber before a council meeting. Nalin, the keeper, controls the key but fears that granting entry will be treated as disloyalty. Sera, an archivist, knows that the chamber contains a document relevant to the dispute. The participants use voice and a shared tabletop containing a gatehouse area, an adjoining courtyard, and three named tokens. This is a constructed analytical example, with no claim that it reproduces an observed session. Its purpose is to show how the same dramatic event depends on several representational relationships.

The group establishes that token placement indicates location, while small adjustments within an area have no automatic meaning. Moving across the boundary between courtyard and gatehouse counts as entry or departure when announced. Spoken description establishes temporary posture and gestures. The portrait is a general likeness, rather than a current expression. These conventions leave much of the scene imagined. They also give participants a common basis

for interpreting consequential actions. No measured distance is needed because the dispute concerns access, responsibility, and acknowledgment rather than the speed with which someone can cross a room.

Irena's player speaks slowly and names Nalin before asking for the key. The name establishes address, while the phrasing makes the request formal rather than familiar. Irena's token remains near the gatehouse entrance. The player describes removing a glove and holding out an open hand. Neither the portrait nor the token shows this movement, yet the gesture becomes part of the shared situation. Nalin's player can respond to the offered hand as well as the words. The character's imagined body now has a specific relation to another character, established through description and recognized through the opportunity to answer.

Nalin's player answers that the key belongs to the council and describes keeping it beneath a folded cloth. This contribution establishes concealment from sight, assuming the group's authority arrangement permits the player to describe possession of the assigned object. It does not necessarily establish that Irena knows where the key is. The player clarifies that the audience hears the description while Irena sees only the cloth on the table. Participants can now distinguish player information from character perception. The imagined bodily action remains useful even though its informational consequences differ for the people following the scene.

Sera's token moves toward the gatehouse boundary, and the player begins to speak. Irena's player interprets the movement as departure and says that leaving now will abandon Nalin to

suspicion. Sera's player clarifies that the marker was moved to avoid covering a label; the character has stayed beside the table. The group retracts the response to the apparent departure and resumes. This small repair demonstrates why interface change cannot always be treated as intentional bodily action. The dramatic accusation was coherent under one interpretation, but its premise had never been authored as fiction.

Sera then deliberately announces a departure and moves the token into the courtyard. This time the action counts. Nalin asks Sera to remain, and Sera stops at the threshold before answering. The departure and hesitation change the scene's options. Irena can appeal to Sera, Nalin can disclose the reason for fear, and Sera can return or leave. The visible movement carries dramatic weight through established convention and response. Its symbolic character does not diminish that weight. The token provides an economical public means of performing a change in relationship and availability.

Suppose Sera's player cannot operate the pointer comfortably and asks another participant to make the same move after the announcement. The dramatic attribution remains intact if the timing and intention are understood. Sera has still attempted to leave, and the others can still answer the attempt. This variation separates interface operation from authorship without pretending that their practical relationship never matters. Delegation could become confusing if the operator moves too early or mishears the request. A clear announcement and confirmation preserve the relevant

connection between the participant's choice and the character's visible action.

Now imagine three alternative portraits for Nalin: a realistic smiling face, a stylized figure with a prominent key emblem, and an abstract name marker. Each offers different cues. The smile could be disregarded as part of an old likeness; the emblem could help identify the keeper's role; the name could leave appearance open. None determines whether Nalin is trustworthy or whether the player identifies with the character. Those outcomes depend on additional interpretation and evidence. The example supports a comparison of representational tasks while leaving causal claims about psychological influence unresolved.

The scene reaches a decision when Nalin describes placing the key on the table within Irena's reach. Irena's player states that the envoy waits for an explicit invitation before taking it. This response treats bodily positioning as socially meaningful. The key's availability becomes a question about permission and responsibility. Nalin can authorize the transfer or withdraw the offer, and Sera can witness the decision if still present. A small imagined hand movement now organizes a conflict that no token animation could settle independently. Its force depends on what the participants understand the movement to commit the characters to doing.

The scene could conclude with Nalin granting permission while asking Sera to state publicly that the access was authorized. Sera returns, Irena accepts the key, and the participants establish the transfer in speech before updating any object marker. The resulting agreement distributes responsibility among the characters. Nalin has made a

decision, Irena has accepted its terms, and Sera has become a witness. The visible display may change very little, yet the dramatic situation has changed substantially. Alternatively, Sera could refuse to return, leaving Nalin unwilling to release the key. Both continuations follow from the same representational arrangement. Their difference arises from participants answering one another through character choices. This comparison identifies a limit to explanations centered on imagery alone: the portrait and token conventions make the exchange available, but they do not supply its resolution. Embodiment supports an encounter among agents whose responses remain open, rather than guaranteeing an emotionally satisfying outcome or directing every participant toward the same interpretation. Participants could agree on every visible event while judging the keeper's decision differently, which preserves dramatic disagreement within a coherent account of what has happened.

The example does not show that one channel compensates completely for another. It shows how several resources support different parts of a consequential exchange. Voice establishes changing address and tone. Description establishes the hand, cloth, and key. Token placement establishes presence under a limited convention. Recognition by other participants makes these contributions answerable. The character's body becomes dramatically available through their coordination, while the participant's actual body remains involved in speaking, listening, or requesting assistance. This relational account explains the episode without requiring a claim that any player literally experiences the token as their own body.

Researching and Designing Distributed Embodiment

An empirical study should begin with a narrower question than whether tokens increase immersion. One possible question concerns how portrait style affects the attribution of character identity during conversation. Another concerns how movement conventions affect whether participants recognize an entrance or departure. These inquiries require different evidence and may yield different answers. Defining the target in advance prevents a favorable report about enjoyment from being presented as proof of bodily ownership, or a quick identification task from being treated as a complete account of dramatic presence. The conceptual distinctions developed here should guide the study's questions and claims.

A comparative design could examine versions of the same scenario using realistic portraits, stylized portraits, and abstract named markers. It would need to control or document other relevant differences, including familiarity with characters, visual distinctiveness, and participant choice of image. If one set contains easily distinguishable colors while another contains similar faces, any difference might concern recognition rather than realism. Matching every feature perfectly may be impossible, but documenting the remaining differences makes interpretation more defensible. The study should explain what aspect of representation its conditions actually vary.

Repeated participation creates its own problem. A participant who plays the gatehouse scene several times learns the document's importance and the other characters' possible

responses. Later performance cannot be treated as a fresh encounter differing only in token style. Researchers could vary the order of conditions, use comparable scenarios, or study separate groups, with each arrangement carrying limitations. The design should identify these limitations before interpreting outcomes. There is no need to invent a universal method that removes every contextual difference. There is a need to connect each claim to what the comparison can support.

Observation can examine public action without claiming direct access to experience. An analyst might identify occasions when participants name an addressee, announce token movement, correct a mistaken location, or respond to a described gesture. The analysis can follow whether a contribution receives acknowledgment and changes subsequent choices. It should distinguish an unobserved response from evidence that no response occurred, especially where conversations divide. Close interpretation also needs the relevant convention. Counting every token adjustment as bodily action would reproduce the conceptual error the framework was designed to prevent.

Participant accounts can address relationships that observation cannot establish. Interviews might ask which representations helped maintain character continuity, when the participant felt control over consequential decisions, and how the character's imagined body related to the visible marker. Questions should permit reports of distance, indifference, or changing involvement. They should also invite concrete episodes rather than requiring participants to endorse theoretical terminology. A participant who says the

token was merely a useful label has supplied valuable evidence about its function. The answer should not be treated as an unsuccessful version of an experience the researcher hoped to find.

Measures borrowed from immersive virtual reality need conceptual review before use. A question about feeling located inside a virtual body may have little clear meaning for a participant viewing a named circle from above. Rewording it does not automatically preserve the construct. Researchers should explain what the adapted question asks and investigate whether participants interpret it consistently. They can combine focused reports with evidence about action and recognition while keeping the outcomes distinct. A modest conclusion about one relationship is more informative than a broad embodiment score whose components refer to incompatible experiences.

Research procedures must also preserve the conditions of voluntary performance. Participants should understand what is observed or recorded and how their contributions will be used. Requests to reflect on emotional involvement should allow refusal without requiring personal explanation. These arrangements matter methodologically because an audience of researchers or an expectation of intimate disclosure can change performance. The study's account should describe relevant conditions without turning private participant circumstances into unnecessary interpretive material. Ethical attention belongs within the explanation of how the evidence was produced, with claims proportionate to the data participants agreed to provide.

Analysis should also consider competing explanations for apparent differences between conditions. If participants use portraits more often after a facilitator demonstrates them, the change could reflect instruction rather than the images themselves. If experienced players need fewer location clarifications, familiarity with the convention may matter more than visual realism. Researchers can examine these possibilities through focused comparison and participant explanation, while acknowledging that naturally occurring performance combines several influences. Negative and ambiguous cases deserve attention because they reveal where the proposed relationship fails or changes. A participant might recognize every token accurately yet report little interest in the character, or report strong involvement while rarely looking at the display. Such cases help separate recognition from identification without diminishing either experience. The final account should explain how its categories handled these differences and identify questions that remain unanswered. This practice makes the framework revisable: evidence can challenge the assigned function of a token, the interpretation of a gesture, or the supposed relationship between interface control and experienced agency.

Design practice can proceed before every empirical question is settled, provided recommendations are presented as reasoned principles rather than proven effects. A facilitator can establish what token location means, distinguish portrait likeness from current expression, and provide a clear way to announce consequential action. The group can test a brief entrance, an offered object, and a change of speaker before

the main drama. These exercises reveal mismatched assumptions while the fictional stakes are low. Their purpose is shared representational competence, leaving participants free to develop their own expressive style during play.

Accessible participation should be built into these conventions. A person who types instead of speaking or delegates movement should retain an intelligible route to character action. Important information should not depend entirely on a subtle color change, a fleeting gesture, or an unannounced movement outside another participant's view. Exact arrangements should follow the group's actual requirements. The principle is that a contribution's fictional authority comes from the agreed role and procedure, rather than from one preferred mode of bodily performance. This connects accessibility directly to the essay's account of agency and recognition.

Evaluation after play can focus on specific breakdowns and successful exchanges. Participants might recall a moment when a token movement was misunderstood, when a portrait supported recognition, or when description made an imagined gesture clear. Such discussion can guide revisions without assuming that every moment of intense feeling arose from the visual representation. It also preserves room for disagreement. One participant may prefer an abstract marker while another values a detailed portrait. A good design explains which shared tasks require consistency and where individual preference can remain open without disrupting the scene.

The Character as a Publicly Answerable Presence

The character, player, and token form a relationship through which distant participants can create bodily meaningful drama. The player remains a living person acting under actual physical conditions. The character has an imagined body whose actions and experiences belong to the fiction. The token offers a visible representative with functions established through use. Their separation allows a participant to portray an unfamiliar body, delegate an interface action, or communicate a gesture through description. Their coordination allows other participants to recognize the same fictional individual and answer what that individual does.

Voice can provide a changing temporal performance, while description establishes bodily details beyond the image. Token movement becomes dramatic action when it carries an intelligible commitment under an understood convention and receives relevant uptake. Its symbolic form is compatible with consequence. Realistic portraits, stylized figures, and abstract markers distribute information differently, but none guarantees identification or convincing presence. The avatar, mask, puppet, and anchor comparisons illuminate particular functions. Their value depends on specifying the relationship being examined and respecting the differences each analogy leaves unresolved.

The analysis also separates private experience from public accomplishment. Perspective taking, emotional involvement, control, and bodily ownership require different kinds of evidence. Social recognition concerns how the shared drama

attributes contributions and sustains consequences. These relationships can support one another without moving together in every case. A participant may portray a compelling character with deliberate emotional distance; another may feel deeply involved while struggling to make contributions available. Research and design become more precise when they ask which relationship needs explanation or support.

Vocal expression and imagined action can create powerful alternatives to shared bodily enactment, with their own demands and possibilities. They do not reproduce every feature of physical copresence, and their success does not depend on doing so. The decisive issue is whether participants can understand and answer the character's relevant action under conditions that preserve agency. Clarification, delegated operation, and accessible communication can strengthen that relationship. The imagined hand becomes dramatic when its offer can be accepted or refused; the token's departure matters when someone can ask the character to stay.

A comprehensive account of digital embodiment should follow these connections at the level of actual episodes. It should ask how a contribution moves from intention to representation, how others recognize it, and what consequence becomes possible. This approach gives visual tokens their appropriate importance without assigning them an automatic psychological power. They can serve as visible bodies for voices and as anchors for imagined individuals, provided the surrounding practice makes those individuals publicly answerable. Character presence is accomplished

through that continuing work of expression, interpretation, and response.

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Tessa Caldwell

Tessa Caldwell is an interaction designer specializing in accessible interfaces and collaborative digital experiences. Outside her professional work, she has played tabletop roleplaying games for many years and designs virtual tokens, character displays, and tools for online

performances. Her interests center on the unusual relationship between the person at the keyboard, the imagined character, and the small digital image that represents both. She argues that even a simple token can influence posture, attention, emotional identification, and social expectations during play. Caldwell advocates flexible visual representation rather than treating avatars as compulsory portraits. She also sews miniature costumes for tabletop figures, although she admits that her most elaborately dressed characters tend to meet remarkably undignified endings.

The Scene Nobody Saw

Simultaneous Performance and Fragmented Narrative in Online Salon LARP

Daphne Mercer

Abstract

This essay examines simultaneous performance and fragmented narrative in online salon live action roleplaying. It argues that collective coherence depends on compatible fictional commitments, traveling consequences, and meaningful opportunities for response rather than a unified audience. The analysis distinguishes events, participant experiences, and retrospective accounts, then compares physical conversational space with digitally separated rooms. It investigates unseen developments, accidental encounters, overhearing, interruption, rumor, and temporal coordination. A hypothetical assembly demonstrates how three concurrent scenes can converge in public action while retaining private meanings and independent trajectories. The essay differentiates fictional consistency, causal intelligibility, participation, and interpretation, drawing bounded comparisons with narrative and communication scholarship. It concludes with design principles and a proposed research approach. Partial witnessing becomes a productive theatrical condition when participants can understand and answer the consequences of encounters they never observed.

Keywords

online salon LARP, simultaneous performance, fragmented dramaturgy, distributed narrative, partial witnessing, collective coherence

Simultaneous Drama and Partial Witnessing

A negotiation changes an allegiance in one conversation while an accusation changes a reputation in another. Elsewhere, two characters decide whether to trust each other. These exchanges occupy the same period of play, yet no participant follows them all. This arrangement is central to the form of online salon live action roleplaying examined here. Participants generate dramatic developments through concurrent interactions and encounter the consequences of conversations they never heard. The performance can remain coherent when its participants share enough fictional conditions and procedures to make those consequences intelligible. Coherence does not require a complete narrative view held by any single person.

The title's scene that nobody saw describes the absence of an encompassing perspective. People experience the individual encounters in which they participate. A secret exchange can have an immediate audience of two, including its speakers, while remaining unavailable to everyone else. What nobody experiences directly is the complete arrangement of simultaneous scenes and their emerging relationships. Calling the performance fragmented recognizes this distribution of access. It does not imply that the exchanges lack internal shape or that the participants are disconnected from one another. The analytical task is to explain how separate experiences become parts of a consequential shared event.

Online salon play makes this task especially visible. A virtual tabletop can provide a common representation of locations

and characters while external voice rooms separate conversations. Participants may see that several people occupy a fictional library without hearing what they say. Private text can carry another exchange alongside the audible scene. These arrangements vary between platforms and groups; no particular feature is assumed to be universally available. The discussion concerns representational choices wherever the relevant communication facilities exist. Their dramatic importance lies in how they organize access, movement, and the transmission of consequences.

The essay argues for a distinction between distributed participation and collective comprehensibility. Participants do not need identical knowledge, but their actions need usable relationships to the world others inhabit. A private promise may change a public vote. An accusation may affect how an absent character is received later. These connections can remain partly unexplained during play. Their coherence depends on compatible fictional commitments and opportunities for response, with enough communication to prevent technical separation from becoming arbitrary contradiction. Fragmented dramaturgy organizes those connections while leaving local encounters open to participant choice.

The comparison with conventional tabletop roleplaying identifies an arrangement rather than an absolute genre boundary. Many tabletop sessions organize conversation around one group and shift attention sequentially between scenes. Such play can include private exchanges, split parties, and simultaneous communication. Salon play often makes the distribution of encounters a sustained organizing principle:

several conversations continue independently without waiting for a common audience. The difference concerns how attention and action are routinely coordinated. It would be inaccurate to make simultaneity exclusive to one tradition or to treat every tabletop group as a single unvarying model.

Mochocki describes live action roleplaying through participants' combined roles as authors, actors, characters, and audience, emphasizing the importance of a situated participant perspective (Mochocki, 2018). This account helps explain why an external spectator cannot serve as the only standard of theatrical completeness. A participant hears a refusal while deciding how to answer it; witnessing and making the event occur together. The present essay extends that analytical concern to digitally separated encounters. It asks how participants sustain a shared drama when their situated experiences overlap selectively and much of the performance remains elsewhere.

The argument proceeds through conceptual analysis supported by roleplaying scholarship and bounded comparisons with communication research. Its invented examples illustrate proposed distinctions rather than report field observations. The discussion separates fictional events from experiences and later accounts, compares physical and digital conversational spaces, and examines unseen developments, encounters, rumor, and temporal coordination. A sustained hypothetical assembly demonstrates the relationships among concurrent scenes. The final sections specify different forms of coherence and propose ways to design and study them. This sequence keeps the central

question focused on performance rather than on producing an omniscient retrospective summary.

The stakes are both artistic and practical. A participant can enjoy an intense encounter while the larger scenario becomes difficult to navigate, or understand the public decision while feeling excluded from consequential action. These outcomes require different explanations. A successful distributed drama gives local encounters room to matter and gives their consequences workable routes into other encounters. It can preserve secrets, disagreements, and incomplete understanding while supporting a recognizable common world. Its achievement is a performance that remains answerable across partial perspectives, even when its full narrative never becomes anyone's immediate experience.

Events Experiences and Narrative Accounts

An event in the fiction, an experience of play, and a narrative account of that experience are related but distinct. A character can surrender a claim to office during a private meeting. The participants experience that meeting through their available channels, expectations, and involvement. Later, one might describe the surrender as generosity and another as coercion. These accounts select and interpret an event whose occurrence they may both acknowledge. Distinguishing the levels prevents disagreement about significance from being mistaken for a broken fictional world, while leaving genuine uncertainty about what happened available for examination.

The distinction also clarifies what a collective narrative might mean. It can refer to the connected history of fictional events generated during play. It can mean a participant's interpretation of how those events fit together. It can also mean a later account assembled from several perspectives. These meanings should not be silently exchanged. A scenario may produce a causally connected history without anyone constructing a complete account. A debrief may produce an elegant story while overlooking experiences that do not fit it. The existence of a persuasive summary provides evidence about interpretation, rather than proof that everyone experienced one unified narrative.

Ryan's discussion of narrative in digital media distinguishes narrative discourse from the represented story and emphasizes worlds, characters, events, temporal relations, and meaningful connections among events (Ryan, 2001). This vocabulary offers a useful basis for considering coherence without requiring one uninterrupted presentation. In the present argument, separate scenes can contribute to a shared event history when their commitments and effects remain compatible. The application is an analytical proposal about salon performance. It does not imply that Ryan's account establishes how participants experience particular voice rooms or that every collection of interactions necessarily forms an equally compelling narrative.

Concurrent events can be connected without being known to the same person. A delegate privately loses support and later withdraws from a public election. Someone who hears only the withdrawal sees a consequence without its full cause. The event remains intelligible at a modest level: the delegate has

withdrawn, and other candidates can respond. A later disclosure can deepen the explanation. Requiring every participant to know the earlier negotiation immediately would remove a potentially useful difference between acting within the world and surveying the whole performance. Causal connection can exist before comprehensive explanation becomes available.

Participant experience includes more than knowledge of fictional facts. The same withdrawal may bring relief to one person, disappointment to another, and confusion to someone who had been in a different conversation. Emotional and interpretive differences need not be resolved into a single correct response. They reveal how a shared event encounters different histories of participation. An analyst should distinguish these differences from incompatible claims such as whether the delegate withdrew before or after the vote. The first kind concerns perspective; the second may affect the event sequence on which subsequent action depends.

Local scenes also have narrative shape at a scale smaller than the whole scenario. A request encounters resistance, new information changes the negotiation, and a participant makes a commitment. The exchange can be satisfying to those involved even if it barely affects the main public decision. Calling it secondary from an external outline does not establish its experiential value. A comprehensive analysis should examine local accomplishments as well as connections across scenes. Otherwise, the researcher may reproduce the perspective of a central plot summary while overlooking the encounters through which much of the performance actually mattered.

Not every local action enters the shared fiction in the same way. A participant can privately imagine that the character regrets a choice without communicating that regret. The imagined experience may influence later portrayal, but others cannot treat it as publicly established evidence until some contribution makes it available. A written private exchange, by contrast, can establish a promise between its participants under the group's conventions. The distinction concerns communication and authority. It avoids treating every unexpressed thought as an event to which the entire performance is already committed.

The shared world can contain beliefs that conflict while its event history remains compatible. One faction may believe that the council dismissed a petition, while another knows it was never delivered. Those beliefs can produce coherent actions if the scenario permits misinformation and participants distinguish belief from established fact. A problem arises when two scenes independently establish mutually exclusive outcomes for the same petition. The analysis needs to ask whether the contradiction belongs to characters' understandings or to the underlying commitments of play. Only the latter necessarily requires procedural repair.

These distinctions support a restrained definition of collective narrative. Participants jointly generate a fictional history whose connections may be unevenly experienced and later interpreted in several ways. The history need not resolve into one plot with a universally recognized protagonist. It does need enough continuity for commitments to accumulate and actions to meet consequences. Narrative accounts can help participants discover additional relationships afterward, but

the performance's coherence already depends on the conditions under which its scenes could affect one another. Later explanation supplements those conditions; it cannot retroactively give a missed opportunity to someone who lacked a usable route into action.

Fragmented Space in the Physical Salon

A physical salon offers several possible conversations within a shared environment. Participants can gather around a table, move toward a doorway, or draw someone aside. Distance, orientation, volume, and architectural boundaries affect what becomes available to others. These conditions do not produce an identical experience for every participant. A person following one exchange may notice movement elsewhere without hearing its words. Someone approaching a group may catch only a final sentence. Physical proximity supplies possibilities for peripheral awareness while leaving attention selective and information unevenly distributed.

The environment's permeability is important. A conversation can appear private while remaining partly audible to someone nearby. A public accusation can attract attention from across the room. Two exchanges can merge when a participant turns toward a neighboring group. These possibilities provide ways for scenes to influence one another without a separate announcement. Their actual availability depends on the room, participants, and conventions of the event. A careful comparison should avoid romanticizing the physical salon as a space of effortless awareness. Noise, crowding, and limited access can make apparently available information unusable.

Accidental encounters involve more than random movement. A participant notices an available person, recognizes an unfinished concern, and decides to approach. The encounter depends on perception, interpretation, and an opportunity to enter. A crowded room can make a character conspicuous while making conversation difficult. A quiet corner can support intimacy while reducing the chance that someone else joins. These conditions influence which relationships receive attention. They do not determine every decision, but they form part of the practical dramaturgy through which a scenario's written possibilities become encounters among participants.

Physical room boundaries can represent fictional differences with varying precision. Two corners of one hall might stand for distant locations, or an actual side room might represent a private study. Participants need conventions to know what movement means and which sounds count as fictional information. Hearing someone speak across an actual room may not authorize the character to hear them across an imagined city. The physical salon already combines material perception with symbolic interpretation. Digital play changes that combination, but it does not introduce mediation into an otherwise completely transparent form.

The relationship between attention and access also matters. A participant can be close enough to hear an exchange while being engaged in a different one. The availability of sound does not establish that the information was noticed or understood. A character's later ignorance may reflect plausible limited attention rather than deliberate concealment. Groups can handle such situations through their own

conventions, but analysis should retain the distinction. Overhearing is an event of successful reception under relevant rules, rather than a property automatically possessed by everyone standing within an approximate radius.

Physical visibility can communicate social activity without disclosing content. A participant may see two rivals talking and infer that a negotiation is underway. That inference can prompt curiosity, suspicion, or an approach. The visible meeting is itself information, even if the words remain unknown. Such information can support indirect connections among scenes. It can also create mistaken assumptions: the rivals might be discussing a personal loss rather than forming an alliance. Dramatic coherence does not require every inference to be correct, provided the underlying observations and the opportunities for response remain intelligible.

The physical environment also creates asymmetries. Participants differ in how readily they hear quiet speech, identify faces, cross a crowded space, or enter a fast conversation. A design that relies on subtle incidental cues may offer uneven access to dramatic opportunities. This observation is a reason to examine actual participation conditions rather than assume that bodily copresence guarantees inclusion. Explicit introductions, clear announcements, and alternative ways to request an encounter can be useful in physical play as well as online. Their value follows from the need to make consequential interaction available under the group's real circumstances.

Transitions between local and collective attention can happen gradually. A nearby argument draws additional listeners until an informal audience becomes a public gathering. Participants

may understand that the encounter has changed scale without a formal cut between scenes. Such transitions can provide dramatic momentum, but they can also interrupt a private exchange before its participants are ready. The issue is how the event balances openness to interruption with the possibility of completing a meaningful interaction. Physical continuity offers resources for that balance, rather than a universally superior answer.

The comparison establishes a baseline of situated, incomplete access. The physical salon supports overlapping zones of attention, but its world is already interpreted through conventions about location, audibility, and participation. Online rooms reorganize these relationships by making some boundaries more explicit and some peripheral cues less available. To explain that change, the analysis must follow particular functions: noticing another encounter, identifying an opening, communicating an arrival, and carrying a consequence elsewhere. Comparing these functions avoids reducing the discussion to a general judgment that physical presence is richer or that digital separation is cleaner.

Digital Rooms and the Architecture of Conversation

A separate voice room can place a firm communicative boundary between encounters. Participants in one room may hear each other clearly while receiving no sound from another. The change is qualitative when compared with a physical environment in which nearby conversation remains partly available. A room transition can become an explicit

action rather than a gradual shift of attention. This arrangement can support sustained private scenes, but it changes how participants notice opportunities elsewhere. The analysis must consider what replaces the incidental information that might otherwise accompany movement, raised voices, or a gathering audience.

A virtual tabletop and a voice system do not automatically describe the same space. A token may occupy a fictional room while its player remains in a general voice channel. Several fictional locations might share one channel, or one location might host several separate conversations. The group needs to establish the relationship. If token position indicates fictional presence while channel membership determines what the player actually hears, the two displays answer different questions. Treating either as a complete representation of the other can produce mistakes about who witnessed a statement or could interrupt an encounter.

Awareness research offers a limited comparison. Dourish and Bellotti examine how information about others' activity can support coordination within shared collaborative workspaces, including information available through the workspace itself (Dourish and Bellotti, 1992). Salon drama has different aims from collaborative editing: secrecy and disagreement can be productive features of the activity. The relevant application is the distinction between knowing that an activity is occurring and knowing its content. A tabletop display might show that a meeting exists without revealing its dialogue. Whether that information helps dramatic participation remains a question about the particular convention and its use.

Visible room membership can provide such limited awareness where the system makes it available. A participant notices that two characters are together and decides to seek one of them later. The display supplies a possible connection between scenes without broadcasting the negotiation. This arrangement can also reveal more than the fictional world permits. Characters might be meeting secretly even though players can see their accounts together. The design needs to distinguish administrative visibility from fictional observation. Participants can then interpret the display without converting every piece of interface information into character knowledge.

Movement between rooms has practical and dramatic costs. A participant may need to leave one exchange, find the correct destination, and establish whether entry is allowed. The transition can interrupt speech or require an administrative request. These costs might discourage casual visits even when travel is fictionally easy. They can also make an intentional entrance more noticeable. The important point is that navigation affects the availability of encounters. An apparently open fictional setting can function as a set of isolated conversations if its entry procedures make approaching another group unclear or cumbersome.

Room names and labels can influence navigation without dictating content. A clearly named public hall can offer an understandable place to seek company. A room labeled with an unexplained code can make the same opportunity harder to locate. Yet a descriptive label can reveal an activity that should remain unknown to characters. The choice depends on what the label is meant to establish and for whom. A useful

design separates information needed to operate the event from information the fiction treats as discoverable. Neither layer needs to be exhaustive, but their relationship should be explainable.

Text introduces a different temporal relation. A participant may receive a private message while following an audible conversation and answer it later. The sender may assume an immediate response or establish a fictional action before the recipient has read the message. This situation involves coordination across channels rather than simple simultaneous awareness. A convention can distinguish a message sent, a message received within the fiction, and a message accepted as the basis for a commitment. The distinction prevents a technically delivered notification from silently becoming a completed dramatic exchange.

Breakout arrangements can provide temporary boundaries, with entry and return managed by participants or a facilitator where the system permits. Their dramatic effect depends on whether the group treats them as fictional spaces, private conversations within a space, or administrative facilities. A breakout room called the garden does not create a coherent garden scene by itself. Participants still need to know who is present, whether another character can approach, and how changes become relevant elsewhere. Communication architecture provides conditions for performance, with fictional meaning supplied through agreed practice.

The number of rooms should follow the intended pattern of interaction rather than a belief that more separation creates more depth. Several rooms can support parallel negotiations when participants have reasons and routes to move among

them. The same arrangement can leave a participant uncertain where to go or unable to find an opening. Conversely, one crowded channel can make independent conversations impractical. Choosing a configuration requires attention to actual participants and the scenario's relationships. Its success is shown through usable encounters and consequential movement between them, rather than through the display's visual resemblance to a floor plan.

Digital room boundaries can support a distinct aesthetic of elsewhere. While a participant negotiates, other encounters continue beyond hearing, producing consequences that may arrive unexpectedly. The performance feels larger than the currently available scene because the world is being acted upon by other people. This possibility depends on more than room separation. If distant encounters never affect anyone outside them, elsewhere becomes mere isolation. The architecture becomes dramaturgically productive when it supports both local concentration and later connection, allowing participants to experience a bounded scene within a continuing shared world.

Significant Scenes Beyond General Awareness

A private scene can alter the larger drama without becoming generally visible. Two characters may agree to withdraw an accusation, exchange a valuable document, or abandon a planned alliance. Most participants need not hear the exchange for its consequences to matter. They can encounter a changed public position, a missing document, or an

unexpected refusal later. The scene's significance comes from the commitments it creates and the responses those commitments make possible. Counting witnesses would provide a poor measure of dramatic importance when a small encounter can redirect a public decision.

This possibility also changes the distribution of protagonism. A participant may experience a quiet reconciliation as the central event of the evening, while a later summary emphasizes a contested succession. Neither description has to invalidate the other. The scenario contains several trajectories, and different participants inhabit different centers of concern. An account of fragmented dramaturgy should ask how these trajectories remain available and connected. It should resist assuming that the most public event supplies the only meaningful plot or that every participant must contribute equally to the same dominant conflict.

Absence from a scene can produce uncertainty that is artistically useful. A character receives an unexpected apology without knowing what prompted it. The participant can respond to the apology's immediate terms while wondering about the unseen cause. Subsequent conversation may reveal that another character intervened. The earlier uncertainty gives the discovery force. A design that routinely pauses to explain every hidden development would change this experience by making the participant a spectator of causes the character does not know. That approach is possible, but it represents a different distribution of perspective rather than an automatic improvement in coherence.

Unequal knowledge is not the same as unequal opportunity. Participants can legitimately know different facts while retaining meaningful routes to action. A problem emerges when one cluster controls every consequential encounter and other participants cannot discover where or how to intervene. Their ignorance then concerns participation conditions as well as fictional secrets. The distinction matters for evaluation. Protecting a private conversation can preserve a dramatic choice, while indefinite closure of all relevant conversations can prevent other players from exercising the roles the scenario promised them.

The scenario can give absent characters actionable consequences without disclosing an entire exchange. A public notice might state that a nomination has been withdrawn. A messenger can request that a character attend a later meeting. A transferred object can become visibly unavailable. Each contribution gives participants something they can answer under the fiction's conditions. The amount of explanation should follow the response required. A person asked to cast a vote may need to know the current candidates, while remaining unaware of every promise that shaped their decisions.

Authority becomes relevant when private scenes establish facts affecting people outside them. Montola's social framework treats roleplaying as involving an imaginary world, personified characters, and an organization of power over the activity (Montola, 2008). Applied here, the question is which commitments a local encounter can legitimately create. Two characters can promise their own support if they possess that authority. They cannot necessarily decide that an

absent character has agreed with them. The scope of local authorship needs to remain compatible with the wider event, especially when the people affected are currently participating elsewhere.

An unseen scene may also remain intentionally local. Two characters can discuss a private memory without altering the public election. The exchange can still develop a relationship or provide an important experience for its participants. Not every interaction needs a measurable contribution to the principal conflict. The larger design should make room for these encounters without requiring them to justify their existence through public consequences. Collective coherence concerns the compatibility and availability of participation across the event; it does not require every conversation to become a mechanism serving one predetermined resolution.

The difficulty appears when a scene's intended consequence cannot travel. A character gains information that would change a decision, but the decision occurs elsewhere before any usable route of communication is available. The result may be a meaningful missed opportunity if timing and travel are established parts of the drama. It may instead be an accidental exclusion caused by unclear channels or unavailable access. The interpretation depends on the event's promises and procedures. Designers should examine the difference rather than treating every missed connection as either a failure or a desirable surprise.

Private encounters also complicate judgments of another participant's portrayal. Someone who hears only a public refusal may read the character as arbitrary, while an unseen scene supplied a reason. During play, that partial

interpretation can be productive. Outside the fiction, participants should be cautious about assuming that their own perspective exhausts the character's available history. A later discussion can disclose relevant context without demanding that everyone defend every choice. Fragmented dramaturgy allows actions to acquire different meanings as information travels, and its analysis should preserve the distinction between incomplete interpretation and incoherent performance.

Accidental Encounters Overhearing and Interruption

The accidental encounter in online salon drama is partly a design problem. Participants need a chance to notice one another without already arranging every meeting. A shared public room can offer a place for characters between private scenes. Visible presence on a tabletop can suggest whom to approach where that display has an established meaning. A request to join a conversation can create an entrance. These practices do not reproduce every feature of physical wandering. They provide specific opportunities for unplanned interaction under a different organization of space and communication.

Chance should be distinguished from opacity. A participant who chooses among available conversations under limited information can experience a meaningful surprise. A participant who cannot understand where anyone is or how to enter a room lacks a usable decision. Both situations involve uncertainty, but only the first provides an intelligible basis for

action. The design can preserve unknown content while making navigation clear. This separation supports discovery without requiring players to solve the interface before they can take part in the fictional encounter.

Overhearing is particularly sensitive to the arrangement of channels. Separate rooms may prevent the gradual reception of nearby speech. A group can instead establish a public area in which conversation is audible to those present, or use an agreed procedure for attempting to listen at a boundary. Any such procedure changes what counts as access to information. It should specify enough about location, timing, and reception to support consequences. A character cannot acquire a statement merely because the player later wishes to have overheard it, unless the group's conventions explicitly allow that retrospective contribution.

The information obtained through overhearing can be partial. A listener might hear a name and an expression of urgency without receiving the whole negotiation. This fragment can prompt an approach, a mistaken inference, or a later question. Its dramatic value lies in the gap between what was heard and what it might mean. An invented fragment should have an accountable relation to the scene when the procedure claims to represent actual overhearing. Otherwise, the facilitator risks introducing a new event under the appearance of transmitting an existing one.

Interruption gives an absent character a way to change an encounter's direction. An arrival can challenge the assumptions of a negotiation, demand a public answer, or prevent a decision from remaining private. The possibility of interruption can matter even when nobody uses it, because

participants know that privacy has conditions. Digital rooms can make those conditions explicit through announced entry or a request to approach. The group should decide whether entry requires permission from the participants, follows fictional location, or depends on another procedure. Technical membership alone should not silently settle all these questions.

The distinction between participant privacy and fictional privacy is essential. A room may be unavailable because players are having an administrative conversation, because a participant needs a pause, or because characters have secured a private meeting. Only the last situation is necessarily open to fictional attempts at interruption under the game's rules. Treating every closed room as a dramatic obstacle can confuse the conditions of participation with the world being portrayed. A simple way to mark administrative status allows the fiction's uncertainties to remain active without turning technical boundaries into unreliable clues.

Interruption also requires proportion. If every approach immediately overrides an ongoing exchange, participants may struggle to complete a conversation with emotional or strategic depth. If every private group can refuse entry indefinitely, other characters may lose meaningful access. A convention can permit an announced approach followed by a brief opportunity to finish a current statement, or establish specific locations with different entry conditions. These are possible design choices, rather than universally optimal rules. Their purpose is to make both local concentration and consequential intervention available within the scenario's intended form.

Public announcements can connect rooms, but they transform the scale of an utterance. An accusation made to one person is different from an accusation broadcast to the entire assembly. A facilitator relaying the statement should preserve its intended reach rather than enlarging it for convenience. Likewise, a request that everyone return to the main room creates a convergence that may interrupt several scenes at different moments. The event needs a convention for whether characters hear the announcement immediately, whether local exchanges can conclude briefly, and when the collective scene begins.

Unexpected encounters can also occur through a shared intermediary. A messenger seeking one character finds another waiting in the public room and chooses to discuss the message. The resulting conversation was not prewritten, yet it arises from intelligible commitments. This form of contingency can be especially useful online because it creates connections through participant decisions rather than simulated ambient sound. Its effectiveness depends on the intermediary having enough discretion to respond. A messenger reduced to a delivery mechanism may connect information while leaving little room for the encounter to become dramatic.

Online play can develop its own grammar of arrival, waiting, entry, and departure. Participants learn how an announced knock differs from a message, how a public room invites conversation, and how an interruption becomes part of the fiction. These conventions make chance encounters possible without promising a complete recreation of physical spatial experience. The artistic question is whether they generate

usable uncertainty and meaningful contact. The practical question is whether participants can understand and employ them while attending to their characters' concerns. Both questions keep the focus on the encounters the architecture enables.

Relays Rumor and Consequences Across Scenes

A consequence travels when an event in one encounter changes the possibilities of another. The connection can be carried by a person, an object, a public statement, or a recognized change in status. A private agreement may lead a character to make a new demand elsewhere. A letter can establish that an earlier decision occurred without reproducing its conversation. A rumor can affect conduct even when its account is false. These routes connect scenes through different relationships to evidence. An analysis should identify what moves, who interprets it, and what action becomes possible as a result.

Communication research helps distinguish transmission from successful understanding. Clark and Brennan describe grounding as a collaborative process through which participants establish understanding adequate to their current purposes, with the process shaped by the communication medium (Clark and Brennan, 1991). The present application concerns local agreement about what a dramatic contribution establishes. A message can reach an account without its recipient understanding that a promise has been requested. A participant can hear a conditional offer while answering as

though it were unconditional. Such gaps matter when later scenes rely on commitments that the earlier participants never understood in the same way.

An adequate relay preserves the distinction between an event and a report of that event. “The minister has resigned” might be an authorized announcement, an eyewitness report, or an unverified claim. Those forms give recipients different reasons for action. The group's conventions can establish which public notices count as settled facts while leaving character testimony open to doubt. This separation allows false reports to function within a coherent world. Without it, a player may mistake an intentional lie for an administrative update, and the resulting response will rest on a misunderstanding of the contribution's status.

Rumor can change as participants retell it. A guarded willingness to consider support may become a report that support has already been promised. The transformation can be deliberate persuasion, mistaken interpretation, or shorthand that loses an important condition. Each possibility has different dramatic implications. The performance remains coherent if participants can distinguish the underlying commitments from the circulating claims when consequences require that distinction. They do not need to correct every rumor immediately. They need a way to prevent an inaccurate report from silently rewriting what another participant actually agreed to do.

Intermediaries become performers in their own right. A messenger chooses whom to approach, how urgently to speak, and which parts of a conversation to disclose within the character's authority. Those choices can create new

encounters and alter interpretation. The messenger may delay a report out of loyalty or invite a recipient to question its source. Such actions give the connecting role a dramatic trajectory. Their limits should be clear when the task includes carrying an authoritative procedural notice. A participant can portray hesitation around a fictional report without necessarily having permission to alter an administrative instruction.

Objects can connect scenes through possession and availability. If a character hands over the only copy of a document, another encounter may be unable to consult it until the new holder arrives. This constraint creates a route through which private action affects public opportunity. It also requires a usable convention for possession. Several people may view a shared image on their screens while only one character possesses the fictional original. Technical visibility does not settle ownership. A transfer matters when participants understand what has changed and which later actions depend on access to the object.

Some consequences travel without explicit explanation. A participant returns from a private meeting and refuses to support a proposal. The refusal itself becomes available to those present, while its cause remains hidden. Other characters can ask questions, offer alternatives, or infer motives. The connection between scenes operates through changed conduct. This indirect route is particularly important because requiring every private scene to produce a formal report would make performance resemble administrative accounting. Dramatic action can communicate enough to

sustain response while withholding the explanation that another participant wants.

Public convergence can reveal relationships that were previously only partial. Two characters discover that they received different versions of the same offer. A vote exposes an alliance formed in a private room. A recipient produces a letter whose existence another character denied. These moments depend on earlier scenes retaining consequences over time. They can produce surprise without retroactive invention because the relevant commitments were established locally. The audience for the convergence still need not know everything. It needs enough information to understand the new conflict and decide how to respond within its available perspective.

The route of information can be as significant as its content. A warning received directly from a trusted companion may carry different weight from the same warning reported by a rival. Participants can interpret reliability through established relationships and the circumstances of delivery. An analyst should avoid reducing these exchanges to identical facts moving through interchangeable channels. The act of telling can ask for loyalty, acknowledge dependence, or expose a risk. Fragmented dramaturgy makes these acts central because many participants encounter distant events through someone else's choice to speak about them.

Relay structures can also concentrate influence. A character with access to several conversations may become a gatekeeper whose reports shape the wider event. This role can be an intentional dramatic position, but the group should distinguish fictional influence from unplanned technical

privilege. If only one participant knows how to move among rooms or access a shared notice, their centrality may reflect the interface rather than the character design. Providing comparable navigational competence allows the fiction's different resources to operate more clearly. It does not require every character to possess equal information or social power.

Consequences need not reach everyone to connect the performance. A private promise may affect only two later choices, and a rumor may circulate within one faction. The resulting pattern can contain several partially overlapping histories. The relevant criterion is whether commitments can reach the participants whose action depends on them under the scenario's conditions. Complete circulation would remove many useful asymmetries. Complete isolation would prevent a collective event from developing. The dramaturgical task is to organize routes through which local actions can matter elsewhere while leaving the form and timing of those connections open to play.

Shared Time and Conflicting Commitments

Simultaneous performance involves several kinds of time. Participants converse during actual elapsed time. Characters act within fictional time, which may pass at a different rate. A described journey can take minutes in the fiction and seconds to announce; an extended discussion of a momentary gesture can reverse that relationship. Separate rooms make these differences harder to notice across the event. A group needs enough temporal coordination to determine which actions can

affect which others. It does not need an exhaustive chronology of every sentence unless the scenario makes that precision relevant.

A common convention can establish that ordinary conversation proceeds approximately in real time, while unusual transitions require clarification. Another arrangement can organize play into broad periods separated by public events. Each approach supports different kinds of interaction. Approximate continuous time permits opportunistic encounters; periods can make scheduled convergence easier to understand. Neither automatically resolves every conflict. The design should explain how local scenes relate to the shared sequence when one conversation uses substantial description or a participant experiences a technical delay. Temporal assumptions should become explicit at the point where they affect a consequential choice.

Deadlines connect rooms even when their conversations remain separate. An approaching election gives several negotiations a common horizon. Participants decide which encounter deserves their limited attention and whether to leave an unfinished discussion. The deadline can create meaningful opportunity costs, but it must be available through a usable announcement or other established signal. A character who knowingly spends time elsewhere has made a different choice from a participant who never received the notice. The resulting outcomes may look similar in a summary, yet they reflect different conditions of agency.

Local scenes can progress at different conversational speeds. One group may reach a decision quickly while another requires clarification or uses written input. Treating the faster

group's completion as the natural clock for everyone can create unintended asymmetry. The event can distinguish fictional urgency from the practical time needed to communicate a contribution. A brief administrative pause may preserve a simultaneous situation without deciding any character's response. The appropriate arrangement depends on the scenario, but the analysis should ask whose pace is being treated as authoritative and why.

Conflicting promises do not always create contradictory fiction. A character can promise the same support to two rivals and later face the consequences of deception. Both promises can have occurred even if they cannot both be fulfilled. A contradiction appears when separate scenes establish incompatible outcomes for something treated as singular. The same sealed document cannot be exclusively delivered to two different characters at the same fictional moment under an ordinary possession convention. The problem concerns the commitments that play has established, rather than the moral reliability of the character who made them.

Resolution should focus on the minimum shared fact needed for continuation. Participants might establish which transfer occurred first, clarify that one contribution was an attempted transfer, or identify a mistaken assumption about the existence of a second copy. The solution should follow previously agreed authority and available evidence. Inventing a duplicate merely to avoid a difficult conversation could change the significance of earlier decisions. A repair can be simple without being arbitrary. Its purpose is to restore a

compatible sequence while preserving as much of the participants' authored action as the event's conventions allow.

Simultaneity can make priority difficult to determine. Two participants may send requests through different channels, each assuming that the first response settles the matter. The order of notifications on one device may not provide a meaningful fictional chronology. If precise priority matters, the group needs a common procedure for establishing it. Otherwise, broad ordering may be enough: both requests arrived before the public meeting, and the recipient must decide how to answer them. A performance gains little from demanding timestamp precision where the drama requires only an intelligible relation among decisions.

The facilitator's response time can also become an unintended clock. If one room receives clarification immediately while another waits, the first may gain opportunities unavailable to the second. Distributed play can reduce this dependence by giving participants authority over routine contributions and clear routes for shared updates. Questions requiring centralized resolution still need an understandable handling practice. The issue belongs to temporal coordination because waiting affects which encounters remain possible. A later explanation cannot fully restore a negotiation that ended before one group received the information needed to take part.

Public convergence creates a useful boundary for reconciling certain facts. Before a vote, the group may need an authoritative candidate list and an agreed account of who holds a relevant office. It does not need a complete review of every private promise. Identifying the small set of facts

necessary for the collective action allows many local differences to remain unresolved. This selective synchronization preserves the event's distributed character. It also avoids forcing every scene into a central report merely because one shared decision requires compatible starting conditions.

Some temporal ambiguity can remain dramatically productive. Participants may know that a confidence was betrayed during the evening without knowing exactly which conversation preceded the disclosure. Characters can investigate or disagree about motive. The group only needs to settle the order if a consequence depends on it, such as whether a promise was made after the betrayal became known. This distinction allows the fiction to retain uncertainty without leaving participants unable to act. Temporal coherence concerns the relations necessary for meaningful response, rather than a universal obligation to establish an exact clock for the entire performance.

The practical achievement is a shared sequence that tolerates local variation. Scenes can expand and contract, participants can miss encounters, and reports can arrive late while the world remains intelligible. Clear deadlines, bounded authority, and proportionate repair help preserve that sequence. These arrangements should be evaluated through the choices they make possible. A technically synchronized event can still frustrate participation if access is poorly distributed, while an approximate chronology can support compelling drama when the relevant commitments remain compatible. Time becomes a dramaturgical resource through its relationship to opportunity and consequence.

A Hypothetical Assembly with Three Concurrent Scenes

Consider an invented evening at Lantern House, a fictional cultural association whose members will vote on opening the building for a free public celebration. Six participants portray characters with different responsibilities and relationships. A shared tabletop represents a lounge, a gallery, and an archive anteroom. Each location has an associated voice room, and a public gathering will occur after an announced preparation period. The following account describes concurrent exchanges sequentially because an essay must present sentences in an order. That presentational choice should not be confused with the event structure being analyzed. The example illustrates possible relationships among scenes and does not report an observed performance.

The group establishes a few relevant conventions. Token location identifies the character's current room, and movement between rooms is announced. Participants can see where meetings occur, but their characters learn that information only through an agreed public visitor register or an actual encounter. Conversation within a voice room is available to characters present there. Private messages represent delivered notes only after the recipient acknowledges receiving them. The archive key is singular, and its transfer requires an announced update to the possession record. These conventions settle selected relationships while leaving motives, dialogue, and decisions open.

In the lounge, Ada, the steward, asks Beren, a guild representative, to support the public celebration. Beren wants assurance that the guild will not be expected to provide staff without consultation. Ada offers to seek volunteers independently, and Beren says that support is possible if that condition is included in the proposal. The exchange establishes a conditional position. It does not yet create an unconditional promise to vote in favor. Both participants have an immediate dramatic concern: Ada needs support, while Beren wants the guild's boundaries recognized without appearing hostile to the celebration.

During the same interval, Celia, the archivist, meets Daro, a musician, in the gallery. Daro wants to know why Celia excluded a personal dedication from the previous ceremony. Celia admits that the decision arose from discomfort with a shared memory, rather than from the official reason previously given. The conversation concerns trust and acknowledgment. It can matter deeply to its participants without deciding whether the public celebration proceeds. Daro might accept the admission, ask for a later public correction, or refuse reconciliation. The scene's value cannot be inferred simply by counting its references to the upcoming vote.

In the archive anteroom, Esme, the caretaker, speaks with Fenn, a patron whose materials are stored in the archive. Fenn will support the celebration if the archive remains closed during the public event. Esme agrees that this condition can be proposed but lacks authority to promise the association's final decision. Fenn asks that Celia retain the key and confirm the arrangement. This exchange creates a need to contact

someone presently involved elsewhere. It also creates a possible connection between a logistical condition and Celia's private conversation, without requiring either scene to surrender its local dramatic focus.

Esme sends Celia a note asking for a meeting. Celia does not acknowledge it immediately because the exchange with Daro has reached a difficult moment. Under the stated convention, Esme knows that a note has been sent but cannot assume a completed conversation or agreement. Celia's delay can become a meaningful choice if the participant has seen the message and intentionally postpones response. If the notification was never noticed, the administrative situation differs. The convention allows that distinction to be clarified before anyone treats the delay as evidence that Celia deliberately rejected the request.

Ada leaves the lounge believing that Beren is likely to support the proposal. In the public area, Ada tells Esme that the guild supports the celebration. The report compresses a condition into a stronger claim. Esme may accept it, question it, or repeat it to Fenn. The underlying lounge exchange remains unchanged. Its significance has begun to travel through interpretation, introducing a possible disagreement that can later become public. This is a connection among scenes even before participants establish the correct account. A rumor has entered the drama through an intelligible act of retelling.

Daro eventually leaves the gallery and encounters Esme in the public area. Esme asks whether Celia is available. Daro can answer briefly, disclose something of the conversation, or protect its privacy. The choice gives Daro a role in

connecting encounters while preserving a separate concern about reconciliation. If Daro says that Celia needs a moment, Esme can wait or approach directly. The resulting encounter was not specified as a required scene. It emerges from the conjunction of an unfinished practical request and a participant whose character happens to become available at the relevant point.

Celia then acknowledges the note and visits the anteroom. Esme proposes that the archive remain closed and that Celia hold the key. Celia can agree to retain it without deciding the whole association's policy. The possession record is updated when the transfer occurs. If another participant later asks Esme for the key, Esme can explain that Celia now holds it. The material consequence of the anteroom scene has become usable elsewhere. Everyone need not hear the transfer, but anyone whose action depends on possession has a way to discover the current situation.

At the public gathering, Ada presents the celebration as supported by the guild. Beren clarifies that support remains conditional on the staffing arrangement. Esme raises the proposed archive restriction, and Celia confirms possession of the key while asking for a clear decision about access. Several private trajectories converge in a public exchange. Participants can understand the immediate choices without hearing every preceding conversation. Beren's correction reveals a gap between the original offer and its retelling. The archive condition introduces another commitment requiring a response. The earlier scenes matter through consequences that remain attributable and contestable.

Daro may now speak about the celebration, remain silent, or connect it to the earlier request for acknowledgment. The personal scene need not become public merely because the others converge. If Daro asks that the new program include an omitted dedication, the request carries a private history that most participants do not know. They can still answer its public terms. Celia's response may acquire different meanings for Daro and for the other characters. This difference preserves the layered experience of the performance rather than preventing a common event from taking place.

Several continuations are possible. The association might approve the celebration with both conditions, reject one condition, or postpone the decision. These outcomes depend on participant choices. The example's coherence lies in the compatible commitments and routes of response that make those choices meaningful. No participant has witnessed the whole preparation period. Each has encountered a different combination of local drama, reports, and public consequences. A later account can relate the scenes more fully, but the shared performance already exists through their continuing effects on what the characters can reasonably do.

Coherence Without a Single Audience

Coherence in fragmented performance has several dimensions. Fictional consistency concerns whether the event's accepted commitments can coexist. Causal intelligibility concerns whether actions can produce consequences that participants can interpret and answer at the level needed for play. Participation concerns whether people have meaningful routes into relevant encounters. Interpretive

coherence concerns the patterns participants construct from their experiences. These dimensions can support one another without being identical. A perfectly consistent record might describe a dull event, while an emotionally compelling private scene might occur within a scenario whose public procedures are confusing.

The distinction prevents a premature answer to the proposal's central question. A collective theatrical performance can remain coherent under partial witnessing, but the claim needs specified criteria. It is not enough that participants all use the same character names or return for a final vote. Nor must they agree on every motive and causal explanation. The event needs a workable relationship between local actions and the shared conditions that later scenes rely on. Participants can then disagree within that relationship, making uncertainty part of dramatic action rather than a sign that no common event exists.

The absence of one external audience does not mean an absence of witnessing. Participants attend to one another while making choices, and they may experience their own actions as dramatically significant. Stenros and Montola identify subjectivity, first-person audience, ephemerality, and co-creation as challenges for understanding and documenting live action roleplaying (Stenros and Montola, 2011). This scholarship supports caution about treating a detached comprehensive account as the performance's natural form. The present argument focuses on the relations among situated encounters. A retrospective overview can reveal connections, but it does not replace the experience of participating under incomplete knowledge.

Conventional dramatic irony depends on an audience knowing something a character does not. Distributed salon play can produce a different configuration: one participant knows what another participant and character both lack, while a third knows a separate cause. The advantage is local and mobile rather than gathered in a single spectator position. A later encounter can reverse it. Participants move among confidence, suspicion, and discovery according to their histories of access. The form can support dramatic irony when player and character knowledge diverge, but it also supports uncertainty shared by both, which creates a different experience of decision.

Collective coherence can be maintained through overlapping relations rather than universal knowledge. One scene shares a participant with a later encounter; an object connects another pair; a public decision brings several consequences together. No single link needs to carry the entire performance. The pattern becomes intelligible through these partial connections. This description is an analytical model, not a claim that every successful event has one fixed structure. A highly compartmentalized scenario may use occasional announcements, while a mobile social drama may rely on many informal encounters. The relevant question is how its actual connections support the activity it promises.

The model also identifies a limit. If scenes remain completely isolated and establish no common consequential conditions, calling them one collective drama may describe only their administrative grouping. They can still be worthwhile performances, but their collective narrative relationship requires explanation. Shared theme or setting can provide one

relationship; exchanged commitments can provide another. A comprehensive essay should distinguish these possibilities rather than assume that simultaneous occurrence alone creates a unified story. Concurrency is a temporal arrangement. Dramaturgical connection depends on what the encounters share and how their differences matter.

Thematic unity can emerge without centralized plotting. Several encounters may independently explore recognition, obligation, or the cost of belonging because the scenario's roles place those concerns in different relationships. Participants can discover the resonance afterward without having followed the same plot. The claim should remain proportionate: a theme identified by an analyst is an interpretation that needs support from episodes. It should not erase encounters that complicate it. Fragmented performance can sustain several themes, including tensions that resist a final harmonious account.

Closure can likewise remain plural. A public vote resolves one question while a private reconciliation remains incomplete. A character may achieve a practical goal while losing trust, and another may fail publicly while finding a meaningful personal connection. The event does not need to convert these outcomes into a single victory condition unless that is part of its design. It does need an understandable stopping arrangement so that participants know when fictional commitments cease to develop through active play. An ending can close the performance without resolving every relationship in its world.

Participant satisfaction provides relevant evidence but cannot serve as the only measure of coherence. Someone may enjoy

intense roleplaying despite repeated contradictions; another may understand the event clearly while finding the chosen role unengaging. Evaluation should ask what the report concerns and connect it to specific episodes or conditions. The same caution applies to facilitator judgment. A scenario that fulfilled the planned public outcome might still have restricted other meaningful trajectories. An adequate account examines the event generated by participants, including developments that the original outline did not anticipate.

Connection alone cannot establish dramatic quality. A rumor may reach every room yet leave nobody with a meaningful decision. An intensely local exchange may create a lasting change in two characters' relationship without broad circulation. Evaluation should examine what a connection enables and what an encounter accomplishes, rather than treating the volume of communication as evidence of a successful performance.

The strongest conception of collective coherence remains compatible with incomplete explanation. Participants share a world whose consequential conditions can be maintained and contested through usable practices. Their experiences remain partial, and their interpretations can remain different. The performance becomes collective through the relations among contributions and responses, rather than through an obligation to experience the whole. This account gives the title its precise force: the unwitnessed totality is real as an analytical problem, but the drama occurs through encounters that are witnessed, answered, and connected by people acting within their limited perspectives.

Designing and Studying Fragmented Dramaturgy

Design can begin with relationships that invite encounters rather than with a sequence everyone must witness. A character needs reasons to approach particular people and enough discretion to respond when the conversation changes. The scenario can distribute knowledge and resources so that several exchanges remain consequential without requiring every participant to serve one central negotiation. Written goals should create possible pressures, rather than guarantee a predetermined route through rooms. This approach supports the proposal's conception of simultaneous performance while leaving actual scene selection and development to the people who play.

The design should also identify which relationships require connection across scenes. A conditional promise may need a route into a public proposal; a unique object may need an acknowledged possession practice; an approaching meeting may need a shared notice. These requirements differ from a demand that all information circulate. The designer can ask what another participant must be able to discover or receive for a promised opportunity to remain meaningful. This question turns coherence into a practical analysis of dependencies, with particular attention to those that might otherwise disappear behind room boundaries.

Preparation should include a short rehearsal of the relevant conventions. Participants can practice entering a conversation, acknowledging a delivered note, and announcing a consequential movement. The exercise should

demonstrate how to find an available encounter without revealing its content. It can also distinguish character action from administrative communication. A rehearsal offers evidence about whether the chosen arrangement is usable by this group. It does not establish that participants will never misunderstand one another, but it can expose basic mismatches before those mismatches determine the outcome of a significant fictional choice.

The facilitator needs an understandable route for handling uncertainty without becoming the audience for every scene. Participants can maintain routine local commitments under agreed authority, while bringing only relevant conflicts or exceptional questions for resolution. Public updates can identify selected facts needed for collective action. The arrangement should make clear what a report establishes and whether it comes from the fiction or from event administration. These practices support distributed action by limiting the amount of coordination that must pass through one person, while retaining a way to repair contradictions that local encounters cannot settle alone.

An empirical inquiry can examine encounters and transitions as its primary units. It might ask how participants recognize an available conversation, how an arrival changes an exchange, or how a private commitment affects a later public action. Each question focuses attention on a relationship that can be investigated through concrete episodes. A general question about whether the event was immersive would leave these mechanisms unspecified. Researchers should define the kind of coherence under examination and state what evidence could challenge their interpretation, including cases in which

apparently clear conventions did not produce usable participation.

Observation can document contributions and responses within available scenes, but no single observer should be assumed to witness all concurrent action. Multiple observations or agreed recordings can extend coverage where participants authorize them. The resulting material still has limits, including conversations that were not captured and experiences that were not publicly expressed. The analysis should mark those limits rather than treat an incomplete record as a complete performance. This concern supports the present essay's central distinction: access to a larger retrospective account differs from having occupied an encompassing viewpoint during play.

Participant interviews can ask about specific opportunities and missed connections. A useful prompt might concern how the participant decided where to go after leaving a conversation, what they believed a reported promise meant, or when they discovered a decision made elsewhere. Such questions permit accounts of productive uncertainty as well as confusion. They should allow participants to describe an encounter as meaningful even when it did not affect the public outcome. Researchers can compare these accounts with available traces while keeping disagreement visible, rather than using one confident memory to settle every uncertainty about the event.

Comparative research could examine different entry conventions or degrees of visible activity information. One condition might make room occupancy available, while another supplies only announced invitations. The study would

need to document differences in scenario, participant familiarity, and communication facilities. Repeating the same scenario introduces learning about secrets and likely responses. Separate groups introduce other differences. These limitations do not make comparison useless, but they narrow the causal claim it can support. The study should describe the arrangement precisely enough that readers can understand which change is being evaluated and which other influences remain plausible.

Quantitative description can complement interpretation when its categories are meaningful. Researchers might describe acknowledged cross-room messages, consequential transfers, or intervals spent seeking an encounter. These measures require clear definitions and adequate coverage. Counting every message as a connection would ignore whether it entered the fiction or received a response. Counting every room transition as agency would ignore its purpose and consequences. The value of numerical description lies in making a pattern inspectable, with its limits stated, rather than producing a single score that claims to summarize the entire theatrical event.

Access should be examined through actual participation requirements. Written input, delegated interface operation, or additional response time can preserve a participant's route to consequential action. Important opportunities should not depend exclusively on hearing a faint cue or noticing a fleeting visual update. The group can establish alternative signals that preserve the fictional distinction between public information and private content. Evaluation should ask whether those signals worked for the people involved. An

arrangement can maintain deliberate inequality among characters while providing participants with understandable ways to use the roles and resources assigned to them.

The emotional pressure of missing other scenes also deserves inquiry. A participant might feel curious about events elsewhere, worry about losing an opportunity, or value the freedom to concentrate on one relationship. These possibilities should be treated as questions for participant accounts rather than presumed universal responses. A design can make the event's distributed character explicit and provide a usable place to seek contact between scenes. It should not promise that everyone can witness everything. The relevant assurance is that the form supports meaningful participation under partial access, with routes to act when a new consequence becomes available.

Postplay discussion can reveal connections without imposing a definitive hierarchy of importance. Participants can describe a local turning point, explain a consequential report, or identify where an access problem altered their choices. A facilitator can invite several perspectives on the same public event while leaving personal disclosures voluntary. The discussion can enrich understanding and guide revision, but it should not erase the performance's original uncertainty. Learning afterward why someone refused an offer is a new interpretive experience. It is not equivalent to having known the reason when the character had to decide how to respond.

The framework remains a proposal for analysis and design rather than a report of proven effects. Its claims are open to investigation through performances that vary in scale, genre, and participant experience. Evidence might show that a

particular public update improves navigation while reducing a desired uncertainty, or that an entry convention supports interruption while disrupting intimate scenes. These are intelligible tradeoffs because the outcomes have been distinguished. Research can then explain what a practice supports, for whom, and under which conditions, helping designers refine a distributed drama without reducing its variety to one prescribed pattern.

A Shared Performance Through Partial Perspectives

Simultaneous online salon performance can remain coherent without a unified audience or a complete participant account. Its coherence depends on how local actions establish compatible commitments, how consequences become available elsewhere, and how participants gain meaningful opportunities to respond. Voice rooms and private conversations organize this activity through explicit boundaries. They can support concentrated encounters while changing the possibilities of overhearing, accidental contact, and interruption. The artistic task is to make those changed relationships productive within the fiction, with enough procedural clarity for uncertainty to remain playable.

The physical salon already distributes access through distance, attention, and conventions about what counts as observation. Online architecture reorganizes that distribution rather than replacing universal awareness with fragmentation for the first time. A visible meeting can suggest activity without revealing content. A private scene can influence a

public decision through changed behavior, a report, or an object. The connection may remain partly unexplained while still giving others an intelligible choice. Complete knowledge is unnecessary when the information required for the next consequential action remains available under the scenario's conditions.

The distinction among events, experiences, and narrative accounts is central to understanding this form. Participants can share a fictional history while interpreting it differently and valuing different encounters. A public resolution can coexist with unfinished personal trajectories. Later discussion can reveal causes and resonances without becoming the performance's uniquely authoritative version. The scene nobody saw is the encompassing arrangement of concurrent encounters, rather than a performance from which all witnessing has vanished. Actual scenes have situated audiences whose responses help make their events occur.

Design and research should follow the relations among those encounters. Clear conventions for entry, communication, possession, and shared time can support consequences without forcing every scene into a common channel. Evaluation should distinguish fictional consistency, causal intelligibility, participation, and interpretation. It should examine specific episodes, attend to missed connections, and avoid assuming that one observer or one satisfaction question captures the whole. Such precision makes the proposed framework open to revision and gives designers practical ways to improve an event while preserving its distributed character.

Fragmented dramaturgy makes partial knowledge a condition of theatrical creation. Participants act within a world that other people continue to change elsewhere. They meet those changes through decisions whose full histories may remain unknown. When the surrounding practices allow those encounters to be understood and answered, incompleteness becomes a source of dramatic possibility. The collective performance takes shape through the continuing connections among local contributions, including the return, correction, refusal, or unexpected invitation that carries one scene into another. Nobody needs to see everything for those encounters to matter together.

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Daphne Mercer

Daphne Mercer is a freelance audio producer and experimental storyteller whose work explores overlapping scenes, fragmented narratives, and performances that cannot be witnessed in their entirety. She became involved in online salon LARP through radio-drama enthusiasts seeking new ways to create stories together at a distance. Mercer designs games in which private conversations, simultaneous encounters, and partial reports force participants to reconstruct events from conflicting accounts. Her interest lies in what an audience imagines when it misses something important. She spends her free time recording environmental sounds, cataloging old radio plays, and making elaborate charts of character whereabouts. The charts are generally more reliable than the characters, though she considers that part of their charm.

The Game Master Leaves the Stage

Distributed Narrative Authority in Virtual Interactive Drama

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Abstract

This essay examines distributed narrative authority in virtual interactive drama and argues that the game master's role can shift from continuous narration toward designing and maintaining dramatic possibilities. It distinguishes descriptive, character, outcome, informational, and procedural authority, comparing tabletop game mastering with theatrical direction, salon facilitation, and virtual directing. The analysis explains how character briefs, persistent spatial representation, and local encounters can support independent action while shared consequences remain coordinated. It develops principles for proportionate intervention, examines authority across large casts, and considers accountability, access, and procedural change. A hypothetical 36-person station scenario demonstrates the proposed allocation of responsibilities. The essay concludes with an evaluation framework focused on usable permissions and consequential participation. Successful distribution depends on intelligible relationships among contributions and responses rather than the facilitator's silence or the technology alone.

Keywords

distributed narrative authority, virtual interactive drama, game mastering, salon LARP facilitation, participant agency, virtual tabletop dramaturgy

The Game Master as Custodian of Possibility

The game master can cease narrating continuously while remaining essential to the conditions of play. In virtual interactive drama, a facilitator may prepare characters, establish spaces, distribute information, and define procedures that let participants initiate consequential encounters independently. The resulting authority is distributed across people and representational resources. This essay argues that such distribution succeeds when participants understand which contributions they can establish, how those contributions affect others, and where unresolved questions can be taken. The facilitator becomes a designer and custodian of dramatic possibilities, responsible for sustaining an intelligible environment in which other people can create the unfolding action.

The title describes a change in function rather than a literal disappearance. A director who leaves the stage of continuous narration still chooses the starting conditions and may intervene when a procedure fails or an encounter requires assistance. Much of that work occurs before anyone speaks as a character. A carefully written relationship can generate several scenes without further instruction. A clear location convention can remove repeated requests for spatial explanation. These contributions remain forms of direction even when participants experience their immediate encounters as self-directed. Reduced visibility during performance does not establish that organizational influence has vanished.

The discussion concerns online dramatic roleplaying supported by a shared virtual tabletop and communication facilities. Its principal model resembles salon live action roleplaying: participants portray individuals with independent concerns, conduct several conversations, and generate developments through relationships and choices. A facilitator may remain available without witnessing every encounter. Combat is unnecessary to the analysis. The consequential actions examined here include promises, disclosures, refusals, negotiated access, and collective decisions. Different groups can allocate these actions differently, so the essay proposes a framework for examining authority rather than a universal rule for conducting every roleplaying event.

Tychsen and colleagues examine game mastering as a collection of functions whose arrangements vary across roleplaying platforms (Tychsen et al., 2005). Their approach supports a functional comparison instead of treating the game master as one indivisible power. The present essay uses that starting point to distinguish descriptive work, character portrayal, outcome resolution, and procedural coordination. A virtual tabletop might support one task while leaving another entirely with participants or facilitators. Saying that technology replaces the game master would obscure these differences. The precise question is which responsibility moves, what carries it, and what work remains necessary around that transfer.

The comparison with theater requires the same care. A conventional theatrical director does not ordinarily supply every spoken line during performance, and actors exercise interpretive and practical judgment. Salon facilitators

likewise vary in how extensively they design roles or manage events. Tabletop games can distribute narration and resolution among participants. These variations prevent a simple historical story in which one centralized tradition inevitably evolves into a decentralized digital form. The argument concerns particular configurations of responsibility and their consequences. Digital tools can make some configurations easier to organize without making them artistically superior in every situation.

Narrative authority is used here to mean recognized permission to establish or resolve a contribution to the shared fiction. It includes decisions about what exists, what a character chooses, and what an attempted action accomplishes. Procedural authority concerns how participation is organized and how uncertainty is handled. The two can overlap, but they should remain distinguishable. A facilitator can pause a scene to clarify a misunderstanding without deciding what any character believes. A player can portray a powerful fictional official without receiving unrestricted authority over other participants' contributions. These distinctions make distribution intelligible at the level where it actually operates.

The essay develops a conceptual argument through scholarship, functional comparison, and hypothetical examples. It does not report a completed empirical study. The analysis separates forms of authority, compares four directing arrangements, and examines how character design, spatial representation, and local encounters support independent action. It then considers intervention, scale, accountability, and evaluation. A fictional station scenario demonstrates how

a large cast could generate consequential scenes under bounded permissions. The sequence keeps the central claim testable: a director's withdrawal from continuous narration is successful when participants can act meaningfully and maintain compatible commitments under the procedures they understand.

This account also changes how the director's achievement is assessed. A quiet facilitator may have prepared a strong environment, or may have become unavailable while participants struggle. Frequent intervention may reflect unnecessary control, or may supply needed clarification. Neither silence nor speech provides an adequate measure by itself. The relevant evidence concerns what participants can initiate, whether their contributions receive consequential responses, and how the event resolves conflicts about the fiction. Direction succeeds through the possibilities that remain usable, including possibilities the designer did not anticipate and outcomes the designer would not personally have chosen.

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 channels display 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.

Technical control needs separate treatment. An account with permission to move every token can change the display, but its operator may have no fictional authority to decide that every character travels. A participant unable to operate a control may still author a valid action that someone else represents. The interface grants operational possibilities; the group establishes what those operations mean. Distribution becomes confusing when technical permission is mistaken for creative entitlement. A shared understanding can preserve delegated operation while keeping authorship attributable to the participant whose character or assigned role supplies the decision.

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.

Comparing Four Forms of Dramatic Direction

The tabletop game master often combines several responsibilities within one role. In a common arrangement,

this person describes environments, portrays individuals outside the player group, presents developments, and resolves uncertainty under the game's procedures. Players make decisions through their own characters and can contribute other material according to the group's practice. The arrangement can provide a readily available point of clarification and a common pace of presentation. It can also make independent action depend on the game master's attention. These are functional possibilities, not claims that every tabletop session produces the same benefits or constraints.

The conventional theatrical director operates within a different relationship between preparation and performance. In a production organized around an established script, the director helps develop an interpretation and coordinates work with performers and other collaborators. The unfolding public performance generally follows a prepared structure, although execution remains a live accomplishment. The comparison should recognize devised theater, improvisation, and other practices that allocate authorship differently. Its limited purpose is to identify a directing arrangement in which much interpretive coordination occurs before the audience encounters the performance, rather than through continuous fictional adjudication during it.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's account of rehearsal emphasizes collaboration among actors and director in choices about plot, characters, themes, and language (Royal Shakespeare Company, n.d.-a). This institutional description corrects the assumption that theatrical direction necessarily means performers obeying every detail of a single person's

vision. For the present comparison, the useful point is the relationship between shared preparation and later action. A virtual drama can likewise prepare interpretive resources without specifying every response. The difference is that participant choices may determine events whose occurrence and outcome have not already been settled by an established dramatic script.

Theater also distinguishes directing from other coordinating work. The Royal Shakespeare Company describes stage management as a central route of communication and identifies performance cueing among the deputy stage manager's responsibilities (Royal Shakespeare Company, n.d.-b). This example shows why a role comparison should follow tasks rather than titles. A virtual facilitator who manages timing or technical transitions may be doing work closer to performance coordination than to continuous narration. The analogy remains bounded: a salon event's participants can generate new fictional developments rather than execute only a rehearsed sequence. Still, separating these functions makes the labor easier to identify.

The salon facilitator often prepares a situation in which several participants can initiate encounters without one person voicing the world continuously. Character relationships and available resources can supply reasons to approach, negotiate, disclose, or refuse. The facilitator may manage opening conditions, handle questions, and organize convergence at selected moments. This arrangement makes local interaction a principal source of developments. Its success depends on how well the written and social conditions support action. A room full of elaborate

biographies will not necessarily produce meaningful encounters if participants have no usable reasons or opportunities to engage one another.

The director of virtual interactive drama inherits some of these tasks while working through digitally organized access. The shared tabletop can make selected locations and objects persistently visible. Separate communication rooms can support independent encounters. Private briefs can distribute information without requiring a spoken explanation to everyone. The director still needs to establish how these resources relate to the fiction. A visible doorway does not decide whether a character may enter, and a private channel does not explain which fictional people can overhear. Technical configuration and dramatic procedure meet in these relationships.

These roles differ partly in the timing of creative authority. A script-based production may establish major events before performance while leaving their interpretation and enactment open to rehearsal and execution. A salon scenario may establish initial pressures while leaving consequential events to participants during play. A tabletop game master may introduce new circumstances in direct response to a shared group's choices. A virtual director can combine preparation with selective intervention across several encounters. The comparison identifies where decisions are made, how they become available to others, and which questions remain open at the moment of performance.

The roles also differ in their relationship to witnessing. A game master following one group may observe most consequential contributions. A salon facilitator or virtual

director may miss entire conversations while remaining responsible for shared conditions. A theater director may watch rehearsals closely while other personnel coordinate a particular public performance. These differences change what responsible intervention requires. A virtual director cannot infer that nothing meaningful happened in an unwitnessed scene. Clarification must begin with an adequate account of the relevant contribution and its authority, rather than with the assumption that only visible developments count.

The four forms should not become a hierarchy of greater freedom. A participant can exercise meaningful agency within a centrally narrated game, and distributed play can conceal restrictive conditions in its role design or software configuration. Rehearsed theater can support substantial artistic collaboration, while open scenarios can leave participants uncertain how to contribute. The useful comparison concerns what each arrangement promises and what it enables in practice. Virtual interactive drama contributes a configuration in which persistent representation and independent communication can support participant-generated events, provided the surrounding allocation of authority makes those events intelligible and consequential.

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.

Spatial Description and the Partial Work of the Tabletop

A shared virtual tabletop can make selected spatial relationships available without repeated narration. Participants can consult a represented room, identify an entrance, or locate a character token under an agreed convention. This persistence can reduce dependence on a facilitator who would otherwise restate where things are. The

contribution is specific: the display carries information that participants have been taught to interpret. It does not independently establish every relevant feature of the imagined world. A drawn door provides a visible relation between areas, while the fiction's procedures determine whether the door is open, guarded, accessible, or merely decorative.

Partial replacement of descriptive work is possible when the represented information answers the question participants actually need resolved. If the scene requires knowing who is in the library, an authoritative presence convention may supply the answer. If it requires knowing whether someone can hear a whisper, token proximity may be insufficient. The group needs a convention connecting representation to perception. The director can delegate the routine reading of an established spatial fact while retaining or distributing authority over exceptional cases. The boundary follows meaning and consequence, rather than the amount of visual detail on the map.

Persistent representation can help participants plan independent encounters. A person sees where an available character is represented and chooses to approach through the appropriate communication procedure. The facilitator need not announce every possible meeting. This works only if the display is sufficiently current and its informational status is understood. A token left behind during a connection problem should not automatically become a deliberate refusal to leave. Participants need a way to correct the representation when it no longer tracks the fiction. Maintenance is part of the work supporting delegated description.

The tabletop can also represent resources whose state matters across scenes. A record might be marked as available, transferred, or temporarily inaccessible under agreed procedures. Such an update can spare several repeated questions to the facilitator. The permission to update it must be clear. A participant may record an accepted transfer without being entitled to invent one. The display's authority rests on the procedure that connects a contribution to the shared record. Treating the interface as an independent judge would conceal the human decisions that made the update legitimate.

Visual persistence introduces a risk of excessive inference. Participants may assume that an illustrated object is usable, that every marked room exists within reach, or that an image accurately specifies scale. The director can state which details are operative and which provide atmosphere. The distinction is especially valuable when a map was selected for appearance rather than constructed as a precise simulation. Delegation requires legibility about the representation's limits. A participant should be able to consult the display confidently for its intended information without being expected to infer an unwritten rule from every decorative feature.

Spatial representation can shift work to participants without making that work disappear. Players must update locations, announce consequential movement, or distinguish fictional travel from administrative repositioning. These tasks can be modest, but they compete with attention to performance. The director should select conventions proportionate to the scene's needs. A social encounter may require only a clear room

assignment; a complicated movement procedure could add little. The useful measure is whether the display supports independent action at an acceptable practical cost for the group, including participants who use different ways of receiving or producing information.

The tabletop's technical permissions and its fictional permissions should remain separate. Someone helping another participant operate a token can implement an announced action without becoming its author. A facilitator moving a marker to make labels readable may intend no fictional movement at all. These distinctions allow assistance while preserving agency. They also identify why automatic records cannot be treated as complete accounts of creative control. Knowing who clicked establishes an operational event. Understanding whose character acted requires the surrounding contribution and the convention under which it was accepted.

Other channels can share the work of spatial description. A written location summary can identify important features that a map leaves unclear. An announced arrival can make a visual movement available to someone attending primarily to audio. These contributions need not duplicate every incidental detail. They should communicate what another participant needs to make a consequential choice. The director's responsibility is to ensure that the arrangement provides a usable route to relevant information, while the actual descriptive labor can be performed by prepared materials, players, or designated assistants.

The virtual tabletop can now be understood as a partial bearer of previously centralized descriptive responsibility. It can

preserve selected facts, make certain relationships inspectable, and support independent navigation. Its usefulness depends on established semantics, authorized updates, and accessible interpretation. These conditions leave substantial creative work with people. Character motives, contested outcomes, and the significance of an encounter still require contributions and responses. The technology supports the director's changed role most effectively when it carries routine information clearly enough that facilitation can attend to questions that the display cannot settle.

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 virtual 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.

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 depicted 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 a technical action 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.

Scaling Authority Across a Large Cast

Distributing authority across dozens of participants requires more than increasing the number of available conversations. Participants need an arrangement that lets many ordinary decisions proceed independently while keeping consequential shared conditions compatible. A cast can contain separate groups, overlapping relationships, and roles with different responsibilities. The event's demands depend on how those relationships interact, rather than on headcount alone. Thirty people with clear local permissions may require less

centralized clarification than a smaller cast whose every action depends on one approval. This is a conceptual comparison, not a claim about a measured threshold.

The first scaling question concerns the scope of local decisions. A pair can ordinarily conduct a conversation without affecting everyone else's permissions. A public declaration changing eligibility for an event has wider consequences. Treating both contributions as equally dependent on central approval creates unnecessary delay. Treating both as purely local risks contradiction. The design should identify the kinds of decisions that remain with participants and those requiring a shared procedure. It can then concentrate coordination where the consequences actually cross boundaries, leaving ordinary portrayal and negotiation free to develop.

Shared resources deserve particular attention. A unique record, a recognized office, or a limited place in a public program can connect many scenes. The event needs an authoritative way to establish changes involving these resources. That authority may be distributed to designated roles or exercised through an acknowledged record. The procedure should specify who can update the state and what acknowledgment is required. It does not need to centralize every conversation about the resource. People can make competing offers or tell false stories while the accepted condition remains separately traceable.

Multiple facilitators can divide coordination work, but they need compatible responsibilities. Assigning helpers to rooms does not solve conflicts if each can issue incompatible rulings about the same shared fact. The arrangement can distinguish

local assistance from decisions whose scope extends across the event. A request should have an understandable destination, and facilitators should know when to consult one another. This is a proposal for organizing responsibility, not a prescription for a particular staffing ratio. The right arrangement follows the event's actual dependencies and the practical capacity of the people supporting it.

Participant roles can carry bounded procedural responsibilities. Someone might maintain a public schedule, acknowledge possession transfers, or relay an agreed announcement. These tasks can belong to a character within the fiction or be administrative assignments outside it. The distinction needs to remain clear. A fictional official may have reasons to lie, while an administrative record keeper is expected to preserve the agreed state. Combining the roles without explanation can make it unclear whether an inaccurate update is dramatic deception or a procedural error. Distribution should preserve the intended status of each contribution.

Requests for clarification can become a concentrated demand even in an otherwise independent event. Several groups may ask questions at once, and a facilitator's attention remains finite. Participants need to understand whether they can continue other actions while waiting and which commitments remain provisional. An unanswered question should not silently immobilize an entire role if unrelated choices remain available. The director can reduce avoidable requests through preparation and simple defaults, but exceptional cases will still arise. Planning for them is part of custodianship rather than evidence that distribution has failed.

Defaults can make routine action dependable. Participants may know that ordinary conversation needs no approval, that a described personal gesture is accepted within its scope, and that a contested effect follows a specified procedure. These conventions reduce the need to negotiate authority from the beginning in every scene. Defaults also need correction routes. A participant should be able to identify when an action exceeds the understood permission and ask for clarification without first winning an argument as the character. Administrative recourse protects the conditions under which fictional conflict remains meaningful.

The arrangement must account for uneven familiarity with the format. An experienced participant may recognize an opportunity immediately, while another waits for permission because previous games required it. The difference can make formally equal permissions produce different patterns of action. Preparation can demonstrate the expected scope through examples and practice rather than assuming that a broad statement about freedom will be interpreted consistently. During play, assistance can clarify the route to contribution. The director should avoid mistaking uncertainty about convention for a character's intended passivity or a participant's lack of creative interest.

Large casts also increase the importance of communication about changes with broad consequences. A revised deadline, an unavailable location, or an alteration to an event-wide procedure needs an understandable announcement. The announcement should distinguish administrative change from fictional development and identify when it takes effect. Local scenes can continue to hold secrets and disagreements.

Universal access is needed only to the shared procedural information on which everyone is expected to rely. Selective common knowledge can support a complex event without converting every private encounter into a public report.

An arrangement can become too complicated to use even when it allocates authority consistently on paper. Participants may struggle to remember several overlapping permissions, locate the correct record, or distinguish kinds of updates during an intense conversation. The director should test the procedures through likely actions and simplify where distinctions add little. Complexity should earn its place by supporting a meaningful feature of play. A social drama whose central actions are requests and commitments may need fewer specialized rules than a detailed authority chart initially suggests.

Successful scale is demonstrated through continued participation and compatible consequences. Many participants can create local developments, shared resources retain intelligible states, and exceptional questions find a workable resolution. The facilitator need not possess a complete account of every scene. The event does need enough visibility into consequential conflicts to repair them when they arise. This is a different goal from comprehensive supervision. It treats coherence as a maintained relationship among authorized contributions, allowing a large cast to generate an event whose full trajectory remains open to collective creation.

The Final Broadcast from Meridian Station

Consider a hypothetical drama set during the final evening of Meridian Station, a fictional communications outpost approaching its scheduled closure. Thirty-six participants portray members of six delegations with different reasons to use the station's final public broadcast program. Each delegation begins with one transmission slot. Individual characters also control materials, endorsements, or personal disclosures that others may want included. A shared tabletop represents the archive, a meeting area, and the transmission room. The number and technical limits are scenario premises rather than claims about real communications equipment. The example examines how authority could be organized across independent encounters.

Before play, the facilitator establishes that a slot can be reassigned only through acknowledgment by its designated holder and recipient, followed by an update to the public schedule. Participants can negotiate freely, but conversation alone does not automatically update the record. They may move between ordinary locations through an announced presence convention. The archive contains prepared materials whose availability is described in the briefs. New incidental detail is permitted, while adding a decisive record about another character requires confirmation. These rules define particular boundaries without supplying the dialogue or deciding which broadcasts should ultimately occur.

Neri, a researcher, wants a disputed scientific record included. Voss, an archivist, controls the relevant copy and wants the uncertainty surrounding its preparation

acknowledged. They meet in the archive without asking the facilitator to introduce the encounter. The map supplies the ordinary location relation, and their briefs supply reasons for contact. Neri can request the record, offer attribution, or seek another source. Voss can agree, refuse, or propose conditions within the assigned authority. Their exchange becomes a scene through the participants' choices, with no need for a director to portray the room after every contribution.

Elsewhere, Suri, an artist, discusses a memorial broadcast with Toma, a community representative seeking space for a message from families leaving the station. Suri offers to consider sharing a program but makes no completed transfer. Toma later reports that Suri's slot is available. The claim can circulate as character testimony, while the public schedule continues to identify Suri as the holder. This distinction permits an inaccurate report to create dramatic pressure without silently rewriting the accepted resource state. Other participants can question Toma, approach Suri, or plan a competing request under the same procedures.

Lian, an engineer, helps participants interpret the transmission schedule through a role carrying a limited procedural responsibility. Lian's player can confirm acknowledged updates but cannot use that administrative function to award a slot to a favored character. Within the fiction, Lian may advocate for a preferred program. The distinction between advocacy and recording needs to remain visible. If Lian speaks as the character about the value of a broadcast, others can disagree. If the player records an accepted transfer, the update has a different standing. The

role combines functions without making their authority interchangeable.

Edda, the outgoing station custodian, tries to order the delegations to prioritize an institutional farewell. The character's status supplies a plausible reason to make the demand. It does not give the player authority to override the schedule's transfer procedure. Other characters may comply out of loyalty, challenge the demand, or offer a compromise. This separation allows a powerful fictional role to remain dramatically active without turning its occupant into a second facilitator. The custodian's authority is something the characters can interpret and negotiate within the prepared conditions, rather than an unlimited administrative permission hidden inside the title.

The facilitator receives a question when Toma's delegation tries to register Suri's slot as reassigned. The relevant participants give their accounts. Since the required acknowledgment did not occur, the schedule remains unchanged. That clarification determines the resource state and leaves the interpersonal consequences open. Suri may accuse Toma of deception, Toma may describe a misunderstanding, and another character may offer a new arrangement. The facilitator does not need to decide which emotional response is correct or force the memorial program back toward its original plan. A limited procedural ruling supports further participant action.

Meanwhile, Neri and Voss agree on a qualified presentation of the scientific record. Their arrangement does not require public disclosure of every private concern raised in the archive. The accepted contribution can enter the broadcast

program with its stated qualification. Other characters can then respond to what becomes public, including uncertainty the researcher would have preferred to minimize. The facilitator may learn of the agreement only when it affects the shared program. Its absence from the director's immediate view does not diminish its authority if the participants acted within the established permissions.

A technical problem temporarily prevents one delegation from receiving an approaching deadline notice. The facilitator pauses the administrative clock long enough to restore the intended communication. The adjustment gives the affected participants the opportunity the event had promised; it does not determine whether their characters secure an agreement. The facilitator explains the scope of the pause and leaves ongoing fictional choices with their authors. This intervention illustrates how practical support can preserve agency without becoming a new fictional event or a reward for a particular strategy.

At the final convergence, the program reflects several encounters that occurred independently. Some slot holders may retain their original plans, others may share or exchange opportunities, and one may choose not to transmit. Edda can challenge the resulting program through character speech but cannot erase authorized decisions. The facilitator ensures that the agreed schedule and stopping arrangement are understood. The drama's public shape emerges from participants' commitments under the scenario's conditions. It may emphasize personal farewell, disputed knowledge, or collective identity in a proportion the designer did not predict.

The example identifies the work that changed hands. Prepared materials and the tabletop carried routine description. Participants generated requests, promises, and refusals. Designated procedures maintained shared resources, while the facilitator clarified an exceptional dispute and restored communication. The director remained responsible for the event's operating conditions without authoring each encounter. The example also identifies what would need investigation in an actual performance: whether participants understood the permissions, whether the schedule remained usable, and whether each role retained meaningful opportunities. A plausible arrangement becomes evidence of success only through the contributions and experiences it actually supports.

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.

Technical access can create similar discrepancies. A role may possess a resource fictionally while its participant lacks the practical means to update or inspect the relevant display. Assistance should preserve the person's authorship and the agreed status of the action. The event can provide a text alternative, delegated operation, or an announced confirmation according to participants' needs. These arrangements follow from the authority framework itself: permission is meaningful when there is a workable way to exercise it. The preferred input mode should not silently determine whose contributions acquire fictional force.

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, technical operator, 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 Meridian Station, participants might propose keeping the outpost open instead of composing its farewell. The director needs to distinguish a character's proposal from an authorized change to the event's premise. If closure 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 a tabletop is intended to carry routine spatial description, 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 persistent tabletop representation while keeping the scenario and relevant permissions similar. It might instead compare two allocations of local authority

using the same display. 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 tabletop's contribution should be evaluated as part of an arrangement. A participant may navigate successfully because of a clear label, a practiced convention, or another player's assistance. The image alone cannot receive credit for every successful encounter. Conversely, a misunderstood token movement may reflect an unclear rule rather than poor visual design. Close analysis can trace how display, instruction, and social response operate together. A defensible conclusion identifies the task the combination supported and the conditions under which participants actually used it, with remaining uncertainty stated alongside the specific claim.

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 technical complexity as evidence of successful distribution.

Direction Through the Conditions of Play

Virtual interactive drama can transform game mastering from continuous narration into the design and maintenance of dramatic possibilities. The transformation involves an allocation of responsibilities: participants portray characters and generate encounters, prepared resources communicate selected circumstances, and procedures establish how consequential contributions acquire standing. The facilitator remains responsible for making the arrangement intelligible and addressing problems within its scope. The role becomes less continuously visible while retaining substantial creative and organizational influence. Its success depends on what participants can do through the conditions it provides.

The comparison among tabletop game masters, theatrical directors, salon facilitators, and virtual directors supports a functional account of that change. Each arrangement distributes decisions across preparation and performance in particular ways. Theater already involves collaboration and differentiated coordinating work; tabletop play already permits several allocations of narration. Virtual drama contributes persistent representation and independently organized communication that can support another configuration. These resources enable specific transfers of work when their meanings, limits, and update procedures are understood. They do not settle authority merely by appearing on a screen.

The virtual tabletop can partially replace routine spatial description by keeping selected relationships available for consultation. Character design can supply reasons and

resources for independent action. Local encounters can establish commitments without central witnessing when participants act within recognized permissions. Shared resources and cross-scene consequences still need coordination. Dozens of participants can be understood through these relationships, with scale depending on the event's dependencies and practical capacity. The framework identifies what a workable arrangement must maintain, while leaving its effectiveness in any particular performance open to investigation.

Intervention should follow an identified need and leave participants with their promised decisions. Clarifying a convention, restoring communication, offering an opportunity, and adjudicating a disputed resource are different acts with different effects. Their value cannot be read from frequency alone. A quiet director can support independence or leave uncertainty unresolved; an active director can restore agency or restrict it. Evaluation needs to follow the contributions, responses, and opportunities that result. Accountability also extends to preparation, where resource allocation and role design shape the range of possible developments.

The game master leaves the stage most productively when the surrounding practice continues to support consequential action. Participants can surprise the designer, sustain local scenes, and make choices whose effects remain intelligible elsewhere. The director's craft lies in preserving those possibilities, including the refusal, compromise, or unexpected alliance that changes the event's apparent direction. Narrative authority becomes distributed through

recognized permissions and usable relationships among people. The resulting performance belongs to their continuing contributions and responses, with direction serving as the attentive care that keeps collective creation possible.

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Julian Hartwell

Julian Hartwell is an independent game designer and workshop facilitator whose projects investigate shared narrative authority in face-to-face and virtual roleplaying. He previously worked in collaborative media production, where disagreements over who controlled a project prompted his interest in ensemble decision-making. Hartwell develops scenarios that distribute responsibilities traditionally held by a game master, including scene framing, pacing, and the introduction of complications. He believes that removing a central director does not eliminate structure; it simply makes the structure everyone's responsibility. Outside game design, he coaches community improvisation groups and builds unnecessarily sophisticated systems for organizing household chores. His fellow players have forbidden him from describing dishwashing as emergent dramaturgy.

Behind the Fog of War

Hidden Knowledge Dramatic Suspense and the Architecture of Virtual Mystery

Rosalind Pike

Abstract

This essay examines fog of war as a theatrical resource within the broader information architecture of virtual interactive drama. It argues that meaningful uncertainty concerns identities, testimony, motives, and future choices as well as concealed geography. The analysis distinguishes suspense, curiosity, and surprise, then examines private character knowledge, evidence, conflicting interpretation, and authority over revelation. It separates predetermined discoveries from emergent developments while showing how fixed facts can support open social consequences. A hypothetical haunted-mansion scenario demonstrates how a known floor plan and staged discoveries can sustain unresolved relationships. The essay concludes with design principles and a proposed research approach that distinguishes representation from experienced effect. Information becomes the principal dramatic environment when discoveries change what participants can understand, disclose, dispute, and do together.

Keywords

fog of war, virtual mystery, asymmetric information, dramatic suspense, character knowledge, interactive dramaturgy

Information as the Dramatic Environment

A fully visible mansion can remain mysterious. Participants may know every corridor while misunderstanding who has arrived, why an old letter was withheld, or what a familiar gesture means. Conversely, a concealed room may offer little dramatic interest if nobody has a reason to discover its contents. The central argument of this essay is that virtual mystery depends on the organization of consequential knowledge. Fog of war can become a theatrical device when concealment, discovery, and response enter that organization. Its value follows from the questions participants can pursue and the choices an answer makes possible, rather than from obscurity alone.

The proposal begins with a convention associated with spatial exploration: portions of a virtual tabletop remain visually concealed until some condition permits revelation. The discussion examines how that convention can support interactive drama concerned with identities, loyalties, memories, and relationships. Such play may use a shared map, character portraits, private briefs, and external communication facilities. The relevant features vary between systems and groups. No particular implementation is assumed to provide all forms of concealment automatically. The analysis concerns the dramatic meanings assigned to available representations and the procedures connecting them to fictional information.

Information becomes an environment in a precise functional sense. A participant encounters claims, identifies possible sources, chooses whom to approach, and discovers

constraints on access. A letter may be available while its significance remains uncertain. A person may know an answer while refusing to provide it. A public explanation may make one action possible and another costly. These relationships organize the participant's routes through the drama. Physical locations can help represent them, but the informational relations extend beyond spatial adjacency. Knowing where a person stands does not establish what the person knows or will disclose.

Harviainen models live action roleplaying environments as social information systems and examines communication, access, documents, and characters within that framework (Harviainen, 2007). This provides a useful foundation for the present argument. A mystery can be analyzed through the information people seek, withhold, transform, and interpret during play. The application here is conceptual and concerns digitally supported performance. It does not establish that any specific visual mask produces an emotional response. The question remains how a particular combination of representation, information distribution, and participant choice supports dramatically meaningful uncertainty.

Meaningful uncertainty differs from a general shortage of information. A participant needs to recognize something worth finding out, understand enough of the situation to act, and have some plausible route toward a relevant response. The answer need not be guaranteed or easy. An investigation can fail, and an encounter can deepen uncertainty. The distinction concerns whether the unknown enters a usable relationship with action. If participants cannot identify what the concealment represents or how their characters can

engage it, the result may be procedural confusion rather than a mystery within the fiction.

The argument separates geographical ignorance from uncertainty about perception, testimony, motives, and future consequences. It distinguishes suspense, curiosity, and surprise as analytical relationships to information rather than automatic labels for interface effects. It then examines character briefs, evidence, interpretation, predetermined discoveries, and emergent developments. A hypothetical haunted mansion provides a sustained example. The final sections consider a completely known map and propose ways to design and study the resulting uncertainty. The examples are invented for analysis; the essay does not claim findings from a completed performance or experiment.

This approach also preserves differences between participant and character knowledge. A player may know that a secret exists while the character has no reason to suspect it. A character may possess a memory described in a private brief that other participants never receive. The event can deliberately support these differences, but their conventions should remain understandable. Dramatic irony and investigation organize information differently. Evaluating either requires knowing which perspective is uncertain about which question, under what conditions, and with what available opportunity to respond.

The stakes extend beyond solving a concealed past. Participants may decide whether to trust an uncertain witness, disclose an identity, protect a confidence, or act before an explanation is complete. These choices make mystery part of a continuing social performance. A final revelation can

transform relationships without supplying one mandatory interpretation of them. The virtual tabletop contributes when it makes selected conditions and discoveries legible enough to support such action. Its architecture becomes theatrical through the ways people encounter and answer information, including information that remains incomplete after the last room has been revealed.

Geographical Ignorance and Social Uncertainty

Geographical ignorance concerns an unknown spatial arrangement or feature. A character may not know what lies beyond a door, whether a passage connects two rooms, or where an object can be found. A visual mask can represent this ignorance when the group understands its meaning. Removing the mask can answer the spatial question directly. The same discovery may also introduce a new question about ownership, history, or motive. Distinguishing those questions prevents the analysis from treating a revealed image as equivalent to a fully explained situation.

Spatial information can be known while access remains uncertain. Participants may see a study on the map without knowing whether their characters may enter it. A represented door can mark a barrier, a social boundary, or simply an architectural feature. Permission and capability require additional conventions. A group might allow ordinary entry unless a stated condition prevents it; another might require acknowledgment from the person controlling the room. The map supports action when the relationship is clear. Its

visibility alone cannot settle every question about what a character can reasonably attempt.

Perceptual uncertainty concerns what an observer can distinguish in the fiction. A room can be visible on the shared display while its imagined lighting prevents a character from identifying a face. The group needs to understand whether the map represents administrative orientation or current character perception. This distinction permits a usable public layout without revealing everything the scene contains. It also prevents a player from being penalized for consulting information the event deliberately placed on the screen. The relevant rule should identify which represented features constitute fictional observation.

Social uncertainty concerns relationships and intentions that spatial inspection does not directly reveal. Two characters may share a room while concealing a past alliance. A person standing beside a disputed document may be protecting it, searching for it, or waiting for someone else. Position provides a circumstance from which characters can infer meaning, rather than a transparent view of motive. The mystery develops through questions, testimony, and response. A detailed map can support those encounters while leaving their most consequential information entirely unresolved.

Identity introduces another distinction. A token may carry the name a guest publicly uses while a private brief establishes another identity. The display can accurately represent the public presentation without exposing the concealed relationship. A revelation may then connect two previously separate accounts of the same person. The event needs an authority convention for that connection: a participant's

accusation does not necessarily establish a new identity as fact. The distinction allows suspicion to be dramatically active without making every imaginative theory an automatic rewrite of another person's role.

Uncertainty about the past concerns events whose fictional occurrence may already be fixed. Participants seek to reconstruct what happened through available traces and accounts. Uncertainty about the future concerns choices or outcomes that remain open. A participant can know who withheld a letter and still wonder whether its recipient will forgive the act. These questions can coexist in one scene. Their relationship matters because a design focused only on recovering hidden facts may overlook the continuing drama produced by deciding what to do after those facts become available.

Procedural uncertainty belongs to another level. A participant may not know whether selecting a covered object reveals it, whether a search requires an announcement, or whether a private message has entered the fiction. These questions concern participation conditions. Some games deliberately make procedures discoverable through play, but that choice needs an intelligible basis. In the present model, ordinary operational guidance should allow participants to engage fictional unknowns. Confusing the two levels can make a character appear indecisive when the player is simply unsure how an intended action can be communicated.

The same concealed area can organize several kinds of uncertainty at once. A masked gallery may hide its physical arrangement, contain an unseen portrait, and promise information about a visitor's ancestry. Revealing the gallery

answers some questions while opening others. A careful analysis follows the sequence instead of assigning one global effect to the mask. What became visible? What became established? What interpretation remains uncertain? Which participant can now act differently? These questions connect the visual operation to the actual dramatic development it supports.

The distinctions also explain why complete spatial disclosure can preserve a mystery. A map can establish all locations while documents, identities, and commitments remain distributed among participants. Searching then involves selecting a source, asking a question, or negotiating disclosure rather than uncovering a corridor. The environment remains navigable in an informational sense. The participant follows relationships among people and evidence, with space organizing opportunities for encounter. Fog of war becomes one available convention within that wider arrangement, rather than the necessary condition of every uncertainty the performance can sustain.

Suspense Curiosity and Surprise in Participant Experience

Suspense, curiosity, and surprise concern different relationships between available information and an unfolding experience. Suspense can involve anticipation of a consequential outcome. Curiosity can involve seeking an explanation for something already indicated as missing or unclear. Surprise involves a development that disrupts an expectation and may require reinterpretation. These

descriptions supply working distinctions for the essay. A single scene can combine them, and participants can experience them differently. The presence of an unknown does not by itself establish which relationship is active or how strongly anyone feels it.

Sternberg relates suspense, curiosity, and surprise to different organizations of gaps between the narrated sequence and its presentation, while resisting rigid accounts that freeze their operation into universal recipes (Sternberg, 2003). This distinction is valuable for interactive drama because the display and the experienced sequence are not identical. A covered room is a representational arrangement. Its significance depends on what participants understand, anticipate, and discover through action. The present essay uses the categories as analytical questions about those relationships, rather than treating an interface operation as proof of a specific emotional effect.

Consider a sealed letter. If participants know it contains an accusation that may be read publicly, they can anticipate the consequences of disclosure. The letter can support suspense even before its words become visible. If they discover that someone removed a page and want to know why, the missing information can organize curiosity about an earlier event. If the revealed signature connects the letter to an apparently uninvolved person, the discovery may produce surprise. The same object supports several relationships through its context and timing, rather than through secrecy as an isolated property.

Participant choice adds a feature absent from a fixed sequence of presentation. A player may decide whether to

reveal the letter, whom to warn, or whether to challenge its authenticity. The future outcome can remain undecided because other participants will answer. Suspense can concern the response to a contribution whose authorship the player controls. The resulting experience should not be reduced to waiting for a designer's prepared revelation. The object may contain fixed information while its social consequences emerge through a scene that nobody has fully specified in advance.

Curiosity also needs an object that participants can recognize as worth pursuing. A fully concealed area might communicate only that the display has not yet been opened. A sound, a reference in a brief, or an interrupted account can establish a more specific question. Participants can then connect the unknown to a character concern. The question need not be articulated formally, but the relationship must become available somehow. Otherwise, the designer may be counting on interest generated by an absence whose significance the players have never had an opportunity to understand.

Surprise requires a perspective against which an expectation changes. A revelation obvious to one participant can transform another person's interpretation. A character may be startled by information the player has known from the beginning. That configuration can produce dramatic irony or an opportunity for portrayal without giving the player an unexpected discovery. The analysis should specify whose expectation is involved. It should also distinguish an intended revelation from a procedural inconsistency that participants

experience as arbitrary. Both can be unexpected, but their relationship to the fiction and its promises differs.

Concealment can delay an answer without increasing suspense. If a participant already knows the relevant consequence or no longer cares about the decision, another minute behind a mask may add only waiting. Conversely, a known outcome can leave significant interest in how characters arrive at it and what the process means to them. These possibilities suggest research questions rather than a guaranteed relation between delay and feeling. The designer should examine the particular concern sustained during the interval, including the choices available while the answer remains unresolved.

The categories can develop through social interaction as well as planned disclosure. A hesitant reply can make a participant suspect that something is missing. An unexpected refusal can change the apparent meaning of an earlier promise. A public question can turn private knowledge into an anticipated exposure. These developments may arise from character decisions and interpretation without any change to the map. The visual environment can keep participants oriented while the dramatic tension moves through speech, withholding, and response. Its contribution belongs within that combination of resources.

The practical implication is to design a relationship between uncertainty and concern, then examine what participants actually make of it. A mask, a private brief, or a delayed announcement is a means of organizing access. Suspense, curiosity, and surprise describe possible experiential relationships to that access and the events it concerns.

Keeping the distinction clear allows the essay to take theatrical effects seriously without assuming them. It also leaves room for performances in which the strongest uncertainty concerns an impending choice among people standing in a room everyone can already see.

Concealment as a Theatrical Convention

A visual mask becomes theatrical when participants understand it as part of the scene's organization of appearance and knowledge. It can function like a closed curtain, an unseen interior, or a restricted view, depending on the assigned convention. These comparisons describe representational functions rather than identical sensory experiences. A mask can withhold an image until a character opens a cabinet, or it can mark a location unavailable until an announced event. The important relationship is the one connecting a fictional condition to a change in what participants can perceive and answer.

The convention should specify what concealment establishes. A covered room may exist at a known location while its contents remain unseen. Another covered area might represent an unknown extension of the building. A shaded portrait might hide a public identity, or it might merely indicate that an image has not been supplied. These possibilities produce different inferences. Participants need enough guidance to distinguish them when the difference affects a choice. The director can preserve unknown content while making the meaning of the representational boundary clear.

Revelation is also a contribution with authority. Someone decides that the relevant condition has been met and makes the information available under the event's procedures. That person may be a facilitator, an assigned participant, or another operator acting on an acknowledged request. Technical ability to uncover an image does not itself establish fictional permission to discover it. Conversely, a participant can author an authorized search while delegating the interface operation. The theatrical effect depends on the understood relation among action, display, and response, rather than on the identity of the person who clicked.

The revealed image can establish a circumstance without providing its explanation. Uncovering a damaged portrait may show that part of the surface has been removed. It need not establish who did so, when it happened, or what the removal means. A written description can identify consequential details that the illustration leaves ambiguous. The participants can then investigate or interpret them. This separation permits visual discovery to initiate drama instead of ending it with a complete solution. It also prevents artistic detail from acquiring an evidentiary authority that the scenario never intended.

Concealment can control the scale of attention. When one area becomes newly available, participants may turn toward it, request an encounter there, or compare its contents with earlier claims. The possibility is contextual. A reveal unnoticed by most participants cannot be assumed to have redirected their attention, and a participant already occupied elsewhere may choose to remain. An announcement can make the change available without requiring everyone to

abandon a current scene. The director should identify whether the event promises a collective spectacle or an optional discovery with consequences that can travel later.

Partial disclosure can preserve a precise question. A label might establish that a document is a letter while leaving the words concealed. A brief description might disclose a signature without revealing the recipient. Each choice organizes what participants can infer and what remains to be found out. The design should ask what the partial information enables. Withholding every useful relation can make an object inert; revealing every relation can leave little to investigate. There is no universal ideal amount. The relevant balance follows the character concerns and routes of action established by the scenario.

Visual revelation should not be confused with the disclosure of every associated fact. A room may be uncovered for orientation while an occupant retains private knowledge. A portrait may show a face while the character's allegiance remains concealed. These relationships allow the display to become clearer as the social mystery grows more complicated. They also support different rates of discovery among participants. One person recognizes the face, another notices an object, and a third has information that makes either detail significant. The image becomes a shared point of encounter within unequal histories of knowledge.

The convention needs a way to handle accidental disclosure. If an operator reveals a covered area prematurely, the group should determine what information entered the participants' experience and how play will proceed. Asking everyone to pretend they never saw the image creates a different

knowledge arrangement, which may be workable when acknowledged. A technical accident should not automatically establish an intentional character discovery. The response should preserve the distinction between actual exposure and fictional access, with an intelligible adjustment where a consequential choice has been affected.

Concealment also has practical conditions of legibility. A discovery should have a usable equivalent for participants who cannot interpret a particular image or follow a visual transition. A concise description can communicate the established fact while leaving the same unresolved questions available. This supports the dramatic function of the device: the discovery becomes something the participant can answer. The aim is not to reproduce every visual detail through every channel. It is to preserve access to consequential information under the event's actual participation conditions.

Fog of war can serve theatrical mystery when its operations acquire these understood relations to action and knowledge. The device can organize anticipation, mark discovery, and bring a new circumstance into an encounter. It remains one resource among descriptions, documents, voices, and participant decisions. Its effectiveness should be evaluated through what the reveal changes and what remains open afterward. A screen can become entirely visible while the performance continues to turn on secrets that no image was designed to settle.

Character Knowledge Secrets and Hidden Objectives

A character brief distributes a perspective on the world. It can establish personal experience, a belief, an obligation, or knowledge of another person's public identity. These contributions differ in status. A statement that the character remembers a visitor does not necessarily establish that the remembered identification was correct. A statement that the visitor privately confessed may establish a different relation to evidence. The brief should give the participant an intelligible basis for portrayal and decision, with the relevant distinctions clear enough to support encounters when other characters offer incompatible accounts.

A secret concerns information withheld from some intended audience. Its dramatic function depends on who knows it, why it matters, and what disclosure would change. A character might conceal an identity to avoid recognition, protect a confidence to preserve trust, or hide an intention until an agreement is secure. These cases create different possibilities for interaction. The design should connect secrecy to a choice rather than assume that a private paragraph automatically generates drama. Participants need some route by which the information can affect conduct, become discoverable, or remain consequentially withheld.

Hidden objectives differ from hidden facts. A character may want to stop a public reading, gain an apology, or persuade a witness to remain silent. The objective organizes future action and may change through play. A fact about the character's past can remain stable while the participant chooses a new

response to it. Treating every objective as an unalterable instruction can reduce the space for emergent relationships. The scenario should clarify which commitments define the starting role and which concerns the player can reinterpret as circumstances develop.

Knowledge can be uneven without being distributed arbitrarily. Several participants may possess different parts of an event: one saw an arrival, another heard an argument, and a third knows why a name was changed. Their accounts can become mutually informative through conversation. The designer need not give anyone a complete solution. It should examine whether the relevant parts have usable routes into encounters, including alternatives when one participant chooses not to disclose. A single indispensable secret can create an intense decision, but it can also concentrate the entire mystery in one person's availability.

Clues grounded in a character's own experience can make sharing more intelligible. A participant understands why the character knows a particular detail and can decide how to tell it. Information about another person's private motives requires a different explanation, such as a confession or inference. These distinctions support both portrayal and evaluation. A character can lie about an experience, misunderstand it, or withhold it, but the participant needs to know the basis from which the contribution is made. Otherwise, apparent deception may result from confusion about what the brief authorized as knowledge.

Private communication can add or transform information during play. A message might supply an established discovery, report another character's claim, or ask for a future

meeting. The recipient should be able to distinguish these contributions. A facilitator's prepared update can carry authority over a fictional event, while a character's message remains testimony open to doubt. Similar formatting can obscure the difference. A simple indication of the message's status lets participants respond appropriately without requiring a complete explanation of its truth. Mystery remains active within the fiction while communication about the convention remains clear.

Player knowledge and character knowledge can deliberately diverge. Participants may publicly know that several identities are false while their characters must discover which ones. This arrangement supports interpretation and portrayal through dramatic irony. Another design may keep the false identities hidden from the players themselves, supporting personal investigation. Neither arrangement is inherently more theatrical. The choice changes the participant's task. A design should identify what kind of experience it offers and avoid treating access to administrative information as an accidental test of whether someone can maintain a fictional perspective.

The allocation of authority determines which secrets can be changed through invention. Montola's account of roleplaying connects the imagined world with an organization of power over contributions (Montola, 2008). Applied here, that organization distinguishes a fixed secret supplied by the scenario from an interpretation or new development a participant may establish. A player might freely decide how a character explains a past action while lacking permission to replace the action itself. These boundaries protect the basis on

which other participants received their information and made investigative choices.

Variation between performances requires similar care. A designer can randomize an identity or responsibility before play, provided the resulting briefs and evidence remain compatible. Predetermination need not mean that the same solution appears in every session. What matters is when the relevant facts become fixed and how they are communicated within that performance. Changing a responsible character after participants form a well-supported theory creates a different arrangement. If such changes are permitted, their status needs to be understood; otherwise, investigation can lose its dependable relationship to the evidence the event offered.

Participants can be uncertain about what other characters know. An archivist may know a visitor's identity while the visitor remains unsure whether that recognition has occurred. A hesitant greeting can then become an invitation, a test, or an accidental disclosure according to the characters' interpretations. This uncertainty concerns the distribution of knowledge itself. Revealing the identity to one person does not settle who believes the secret has spread. The design can support such relationships through attributable conversations and clear audiences for messages, without requiring participants to maintain an account of everyone's beliefs. What matters is the local question shaping an encounter: whether to confess, ask indirectly, or continue the public disguise. These possibilities show how the same established fact can generate new dramatic uncertainty as people learn about one another's access to it.

The purpose of distributed private knowledge is to create consequential encounters among perspectives. A secret can become a bargaining resource, a source of hesitation, or a reason to approach someone with a difficult question. Disclosure can alter a relationship even when it solves no central puzzle. The information architecture succeeds when participants can use what they know and meaningfully engage what they lack. A character sheet and a visual mask support different parts of that work, with neither providing a substitute for the response through which information becomes dramatic action.

Evidence Testimony and Conflicting Interpretation

Evidence in a fictional mystery is information participants can use to support or challenge a claim under the scenario's conditions. A document, a remembered conversation, or a discovered object can all play that role. Their evidentiary value depends on what they establish and what inference connects them to the question. A signature may support a claim about authorship, yet remain compatible with copying or another authorized explanation. The design should make relevant possibilities intelligible without requiring every clue to certify its own complete interpretation.

Testimony supplies information through a character with a position in the drama. The speaker may be informed, mistaken, deceptive, or selective. A listener also interprets the circumstances of telling. An account offered reluctantly to a trusted friend may be received differently from the same

words in a public accusation. These relations give testimony its theatrical force. The content matters, and so does the choice to speak. Treating every statement as a fact token awaiting combination would overlook the relationships through which participants decide what to believe and how to act.

Contradiction can arise at several levels. Two characters may remember the order of events differently. They may agree on the order but disagree about motive. One may intentionally deny an action that the scenario establishes as having occurred. The event should retain a distinction between conflicting accounts and conflicting authoritative facts. Characters can dispute testimony while the performance remains coherent. A problem appears when the underlying materials accidentally require mutually exclusive histories without acknowledging the discrepancy. That condition needs repair rather than being defended automatically as subtle narrative ambiguity.

The source of information affects how strongly it can support a conclusion. Two characters repeating the same rumor do not necessarily provide two independent confirmations. A copied note can reproduce the same initial mistake. Conversely, different observations can support a common event while leaving its explanation open. The design can make source relationships discoverable when they matter. This creates opportunities to question an apparently strong theory through conversation and comparison. It also prevents the sheer number of repeated claims from being mistaken for a guarantee of their truth within the fiction.

Participants may favor an interpretation for reasons that extend beyond the evidence. A character can protect a friend, distrust an institution, or prefer an explanation that preserves a valued relationship. Nickerson's review describes confirmation bias as seeking or interpreting evidence in ways partial to existing beliefs or expectations (Nickerson, 1998). This offers a bounded comparison for studying interpretation. It does not establish that a particular player is biased because a character defends a preferred account. Deliberate portrayal, limited knowledge, and the participant's own reasoning need to remain distinguishable in any empirical claim.

Competing interpretations can remain reasonable when the evidence underdetermines the answer. A letter asking someone to leave may be understood as a threat, a protective warning, or an effort to avoid embarrassment. Additional facts can eliminate some possibilities without deciding every motive. The mystery can develop through negotiation over significance as well as through discovery of missing events. Participants can agree about the letter's words while making different choices about trust. This form of uncertainty gives social drama room to continue after the document has been fully revealed.

The design should distinguish a misleading clue from an arbitrary obstruction. A clue can support a plausible initial theory that later evidence complicates, with an intelligible explanation for the earlier appearance. An object that looks decisive but has no relationship to any relevant event may merely consume attention. Its value depends on the event's aims and the routes remaining available. A mystery can contain atmospheric details and irrelevant objects, but it

should not require participants to infer the designer's hidden preferences from an unlimited field of indistinguishable possibilities.

The status of material evidence also needs conventions. A visible document might be an authoritative reproduction, an in-world copy, or a character's summary. Editing a shared note can record a new interpretation without changing the fictional original. These distinctions matter when participants compare versions or accuse someone of alteration. The interface can support the representation, but the group must establish what a visible change means. Otherwise, routine annotation may be mistaken for fictional forgery, or an actual contribution to the fiction may disappear into administrative handling.

An accusation creates a new event rather than merely reporting a conclusion. It can expose a confidence, demand an answer, or change who is willing to cooperate. The accused character's response becomes part of the mystery's present. Even a factually incorrect accusation can have coherent dramatic consequences. The event needs to preserve the difference between that consequence and validation of the claim. A forceful public statement does not become true because it received attention. Participants can answer its social effects while continuing to investigate whether its evidentiary basis holds.

Evidence and testimony become an architecture of relationships through these distinctions. Participants encounter sources, assess claims, revise interpretations, and make commitments under uncertainty. The director's preparation can support that activity with compatible facts

and discoverable connections while leaving motives and responses partly open. The strongest account of virtual mystery follows what a clue allows someone to ask or do next. It treats discovery as an opening into another consequential encounter, including an encounter in which the most important answer remains disputed.

Predetermined Discoveries and Emergent Mysteries

A predetermined mystery establishes some relevant facts before participants investigate them. The designer may specify who wrote a letter, which identity a guest conceals, or what happened during an earlier gathering. Play changes who learns these facts and what follows from learning them. The investigator's choices can remain meaningful even when the past is fixed. Participants select sources, negotiate disclosure, and decide how to act under incomplete evidence. Predetermination of the past does not by itself imply predetermination of the performance or its outcome.

The approach supports a particular relationship between clues and answers. A clue can be prepared to fit an event that already has an accepted fictional history. Participants can compare discoveries against that history, and a final explanation can account for earlier appearances. The arrangement needs compatible materials and usable routes of inquiry. It also needs clarity about what remains open. A character can invent an explanation of a motive within an allowed scope while lacking permission to replace the identity that other briefs and documents establish.

Investigation depends on knowing that evidence has some dependable relation to the question.

Predetermined disclosure can become overly sequential if every discovery requires one exact earlier action. A hidden document may point to a witness who alone can authorize entry to the only relevant room. Such a chain can be intentional, but it makes several opportunities depend on specific choices and availability. A different design can provide several routes to the same important question. Participants might learn of the letter through a memory, a physical trace, or an interested character. The routes need not yield identical detail. Their purpose is to support investigation without making one missed encounter silently close the entire mystery.

A mystery of interpretation can use the same fixed events while leaving their significance contested. Everyone may eventually agree that a letter was withheld. One character understands the act as protection, another as control, and another as an effort to preserve an institution's reputation. The distinction between these interpretations may depend on additional facts, but it can also involve incompatible values. No new document necessarily settles whether the act deserves forgiveness. The drama develops through how participants negotiate the meaning and consequences of an acknowledged event.

This interpretive form does not mean that every claim is equally supported. A theory inconsistent with the established sequence may be challenged by evidence. Another may account for the events but offer an unpersuasive understanding of intention. The performance can preserve

degrees of support without assigning the facilitator authority to resolve every moral or emotional judgment. Participants need enough common conditions to know what they are disagreeing about. Their disagreement then becomes a scene, with questions about trust and response that remain open after the factual uncertainty has narrowed.

Emergent development adds another relationship to uncertainty. A participant may decide during play to reveal a confidence, abandon an allegiance, or create a new obligation through a promise. These events become facts as authorized contributions occur. Their outcomes are not hidden in a prepared answer packet. Other participants can investigate them afterward, but their origin lies in the unfolding performance. The mystery now includes a past partly generated by play itself. This process can coexist with predetermined history, producing a changing combination of prepared discoveries and newly consequential actions.

Some forms permit participants to establish previously unspecified history during investigation. This is a further allocation of authorship, rather than merely a different interpretation of fixed evidence. A group might agree that a discovered connection becomes part of the world through a recognized procedure. Such play can be effective when participants understand the arrangement. Its questions concern how a proposed addition is accepted and how it relates to prior commitments. Without that understanding, a participant seeking a prepared solution may experience authorized invention as an arbitrary change of answer.

The designer should distinguish uncertainty that belongs to participants from indeterminacy in the fiction. In one case, an

answer exists within the scenario but is not yet known to a particular person. In another, the relevant fact remains unassigned until an authorized contribution establishes it. A third case leaves the question permanently open by design. These configurations require different expectations. A promise that investigation can determine a concealed identity does different work from an invitation to co-create the identity's history. Neither promise should be substituted for the other without acknowledgment.

The distinction also guides facilitation when participants advance an unexpected theory. In a fixed mystery, the theory can be plausible yet incorrect, and the available evidence should retain its established relation to the past. In an openly generative form, the theory might become material for a new accepted development. An interpretive drama may allow the theory to matter socially without deciding its truth. The director's response should follow the event's authority arrangement. Rewarding a striking idea does not require pretending that all three configurations establish facts in the same way.

Repeated performances can combine stability and variation. A scenario may preserve the same broad relationships while selecting different responsible characters or hidden identities before each session. The resulting evidence needs to correspond to the selection. Participants' choices can then generate further differences during play. This arrangement keeps repeated investigation from being identical while maintaining a fixed basis within a particular performance. The relevant distinction is temporal: what was decided before play, what became established during it, and what remains

disputed afterward. These questions are more useful than a general opposition between authored and emergent mystery.

A hybrid design can deliberately preserve several kinds of closure. Participants may solve the historical question, fail to discover a secret identity, and still make a consequential agreement about the future. Another performance may expose the identity while leaving motive unresolved. The event's stopping arrangement should make clear that play can conclude without every question receiving the same kind of answer. A shared performance can be coherent while its interpretations remain plural. The design should identify which uncertainties are intended to be answerable and which remain opportunities for continuing reflection.

Predetermined revelation and conflicting interpretation are complementary resources when their roles are clear. Prepared facts provide a basis for discovery; interpretation turns that basis into contested social meaning; participant decisions create new consequences. Visual concealment can organize the availability of any prepared representation within this process. It does not determine the kind of mystery by itself. The architecture lies in the relationship among established conditions, authorized invention, and open response, allowing a disclosed object to settle one question while making another newly urgent.

Revelation Timing and Meaningful Choice

A revelation matters dramatically when it changes a participant's understanding or available response. Learning a hidden name can redirect an approach. Discovering that a

witness relied on a rumor can weaken a planned accusation. Receiving a private admission can create a choice about disclosure. The effect depends on timing and context. An answer supplied after every related decision has become unavailable may provide retrospective interest but little opportunity for action. That can be an intentional ending, but it differs from a discovery designed to shape the continuing scene.

Relevance should be established without giving away the answer. A reference to a missing letter can connect an object to a character's concern before the contents become known. A disputed memory can give someone a reason to ask about an old room. These connections create anticipatory structure through questions participants can pursue. The design does not need to announce the mystery's whole significance. It needs enough information for the next meaningful step to become imaginable. Concealment works within that relation between an indicated concern and a possible action.

The route to disclosure can itself be a scene. A character may request a document from someone who wants an acknowledgment first. The answer becomes available through negotiation, with the disclosure carrying a new commitment. This differs from a purely technical interaction in which selecting an object immediately displays its text. Both arrangements can serve a design, but they distribute agency differently. The first places a person and relationship within access; the second may keep attention on interpretation or pace. The choice should follow what the event wants participants to do with the discovery.

Several routes can preserve opportunity when secrecy matters. A participant may choose not to confess, yet another character can discover relevant traces or ask a witness. These alternatives do not need to force the same outcome. They can expose different amounts of information and create different costs. The design should examine whether withholding remains a meaningful choice and whether other participants retain a playable inquiry. If every route requires the secret holder's voluntary cooperation, the event has concentrated control over discovery in that role. The arrangement can be deliberate, but its consequences should be understood.

Public and private revelations have different reach. A private discovery can make one participant reconsider a relationship while leaving the wider event unchanged for the moment. A public reading changes what many characters can answer together. The participant who controls disclosure may choose between these forms. The interface should make the intended audience understandable where its facilities permit. An announcement meant for one scene should not accidentally become a declaration to everyone, and a public development should have a usable route to the participants expected to respond to it.

The order of disclosure can change interpretation without changing underlying facts. Learning that a character concealed an identity before learning the reason may invite suspicion. Encountering the reason first may make the concealment appear protective. Participants can later revise either impression. This observation does not establish a universal emotional sequence. It identifies a design variable whose operation depends on the people, roles, and

circumstances involved. The event can allow different discovery orders while maintaining a compatible history, producing distinct experiences without requiring different facts in every version.

Disclosure can create costs that make information more than a prize. A character may gain an explanation while losing the confidence of the person who provided it. A public accusation can secure an answer but expose an ally's private role. The participant chooses among consequences within the scenario's scope. These costs should arise through intelligible fictional relationships and procedures, rather than through unannounced penalties for investigating. A mystery becomes interactive when knowing and telling enter choices that other participants can meaningfully answer.

Waiting requires something worth doing during the interval. If a clue cannot become available until a later event, participants may pursue other relationships, test preliminary explanations, or decide whether to make an incomplete claim. The unavailable answer then shapes activity without stopping it. If no relevant action remains, the same delay may merely suspend participation. The director should examine the opportunities left open rather than assume that postponement generates tension. Time becomes dramatic through the concerns and choices it organizes, not through a clock considered alone.

Revelation can alter the future while leaving the past unchanged. A discovered letter may confirm that a departure was voluntary, yet the participants still need to decide whether the departing character owes an explanation. This is an important source of continuing drama after investigation

succeeds. A design can prepare questions about responsibility, recognition, or reconciliation that no final document automatically settles. The new information supplies a changed circumstance for response. It does not need to prescribe how every character should feel or which relationship must be restored.

The final disclosure deserves particular attention because it can redistribute authorship at the stopping point. A facilitator's authoritative explanation may answer historical questions, but it should not silently determine consequences the event left to participants. If a shared decision remains open, the group needs an opportunity to make it after the information becomes available. If the revelation is intended only for reflection, that status should be clear. Either arrangement can provide closure when its relationship to active play is understood. Confusion arises when participants are invited to choose and then learn that the choice has already been supplied for them.

The timing of information is also uneven across concurrent scenes. One participant may discover a fact early and another only through a later report. Their opportunities differ, and the difference can be part of the drama. It should remain distinguishable from a practical failure that prevented a participant from receiving an intended notice. The director's task includes preserving that distinction when repairing communication. Restoring an unavailable channel can support the promised opportunity without declaring that a character has solved a question or forcing information into a scene where it never fictionally arrived.

Meaningful revelation connects past preparation to present agency. It gives participants something to understand, disclose, dispute, or act upon at a moment when the response can matter. Visual concealment can help stage that connection, but the decisive relation extends through people and procedures. The event gains depth when a discovery changes the terms of an encounter and leaves room for an answer. It can lose that depth when every reveal becomes a self-contained reward whose consequences have already been settled outside the participants' choices.

A Hypothetical Mystery at Blackthorn House

Blackthorn House is an invented haunted mansion hosting a memorial gathering for Elias, a resident who disappeared twenty years earlier. Six participants portray people with different relationships to the disappearance and the house's reputation. Mira hosts the gathering, Cora maintains the archive, Ivo has restored the building, Ren witnessed part of the earlier evening, Selene has prepared a commemorative song, and Vale arrives under an unfamiliar name. The scenario uses private briefs and a shared tabletop. Its purpose here is analytical: the following developments illustrate possible relations among concealment, evidence, and choice rather than describe an observed performance.

The complete floor plan is visible from the beginning. Participants know where the archive, gallery, and memorial room are located. A covered image represents the contents of a writing desk, with an announced inspection procedure

governing revelation. The cover does not represent an unknown room or prohibit ordinary movement. Private communication supports conversations within the fiction under established presence conventions. The preparation also distinguishes stable historical facts from interpretations and allows some apparently supernatural phenomena to remain unexplained. The event offers investigation and social response without promising that every unsettling occurrence has one discoverable explanation.

The prepared history establishes that Elias left voluntarily and asked Cora to withhold a letter explaining the departure. Vale is Elias returning under another name, a fact supplied privately to that participant. These starting conditions remain stable during the performance. Other characters receive limited experiences and concerns rather than full explanations. Ren remembers a figure near the gallery clock and believes its displayed time establishes when the departure occurred. Ivo has information that the clock was unreliable. Mira wants the memorial to preserve a particular public account, while Selene wants the missing resident's own words acknowledged.

Before the memorial begins, a bell rings with no operator visible to the characters present. The event establishes the sound, while its meaning remains open within the stated genre arrangement. Ren connects it to the earlier disappearance and approaches Ivo. The conversation can expose the difference between a remembered observation and an inference about time. Ivo can provide the restoration information, ask why the timing matters, or postpone an answer while pursuing another concern. The unknown

becomes a reason for contact, with the participants generating the exchange rather than waiting for the map to deliver a solution.

An authorized inspection reveals the desk's displayed contents, including a restoration note about the clock. The image and accompanying text establish the note's relevant details. They do not establish that Ren lied or explain why the figure was there. Ren may revise the account, defend the memory's remaining parts, or suspect that someone altered the record. The discovery narrows one inference while leaving several possible responses. The fog operation has become a theatrical event through this change in the encounter's terms. Its contribution is the staged availability of evidence, not a direct declaration of the correct interpretation.

Selene asks Cora whether the archive contains words by Elias suitable for the ceremony. Cora knows about the withheld letter and must decide what to disclose. The private brief gives Cora a reason for the earlier concealment but does not prescribe the present response. Cora can mention a limited passage, request a private conversation, or refuse. Other prepared references to the letter allow further inquiry if it remains withheld. The arrangement gives secrecy a genuine role without placing every route to investigation behind one participant's cooperation. Different discoveries can yield different amounts of information and different relationships to the source.

Vale hears that a letter may be read and privately approaches Cora. The participant can decide whether Elias reveals the returning identity now, asks for continued secrecy, or offers another explanation. The identity exists in the prepared

history, but the decision to disclose it is new action. Cora's response remains open. This scene can produce suspense about an impending exposure even though both involved participants know who Vale is. The concern has shifted from discovering an answer to anticipating what the other person will choose and what the choice may do to their relationship.

Mira receives a report that the letter proves someone forced Elias to leave. That report exceeds what the document establishes. Mira may repeat it, question it, or approach Cora. The original letter remains unchanged while its circulating interpretation acquires a new social life. If Mira accuses Cora publicly, the accusation becomes a consequential event without becoming automatically true. Cora can answer the accusation's terms while other characters ask to inspect the source. This sequence illustrates how a fixed discovery and emergent testimony can produce a mystery that develops beyond the designer's initial distribution of facts.

When the letter becomes available, its wording supports the voluntary nature of the departure. It does not settle whether Cora's concealment was an act of care, control, or institutional loyalty. Nor does it establish what those present now owe one another. Ren may feel misled, Selene may ask to revise the song, and Mira may try to preserve the planned ceremony. These are possible character responses, not prescribed emotional outcomes. The document can resolve a historical question while opening a scene about acknowledgment and responsibility that must be made through participant contributions.

Vale can disclose the identity publicly, but the fictional audience need not accept every claim immediately.

Corroborating knowledge, relationships, and prepared evidence can affect how characters respond. The fact established in the private role remains distinct from the evidentiary position of those hearing the announcement. The event's conventions determine when a contribution is an authoritative disclosure for players and when it remains a claim within the fiction. Keeping that distinction intelligible allows recognition, doubt, and portrayal to coexist without silently changing who Vale has been throughout the performance.

The gathering can conclude in several ways. Participants might transform the memorial into a welcome, continue the ceremony while preserving Vale's secrecy, or leave the community divided over the letter's meaning. The bell may remain unexplained. These endings combine different forms of closure: a recovered historical fact, an optional identity revelation, and an unresolved interpretation of loyalty. No further corridor needs to be discovered for these choices to matter. The house's visible architecture organizes encounters, while its informational architecture organizes the reasons people approach, avoid, trust, and challenge one another.

Several limits become visible in the example. The restored clock challenges a particular inference rather than proving a whole theory. A visual reveal makes evidence available without determining belief. A private brief establishes a basis for choice without dictating what the participant must do next. The prepared past stays compatible while the current event develops through decisions. These distinctions identify what an actual study could observe and ask participants about. They also show why a plausible mystery design cannot

be judged solely from the apparent elegance of its written solution.

Blackthorn House demonstrates the proposal's central possibility. Fog of war can contribute to theatrical discovery within an environment whose physical layout is already known. The more substantial uncertainties concern identity, access to testimony, and the significance of past choices for present relationships. A revelation changes the social scene when people can answer it. The virtual tabletop provides a shared location for selected evidence and encounters, while the mystery extends through a larger pattern of distributed knowledge. The information itself supplies the principal terrain participants must learn to navigate.

A Known Map with Unresolved Relationships

A known map can support uncertainty because spatial description answers only selected questions. Participants can locate the gallery, identify the archive entrance, and plan an approach while remaining unsure what a conversation will disclose. The same clarity can make social investigation easier to organize. A participant who understands the building can devote attention to choosing a source or deciding how to ask a difficult question. This is a reasoned design possibility, rather than a measured claim that revealing maps always improves interaction. The effect depends on the participant, task, and other information available.

The known map can establish a common reference without creating common knowledge of every event. A token in the

gallery may indicate presence while saying nothing about the character's private conversation. Even that presence may represent administrative information rather than something every character can observe. The convention determines its fictional status. Shared visibility can support orientation while the event preserves limits on what a character knows. The director should state the distinction where it affects action, avoiding an expectation that participants infer the rule from the interface's ordinary appearance.

A useful conceptual comparison holds the social situation constant while varying spatial concealment. In one version, participants begin with the full plan and a reference to a missing letter. In another, they must discover the relevant room as well. The second version adds a spatial question and may change pace, routes, and attention. It does not necessarily create a stronger social mystery. The comparison asks what the additional unknown contributes and what opportunities it delays. Its value lies in specifying a difference that could later be investigated through actual performances.

Removing spatial concealment can also reveal where the design depends on it. If the event loses every consequential question once the map is open, its principal mystery may concern exploration. That is a legitimate design focus. If identities and motives remain active, the event demonstrates another organization of uncertainty. The distinction helps designers select tools according to purpose. It avoids treating a conventional feature of adventure play as compulsory for every social mystery, while leaving room for scenarios in which environmental discovery is itself central to the intended experience.

An open map can make routes to information visible without making the information free. A participant knows that Cora is associated with the archive but still needs to negotiate disclosure. The difference turns access into an encounter rather than an exercise in locating a hidden object. It also allows a secret holder to act as more than a locked container. The character can reinterpret an obligation, ask for recognition, or decide that the present circumstances justify a new response. Information becomes relational because another person's choices shape its availability and consequences.

The visible environment can change meaning after a revelation. A gallery previously understood as a neutral meeting place may become associated with a disputed farewell. Participants need no additional drawing to experience that shift through the fiction. A familiar route can become an approach to someone newly recognized as a witness or relative. These transformations arise from narrative information and participant interpretation. The map remains a stable reference while the drama reorganizes what its locations signify. That capacity explains how spatial familiarity can coexist with repeated discovery.

Known geography can coexist with unknown future action as well. Participants may see the room where a reading will occur and know its scheduled time while remaining uncertain whether the document will arrive or who will object. The anticipated event draws together choices from several scenes. Its uncertainty concerns people rather than a missing portion of the display. A visual indicator can support coordination, but the response comes from participants who retain

meaningful alternatives. The performance's future remains open even when its setting has become completely legible.

The main risk is assuming that spatial transparency solves every practical problem. Participants may still struggle to find an available conversation, understand a private message's status, or distinguish current evidence from an earlier report. These are matters of information organization and participation procedure. They require attention in their own right. Opening the map can remove one source of uncertainty while leaving others unchanged. The analysis should evaluate the specific task the representation supports rather than turn either concealment or disclosure into a universal solution.

A fully known environment can make the informational structure particularly clear. Participants act through a shared setting whose relationships continue to change as knowledge moves. The unknown is who will speak, what a source can establish, and how another character will answer an explanation. The mystery remains theatrical when these questions enter consequential encounters. Fog of war then becomes an optional means of staging selected discoveries within a larger dramatic architecture. Its absence need not empty the house of uncertainty, because the people inside remain capable of surprising one another.

Designing and Studying Dramatically Useful Uncertainty

Design should begin with the questions participants might care about, the information relevant to those questions, and the actions through which it can become available. The

account should specify whose uncertainty is involved. A player seeking a hidden identity has a different task from a player portraying a character who lacks information the player already knows. The design can support either arrangement. Making the distinction explicit gives evaluation a precise object and prevents a general report of excitement from standing in for every possible effect of concealment.

The information structure can be examined before performance through its commitments and routes. Designers can identify fixed facts, potentially unreliable reports, and meanings left open to interpretation. They can ask which characters possess each relevant contribution and what other routes remain if someone withholds it. This review does not require a script of every conversation. It tests whether important questions have a playable basis. It also identifies accidental contradictions in materials before participants are asked to treat those contradictions as evidence about a mysterious world.

Clue design can be tested through possible next actions. A discovered note might allow someone to identify a witness, challenge a time claim, or request an explanation. If the note supplies no usable connection, its intended significance may depend on information participants never receive. The solution can be another intelligible relation rather than a complete explanation. Designers should also distinguish repeated access from independent corroboration. Several copies of one report can improve availability without increasing its evidentiary independence, a difference worth preserving when the mystery asks participants to assess reliability.

Comparative research can vary a specific representational choice while documenting the rest of the arrangement. One study might compare a complete initial map with progressive spatial revelation while retaining similar character information. Another might examine public and private delivery of a particular discovery. The changes should be described precisely enough that readers can understand what is being evaluated. Repeating a mystery introduces knowledge of its secrets, while separate groups introduce other differences. Neither difficulty makes inquiry pointless, but each limits how confidently an observed effect can be attributed to the chosen device.

Hoeken and van Vliet investigate cognitive and affective responses to different discourse structures using an authored story, reporting that suspense could occur even when readers knew the ending (Hoeken and van Vliet, 2000). Their study provides a bounded comparison for examining the relationship between information order and experience. It does not establish an equivalent result for interactive tabletop performance. Participants in the present format can create events and alter responses. Research should identify which information relationship is comparable and which features of active participation require separate investigation.

Participant accounts should focus on concrete episodes. Researchers might ask what the person wanted to discover, what they expected before a reveal, and which choice changed afterward. These questions can distinguish curiosity about a past event from anticipation of a future response. They can also identify an unknown that participants found irrelevant or a disclosure they experienced as confusing.

Reports of distance or indifference are useful evidence. The inquiry should not assume that a covered area succeeded merely because the designer intended it to be mysterious.

Observation can follow discovery and uptake where access permits. An analyst might identify what was revealed, who received it, and how subsequent contributions used it. The analysis needs the relevant convention: an image becoming visible does not automatically establish that every character witnessed the discovery. Private scenes and missed communications can leave gaps in the record. Those limits should remain visible rather than being filled through a presumed complete participant perspective. The unit of interest is a contribution in context, including the response through which it becomes consequential.

Quantitative description can support interpretation when the categories are clear. A study might describe acknowledged discoveries, changes in stated hypotheses, or intervals between receiving information and acting upon it. Such measures answer limited questions. The number of covered objects does not measure suspense, and the number of exchanged clues does not establish understanding. A participant might receive an answer without recognizing its relevance. Numerical patterns become informative when connected to the episode, the participant's account, and the particular construct being examined, with uncertainty retained where the evidence cannot settle it.

Alternative explanations deserve attention. A striking image may attract attention through novelty rather than its relationship to a mystery. A participant familiar with the scenario may navigate rapidly because of prior knowledge. A

confident performer may disclose more information regardless of visual concealment. These possibilities can be investigated through design, observation, and focused questions without assuming that every influence can be removed. The final claim should identify the combination of conditions the study actually examined. An explanation proportionate to that evidence is more useful than a universal statement about fog of war.

Practical design should preserve access to participation while allowing fictional ignorance. Participants need understandable ways to ask how a search works, receive an intended discovery, or communicate an accusation. Alternative descriptions and delegated interface operation can preserve the same consequential information when visual access differs. A procedural question should not be treated automatically as a character's ignorance or failure. The distinction lets the group repair the participation condition while retaining secrets within the fiction. It connects accessibility to the functioning of the mystery rather than treating it as an unrelated addition.

Research access to private material needs agreement from the participants whose contributions are involved. A secret available to a facilitator for running the event is not automatically material for every later analysis. Interviews should also permit participants to discuss portrayal without disclosing personal experiences they do not wish to supply. These conditions affect what evidence exists and how the performance was conducted. A method should describe its authorized coverage and retain unobserved encounters as

limits. It should not convert the mystery's incompleteness into an unsupported account of what everyone knew or felt.

Postplay discussion can separate kinds of closure. Participants can identify which historical questions were answered, which interpretations remained disputed, and which future decisions they actually made. They may discover that someone else's private scene changed the meaning of an apparent contradiction. This new information enriches retrospective understanding without replacing the original experience of choosing under uncertainty. The discussion can also expose a route that failed operationally or a clue whose status was unclear. These specific findings provide a basis for revision while leaving room for different readings of the same event.

The framework offers design principles and research questions rather than claims of proven effects. It can be refined through performances that reveal where concealment supports attention, where it delays opportunity, and where a visible map leaves social uncertainty intact. The central evaluative question is what participants can meaningfully do with what they know and what they lack. Keeping that question attached to actual episodes allows mystery to be studied as a collective performance, with information architecture understood through its practical use and its interpreted consequences.

Beyond the Concealed Room

Fog of war can become a theatrical device when its concealments and revelations participate in an intelligible organization of knowledge. A mask can mark an unseen

circumstance, anticipate a discovery, or make evidence available at a consequential moment. The effect depends on the question participants recognize and the responses they can make. Visual obscurity alone does not establish suspense. A fully visible house can remain dramatically uncertain when identities, testimony, motives, and future choices are distributed among people who must decide how to approach one another.

The distinctions developed here clarify that wider architecture. Geographical ignorance differs from uncertainty about perception, access, and social meaning. Suspense, curiosity, and surprise describe different possible relationships to information and events. Character briefs distribute knowledge and objectives whose statuses need to remain recognizable. Evidence supports claims through interpretation, while testimony also performs a social act. Predetermined history can coexist with competing explanations and new developments authored during play. The mystery gains depth when these relationships remain distinct enough for participants to understand what a discovery has changed.

Blackthorn House demonstrates how those resources can work together in a conceptual example. The floor plan is known, a covered display stages a material discovery, and private accounts organize encounters around a missing resident. Revealing a letter can clarify a past departure without deciding whether concealment deserves forgiveness. An identity can be fixed in a brief while disclosure and recognition remain open in performance. The resulting uncertainties extend through relationships that no additional

room drawing can resolve. The map provides orientation within a more complex environment of knowledge and response.

Design and research should examine that environment through specific contributions and their consequences. Clear conventions can preserve fictional secrets while making participation usable. Multiple routes can support inquiry without forcing a single disclosure. Comparative studies and participant accounts can investigate effects without treating a representational feature as an automatic emotional cause. Evaluation should distinguish a solved historical question, a disputed interpretation, and a continuing choice. These outcomes can coexist within a coherent performance whose closure remains selective rather than complete.

Information becomes the principal dramatic environment when learning, withholding, and telling change what people can do together. The most consequential discovery may concern a person already standing in a familiar room. The most lasting uncertainty may begin after a secret has been exposed, when someone must answer what it means for a relationship. A virtual tabletop supports this form by giving selected spaces and evidence a shared representation. The drama develops through the participants who interpret that representation, pursue its unanswered questions, and decide how to respond to one another.

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Rosalind Pike

Rosalind Pike creates escape-room puzzles and online mystery experiences, specializing in information that must remain hidden until the right dramatic moment. A dedicated roleplaying hobbyist, she is interested in how digital permissions, secret messages, and limited visibility can create suspense without frustrating participants. Her design process combines meticulous testing with a willingness to let players discover solutions she never anticipated. Pike writes practical essays on clue distribution, fairness, and the theatrical value of not knowing what lies beyond a virtual door. She keeps a shelf of antique locks and mechanical puzzles, none of which contains anything valuable. She says the real treasure is the brief, glorious expression on someone's face when a mechanism finally opens.

The Performance That Disappears

Documenting Analyzing and Reconstructing Ephemeral Virtual Drama

Harriet Bellamy

Abstract

This essay develops a methodology for documenting and analyzing virtual tabletop interactive drama as an ephemeral participatory art. It argues that digital persistence does not provide a complete performance record and proposes reconstruction through consequential episodes supported by traceable evidence. Scenario documents establish opportunities, while maps, messages, recordings, observations, and participant accounts support different claims about action, knowledge, consequence, and experience. The essay examines simultaneous conversations, transcription, translation, memory, debriefing, contradictory sources, and the distinction between chronology and influence. A hypothetical contested promise demonstrates how researchers can combine evidence without resolving every uncertainty. Repeated performances provide comparative opportunities to study structure and agency. Consent, access, and archival decisions remain integral to the method. The resulting dramatic account is a bounded scholarly reconstruction whose authority depends on explicit reasoning rather than an imagined omniscient perspective.

Keywords

Virtual Tabletop Interactive Drama, performance documentation, ephemeral participatory theatre, narrative reconstruction, participant memory, research methodology

Ephemeral Drama and the Problem of the Complete Account

Virtual tabletop interactive drama can leave an abundance of records without leaving a complete account of its performance. Character documents survive, tokens occupy recorded positions, messages retain wording, and selected conversations may be preserved. These traces do not automatically establish how the event unfolded for the people creating it. Several scenes can occur simultaneously, characters can act on different information, and a decisive exchange can acquire incompatible meanings for its participants. The research problem is to construct a defensible account from those partial sources while keeping their differences visible. Completeness should not be assumed merely because a production uses digital systems capable of storing information.

The problem begins with the relationship between preparation and event. A scenario can establish a situation, distribute motives, and describe possible developments without containing the dialogue or decisions that will occur. Its written materials may resemble a dramatic score more closely than a finished script. Participants create particular encounters through choices that others interpret and answer. A later transcript can preserve some resulting speech, but it does not become the script that governed the performance. Confusing these documents leads researchers to treat the designer's intentions as events or to read a surviving conversation as if it

exhausted the shared activity that made its words consequential.

The title's disappearance concerns the passing of opportunities for situated response. After a scene closes, a participant can remember a refusal, explain it, or reinterpret it, but cannot ordinarily reenter the same open moment with the original capacity to change what happens next. A recording permits another kind of encounter with the exchange. It can support close attention unavailable during play, including repeated listening and comparison with other materials. These benefits are real without making the later encounter identical to participation. Documentation preserves resources through which a performance can become knowable while transforming the conditions under which that knowledge is produced.

Stenros and Montola identify ephemerality, subjectivity, the first person audience, and coauthorship as challenges for documenting LARP. Their account also addresses the normative choices involved in describing a practice from within its community (Stenros and Montola, 2011). Those concerns provide a foundation for the present inquiry, which extends the methodological problem to VTT supported salon performance. Digital records can make some actions easier to inspect while leaving perception, interpretation, and private coordination unevenly represented. The extension requires examining what each medium actually records rather than assuming that technological persistence has solved the difficulties associated with participatory events.

The central argument is that reconstruction should be plural, traceable, and limited by the evidence supporting particular

claims. Plurality means that a collective event can sustain several situated accounts without requiring every difference to be resolved into one authorized story. Traceability means that an analytical claim remains connected to identifiable sources and to the steps through which it was inferred. Evidentiary limitation means that uncertainty survives where records cannot settle it. These principles do not prohibit strong conclusions. They permit conclusions whose strength matches the available support, including clear statements about what happened when the sources justify them.

The proposal that the complete dramatic text exists only as a retrospective reconstruction needs qualification. A reconstruction can assemble relationships no participant perceived together, but it cannot recover every experience or provide access to every unrecorded exchange. Nor does the absence of a total account mean that the event did not occur until a scholar described it. The performance took place through participants' actions and responses. The research account is a later representation of that activity. Its achievement lies in making selected patterns and consequences examinable, with enough openness for readers to assess how the evidence supports the interpretation.

This essay develops a practical methodology through distinctions among scenario materials, action traces, records of interaction, participant accounts, and analytical reconstruction. It examines the evidentiary value of each source before considering their combination through timelines, linked episodes, and explicit uncertainty. A hypothetical diplomatic salon demonstrates the procedure without claiming empirical findings. Repeated performances

then provide a basis for comparing dramatic structure and agency, while a discussion of consent and archival access considers how documentation choices shape the research object. The intended result is a usable approach to studying participatory narrative without converting its partial perspectives into a falsely seamless retrospective script.

The method begins by deciding what a particular inquiry needs to explain. A study of how a secret becomes public requires different evidence from a study of character identification or facilitator intervention. Recording everything is not a substitute for identifying the relationship under investigation. It can produce a large archive whose apparent comprehensiveness obscures missing context and whose processing exceeds available resources. A focused design identifies consequential episodes, preserves relevant sources, and records the boundaries of its coverage. It treats documentation as an interpretive practice through which the event becomes available for analysis, with choices that deserve scrutiny alongside the performance itself.

Distinguishing Events Traces Experiences and Interpretations

A research method needs clear distinctions among the things its evidence can describe. The proposed approach separates the prepared opportunity, the observable contribution, the accepted fictional consequence, the participant's experience, and the later interpretation. These are analytical distinctions rather than independent layers of reality. They often overlap within a single encounter. A character's spoken accusation

can be an observable contribution, a proposal about the fictional world, and an experience of pressure for the person addressed. Separating the questions prevents evidence for one aspect from being treated automatically as evidence for all the others.

Prepared opportunity concerns what the scenario makes possible or likely. A character brief may tell one participant to seek a missing letter and another to conceal it. That arrangement supplies reasons for interaction without proving that the participants met or that the letter affected an outcome. Observable contribution concerns what someone said, typed, moved, or otherwise made available. A recording might establish that the first character requested the letter. Accepted consequence concerns whether the exchange changed possession, knowledge, obligation, or another shared condition. The request alone does not establish a transfer, and a declaration of transfer may require acknowledgment under the event's procedures.

Participant experience concerns how a person understood or felt an encounter from a particular position. A later account can explain that a refusal seemed threatening or that a supposed victory felt unearned. Such testimony is important evidence of experience without necessarily establishing every external circumstance it describes. Analytical interpretation concerns the researcher's explanation of relationships among contributions, conditions, and consequences. For example, a scholar might argue that ambiguous transfer procedures made a negotiation difficult. That claim should identify the observed difficulties and the procedural material on which it

rests. It should not appear as though it were simply another fact captured by the recording.

The unit of analysis should follow the research question. An utterance can support a study of address or turn taking, but it may be too small to explain how an agreement becomes binding. A scene can encompass an encounter while omitting the earlier promise that gives it significance. An episode can connect several scenes through a consequential object, claim, or decision. The proposed default is the consequential episode, defined as a bounded sequence in which a contribution is attempted, interpreted, and either accepted, revised, refused, or left unresolved. Its boundaries remain open to revision when additional sources reveal relevant connections.

This unit does not assume that every action changes the entire story. A small refusal can alter a relationship even when the public outcome remains unchanged. An attempted intervention that fails can reveal limits on agency, especially if its failure follows from technical access or unclear authority rather than a character's strategic choice. The researcher should document attempted as well as successful action where the question requires it. Otherwise an archive of accepted outcomes can conceal the alternatives participants believed they were trying to create. The performance includes the work of proposing and negotiating change, not only the changes that remain visible afterward.

Episodes can be linked without forcing them into a single linear plot. A private promise may affect a later vote, while another conversation changes the meaning of the same promise for someone elsewhere. The account can identify

those relationships through evidence about transmission, timing, and response. It should distinguish an established connection from a plausible interpretation. If a voter says the promise influenced the decision, that is a reported reason. If a message proves the voter received information, that establishes access without proving influence. The difference matters when researchers explain causation in an event where many motives can operate simultaneously.

Research should also separate player and character references. A participant may know a secret from preparation while the character has not learned it. An account that says I knew may refer to either level, depending on the conversation. Interviews can clarify which perspective is intended without assuming perfect separation. Similar care applies when a participant describes an emotion as belonging to the character, the player, or both. The method should preserve the speaker's distinction where possible and avoid supplying a psychological explanation unsupported by the material. Precision about reference can prevent an apparently contradictory testimony from being misclassified as unreliable.

The event's temporal boundaries require the same attention. Preparation, play, technical pauses, debriefing, and later conversation can all contribute to meaning, but they do not necessarily possess the same fictional authority. A revelation made after the closing announcement may explain earlier action without having been available to characters during it. A later epilogue may establish new fiction if the production explicitly permits that practice. Researchers should identify when each source was created and what participants

understood it could change. This preserves the difference between an event's unfolding conditions and the retrospective knowledge through which it is later discussed.

These distinctions create a vocabulary for evidentiary claims. A researcher can state that a scene was planned, a statement was recorded, a consequence was acknowledged, an experience was reported, or a relationship was inferred. The vocabulary is deliberately ordinary because its function is to clarify reasoning rather than decorate it with technical labels. It allows readers to follow how the research moves from surviving materials to conclusions. The resulting account can remain detailed and interpretively ambitious while resisting the temptation to transform every available trace into proof of a completed, universally understood dramatic action.

Scenario Documents and Character Briefs as Evidence of Possibility

Scenario documents establish the designed conditions under which a performance begins. They can reveal characters, prior events, objectives, relationships, and procedures for changing the fictional world. Their evidentiary value is strongest when the inquiry concerns what opportunities were supplied and what assumptions the organizer expected participants to share. They cannot, by themselves, establish that an opportunity was noticed, understood, or used. A written objective can remain unread, be forgotten during a conversation, or acquire a different meaning through an unexpected relationship. The distinction between provision

and uptake should guide every comparison of scenario structure with performed events.

The researcher should preserve the version actually used, including supplements and changes made during preparation. A polished scenario revised after the event can conceal the ambiguities participants encountered. Conversely, an early draft can attribute confusion to a problem corrected before play. Version identification does not require elaborate software. A clear filename, date, and explanation of revision can establish the necessary relationship. The important point is that the analytical account cites the material available at the relevant time. Later improvements can be discussed as later decisions without silently replacing the source through which participants formed their original expectations.

Different participants may receive different documents. Public information can establish a common situation, while private briefs distribute motives and incomplete knowledge. The researcher needs to know which material each participant could access, not merely what exists in the organizer's folder. A facilitator's master document can contain explanations unavailable to every character. Reading it first can help the scholar understand the design while also encouraging premature interpretation of player behavior through an omniscient perspective. A defensible method preserves the distribution of information so that choices can be assessed against what participants could reasonably know when they acted.

Character briefs should be analyzed for the kinds of interaction they invite. A role might possess a resource others need, a reason to approach particular people, or an obligation

that conflicts with a public objective. These features can be represented as dependencies for analytical purposes, but the representation remains an interpretation of the design. It should be checked against the wording and procedural context. Counting the number of named relationships can describe density without establishing dramatic usefulness. A single actionable obligation may produce more sustained encounters than several decorative biographical connections, depending on how participants understand and use them.

Scenario analysis can identify alternative routes through a problem. If several characters can reveal a secret, a missing encounter need not prevent disclosure. If one participant alone possesses essential information, the design concentrates a particular kind of authority. Neither arrangement is automatically good or bad. Their consequences can be examined by comparing intended access with actual transmission. A performance in which the secret never emerges might demonstrate a legitimate outcome, an inaccessible opportunity, or a breakdown in communication. The document helps formulate these possibilities, while observations and participant accounts are needed to distinguish among them.

The wording of instructions can shape the interpretation of evidence. A brief that says a character believes a rival forged a letter establishes a belief. A brief that states the rival forged it can establish a different level of fictional fact, depending on the production's conventions. Researchers should preserve such distinctions when reconstructing conflicting testimony. Participants may be performing consistent perspectives even when their accounts differ. Treating every discrepancy as

faulty memory would erase a feature deliberately designed into the event. The archive should retain enough of the original framing to show whether uncertainty belongs to the fiction, the instructions, or the later reconstruction.

Preparation also includes demonstrations and spoken explanations that may not appear in the written scenario. An organizer might explain how to transfer objects, request private conversations, or mark a technical absence. Those instructions can become central when an action is later disputed. If feasible, the researcher should preserve a record of the briefing or create notes identifying its consequential conventions. Participants can then be asked how they understood them. The aim is to recover the operative framework rather than assume that the published rules were the only instructions governing play. A short verbal clarification may matter more than several pages nobody consulted.

Researcher involvement in design should be made analytically visible. A scholar who writes the scenario can explain intended dependencies with unusual precision, but may also favor episodes that realize those intentions. A scholar encountering the materials afterward can maintain distance while missing tacit conventions familiar to the group. These positions offer different resources and limitations. Neither grants automatic authority over what the event meant. The account should identify relevant involvement and show how conclusions were checked against sources beyond the researcher's own intentions. Reflexivity becomes useful when it changes the handling of evidence

rather than appearing only as a ceremonial statement of perspective.

Scenario documents are best treated as evidence of a field of possibilities whose realization must be investigated. They allow the researcher to ask what participants could attempt, which relationships were made available, and where authority was concentrated. They also provide a basis for studying departures from design without labeling every departure a failure. A character who abandons an initial objective after a persuasive encounter may demonstrate emergent development. The document establishes the starting commitment; the performance and participant account establish how it changed. Their combination can explain a trajectory that neither source contains adequately on its own.

Maps Token Positions Messages and Persistent Objects

Digital artifacts can preserve relationships difficult to recover from conventional theatrical scripts. A map can show a common spatial reference, a message can retain the wording of a private proposal, and an object record can document an acknowledged transfer. Their value depends on knowing how each artifact functioned within the event. A token's position may indicate character location, a convenient arrangement of portraits, or an outdated marker that participants no longer consult. The same visible trace can support different claims under different conventions. Researchers should establish those conventions before interpreting the artifact as a direct record of fictional action.

A map supplies evidence about represented space rather than a complete report of experienced place. It can identify adjacency, recognized entrances, or locations made available for encounters. It cannot ordinarily establish which features participants noticed or which meanings a room acquired through conversation. An apparently empty area might have supported intense interaction through an external audio channel. A richly detailed room might have remained unused. Comparing spatial materials with interaction records can reveal these differences. The analysis should ask what the representation enabled and what people did with it, avoiding the assumption that visual prominence corresponds automatically to dramatic importance.

Token positions require temporal context. A final screenshot establishes an arrangement at capture time, but does not reveal the sequence through which it developed. A movement log, where the platform provides one, can offer a more detailed trace, though the meaning of each move still depends on procedure. A token might be repositioned by a facilitator, adjusted to avoid overlap, or left behind during a channel change. These possibilities limit what movement alone can establish. The strongest claim may be that a location was represented, with further evidence needed to show presence, perception, or participation in a particular encounter.

Messages preserve wording while leaving reception and use open to inquiry. A private note saying that a treaty has been signed establishes that somebody communicated the claim. It does not necessarily establish that the recipient read it, believed it, or acted on it. Technical delivery indicators can support narrower conclusions about transmission, but their

interpretation should remain tied to the system and conventions actually used. The researcher should separate sending, availability, acknowledged receipt, and consequential response. This sequence is especially useful when tracing how private knowledge becomes public or why an expected development did not reach the characters positioned to address it.

Persistent objects introduce questions of identity and authority. A letter may exist as a shared file, a token, a text message, and a spoken description. These representations can refer to the same fictional object without remaining synchronized. A participant might retain technical access after transferring fictional possession. A copy might be allowed in the interface but prohibited by the scenario. Research needs to identify which representation governed the action at the relevant moment. Otherwise the archive can produce a misleading history of ownership by treating technical access as though it were identical to the character's recognized right to use the object.

Artifact provenance connects each item to the circumstances of its creation and modification. The researcher should retain the source, capture time where available, relevant author or custodian, and any later changes affecting interpretation. Original material should remain distinguishable from cleaned transcripts, annotated maps, and reconstructed documents. A normalized copy may help analysis without replacing the original evidence. This distinction matters when a correction removes an apparent contradiction or when an annotation introduces information learned only after play. Readers should be able to identify which features belonged to the

event and which were added to make the research account easier to navigate.

The apparent precision of timestamps can be deceptive. Different systems may use different clocks, exports may omit timing information, and a message's recorded time may refer to sending rather than reading. The method should check synchronization where ordering matters and preserve intervals where exact alignment is unavailable. A claim that one conversation preceded another may be supportable; a claim that it occurred precisely seventeen seconds earlier may not be. Precision should follow the evidence rather than the display format. A long decimal timestamp can look reassuring while adding no reliable knowledge about the sequence under investigation.

Persistence can also conceal absence. A message archive may exclude deleted material, voice conversation, or an unexported private channel. The researcher should describe the coverage of each collection and distinguish a searched record from the whole event. Failing to find an announcement in one log does not prove that nobody made it elsewhere. Negative evidence becomes stronger when the source would ordinarily capture the relevant action and its coverage is known to be adequate. This qualification does not make absence unusable. It specifies the conditions under which an absent trace can support a meaningful inference.

Digital artifacts are most informative when treated as participants in the event's coordination and as later evidence whose meaning requires reconstruction. They can show how agreements circulate, how spatial arrangements persist, and how object identities become stable or disputed. They can

also preserve contradictions that a polished retrospective account might erase. Their analytical strength lies in the relationships they allow researchers to examine, especially when linked with speech and participant explanation. The archive becomes richer through those connections, not simply through accumulating more files whose operational significance has never been established.

Recording and Transcribing Simultaneous Conversations

Recordings can preserve the temporal detail of interaction more directly than a retrospective synopsis. They may retain wording, hesitation, overlap, laughter, and the sequence through which a proposal receives a response. Their value is especially strong for questions about how a scene develops turn by turn. They remain records of selected channels from particular capture positions. A recording of one conversation cannot establish everything happening elsewhere, and a screen recording cannot show every interpretation occurring behind the screen. The method should specify what the recording makes available and resist converting its technical continuity into an imagined continuity of collective experience.

The selection of channels should follow the inquiry. A study of public hearings may prioritize the common assembly, while a study of secrecy requires attention to selected private encounters and the routes through which information moves. Recording every available channel might support broader reconstruction, but it also creates substantial work of

alignment, review, and interpretation. More material can expose more relationships without guaranteeing that the relevant relationship has been captured. A recording plan should identify coverage, expected gaps, and the basis for selection. Its adequacy rests on whether the resulting evidence can answer the stated question, not on the number of hours stored.

The capture perspective matters even within one channel. Audio recorded by a participant can differ from audio available to another listener because of connection problems, local settings, or interruptions. A recording may preserve a statement that a particular participant never heard clearly. Conversely, a local failure in the record need not imply that the live conversation failed for everyone. Where perception matters, the researcher should ask what each participant reports receiving and examine any available evidence of repair. Repeated requests to repeat a sentence can establish an interactional difficulty without proving precisely what every listener understood at each moment.

Screen capture adds another selective frame. It can show a participant's current map view, open documents, and interface actions, subject to the recording arrangement. It does not necessarily show what other participants saw or which visible element received attention. A token may appear on screen while the player listens to a private message elsewhere. The researcher can identify what was displayed and compare it with later explanation, but should avoid equating display with notice. Such distinctions become crucial when a study claims that a visual feature produced an action. A feature's presence

in the frame is an opportunity for perception rather than proof of its effect.

Transcription transforms the recording into another representation. Decisions about punctuation, pauses, speaker labels, overlapping speech, and omitted sounds affect how a reader understands an encounter. A polished transcript can make uncertain exchanges appear orderly and decisive. A detailed notation can preserve relevant timing while becoming difficult for readers whose interests lie elsewhere. The level of transcription should match the analytical question. A study of who yielded a conversational turn may need detail unnecessary for tracing the transfer of a document. Researchers should state significant transcription choices and retain access to the relevant recording where permitted, so claims can be assessed against the material they interpret.

Multilingual performance requires another record of interpretive decisions. A translated transcript should remain distinguishable from the language in which participants acted, particularly where politeness, hesitation, forms of address, or humor carry dramatic force. The researcher can retain the original passage alongside a translation for analysis and explain consequential choices in publication. A fluent English rendering may otherwise make an uncertain agreement sound more definite than the recorded exchange. Interviews can ask participants what they understood without assuming that a dictionary equivalent settles the social meaning. Where speakers disagree about an expression, that disagreement can belong to the episode rather than being removed as an obstacle to clean prose. Translation becomes one more stage

in the reconstruction, with its author, timing, and purpose identified. It can increase access to the evidence while preserving uncertainty about meanings that the available material does not fully settle.

Simultaneous scenes should initially retain their local sequences. A researcher can create parallel timelines and align them through shared announcements, recorded timestamps, or cross referenced events. The alignment should preserve uncertainty where the clocks cannot be matched precisely. It should also distinguish chronological order from causal influence. A confession that occurred before a vote did not necessarily affect that vote if nobody transmitted it to the voters. The connection requires evidence of access, acknowledgment, or reported influence. A synchronized timeline organizes possibilities for explanation; it does not supply the explanation merely by placing events next to one another.

Montage can make a distributed event intelligible for later audiences, but its editorial work must remain visible. An account that alternates between two conversations may imply that their participants understood a relationship only the researcher can see. It may also heighten suspense through juxtaposition unavailable during play. These choices can produce an effective documentary presentation while supporting a different experience from the original event. The analytical account should identify when it assembles perspectives retrospectively. Otherwise the research silently gives participants an omniscient audience position and then interprets their actions as if they had possessed it at the time.

Auslander questions familiar assumptions about the relation between performance and its documentation, including the idea that a document simply provides transparent access to an independently complete event (Auslander, 2006). That challenge is relevant here because recordings and edited transcripts help constitute how later audiences encounter virtual drama. The present method does not infer that documentation makes the original event irrelevant. It distinguishes the evidentiary questions asked about the event from the aesthetic experience created through its later presentation. A compelling documentary sequence can have value while its claims about timing, knowledge, and influence still require specific support.

Researchers should preserve unrecorded intervals as known limits rather than smooth them away through narrative transition. If a private discussion survives only through two participants' accounts, the reconstruction can present their reports and identify what remains unresolved. It should not write invented dialogue to supply the missing scene unless the passage is clearly presented as a creative adaptation outside the evidentiary account. A transition that says the characters then agreed can be just as misleading as fabricated quotation when no source establishes agreement. The desire for readable prose should not turn an incomplete record into an apparently witnessed event.

The strongest use of recording is selective precision within a clearly described field of coverage. Researchers can examine a decisive exchange closely, identify its relation to other scenes, and distinguish what the record establishes from what participants later explain. This approach values the recording

without treating it as a universal observer. It also recognizes that the experience of watching or hearing a preserved scene is itself mediated by capture, transcription, and presentation. Virtual drama becomes more knowable through these resources when their particular vantage points remain part of the analysis rather than disappearing behind a confident retrospective voice.

Observation Facilitation and the Researcher Within the Event

Observation supplies information that surviving documents may not explain, including requests for help, unexpected procedural repairs, and moments when participants struggle to locate an encounter. An observer can record the conditions surrounding an action as well as the action itself. The position remains partial. A facilitator attending to one disputed transfer may miss a quiet confession elsewhere, while a researcher following one character may overlook the larger pattern of attention. Field notes should identify the observer's position and task so readers can understand what the notes were able to capture and why some scenes received more detail than others.

Facilitation and research can coexist, but they impose competing demands. A facilitator must respond to the needs of the event, sometimes immediately, while careful observation requires sustained attention and documentation. The same person may have to stop taking notes to repair access or clarify a rule. These interruptions are not merely gaps in diligence; they reveal the practical organization of the

performance. The research account should record significant interventions and the circumstances that prompted them. A facilitator's successful repair can make a scene appear fluent in its final recording even though that fluency depended on unrecorded coordination outside the fictional exchange.

The distinction between observation and inference should remain visible in notes. A record that a participant stayed in one channel for ten minutes describes a situated observation if the relevant access was available. A statement that the participant was bored interprets the behavior and requires other support. Remaining still can indicate listening, planning, technical difficulty, or satisfaction with a sustained scene. The observer can note possible explanations and later ask the participant, but should not allow an initial interpretation to become an unquestioned fact through repeated copying into the analysis. The phrasing of field notes helps preserve this distinction from the beginning.

Pink and colleagues situate digital ethnographic inquiry across experiences, practices, things, relationships, localities, and events rather than reducing research to the extraction of media content (Pink et al., 2016). That orientation supports attention to the activities through which a virtual salon becomes workable. Participants manage devices, consult notes, establish social conventions, and repair communication while performing characters. The application here remains focused on dramatic episodes, but the surrounding practices can explain why an action was possible or why it failed. A narrowly textual archive may miss those conditions even when it preserves every line of dialogue within a selected scene.

Observation can be sampled in several ways. Following a character across encounters reveals continuity from one position, while observing a location captures the different people who enter it. Focusing on a resource can trace its circulation across scenes. Sampling public announcements can show how local knowledge is brought into a common forum. Each choice makes some relationships more visible and others less accessible. A study can combine approaches if resources permit, but should state the logic rather than present observation as undifferentiated coverage. The sampling decision helps determine which claims the eventual reconstruction can support.

The observer's presence may become part of the event. Participants can explain their actions for the benefit of research, seek acknowledgment from an apparent authority, or avoid a scene they would otherwise attempt. These are possibilities to examine rather than reasons to abandon observation. Clear roles and consistent procedures can reduce confusion, while participant accounts can help identify situations in which research awareness mattered. The researcher should also note interventions made for data collection, including requests to repeat a statement or explain an intention. Such requests can improve the record while changing the scene they are intended to preserve.

An insider researcher has access to tacit knowledge that an outsider may need to elicit explicitly. Familiarity can clarify abbreviations, genre conventions, and recurring patterns of play. It can also encourage assumptions that remain unexplained in publication. An outsider may notice unusual procedures that insiders take for granted while

misunderstanding their local significance. These positions should be treated as sources of questions rather than automatic measures of credibility. A useful account shows how interpretations were tested through documents, observation, and participant discussion. The researcher's relationship to the community matters when it helps explain particular decisions about evidence.

Field notes should be expanded promptly enough to preserve context while keeping later additions distinguishable. A brief mark made during play can be elaborated afterward, but the elaboration should not masquerade as a contemporaneous quotation. Researchers can retain the initial note and append a dated explanation, including uncertainty about wording or timing. This practice supports readable analysis without losing the history of its construction. Observation then contributes a situated account of the event's conditions, including the work of facilitation and research, rather than claiming a view from nowhere that no participant or observer actually occupied.

Participant Memory Interviews and the Work of Debriefing

Participant recollections are indispensable because many aspects of interactive drama concern what people understood, intended, or experienced from positions unavailable to an observer. Their value does not depend on treating memory as an exact recording. A person may recall an emotional turning point clearly while misplacing its timing, or remember the gist of a promise without its wording. The researcher should

ask which kind of claim a recollection supports and what other evidence can clarify it. Reliability is a relation between a source and a particular question, not a permanent rank assigned to participants who happen to agree or disagree with an organizer's account.

Loftus and Palmer demonstrated in experiments involving films of automobile accidents that changes in question wording affected reported speed estimates and later responses about broken glass (Loftus and Palmer, 1974). Their study did not examine LARP or character experience, so its findings should not be transferred as a measured effect within virtual drama. It does provide a reason to scrutinize how interviews frame the events they seek to recover. Asking how a betrayal changed the scene assumes that betrayal occurred. A less leading question invites the participant to explain what happened and what, if anything, it meant at that moment.

An interview can begin with an open account before introducing specific episodes. The participant might describe which encounters mattered, what decisions seemed available, and where the experience became difficult or surprising. Follow up questions can then seek timing, sources of knowledge, and distinctions between intention and consequence. This sequence allows the participant's priorities to appear before the researcher's categories organize the discussion. It does not guarantee an unmediated memory, since every interview is an interaction. It creates a clearer basis for identifying which topics arose spontaneously and which were introduced through the inquiry's particular interests.

The interviewer should distinguish remembered experience from later explanation. A participant may now understand that another character was protecting a sibling, while during play the action seemed inexplicably hostile. Both accounts can be important, but they describe different moments of understanding. Questions about when a detail became known can preserve the distinction. A later interpretation should not be substituted silently for the uncertainty that shaped the original response. This matters especially in mystery scenarios, where postgame revelation can make earlier events appear more obvious and coherent than they were to the people who had to act without those revelations.

Recording assisted recall can help participants discuss a specific exchange, but it also changes the evidence available to them. After hearing a clip, they may revise an earlier account or notice a detail missed during play. The researcher should preserve the initial account and mark the introduction of the recording. The resulting discussion can reveal how interpretation changes when a scene becomes inspectable. It should not be described simply as the recovery of an original experience. The recording supplies new material for reflection, and the participant's revised account belongs to that later encounter with the event.

Individual reflection and collective debriefing serve related but different purposes. An individual account can preserve a perspective before exposure to other participants' explanations. A group discussion can reveal connections among scenes and allow misunderstandings to be examined collaboratively. The method can collect both while respecting the event's practical needs. Research should not delay support

or an expected communal closure merely to protect a preferred order of data collection. When immediate debriefing is appropriate, the researcher can document that sequence and interpret later interviews with awareness of the shared information already available. Methodological clarity does not require pretending that research exists outside the social occasion.

Collective discussion can generate agreement through several processes. Participants may compare complementary observations and resolve a genuine factual uncertainty. They may also defer to a confident speaker or adopt an organizer's explanation because it gives the evening a satisfying shape. These possibilities should remain open to investigation. A consensus reached during debriefing is evidence that a particular account became shared there. It is not automatically independent corroboration of every claim within that account. Researchers should track whether testimonies were formed separately or after exposure to the same explanation, especially when they use agreement to strengthen an inference.

Differences in recollection can preserve meaningful asymmetry. Two characters might have understood the same offer as protection and coercion, respectively. A recording may establish the wording while leaving that difference intact. The analytical task is not necessarily to determine which experience was correct. It can explain how the scene supported divergent interpretations and what each interpretation made possible afterward. This approach treats subjective accounts as evidence of situated participation rather than flawed attempts to reproduce one total story. It

also prevents a researcher's preference for narrative coherence from erasing the very uncertainty through which the performance generated dramatic action.

Participant review of a reconstruction can improve accuracy while introducing another interpretive stage. People may correct names, distinguish player from character knowledge, or identify a missing encounter. They may also dispute an interpretation whose evidence remains supportable. The researcher should record the nature of the response and explain how it affected the account. Review is most useful as dialogue about particular claims, not as a ceremony that converts a single participant's approval into universal validation. A reconstruction can acknowledge a disagreement while retaining a reasoned interpretation, provided the publication shows what is contested and why the argument remains warranted.

The resulting interview material should retain its temporal and conversational context. An immediate reflection, a discussion after a reveal, and a later retrospective account answer different questions about the event's continuing meaning. Their differences can illuminate how participants assemble personal and collective narratives after play. Memory becomes a source to analyze alongside other sources rather than a defective substitute for missing video. It can reveal intentions, emotional stakes, and perceived alternatives that no map or transcript records directly, while the limits of recollection remain visible wherever the account makes claims about external sequence or shared consequence.

Reconstructing Episodes Through Traceable and Bounded Inference

Reconstruction begins by assembling sources around a question rather than writing a complete plot from the beginning. If the inquiry concerns how a private promise affected a public decision, the researcher can identify the promise, possible routes of transmission, the decision episode, and participants' accounts of influence. Each link needs its own evidentiary basis. This approach prevents a compelling final outcome from making every earlier event appear to have led inevitably toward it. The researcher asks what connections can be established and what alternatives remain plausible, using the surviving materials to test an interpretation rather than merely illustrate a story already chosen.

An evidence register can connect claims with sources and analytical status. It can identify the episode, relevant participants or characters, the material supporting a statement, and whether the statement is observed, reported, inferred, or unresolved. The register need not appear as a large table in publication; its function is to discipline the work behind the prose. It should preserve source locations precise enough for later review, such as recording intervals or document passages. A reader can then understand why a conclusion was reached, while the researcher can revise one link without having to rebuild the entire narrative from an undifferentiated mass of notes.

Chronology should initially be represented with the precision the sources permit. Exact times can be used where

synchronization is reliable; elsewhere the account can establish before, after, overlapping, or uncertain. These relations are often sufficient to explain the opportunities available to a character. A participant could not react to a message that had not yet arrived, but the precise second of arrival may be irrelevant. Preserving intervals avoids invented certainty while retaining analytical usefulness. It also allows different clocks to coexist, including technical recording time and fictional sequences whose duration the participants never measured in real time.

Triangulation works through the relation among sources, not simply their number. Two accounts copied from the same debriefing explanation do not provide the same kind of support as independent observations. A map and an audio recording can contribute complementary information without corroborating one another directly: the map locates a room, while the recording establishes speech. A participant account can connect those materials by explaining where the scene occurred, with appropriate uncertainty if no independent location evidence survives. The researcher should state what each source adds. More citations do not strengthen a claim if they all repeat the same unexamined assumption.

Contradictions should be investigated at the level of the claim involved. A disagreement about exact wording may be resolvable through a recording, while disagreement about perceived hostility may remain a difference in experience. A conflict about who possessed an object might arise from separate technical and fictional meanings of possession. The reconstruction should test these possibilities before labeling a source inaccurate. Some contradictions can be resolved;

others should remain explicit. The goal is not permanent indecision. It is a conclusion that identifies which uncertainty has been settled, which survives, and how that uncertainty affects the larger interpretation.

The analysis should seek evidence that could weaken its preferred explanation. If the argument is that a particular promise caused a vote, the researcher should examine whether the voter reported another motive, whether the promise was known, and whether the decision had already been made. A plausible rival account may fit the same sequence. The inquiry can compare these explanations and identify where the evidence favors one or leaves them unresolved. This practice is especially important for researcher designed scenarios, where intended causal pathways can look persuasive simply because the scholar knows how the event was supposed to work.

Thematic interpretation can complement episode reconstruction when the inquiry concerns patterns of experience across accounts. Braun and Clarke present thematic analysis as a flexible qualitative method whose analytic choices require explicit consideration (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The present proposal uses that general orientation while distinguishing interpretive themes from factual event coding. A theme concerning insecure authority is an analytical account developed across materials; a code marking a recorded request for clarification describes a more narrowly defined occurrence. Their quality should be assessed according to their respective purposes. Treating every interpretive theme as a directly countable fact would obscure the work through which it was constructed.

Researchers can maintain separate records of descriptive coding and interpretive decisions. Descriptive categories might identify attempted transfers, requests for clarification, acknowledged disclosures, and unresolved contradictions. Interpretive notes can explain why these patterns matter for agency or dramatic coherence. Where a team uses common descriptive definitions, comparing coding decisions can expose unclear boundaries. That procedure should not be presented as the universal validation of every qualitative interpretation. Interpretive analysis also requires reflexive explanation, contextual support, and attention to alternative readings. Clear separation allows quantitative description and qualitative interpretation to cooperate without pretending that they follow identical standards of evidence.

Narrative presentation should preserve the path from source to claim without overwhelming the reader with every procedural detail. A reconstructed episode can identify the immediate circumstances, the contributions established by records, the consequences acknowledged within the event, and the interpretations supplied afterward. Where the account shifts perspective, it should make that shift intelligible. Where a scene is known only through testimony, it should say so. The result can remain readable and dramatically engaging. Precision does not require lifeless prose; it requires avoiding transitions and causal statements that imply a stronger position of knowledge than the materials provide.

Reconstruction should also identify its coverage limits. A study following one object through several conversations may produce a strong account of that object's circulation while offering little basis for claims about every participant's

experience. A reconstruction centered on a public assembly may explain the final debate while missing the private negotiations that shaped it. Stating these boundaries allows a focused analysis to stand on its actual merits. It protects the value of partial knowledge by refusing to inflate it into comprehensive representation. The account becomes useful because readers know which questions it can answer and which require further evidence.

The finished reconstruction is a research argument with a documented history of assembly. It can bring together relationships that no individual participant experienced as a whole, yet it should preserve the local perspectives through which those relationships developed. Its authority comes from traceable reasoning and appropriate claims, not from sounding like an omniscient narrator. This understanding provides a basis for sharing selected materials, revising interpretations, and comparing later performances. It makes the event examinable while acknowledging that some experiences and exchanges remain outside the surviving record, and that their absence cannot be repaired through confident narrative invention.

A Hypothetical Reconstruction of a Contested Promise

Consider a hypothetical noncombat salon called The Meridian Reception. Envoys, archivists, and representatives of displaced families meet to decide whether a disputed historical archive should be opened. One envoy wants disclosure but fears exposing living witnesses. Another needs

visible support before a public vote. Participants can negotiate protections, delay disclosure, or reject the proposal. The example is constructed to demonstrate a research procedure, not to report an observed session. Its central episode concerns a conditional promise that circulates through several scenes before being presented publicly as unconditional backing. The research question asks how that transformation can be established and what remains uncertain about its consequences.

The surviving materials in the example would include the scenario and briefs, a recording of the private negotiation, a message sent afterward, a public assembly recording, a final map capture, facilitator notes, and individual reflections. The materials have deliberately different coverage. The private recording preserves speech but not every listener's perception. The message preserves one character's account of the promise. The map shows a final arrangement without a movement history. The reflections explain different experiences after the event. A researcher begins by describing these limits rather than combining the sources immediately into a seamless story of agreement and betrayal.

Scenario analysis would establish that the first envoy was authorized to negotiate witness protection and had reasons to favor disclosure under appropriate conditions. It would also establish that the second envoy needed support but possessed no automatic authority to speak for others. Those provisions help explain possible motives without proving which motive governed the exchange. The private recording would preserve the first envoy linking support to protection. A response from the second envoy might acknowledge the proposal without

settling what adequate protection requires. The analytical account should retain that ambiguity instead of converting a potentially incomplete negotiation into a fully specified contract simply because the later conflict concerns a promise.

The subsequent message would report that the first envoy supports opening the archive. Its wording would omit the condition. This difference can be established by comparing the recorded exchange with the message, provided the materials refer to the same episode. The comparison supports a claim that the communicated account was less qualified than the preserved statement. It does not establish why. The sender might have intended persuasion, believed the condition already satisfied, shortened the message carelessly, or misunderstood the exchange. An interview can investigate these possibilities, but the visible omission alone cannot prove deception as a player intention or even as a character's deliberate strategy.

The public recording would then preserve the second envoy announcing support. To connect the private message with another character's vote, the researcher would need evidence that the relevant information became available and influenced the decision. A voter might acknowledge receiving the message and explain that it increased confidence in the proposal. That account would support a reported reason, especially when consistent with the recorded public response. It would still not show that the vote had only one cause. A stronger account examines other obligations and prior statements, allowing the private promise to be one consequential factor rather than making it the inevitable explanation for the entire outcome.

The final map capture would show the first envoy's token in the assembly room. It would not establish when the envoy arrived or whether the announcement was heard. A participant reflection might report arriving late because of a technical interruption. A facilitator note could identify a reconnection request during the relevant interval. Together, these materials would make it reasonable to question the inference that visible final presence proves timely knowledge. The reconstruction could establish that the character was represented in the room at capture time while leaving the timing of actual participation uncertain. This distinction prevents a spatial trace from becoming unwarranted evidence of consent through silence.

The two principal participants might describe the encounter differently afterward. One could remember a breached condition, while the other could believe the necessary protection had been secured informally. These reports need not be forced into a single shared intention. The researcher can compare them with the preserved wording and identify where the agreement remained underspecified. A possible interpretation is that a weakly defined protection procedure allowed incompatible understandings to persist. That explanation would require examination of the rules and any relevant exchanges about protection. It would remain an analytical argument, open to revision if another source showed an acknowledgment that resolved the condition before the assembly.

The reconstruction should investigate evidence that challenges its emerging account. A second private conversation might reveal that the first envoy later offered

support without conditions. If such a conversation is reported but unrecorded, the account should identify its source and seek relevant confirmation. The absence of a recording would not make the report false, but it would affect the certainty available for claims about wording. If the report cannot be settled, the researcher can present two possible sequences and explain which conclusions survive both. The transformation of the first message might remain clear even while its importance to the final disagreement becomes less certain.

Publication could present the episode as a bounded argument about the circulation of a conditional commitment. It could establish the initial wording, the later omission, the public announcement, and the limits of evidence concerning reception and motive. It could then discuss how those differences shaped participants' reported experiences of agency and trust. Such an account would be more useful than a polished story in which one envoy simply tricks everyone else. The latter supplies a satisfying villain while concealing the unresolved questions that make the event methodologically interesting. The former preserves dramatic complexity and shows how its interpretation was built.

The example demonstrates what digital evidence can add beyond a conventional script. It can preserve discrepancies among a performed exchange, a transmitted account, and a later public claim. It can connect those discrepancies with technical interruption and retrospective explanation. Its value lies in making a particular transformation examinable. The reconstruction still cannot occupy every participant's experience or recover every missing conversation. It can explain what the available sources establish, identify

competing interpretations, and show why a private promise became a different dramatic resource as it moved through the collective event.

Repeated Performances and Comparative Evidence of Agency

Repeated performances of one scenario offer opportunities to study how stable preparations interact with changing ensembles and decisions. They can reveal which dependencies recur, which opportunities remain unused, and how different actions produce divergent consequences. Their value depends on maintaining the distinction between a scenario and its realizations. Two performances share some designed conditions without becoming repeated measurements of an identical experience. Participants bring different relationships, expectations, and interpretations. A comparative account should document those differences and ask what patterns remain informative despite them, rather than assuming that a shared title makes every session equivalent.

The unit of comparison should be specified. A researcher might compare whole events, the trajectory of one character role, the circulation of a secret, or episodes involving a particular procedure. Each comparison requires different evidence. A complete event comparison can describe broad outcomes while missing the mechanisms that produced them. An episode comparison can reveal how a transfer rule works while supporting fewer claims about the entire evening. The study should connect its scale to its question. It can compare a

recurring point of uncertainty across several runs without claiming to have captured the full aesthetic quality of each performance.

Agency requires a definition that can guide observation. The proposed account treats it as a participant's recognized capacity to attempt consequential action and influence relevant fictional conditions. Perceived agency concerns whether the participant experienced meaningful alternatives; enacted agency concerns the attempts and accepted consequences that the evidence supports. These dimensions can diverge. A character may change a public decision while the player feels compelled to follow an obvious path. Another player may experience substantial freedom in an intimate relationship that leaves the public ending unchanged. Comparative research should permit both cases instead of measuring agency solely through variation in final outcomes.

The record should include opportunities and attempted actions where feasible. If a participant never approaches a key character, the event may reflect a deliberate choice, an unnoticed dependency, an inaccessible encounter, or a competing priority. Counting the missing interaction alone does not identify the explanation. Scenario analysis establishes the supplied opportunity, while observation and participant reflection help explain its use. Across performances, recurring obstacles may suggest a design problem worth investigating. Occasional nonuse may simply reveal that participants pursued other legitimate possibilities. The comparison becomes informative when it examines how action was available, attempted, and recognized rather than treating every unused design feature as failure.

Research involving the same participants across runs must consider learning. Knowledge of secrets and possible outcomes can change how later scenes are interpreted, even when participants try to maintain character perspective. Using different ensembles reduces this carryover while introducing variation among groups. Structurally related scenarios can support some comparisons, though their equivalence needs justification. No arrangement removes every difference. The study should identify its tradeoff and limit conclusions accordingly. A repeated scenario can reveal the consequences of familiarity if that is the question, but it cannot automatically reproduce the uncertainty of a first encounter for people who already know its hidden information.

Comparative data should retain the identity of each run. A message from one performance must not be used to complete a gap in another merely because the character names and location match. Researchers can compare recurring patterns while preserving separate source histories. This discipline is important when a scenario evolves through revision. Changes to instructions, access, or character distribution can alter the opportunities under study. A comparison should identify those revisions and distinguish evidence about the original design from evidence about its later adaptation. Otherwise improvement may be attributed to participant choice when the operative framework has changed substantially.

Quantitative descriptions can complement close reconstruction when their measures are clearly defined. A study could count acknowledged disclosures, unresolved transfer disputes, or facilitator interventions under consistent criteria. The counts describe selected features rather than

theatrical quality as a whole. Participants within an ensemble affect one another, so their observations should not be treated as independent repetitions of a condition without an appropriate analytical basis. Where the number of runs is small, careful case comparison may support more defensible conclusions than elaborate statistical claims. The methodological choice should follow the available evidence and the scope of the intended argument.

Unusual or unsuccessful cases deserve attention because they can test an explanation built from more familiar outcomes. If a design generally produces a public revelation but one ensemble sustains secrecy, that case may expose an overlooked route or a different interpretation of obligation. It need not be excluded as aberrant. The researcher can ask which conditions made the divergence possible and whether the scenario recognized the resulting action. Such comparison gives agency an empirical question: how do participants use and alter the possibilities supplied? The answer may include both recurring constraints and creative departures whose significance becomes apparent only across performances.

Repeated performance provides comparative evidence when it preserves difference as something to explain. It can identify robust dependencies without making a deterministic claim that the scenario causes one inevitable story. It can show how procedures sustain or frustrate action while recognizing the contribution of particular people. The resulting research remains concerned with dramatic form: the relationship between prepared possibilities and enacted consequences. Documentation supports that inquiry by preserving enough of each realization to compare mechanisms, while the analysis

acknowledges that no single ending or participant account stands for everything the scenario can become.

Consent Research Use and the Shape of the Archive

Documentation decisions shape both what researchers can know and what participants are willing to perform. A private scene understood as temporary exchange may be experienced differently when its recording could circulate beyond the group. The research design should make the intended audience and use of materials clear enough for participants to decide how they wish to take part. This is not a procedural addition after the artistic event. It is one of the conditions under which the documented performance occurs. The resulting archive reflects those conditions, including choices about what remains unrecorded and which kinds of evidence can later be shared.

The Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines emphasize context, the stages of research, and ongoing judgment about participants and data use rather than offering a single mechanical solution for every setting (franzke et al., 2020). The present proposal applies that orientation to an organized salon whose participants can ordinarily be consulted directly. It treats permission to attend, permission to record, permission to analyze, and permission to publish identifiable material as different questions. The appropriate arrangements depend on the project and its institutional context. The analytical point is that a broad technical capacity

to retain interaction does not establish that every subsequent use belongs to the occasion participants understood.

The fictional status of dialogue does not remove its relationship to real people. A confession can belong to a character while the participant's voice, timing, and expressive choices remain recognizable. An emotionally intense exchange may reveal little about a player's private life and still be something the player does not want circulated. Researchers should avoid reading character speech as autobiographical disclosure unless the person provides that connection. They should also avoid assuming that fictional content is automatically impersonal. The method can respect performance as performance while recognizing that its documentation represents identifiable acts undertaken by participants within a particular social setting.

The audience for an archive should be specified at a practical level. Materials retained for analysis by a small research team are different from clips published openly or resources shared with a class. A participant may agree to one use while declining another. The production can explain these distinctions before collection and revisit them when a specific excerpt becomes important. This supports concrete decisions about recognizable voice, character identity, and contextual information. The researcher should not promise a degree of anonymity the material cannot provide. Replacing a name may leave a distinctive role or scene recognizable to people familiar with the event.

Evidence involving several people requires attention to their interdependence. One participant's approval of a recorded exchange does not automatically resolve the representation of

the other participants heard within it. An edit can protect one identity while making the remaining person appear responsible for a statement whose response has been removed. Researchers should evaluate excerpts as relational scenes rather than isolated pieces of individual testimony. The selection should preserve enough context to support the analytical claim and represent its participants accurately. Where that cannot be achieved under the available permissions, a different source or a narrower claim may be more appropriate.

Research involving teaching can introduce a particular question about choice. Students may understand an instructor's invitation differently from an invitation made by someone without an evaluative role. A study should arrange recruitment and research participation so that the practical terms of refusal are credible, following the institution's applicable procedures. The point here is methodological as well as relational. If participants perform partly to satisfy an evaluator, their actions and later reflections may reflect that expectation. Researchers should describe relevant roles and interpret the evidence accordingly. The claim concerns the setting of participation, not an assumption that every educational use of interactive drama produces the same response.

Archival organization should distinguish raw evidence from material prepared for wider access. A restricted recording, a deidentified transcript, and a published episode account can preserve different levels of detail for different purposes. Each derivative should remain linked internally to its source while carrying an explanation of consequential edits. A paraphrase

can protect wording where exact quotation is unnecessary, but it should be identified as paraphrase rather than placed inside quotation marks. A composite created from several encounters may illustrate a pattern, yet it should not be presented as one documented scene. These distinctions preserve the integrity of interpretation while allowing proportionate forms of sharing.

Retention decisions should follow the research purpose and the commitments made to participants. Preserving every file indefinitely is not the only way to support scholarly scrutiny. A project can retain selected evidence, documentation of analytical decisions, and descriptions of coverage under a stated access arrangement. Where later review requires restricted material, the publication can explain the available route without promising unrestricted release. The important relationship is between the claim and the evidence that can responsibly support it. A publicly accessible archive is valuable in some projects, but public access should not be treated as the automatic measure of methodological quality for every participatory performance.

Participant preferences can also concern credit and ownership of contribution. Some may want their performance acknowledged; others may prefer separation from a character's actions. Researchers should not assume that one representation serves everyone. Acknowledgment can recognize collaboration without granting participants responsibility for every scholarly interpretation. The final account can distinguish creative contribution, factual correction, and analytical authorship in ordinary language. This clarity helps explain how knowledge was made with the

people whose event is being studied. It also preserves the distinction between respecting a participant's representation and asking that participant to certify conclusions extending beyond their own perspective.

The archive is an outcome of methodological choices about purpose, access, context, and representation. Its gaps can reflect care and proportion as well as technical failure or incomplete collection. The researcher should document those gaps sufficiently for readers to understand the account's limits without disclosing material that the project has agreed to withhold. This approach connects interpretive rigor with the conditions of participation. It permits a detailed study of virtual drama while resisting the premise that every valuable experience must become permanently inspectable. Some parts of the event may remain known principally to the people who performed them, and the research can acknowledge that boundary without inventing what lies beyond it.

Documentation as an Accountable Reconstruction

The performance that disappears does not leave scholars without evidence. It leaves evidence distributed across preparations, artifacts, recordings, observations, and accounts whose strengths differ according to the question being asked. A character brief can establish an opportunity, a recording can preserve a contribution, and a participant reflection can explain a perceived alternative. None becomes a universal substitute for the others. Their combination supports a research account when the movement from source to

interpretation remains traceable and when its conclusions preserve the uncertainty that the materials cannot resolve.

The method proposed here organizes inquiry around consequential episodes rather than an assumed complete plot. It distinguishes intended possibilities from attempted action, accepted fictional consequence, experienced meaning, and retrospective explanation. It treats chronology as a set of evidentiary relationships and asks how information became available before making claims about influence. It also examines contradictory sources as possible evidence of different perspectives, technical conditions, or unresolved conventions. This procedure can produce strong conclusions about particular exchanges without claiming an observer's impossible access to every scene and every participant's understanding.

Digital traces offer distinctive resources for this work. They can preserve the transformation of a conditional promise into a public claim, show how a document circulated, or expose a mismatch between represented location and reported participation. They can support comparison across repeated performances while keeping the identity and conditions of each run intact. Their persistence should invite careful analysis rather than confidence in automatic completeness. A large archive remains partial if it cannot establish who perceived its contents, how actions acquired authority, or which unrecorded encounters changed the situation.

The reconstruction also becomes part of the performance's later life. Its selection of scenes, arrangement of perspectives, and explanation of outcomes shape what readers can encounter and what the community may remember. That

responsibility does not require an account devoid of interpretation. It requires interpretation that names its basis, investigates alternatives, and remains open to correction where new evidence matters. A scholarly narrative can be clear and engaging while showing how it was assembled. Its authority rests on the quality of those relationships rather than on a seamless voice that conceals the gaps.

Virtual interactive drama deserves documentation that preserves its capacity for shared action without reducing its participants to sources for one final story. A defensible account can recover important sequences, explain recurring structures, and recognize experiences unavailable to a public recording. It can also identify what remains outside its reach. The resulting dramatic text is a bounded reconstruction whose value lies in what it makes examinable. It allows the event to continue as a subject of criticism and comparison while retaining the differences through which participants made it together.

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Harriet Bellamy

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From Prompt to Play:
Using Generative AI to Create Assets for Online Tabletop Role-Playing Games
A Describe–Demonstrate–Debrief Approach to Characters, Tokens, NPCs, Adventures, and Virtual Tabletop Maps

Brian David Phillips

Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence can serve as a practical production assistant for tabletop role-playing game directors, game masters, players, teachers, actual-play producers, and designers who need usable materials quickly without surrendering creative control of the game itself. The important word there is *assistant*. We are not asking a machine to sit at the table, eat all the snacks, interrupt the villain's monologue, and decide what our game ought to be. We are asking it to perform pieces of production work that have traditionally required a mixture of writing, illustration, page layout, image editing, statistical checking, and a rather alarming number of open application windows.

This essay demonstrates a workflow for using generative AI to create assets for online tabletop role-playing game play, particularly within virtual tabletop environments. The demonstration uses *Steampunk Beyond RPG: Bureau of Odd Phenomena!* as the working example, but each specialized prompt is accompanied by a generic version that readers can adapt to fantasy, horror, science fiction, superhero, historical, contemporary, investigative, comedic, educational, or entirely original role-playing systems.

The method follows a repeated Describe–Demonstrate–Debrief structure. Each stage first describes the production problem, then demonstrates a usable AI prompt, and finally debriefs the results, limitations, likely failure points, and possible revisions. The workflow progresses from establishing game context through player characters, character cards,

printable and virtual tokens, non-player characters, adversaries, short demonstration adventures, adventure-specific reference sheets, and virtual tabletop maps. Particular attention is given to prompt specificity, visual consistency, editable document production, verification, iterative correction, conversation length, context drift, and the distinction between generated raw material and a finished game-master artifact.

The core argument is simple: generative AI is most useful for role-playing games when it is treated neither as an oracle nor as an autonomous game designer but as an extremely fast, occasionally confused production collaborator. Give it context. Tell it what the artifact is for. Specify the dimensions, format, audience, constraints, and output. Check what it gives you. Correct it. Reuse the useful material. Throw away the nonsense. Keep playing.

That is the glamorous future of artificial intelligence: making sure your goblin token has enough transparent space around its hat.

Keywords

Generative AI; tabletop role-playing games; TTRPG; virtual tabletop; VTT; game mastering; RPG design; prompt engineering; AI-assisted creativity; role-playing game assets; online role-playing; character tokens; adventure design; map generation; educational technology.

1. Generative AI as a Tabletop Production Assistant

Describe

When people talk about artificial intelligence and tabletop role-playing games, the conversation very quickly becomes larger than it needs to be. Someone asks whether AI can help make a character portrait, and five minutes later we are discussing the death of human creativity, the future of civilization, whether a language model can truly understand a goblin, and probably Skynet. This is entertaining, and I am as

willing to wander into strange territory as the next fellow—perhaps rather more willing—but it can obscure a much more practical question.

What can we actually *do* with the technology?

For a game master preparing an online session, the answer is: quite a lot.

A virtual tabletop game can require character portraits, player tokens, enemy tokens, NPC cards, quick-reference sheets, printable materials, encounter notes, room descriptions, maps, scenario summaries, equipment lists, and any number of other small artifacts. None of these necessarily constitutes the heart of the game. The heart remains the interaction among the people playing it. Yet every one of these artifacts can consume preparation time.

That makes the production side of tabletop gaming a particularly sensible place for generative AI.

The example used throughout this essay is *Steampunk Beyond*, a role-playing game in which player characters serve as agents of the Bureau of Odd Phenomena, conveniently abbreviated BOP. The agents investigate unusual events in a stylized nineteenth-century world of steampunk technology, supernatural strangeness, wyrd science, occult ideas, and musical metaphysics. Characters use musical instruments because BOP agents can interact with the Music of the Spheres. Yes, there are bagpipes. Yes, this means magical bagpipes are possible. No, I will not apologize.

The game provides a useful demonstration because it has a recognizable visual identity and unusual mechanical and narrative requirements. A generic AI model knows what

"steampunk" means in a broad visual sense, but it does not automatically know what *this particular game* means by steampunk, what BOP agents do, why musical instruments matter, what statistics belong on a character, how a Focus functions, or what makes a useful reference artifact for play.

That distinction matters.

A generative model has broad prior knowledge, but a game master has local knowledge. The GM knows the campaign. The GM knows the house rules. The GM knows whether the supposedly terrifying clockwork skeleton is intended as a major villain or as something the group will immediately befriend, give a ridiculous nickname, and invite to tea.

The first principle of the workflow is consequently contextual: before asking for assets, give the model the rules, setting information, examples, or campaign material it needs.

Demonstrate

In the demonstration workflow, the AI conversation is first primed with the role-playing game rules and the purpose of the session. The important idea is not a magic sentence. It is the act of establishing working context.

A reusable generic setup prompt can be written this way:

We are going to create practical assets for an online tabletop role-playing game. I will provide the rules, setting information, character guidelines, and any relevant source material for the game. Treat those materials as the primary authority for mechanics, terminology, character statistics, setting details, and formatting requirements. Do not substitute mechanics from another RPG merely because they seem

similar. When creating game statistics, check all calculations against the supplied rules. When information is uncertain or absent, identify the uncertainty rather than silently inventing a rule.

The assets may include player characters, NPCs, monsters, villains, printable reference cards, VTT tokens, short adventures, encounter materials, and virtual tabletop maps. Keep generated material consistent with the supplied setting and with previously approved assets in this conversation. Think carefully before generating each artifact.

That prompt is deliberately less glamorous than asking for an image of an airship exploding above Victorian London while a woman with a lightning violin duels an extradimensional octopus.

It is also more important.

The model now knows that the task is not merely "make steampunk stuff." It is participating in a production workflow tied to a particular game.

A generic version can use placeholders for any system:

We are going to create assets for [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM], a [GENRE AND SETTING DESCRIPTION] tabletop role-playing game intended for [ONLINE / IN-PERSON / HYBRID] play. I will provide the rules and relevant campaign material. Use those materials as the primary authority for terminology, mechanics, statistics, setting details, and character capabilities.

We will create [ASSET TYPES]. Keep every asset consistent with the supplied rules and with previously approved

material. Check numerical game statistics before presenting them. When a requested detail is not supported by the supplied material, flag the uncertainty rather than importing assumptions from another game.

Nothing prevents the game director from making this much shorter. The purpose is simply to establish authority and scope.

Debrief

This stage illustrates something that becomes increasingly important as the workflow grows: a model cannot reliably preserve distinctions it was never given.

If we ask for "six steampunk characters" without supplying game context, the AI may produce perfectly serviceable fictional steampunk people. They may even be delightful. They are not necessarily playable characters in the intended system.

Once the relevant rules are available in context, the model can attempt statistics, Foci, equipment, instruments, powers, health values, and other system-dependent features. Those outputs still need checking. Language models are very good at producing text that *looks* structurally correct. Looking structurally correct and being mechanically correct are two different hobbies.

That is why one of the recurring instructions in the source workflow is essentially "check your math."

It sounds almost insultingly simple. It is not.

If a character-generation system allocates a fixed number of points among statistics, the model should be asked to verify the total. If derived Defense comes from another statistic, ask it to calculate Defense explicitly. If Health follows a rule, ask it to check the rule. If Foci carry numerical bonuses, make those visible.

We are not doing this because the model is uniquely incompetent. Human game masters also miscopy numbers. Human players also forget bonuses. Human designers have produced errata since somebody first scratched game rules onto a clay tablet. The useful habit is verification.

The same logic applies to output format. Tell the model whether the artifact is intended for a screen, a printer, a VTT, an image editor, a student handout, or direct GM use. “Create a character sheet” is vague. “Create an editable A4 character-reference document with one-inch margins, twelve-point body text, black-and-white printable styling, six separated cards, and enough space between cards to cut them apart” is production information.

One is an idea.

The other is a job specification.

Generative AI becomes much more useful when we learn to give it job specifications.

2. From Player Photograph to Virtual Tabletop Token

Describe

A virtual tabletop token is one of the smallest assets in an online game, yet it performs a surprisingly large amount of work. It tells us where a character is. It gives the character visual identity. It helps players distinguish pieces at a glance. It can communicate faction, hostility, role, mood, or simply "this purple circle is Brian; please stop moving Brian into the fireplace."

Many VTT systems use circular tokens placed on a transparent square canvas. The exact pixel dimensions can vary because the VTT can usually resize the image, but a square 1:1 canvas gives us a predictable starting point.

The demonstration uses a real portrait as a reference. This is something I enjoy for player tokens because it gives the virtual game piece a playful connection to the actual person. The photograph is not merely pasted into a circle. The AI is asked to reinterpret the reference subject as a character who belongs to the game world.

For *Steampunk Beyond*, that means a colorful steampunk costume and a musical instrument. In the example, we can go completely sensible and restrained by choosing magical bagpipes with a harmonic resonator.

Naturally.

The source prompt also specifies a photographic look: Canon EOS R5, 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm studio lighting. Such

camera-language prompting is not magic. A generated image has not literally been photographed with that camera. What the wording does is communicate a family of visual qualities associated with professional portrait photography: perspective, depth of field, lighting, and photographic realism.

The purple border performs a second function. It establishes visual consistency across player tokens. Later, NPCs and enemies can use other border colors so the role of a token can be recognized immediately.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: Player Token / Reference

Please create a Steampunk Beyond RPG VTT tokens with the provided portrait rendered as a high-detail vibrant colorful closeup portrait photograph taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting, the person in the reference image is dressed in a bright colorful Steampunk costume holding a magical TYPE musical instrument with a harmonic resonator attached to it. The profile photo is surrounded by a bright royal-purple circle token border; the circle photo is on a 1:1 square canvas with a transparent background. Think carefully. The token will be used with a VTT program to play the Steampunk Beyond RPG online.

The prompt contains a placeholder—TYPE—for the musical instrument. That could become bagpipes, violin, trumpet, cello, concertina, flute, percussion instrument, or something much stranger.

The generic form removes the setting-specific assumptions.

Generic Editable Prompt: Player VTT Token

Please create a VTT token for [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM] using the provided portrait as the character reference. Render the person as a high-detail, vibrant [PHOTOGRAPHIC / PAINTERLY / COMIC / ILLUSTRATED] close-up portrait appropriate to [GENRE / SETTING]. Dress the person in [CHARACTER CLOTHING / ARMOR / UNIFORM / COSTUME] and show them holding or visibly associated with [SIGNATURE WEAPON / TOOL / SPELL FOCUS / INSTRUMENT / EQUIPMENT].

Surround the portrait with a [COLOR] circular token border. Place the circular token on a 1:1 square canvas with a transparent background. Keep the face readable at small VTT size, avoid important details extending beyond the token border, and leave clean transparent space around the circle. The finished token will be used in [VTT PLATFORM OR GENERAL ONLINE TABLETOP PLAY].

The generic prompt is intentionally modular. Replace the character type, medium, border color, genre, and signature object.

A fantasy game might ask for a weathered ranger with a longbow. A science-fiction game could use a pressure-suited engineer holding a diagnostic scanner. A contemporary supernatural game might ask for a tired university lecturer carrying an EMF meter and the haunted expression of a man who has agreed to attend one meeting too many.

The structure stays the same.

Debrief

This prompt demonstrates several useful principles.

First, we tell the model the *purpose* of the image. "The token will be used with a VTT program" is useful because it changes what counts as a good composition. A beautiful full-body portrait can make a terrible token. At token size, the face may become six pixels and a hat.

Second, we specify transparency. Current image systems can often generate or return transparent backgrounds directly. Earlier workflows frequently required a solid gray background followed by manual background removal in Photoshop or another editor. When transparency is supported, asking for it during generation removes an entire editing step.

Third, we keep the subject close. A token should not require the player to zoom in and ask, "Is that me, or is that a decorative brass lamp?"

Fourth, a consistent border is more than decoration. Purple can identify player characters. Red can identify hostile creatures. Blue can identify friendly NPCs. Other campaigns might use green for allies, yellow for neutral actors, gold for major named NPCs, or no categorical colors at all.

The system is editable.

One also has to inspect the result. Generated hands, instruments, tiny mechanisms, eyewear, text, and complicated costume details remain common places for visual mistakes. A bagpipe may acquire seven pipes. A violin may become an object that no luthier on Earth or Mars would claim. A sword may merge into a sleeve.

Do not become emotionally attached to generation number one.

Generate, inspect, correct, and regenerate if needed.

The goal is not to prove that the AI made something on its first attempt. The goal is to have a token that works when the game begins.

3. Building a Rough Player Group

Describe

Once a visual token workflow exists, we need people to put inside those circles.

A demonstration game often needs pregenerated player characters. This is especially useful for convention sessions, classroom games, online demonstrations, one-shots, introductory events, streaming tests, and any situation in which spending the first hour making characters would defeat the purpose of having a short game.

The source workflow asks for six characters: two men and four women. That distribution reflects the particular teaching and demonstration context in which the game is used. It is not a rule of the game. Another group should change the number, gender distribution, ages, identities, cultural backgrounds, archetypes, and roles to fit the actual players and the campaign.

What matters is that the prompt asks for a *bare-bones* group.

That phrase is useful.

At this stage, we do not need five pages of psychological history for every character. We need enough information to decide whether the group is interesting and functional. Names, statistics, Foci, instruments, equipment, and a short biography are enough to evaluate the shape of the ensemble.

If a character survives this rough stage, we can develop the character further.

This is an important production habit. Do not spend twenty minutes polishing the brass buttons on a character you are going to delete.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: Rough Player Group

Please create six steampunk beyond characters, 2 men and 4 women, provide a bare-bones list of name, stats, foci, musical instrument, and equipment with three-sentence bio of each character. Please check your math and make sure all stats are correct.

It is a short prompt compared with some of the later examples, but it communicates the required fields and explicitly requests mechanical verification.

A more reusable form can carry a few more controls.

Generic Editable Prompt: Rough Player Group

Please create [NUMBER] sample player characters for [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM], suitable for [BEGINNER /

INTERMEDIATE / EXPERIENCED] players in a [GENRE / CAMPAIGN TYPE] game. Use a varied group appropriate to [PLAYER GROUP OR DEMONSTRATION CONTEXT].

For each character, provide a bare-bones entry containing the character's name, required game statistics, skills/foci/specialties, signature equipment, and any setting-specific feature required by the game. Include a concise three-sentence biography covering the character's concept, personality or motivation, and reason for participating in the campaign.

Make the characters mechanically legal under the supplied rules. Check all point totals, derived values, bonuses, and other arithmetic before presenting the final group. Avoid unnecessary duplication of names, backgrounds, abilities, and character niches.

That final sentence is worth having because generative systems sometimes fall into naming grooves. Ask for six steampunk characters and you may discover that Victorian Britain was apparently populated entirely by people called Brasswell, Blackwood, Ashcroft, Hawthorne, and some improbable cousin of Professor Cogsworth.

Names are easy to change, but duplicated patterns are a clue that we should inspect the whole set for repetition.

Debrief

The rough-group prompt demonstrates a productive division of labor between generation and selection.

The AI can create six candidates quickly. The human director can then ask useful questions.

Do these characters perform distinct roles?

Do they have different personalities?

Are the mechanics correct?

Are several characters effectively the same archetype wearing different hats?

Does the group include abilities likely to matter in the proposed adventures?

Do the biographies provide hooks that players can understand in a minute?

For *Steampunk Beyond*, the instrument matters because it belongs to the world and its mechanics. For another game, the setting-specific slot could be a supernatural gift, starship duty position, magical tradition, superhero power source, investigative specialty, mecha frame, social class, faction, or anything else that helps define play.

The output should also be checked against how pregenerated characters are actually used.

A demonstration character is not a novel protagonist whose hidden trauma will become significant on page 437. The player needs to look at the sheet and understand, "Ah. I am the charming occult violinist who knows about ghosts."

That is playable information.

The three-sentence biography constraint helps. It forces the model away from excessive backstory and toward usable identity.

This is a recurring theme in AI-assisted game preparation: constrain the artifact to the job it must perform.

The temptation with generative systems is to ask for more because more is available. More is not automatically better. A two-hour demonstration game does not become more playable because the GM has forty thousand words of generated lore.

Sometimes the best prompt contains the phrase “bare-bones.”

4. Turning Rough Characters into Printable Player Cards

Describe

A character list is useful to the game master. A character card is useful to the player.

That distinction changes the design problem.

Now the material needs to be physically or digitally readable at the table. The source workflow moves the six characters onto a single A4 document. Each character receives a portrait and the core information required for play. The cards are separated enough to be cut apart.

The prompt asks for one-inch margins. This is not glamorous prompt engineering. It is document engineering.

AI document-generation tools may make surprising layout choices when margins, font size, orientation, page count, and print requirements are unspecified. The results can look impressive on a screen while being miserable to print.

The source workflow also specifies black-and-white compatibility. Again, this is production thinking. A dark purple background with pale lettering may look gorgeous in a preview. It can also consume ink or toner at a rate normally associated with an industrial accident.

If an artifact is going to be printed, tell the model that it will be printed.

If it will be cut apart, tell the model.

If it needs to be editable, tell the model.

If twelve-point type matters, say so.

AI does not object to production notes. It does not become offended and say, “I am an artist. I cannot work under these conditions.”

Well, not yet.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: Rough Player Cards

Place all the characters with their profile image on a single A4 doc with 1" margins with each character with a portrait and their info in a bright royal-purple square or rectangle arranged on the document, a row for each character, for simple printing and cutting out for demo players. Include

name stats with focuses, instrument, and equipment with three-sentence bio of each character. Please have a little space between each to make cutting easier. Make sure the document is appropriate for a black-and-white printing so no color backgrounds. Return an editable document.

There is an apparent tension between the request for a bright royal-purple square or rectangle and the instruction not to use color backgrounds. In practice, this can be interpreted as a purple border or design accent rather than a filled purple field. It is better, though, not to depend on interpretation when adapting the prompt.

A generic form can make that explicit.

Generic Editable Prompt: Printable Player Character Cards

Create an editable [A4 / LETTER] document containing all approved sample player characters for [GAME TITLE]. Use 1-inch margins and a clear, readable [FONT SIZE]-point body font. Arrange one character per separated card or horizontal row, with enough white space between cards for easy cutting.

Each card should contain the character's portrait, name, essential statistics, skills/foci/specialties, signature equipment, setting-specific feature, and short biography. Use [ACCENT COLOR] only for thin borders, headings, or small accents so the cards remain legible when printed in black and white. Do not use large colored or dark backgrounds.

Keep the layout consistent across all characters. Return an editable document suitable for printing, revision, and reuse during demonstration play.

The generic prompt deliberately separates visual accent from background fill. That makes the production requirement easier to interpret.

Debrief

The original demonstration encountered a very common generative-document problem: the system produced something visually card-like, but the result was an image rather than the requested editable document.

That is exactly the sort of thing users need to expect.

A model can understand "character card" as a visual design request and prioritize appearance over editability. If the returned artifact is a flattened image, the correct response is not philosophical despair. Ask again.

"Please recreate this as an editable document."

If a portrait is wrong, ask to replace the portrait.

If the statistics omit the Foci, ask to include them.

If the model uses the reference portrait of the user for a completely unrelated character, say so and ask it to generate a different portrait.

In the demonstration, one generated male character portrait resembled the provided reference more than intended. The fix was simple: replace the portrait while preserving the character and card structure.

This illustrates another useful pattern: revise the smallest necessary part.

We do not need to regenerate six characters because one portrait is wrong.

We do not need to rewrite an adventure because the map title is misplaced.

We do not need to abandon AI because a character card came back as an image.

We identify the defect and make a targeted correction.

This sounds obvious when stated plainly, but it is a major difference between casual prompting and production prompting. Casual prompting asks, "What will the machine give me?" Production prompting asks, "What remains to be fixed before this artifact does its job?"

The second question produces much better game materials.

5. Printable Player Token Sheets

Describe

Virtual tabletop play does not eliminate physical play. Many game masters move between online sessions, classroom demonstrations, convention tables, hybrid events, and traditional face-to-face games.

Once a set of player tokens has been created, it is very little extra conceptual work to create a printable token sheet.

The source workflow asks for the colorful tokens to be placed on an A4 page, one inch by one inch per token, repeated to make multiple sets. Dotted cut lines separate the squares. Space between sets makes it easier to prepare multiple demonstration kits.

This is a beautiful example of what AI-assisted production can do well because the creative work has already happened.

The characters exist.

The portraits exist.

The token style exists.

The new task is layout.

If we can preserve the approved artwork rather than regenerate it, we reduce visual drift. The goal is not to ask the image generator to reinvent the six characters. The goal is to arrange known assets.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: Player Token Sheet — A4 DOCX

Please create a printable A4 doc with 1" margins with these colorful character tokens arranged in grids of 1 inch by 1 inch squares for each token so they can be cut out for use in tabletop play. Repeat the tokens to have multiple sets on the page. While the tokens have their bright royal-purple circle token borders, have a dotted cut line between each square and space between each set for ease of separation in preparation of multiple demos. Return an editable document.

The generic version simply exposes the variables.

Generic Editable Prompt: Printable Token Sheet

Create an editable [A4 / LETTER] document with 1-inch margins using the approved character-token images supplied in this conversation. Arrange the tokens in a clean grid of [TOKEN WIDTH] by [TOKEN HEIGHT] squares so they can be printed and cut out for tabletop play.

Preserve each token image exactly rather than redesigning the character. Add a light dotted cutting guide around or between token squares. Repeat the complete token set [NUMBER OF SETS] times on the page where space permits, with a slightly larger gap between complete sets. Keep the background white and make the page economical for ordinary color or black-and-white printing. Return an editable document.

That single phrase—"preserve each token image exactly rather than redesigning the character"—can prevent unnecessary regeneration.

Debrief

There are two different kinds of AI task hiding under the phrase "make a token sheet."

One is generative: create token artwork.

The other is compositional: arrange existing tokens.

We should distinguish them.

If we already have approved images, compositional workflows are safer. Every regeneration creates another opportunity for hair, clothing, facial features, equipment, color, or proportions to change.

Continuity matters surprisingly quickly.

Players learn that the red-haired woman with the mechanical cello is Mei. If the next handout shows a dark-haired woman with a trumpet and the same name, we have created cognitive friction for no useful reason.

The more assets we produce, the more valuable stable source images become.

This suggests a simple asset pipeline. Create a canonical portrait or token for each important character. Approve it. Reuse that file in subsequent cards, reference sheets, encounter handouts, and token pages.

A long AI conversation can sometimes lose track of which earlier image was approved. In that situation, upload the approved image again when requesting the new layout. Do not rely on conversational archaeology if you can provide the file directly.

The printable token sheet also reminds us that good AI prompts often contain ordinary measurements.

One inch.

A4.

One-inch margins.

Dotted lines.

Multiple sets.

Those instructions are not creatively exciting, but they are what turn an image into a usable tabletop component.

6. Building a Digital VTT Token Sheet

Describe

The printable token page solves a physical problem. The VTT token sheet solves a digital asset problem.

In the source workflow, six character tokens are generated together on a 2:3 transparent canvas. They are arranged as three rows of two. Space is left between tokens so that each can be separated later in an image editor.

Why generate a sheet rather than six separate images?

Sometimes it is simply faster. A sheet also helps the image model maintain a shared aesthetic across the set: similar lighting, rendering style, border treatment, and visual scale.

There is a trade-off.

The more distinct characters we ask an image model to render in one composition, the greater the chance that details will become confused. Instruments may migrate. Clothing colors may become more uniform than intended. Character features may be blended.

In the transcript demonstration, the generated group became more purple than the setting actually required. The purple token border was intentional. A purple uniform for everyone was not.

This is a perfect example of a model overgeneralizing a salient visual instruction.

The correct response is not surprise. It is refinement.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: Player Token Sheet PNG

Please create a sheet of VTT tokens for these characters all rendered as high-detail vibrant colorful photographs taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting, be sure to show them holding their musical instrument , the six images each surrounded by a bright royal-purple circle token border; all six circle sketches arranged on a 2:3 canvas with a transparent background with space between each token for easy editing and separation later. think carefully. these tokens will be used with a vtt program to play the Steampunk Beyond RPG online.

The prompt can be generalized without losing its useful structure.

Generic Editable Prompt: VTT Player Token Sheet PNG

Create a digital VTT token sheet for the [NUMBER] approved player characters from [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM]. Render each character in a consistent [PHOTOGRAPHIC / ILLUSTRATED / PAINTERLY / COMIC] style appropriate to [GENRE / SETTING]. Preserve

each character's established appearance and show their defining [WEAPON / TOOL / INSTRUMENT / SPELL FOCUS / EQUIPMENT] where practical.

Surround each portrait with a [COLOR] circular token border. Arrange all [NUMBER] circular tokens evenly on a [ASPECT RATIO] canvas with a transparent background. Leave clear transparent space between every token so each image can be isolated easily in an image editor. Keep token scale and border thickness consistent. Do not turn the border color into a character uniform unless the approved design specifically uses that color. The sheet will be separated into individual tokens for use in a virtual tabletop.

That added sentence about border color is not decorative. It responds to an observed failure mode.

Debrief

The lesson here is that prompts are living production documents.

When a model repeatedly misunderstands something, improve the prompt.

This is why keeping prompts is useful. We are not merely saving magic incantations. We are maintaining templates that encode what we have learned from previous failures.

Perhaps generation one makes everyone wear purple.

Fine. Add: "The purple applies only to the token border; characters should wear varied clothing."

Perhaps generation two crowds the circles together.

Add: “Leave at least [X] percent of the canvas width as transparent separation.”

Perhaps generation three gives the pianist a violin.

Add: “Match each named character to the instrument in the approved character record.”

Over time, a good prompt becomes less like a wish and more like a specification.

There is a point at which the prompt can become absurdly long. That is also worth noticing. If every task requires eight hundred words of prohibitions, the workflow may be fighting the tool.

Break the job into stages.

Generate individual canonical portraits first.

Approve them.

Create tokens from those portraits.

Compose the approved tokens into a sheet.

This staged process can be more reliable than asking a single generation to invent six characters, remember six biographies, match six instruments, preserve six costumes, create six clean circles, maintain six identities, and leave perfect transparent spacing.

AI can do surprisingly complicated things.

It can also get confused by a hat.

Plan accordingly.

7. Creating NPCs, Villains, Monsters, Ghosts, Aliens, and Other People You Will Inevitably Befriend

Describe

Player characters are only one side of the table.

A game master also needs people, creatures, threats, allies, bystanders, suspects, rivals, monsters, weird entities, mysterious strangers, and the occasional perfectly innocent clockwork abomination.

Many role-playing systems provide extensive bestiaries. Others provide a smaller selection because the setting expects the director to create adversaries as needed. The source workflow uses AI to produce eighteen simple NPCs and creatures for demonstration play.

The number eighteen is practical because it divides neatly into three pages of six cards.

The prompt deliberately requests variety: enemy monsters, ghosts, alien creatures, and friendly NPCs. In *Steampunk Beyond*, that mixture belongs to the premise. BOP agents investigate odd phenomena, so a case might involve hauntings, strange science, extraterrestrial visitors, occult manifestations, or something that initially appears supernatural and turns out to be a fellow in a boiler suit with an unfortunate machine.

The cards include portrait, name, title, type, role, statistics, Foci, Defense, Health, Karma, Power, instrument, equipment, and a one-sentence description.

The adjective “simple” is important.

These NPCs are being prepared for demo play. A GM needs enough information to run them at the table, not a doctoral dissertation on each creature’s childhood.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: NPC/Villain Sheet — A4 DOCX

Create a multi-page document NPC/Villain sheet of 18 original SIMPLE enemy monsters/ghosts/alien creatures and friendly NPCs for STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG demo games with six NPCs on a single A4 page in a 2 × 3 arrangement, with each NPC in an individual bordered card containing the matching profile portrait high-detail vibrant colorful photographs taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting and their name, title, type , Role, Stats and Foci, Defense, Health, Karma, Power, instrument, equipment, and one-sentence description. Have a variety. There is clear spacing between the six cards plus an inner dashed cutting guide, so they should be easy to print, cut apart, and hand directly to demo players. provide a printable multi-page document of 18 cards, six cards/NPCs on each page with each character/creature on a single row, one column only. Return an editable document with 1" margins. No color backgrounds, printable in black-and-white.

This source prompt contains a layout conflict. It requests six NPCs in a 2 × 3 arrangement and later specifies each character or creature on a single row with one column only. Both cannot describe the same page layout.

That is worth preserving in the historical prompt because the contradiction itself teaches us something. For a new version, choose one arrangement.

Generic Editable Prompt: NPC and Adversary Reference Cards

Create an editable multi-page [A4 / LETTER] reference document containing [NUMBER] original, mechanically simple NPCs and adversaries for [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM]. Include an appropriate mixture of [ENEMY TYPES], [NEUTRAL TYPES], and [FRIENDLY NPC TYPES] suited to [GENRE / CAMPAIGN].

Place [NUMBER PER PAGE] NPC cards on each page in a [ROWS × COLUMNS] arrangement. Give every NPC an individual bordered card containing a matching portrait and the following game information: name, title or descriptor, type, role, required statistics, skills/foci/specialties, Defense or equivalent, Health or equivalent, resource points if used, powers or special abilities, notable equipment, setting-specific feature, and one concise sentence explaining the NPC's personality, behavior, or function.

Keep the NPCs mechanically simple enough for quick demonstration play. Check all statistics against the supplied rules. Use 1-inch page margins, clear spacing between cards, and light dashed cutting guides. Use white backgrounds and formatting that remains legible in black-and-white printing.

Return an editable document. Preserve a consistent portrait style across the full set.

This version resolves the layout by making rows and columns explicit variables.

Debrief

The demonstration exposed another common behavior: an AI system may begin by creating portraits when the user actually asked for complete stat cards.

This is not surprising. The prompt contains substantial visual language, and image generation is salient.

The fix is to restate the missing requirement.

“Please provide the complete cards with the portraits and stat blocks.”

If the model gives you eighteen lovely monsters and no numbers, you have an art gallery, not an NPC reference sheet.

The distinction is important because mixed-media tasks are harder than single-media tasks. The model must solve content generation, rules application, image generation, and document layout at once.

Breaking the process into stages may improve reliability.

Stage one can generate and approve the eighteen NPC concepts and statistics.

Stage two can generate portraits.

Stage three can assemble the approved content into cards.

A single all-in-one prompt is convenient when it works. A staged workflow gives more control when it does not.

The numerical information deserves special attention. AI-generated NPC statistics should always be checked when the game rules matter. A creature with impossible values can ruin encounter balance, but a subtler problem is more common: the numbers look plausible enough that nobody notices the mistake until play.

Ask the model to validate every NPC against the supplied rules.

Then spot-check.

The human remains the director.

That is not a sad limitation of the technology. It is why the workflow remains yours.

8. Turning NPCs and Villains into VTT Token Sheets

Describe

Once the eighteen NPCs exist, the next production step is predictable: turn them into VTT tokens.

The source workflow uses border color to communicate game role. Enemies and monsters receive bright red circles. Friendly NPCs receive bright blue circles.

Color coding is particularly useful in a demonstration game because players have not yet learned the setting's visual language. A red token reads as danger almost immediately. A blue token can signal that the character is currently regarded as friendly.

"Currently" is doing a little work there. This is a role-playing game. Anyone can betray anyone.

The token prompt asks for multiple sheets, each with six circular portraits on a 2:3 transparent canvas. As with player tokens, the images are separated for later extraction.

The prompt also refers back to the eighteen original NPCs. That backward reference is where conversation management starts to matter.

If the conversation is long, the model may retrieve or reconstruct the wrong image set. In the demonstration, an attempted token generation began drifting toward material from an earlier generation.

The practical fix was to re-upload the approved NPC sheets and explicitly tell the AI to use those references.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: NPC/Villain Token Sheet PNG

Please create the multi-page SHEETS of VTT tokens for all 18 original enemy monsters/ghosts/alien creatures for STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG demo games, all rendered as high-detail vibrant colorful photographs taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio

lighting, be sure to show them holding their musical instrument , the six images each surrounded by a bright RED circle token border for enemies and monsters and bright BLUE circle token border for friendly NPCs; all six circle sketches arranged on a 2:3 canvas with a transparent background with space between each token for easy editing and separation later. think carefully. these tokens will be used with a vtt program to play the STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG online.

A generic form can make the relationship between canonical source images and token categories explicit.

Generic Editable Prompt: NPC and Adversary VTT Token Sheets

Using the approved NPC and adversary records and portraits supplied with this request, create VTT token sheets for all [NUMBER] characters and creatures from [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM]. Preserve each established character design rather than inventing replacements. Render all portraits in a consistent [VISUAL STYLE] appropriate to [GENRE / SETTING].

Give hostile enemies and monsters a [HOSTILE BORDER COLOR] circular token border. Give friendly NPCs a [FRIENDLY BORDER COLOR] circular border. Use [NEUTRAL BORDER COLOR] for neutral, unknown, or faction-independent characters if needed.

Place [NUMBER PER SHEET] circular tokens on each [ASPECT RATIO] canvas with a transparent background. Leave clear transparent space between tokens for easy separation in an image editor. Keep border thickness, image scale, lighting, and portrait crop consistent across all sheets.

Match each token to the approved character's equipment and defining features. These files will be used for online play in a virtual tabletop.

Debrief

Long conversations are useful because they preserve working context.

Long conversations are dangerous because they contain too much working context.

Both statements are true.

As more images, characters, revisions, prompts, and documents accumulate, the model has more material from which to draw. That can produce accidental references to outdated versions.

A very simple habit improves reliability: bring the current approved artifact back into immediate context.

If you want tokens based on three NPC sheets, attach those three NPC sheets to the request.

If you want an adventure based on eighteen approved NPCs, provide the approved NPC list or document.

If you want a revised map, attach the current map rather than saying "you know, the map from twenty-seven messages ago."

Humans do this too. If I hand an artist a folder containing fourteen drafts and say, "Use the good one," I deserve what happens next.

Version clarity is part of prompt engineering.

This becomes even more important when using project-style or workspace-style AI environments where stable reference documents can be kept with the task. A persistent project containing the game rules, approved NPC roster, visual guide, and canonical character images can be more reliable than a single enormous chat.

For quick demonstrations, ordinary chat may be perfectly adequate.

For a campaign production pipeline, organize your sources.

The goal is not merely to make the AI remember.

The goal is to make the correct material easy for it to use.

9. Generating Short Demonstration Adventures

Describe

Characters and monsters are assets.

An adventure gives those assets something to do.

The source workflow asks the AI to create three short demonstration scenarios using the previously generated NPCs. The adventures are aimed at beginning players, use three or four sample player characters, contain a small number of rooms, mix combat and puzzles, and target approximately one to two hours of play.

This is a sensible scale for AI-assisted scenario generation.

Short adventures expose whether the generated NPC set is actually useful. The process can reveal gaps. Perhaps all eighteen creatures are combat opponents and nobody can provide information. Perhaps there are six occult investigators but no social antagonist. Perhaps the AI has created three different versions of "angry clockwork man."

Putting the characters into scenarios tests the roster.

The original prompt contains several internal inconsistencies. It asks for "3 two-page A4" adventures, later says each scenario should fit on a single A4 sheet, and then requests a file containing "all six adventures."

These are precisely the kinds of contradictions that appear in real prompts because humans write them.

We change our minds halfway through. We copy an old prompt and forget to alter one sentence. We decide on six adventures, reduce the number to three, and leave a fossil from the old version behind.

A model may guess what we mean.

A production workflow should not depend on lucky guessing.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: Three Demo Adventures

Please create 3 two-page A4 STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG adventure scenarios for demo play with BEGINNER players.

Each scenario should have a simple intro and contain 4-5 of the demo villains/friendlies provided, make sure you use all the NPCs at some point and may re-use a villain in more than one scenario. You may not use a NPC more than once in a single scenario.

Have 3-4 rooms for each scenario and some combat and some puzzles. EACH SCENARIO SHOULD BE APPROPRIATE FOR 1-2 HOURS OF PLAY

Players will be playing 3-4 of the sample PCs provided so make the scenario balanced for that level of player.

Each scenario should fit on a single A4 sheet in 12 point font.

Output an editable docx file with 1" margins with all six adventures in the file. DO NOT USE COLUMN LAYOUT. Please give each adventure a unique title and plot.

The prompt is reproduced as supplied because the contradictions are instructive.

A cleaner generic template can eliminate them by using variables consistently.

Generic Editable Prompt: Short Demo Adventures

Create [NUMBER OF ADVENTURES] short adventure scenarios for [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM], designed for [BEGINNER / INTERMEDIATE / EXPERIENCED] players and suitable for approximately [PLAY LENGTH] of actual play each. The player group will contain approximately [NUMBER OF PCS] characters at [POWER / LEVEL / EXPERIENCE DESCRIPTION].

Each adventure should begin with a concise premise and immediate player objective. Build the scenario around [NUMBER OF AREAS] distinct locations, rooms, scenes, or encounter areas. Include a mixture of [COMBAT / SOCIAL INTERACTION / INVESTIGATION / PUZZLES / EXPLORATION] appropriate to the game. Use [NPC COUNT RANGE] characters from the approved NPC roster in each adventure. Do not duplicate the same NPC within a single scenario, but NPCs may recur in different adventures when narratively appropriate. Across the complete set, use every required NPC at least once.

Give every adventure a distinct title, central problem, progression, climax, and resolution possibilities. Keep the scenario flexible enough for unexpected player decisions rather than assuming one mandatory solution. Balance encounters for the specified sample player characters using the supplied game rules.

Format each adventure as exactly [PAGE COUNT] [A4 / LETTER] page(s) in approximately [FONT SIZE]-point body text with 1-inch margins. Do not use a multi-column layout. Return one editable DOCX containing all [NUMBER OF ADVENTURES] adventures.

There is no magic in the bracketed variables. Their value is consistency.

If we want three adventures, the phrase “[NUMBER OF ADVENTURES]” appears everywhere the number matters. When adapting the template, we replace all instances with three.

No fossilized six survives.

Debrief

AI-generated adventures are especially good candidates for the "rough but useful" category.

They can provide a premise, locations, encounters, complications, NPC placement, and pacing structure quickly. That makes them excellent for emergency preparation, demonstrations, classroom play, testing mechanics, brainstorming, or producing a playable skeleton that the GM intends to customize.

The transcript makes an important observation: the best game is still likely to be the one you develop around your players and your own ideas.

AI assistance does not require us to pretend the first generated scenario is sacred.

Feed it your idea.

Ask it to expand the idea.

Give it your villain.

Give it the clue you already know you want.

Tell it the final room must involve a runaway calliope powered by ectoplasm.

It will survive.

The strongest use of generative AI for adventure design may not be "invent everything." It may be "help me develop what I already know."

A director can begin with one sentence:

“The ghost haunting the railway station is actually trying to prevent an experimental engine from opening a dimensional gate.”

Then ask the model to create four encounter areas, three clues, two ways to misunderstand the ghost, one escalating hazard, and statistics for the engineer responsible.

That workflow preserves human authorship of the premise while using AI for elaboration and production.

The generated result also needs playability review.

Can the players understand the objective?

Does every clue depend on a single successful roll?

Can the scenario continue if the group befriends the monster?

Is there a reason to visit all four rooms?

Does “puzzle” mean an actual interactive problem or merely a paragraph saying “the players solve a puzzle”?

Does the final encounter require equipment none of the pregenerated characters possess?

Those questions are the debrief.

Generation gives us material.

Game design begins when we examine what that material will do at the table.

10. Adventure-Specific NPC and Villain Sheets

Describe

A master NPC reference contains everything.

A session reference should contain only what the GM needs now.

That difference is one of the most useful organizational principles in role-playing preparation.

After generating short adventures, the source prompt proposes creating an NPC/villain sheet for each adventure. If a scenario uses four NPCs from the master roster, the director should not have to search eighteen cards while running the game.

Put the four relevant cards together.

If an NPC appears in multiple adventures, duplicate the card on multiple adventure sheets.

This is not waste. It is interface design.

The source prompt requests black-and-white line illustrations in the style of Will Eisner. For a modern reusable template, it is better to describe the visual properties required—expressive black-and-white comic line art, strong shadows,

clean silhouettes, printable contrast—rather than depend on the name of a specific artist.

The source prompt also repeats the earlier mismatch between three demo adventures and "six demo adventures." Once again, the correct generic template uses a shared variable.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: NPC/Villain Adventure Sheet — A4 DOCX

Create a multi-page document NPC/Villain document with a single page of NPC/VILLAINS for each of the six demo adventures, each adventure scenario sheet contains all the NPC/VILLAINS for that adventure.

Repeating some of the 18 original SIMPLE enemy monsters/ghosts/alien creatures that repeat in the adventures for multiple pages, for STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG demo games with six NPCs on a single A4 page in a 2 × 3 arrangement, with each NPC in an individual bordered card containing the matching profile portrait simple Black & White Line illustration in the style of Will Eisner and their name, title, type , Role, Stats and Foci, Defense, Health, Karma, Power, instrument, equipment, and one-sentence description. There is clear spacing between the six cards plus an inner dashed cutting guide, so they should be easy to print, cut apart, and hand directly to demo players. provide a printable multi-page DOCX of THE ADVENTURE cards, six cards/NPCs on each page in rows. Output an editable docx file with 1" margins with all six adventures in the file. DO NOT USE COLUMN LAYOUT. Please give each adventure a unique title and plot. Printable black-and-white document.

The generic prompt focuses on function and avoids adding adventure content that belongs elsewhere.

Generic Editable Prompt: Adventure-Specific NPC Reference Sheets

Create an editable multi-page [A4 / LETTER] NPC reference document for the [NUMBER OF ADVENTURES] approved adventures in [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM]. Give each adventure its own page or clearly separated section containing only the NPCs, enemies, monsters, and allies that appear in that adventure. If an NPC appears in several adventures, repeat that NPC's card on each relevant adventure sheet.

Use the already approved NPC statistics and identities. Do not create replacement versions unless a correction is required. Place up to [NUMBER PER PAGE] NPC cards on each page in a [ROWS × COLUMNS] arrangement.

Each card should contain a matching [BLACK-AND-WHITE HIGH-CONTRAST COMIC LINE ART / PHOTOGRAPHIC / OTHER] portrait, the NPC's name, title or descriptor, type, role, required statistics, skills/foci/specialties, Defense or equivalent, Health or equivalent, resources, powers, equipment, setting-specific features, and one concise behavioral or descriptive sentence.

Use 1-inch margins, white page backgrounds, clean card borders, readable type, and optional dashed cutting guides. Make the document economical to print in black and white. Do not use a multi-column document layout beyond the card grid itself. Return an editable DOCX containing the reference sheets for all [NUMBER OF ADVENTURES] adventures.

Debrief

This step illustrates a larger idea: AI can help not only generate content but reorganize content for the moment of use.

That is important because game-master information has at least two lives.

During design, we want breadth. We want the full cast, possibilities, background, alternatives, and supporting information.

During play, we want retrieval speed.

The beautifully written seven-paragraph NPC biography may be valuable before the session. During combat, the GM wants to know Defense, Health, attack, special ability, and whether the creature screams when struck with a tuning fork.

Different artifacts can serve different cognitive needs.

Generative systems can transform the same source material into a master reference, session reference, player handout, GM card, token, and compact screen summary.

That transformation is particularly useful because it does not require inventing new canon each time.

The model can be told, "Use only approved information and compress it."

This is often safer than asking for repeated fresh generation.

Every time the model reinvents a character, continuity can drift.

Every time it reformats a canonical character, continuity has a better chance of surviving.

We should use generation when we need invention.

We should use transformation when we need another form of the same information.

That distinction makes an AI-assisted campaign far easier to manage.

11. Creating Virtual Tabletop Maps

Describe

Now we reach one of the assets most obviously associated with virtual tabletop play: the map.

A VTT map must satisfy different needs from an illustration.

An illustration can be dramatic, cinematic, angled, atmospheric, full of smoke, full of people, and entirely unconcerned with whether anyone can move a token through the door.

A VTT map needs usable space.

The source workflow asks for an above-view map for each generated scenario. The maps should be colorful and realistic enough to support the game while remaining practical for players and game masters.

The prompt requests no labels on the map itself. That is a wise choice because generated text inside images is often less reliable than separately generated text, and room labels can clutter play space. Instead, the title appears in a controlled location while the GM receives a separate area key.

This separation is important.

Players see the map.

The GM sees the map key.

The map does not announce, “ROOM FOUR: SECRET CULT LABORATORY, DEFINITELY DO NOT LOOK BEHIND THE CABINET.”

One would hope the players might have discovered that organically.

Demonstrate

Steampunk Beyond Prompt: VTT Maps

Create a VTT Map for online STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG play of EACH the scenarios, make the maps colorful and useful for players and game masters. Do not put labels on the map but do describe the areas in text after the PNG render. Do put the title of the adventure in appropriate STEAMPUNK Font on top of the "STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG" title in the lower right corner of the 3:2 image. Put the PNG map on a plain gray background. Be creative and realistic but maintain the above-view of a VTT map. Provide an area key for each map. Think carefully.

The generic version can be more explicit about navigability and map-to-scenario consistency.

Generic Editable Prompt: VTT Encounter or Adventure Maps

Create one VTT map for each approved scenario in [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM]. Base every map directly on the locations, rooms, exits, obstacles, encounter areas, and environmental features described in its corresponding scenario.

Render each map as a clear top-down or near-orthographic virtual tabletop map suitable for token movement. Use a [VISUAL STYLE / GENRE] aesthetic and make important play spaces visually distinct without filling them with decorative clutter that interferes with tokens. Maintain practical doorways, passages, room boundaries, and navigable floor space.

Do not place room numbers, secret information, NPC names, encounter labels, or GM-only notes on the player map. Place only [OPTIONAL ADVENTURE TITLE / GAME TITLE] in [LOCATION] if desired. Use a [ASPECT RATIO] image and [TRANSPARENT / PLAIN GRAY / OTHER] exterior background as appropriate.

After each map, provide a separate text-only GM area key. Number the areas in the key and explain the important features, exits, hazards, clues, NPC locations, and scenario functions represented by each area. Verify that every keyed area corresponds to something visibly present on the map and that every required scenario location appears on the map.

That last sentence helps prevent the beautifully drawn map that somehow forgets the room where the climax occurs.

Debrief

Map generation is where “looks good” and “works well” diverge very quickly.

A generated map may be gorgeous.

It may also contain doors opening into walls, staircases that lead nowhere, furniture blocking every movement route, rooms with impossible geometry, inconsistent scale, duplicated corridors, or decorative machinery occupying the exact area where the encounter is supposed to happen.

Inspect maps as game spaces.

Can characters move through them?

Can the GM understand which room corresponds to which scenario area?

Does the puzzle room contain the physical thing required for the puzzle?

Does the map accidentally reveal the secret passage?

Are there enough entrances and exits?

Is there space for tokens?

If the adventure says there are four rooms, why are there seven?

Some discrepancies are harmless. Some are useful. A generated side closet might become a wonderful improvised hiding place.

Others require correction.

The source demonstration also shows that the system may forget the requested area key. The appropriate follow-up is extremely simple:

“Provide an area key for each map.”

We do not need to regenerate all maps because the prose key is missing.

This is another example of modular revision.

A large AI-assisted workflow becomes manageable when every missing piece is treated as a specific task.

The map is good; keep it.

The key is missing; generate the key.

The third room is wrong; revise the third room.

The title is misspelled; correct the title.

The whole process becomes less mystical once we stop judging each generation as an all-or-nothing performance.

It is production.

Production has revisions.

12. Context Drift, Verification, and the Fine Art of Asking Again

Describe

By the time the workflow has produced player characters, portraits, character cards, printable tokens, VTT tokens, eighteen NPCs, NPC cards, NPC tokens, three adventures, adventure-specific references, and several maps, the AI conversation is no longer short.

That matters.

Long-context systems can retain substantial amounts of material, but retention is not the same thing as perfect working attention. Earlier instructions may become less influential. Several similar image sets may compete. The model may use an older version because both are present. A later request may conflict with an earlier one.

The transcript demonstration shows this directly when the system begins using the wrong NPC material for a token sheet.

The solution is practical rather than magical.

Re-anchor the task.

Upload the specific images again.

Name the current artifact.

Restate the immediate requirement.

Ask the system to refer to the NPC sheets supplied with the current request rather than to earlier drafts.

This is one of the central skills of productive AI use: recognizing when a conversation needs a local reset.

Demonstrate

A generic re-anchoring prompt can look like this:

For this task, use the attached files/images as the authoritative current versions. They replace earlier drafts of the same assets in this conversation. Preserve the names, identities, statistics, visual details, and classifications shown in these current references.

Do not pull replacement portraits, outdated statistics, or discarded designs from earlier generations. Create only the requested [NEW ARTIFACT] from these approved source materials. Before producing the result, cross-check that every included character or location matches the attached current reference.

A numerical verification prompt can be equally simple:

Recheck every game statistic in the material you just created against the supplied [GAME TITLE] rules. Show your verification privately if possible, but revise the final artifact so that all totals, derived statistics, skill/focus bonuses, defenses, health values, resource values, and equipment restrictions are legal. Do not change narrative details unless a mechanical correction requires it.

A formatting repair prompt might read:

Keep all existing approved content, but rebuild the output as an editable [DOCX / DOCUMENT] rather than a flattened image. Use [A4 / LETTER], 1-inch margins, [FONT SIZE]-point readable text, white backgrounds, and the existing card order. Do not rewrite character content except where necessary to fit the requested layout.

These prompts are not glamorous.

They are very useful.

Debrief

The phrase “think carefully” appears repeatedly in the source prompt set. Modern AI interfaces may offer explicit reasoning or effort settings, and choosing a higher reasoning mode can help with tasks involving rules, cross-references, consistency, or complicated document constraints.

Yet more reasoning does not erase contradictory instructions.

It does not guarantee an image will contain exactly six circles.

It does not make a model immune to context drift.

The human workflow still matters.

The transcript also contrasts ordinary chat with more persistent project or work-oriented environments. The general principle is sound regardless of product naming: stable projects are useful when the task depends on a continuing body of source material.

A campaign can benefit from keeping the rules, style guide, approved character roster, setting reference, and canonical assets together.

A one-off token does not need that much infrastructure.

Use the smallest workflow that stays reliable.

This is the same principle we apply in tabletop gaming itself. We do not need a hydraulic stage system to run two goblins in a cellar.

Unless we want one.

Then, by all means.

13. Prompt Specificity Without Prompt Superstition

Describe

A long prompt can create the impression that success comes from discovering the correct secret wording.

That is not the lesson of these examples.

The source prompts are detailed because the requested outputs contain many constraints. They specify A4 paper because paper size matters. They specify one-inch margins because margins matter. They specify transparent backgrounds because extraction matters. They specify six tokens on a 2:3 canvas because arrangement matters.

The useful details are connected to production needs.

Prompt superstition begins when we keep phrases merely because we imagine they possess mysterious power.

“Think carefully” can be a useful reminder.

“Canon EOS R5, 35mm, f/2.8” can communicate a desired portrait aesthetic.

Neither phrase is a ritual spell.

We should understand what each instruction is trying to accomplish.

That makes the prompt transferable.

Demonstrate

Consider the photographic description:

high-detail vibrant colorful photographs taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting

The functional intention is roughly this:

Use a polished, realistic portrait-photography aesthetic with moderately wide environmental portrait perspective, shallow depth of field, strong facial detail, vivid color, and warm controlled studio lighting.

If a different image model responds better to descriptive visual language than to camera metadata, the second version may be more useful.

The same principle applies to document prompts.

“Return an editable document” expresses a required deliverable.

“1-inch margins” expresses a page-layout requirement.

“No color backgrounds, printable in black-and-white” expresses a production constraint.

“Six cards on each page” expresses density.

Those phrases deserve to remain because we know what job they are doing.

A reusable meta-template can be expressed in prose:

Create [ARTIFACT] for [PURPOSE] using [AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE MATERIAL]. The intended user is [AUDIENCE]. Include [REQUIRED CONTENT]. Follow [GAME RULES OR SETTING CONSTRAINTS]. Use [DIMENSIONS / PAGE SIZE / ASPECT RATIO / FILE TYPE]. Apply [VISUAL STYLE] while preserving [CONSISTENCY REQUIREMENTS]. Avoid [KNOWN FAILURE MODES]. Return the result in [EDITABLE / PRINTABLE / TRANSPARENT / VTT-READY] form. Before finalizing, verify [MECHANICS / COUNT / LAYOUT / CONTINUITY / SPELLING].

That is the underlying grammar of most prompts in this workflow.

Debrief

Good prompting is not about speaking to AI in an unnatural dialect.

It is about articulating requirements.

If you can brief a human collaborator well, you already understand much of the skill.

Imagine giving the task to a freelance illustrator, layout designer, assistant GM, or intern.

Would “make me some cool RPG stuff” be enough?

Probably not.

You would explain the game.

You would specify the number of items.

You would identify the audience.

You would show examples.

You would say when you need transparent PNGs.

You would mention that the printer is black-and-white.

You would point out that the cards must be cut apart.

You would review the draft.

Prompting becomes much less strange when viewed this way.

The AI is unusually fast, unusually broad, and unusually willing to redo things without sending an invoice for revisions.

It is also unusually capable of producing something confidently wrong.

Those characteristics belong together.

14. Adapting the Workflow to Other RPG Genres

Describe

The demonstration uses a setting with occult steampunk agents and musical instruments, which is rather specific.

That specificity is useful because it proves the workflow does not depend on generic fantasy.

The same production sequence can serve nearly any tabletop role-playing game.

The content slots change.

The workflow does not.

For fantasy, instruments might become weapons, holy symbols, grimoires, animal companions, or magical implements.

For science fiction, they might become sidearms, scanners, cybernetic devices, drones, or spacesuit equipment.

For horror, the defining object might be a flashlight, camera, ritual text, improvised weapon, or something the character deeply regrets picking up.

For superheroes, the token needs costume identity and power cues.

For historical investigation, period clothing and social role may matter more than visible weapons.

For a school-based language-learning game, the cards might emphasize vocabulary functions, interaction goals, or role prompts.

The question is always the same:

What information does this game need to communicate?

Demonstrate

Imagine adapting the player-token workflow to a fantasy game:

Create a VTT token using the provided portrait as reference. Reimagine the person as an experienced elven ranger in a windswept high-fantasy frontier setting, wearing practical green and brown travel clothing and carrying a recurved longbow. Use a realistic painted portrait style with strong face readability. Place the portrait inside a forest-green circular border on a 1:1 transparent square canvas.

A cosmic horror game might use:

Create a VTT token using the provided portrait as reference. Reimagine the person as a 1920s investigative journalist who

has been awake far too long, wearing a rumpled period suit and holding a notebook and compact camera. Use moody but readable photographic realism. Place the portrait inside a muted brass circular border on a transparent 1:1 canvas. Do not add visible monsters or supernatural effects; the character should look human and plausible.

A science-fiction NPC-card prompt could say:

Create twelve mechanically simple NPCs for a hard-science-fiction salvage campaign. Include ship crew, station workers, corporate personnel, independent contractors, and two potentially hostile unknown contacts. Give each NPC a role, core stats, trained specialties, equipment, current objective, and one sentence describing how the NPC behaves under pressure. Keep the designs grounded in the supplied technology level.

The adaptation is easy because the prompt structure separates setting-specific content from production logic.

Debrief

Generic prompts are useful, but they should not become generic games.

That distinction matters.

The point of a reusable template is to make customization easier, not to flatten every campaign into the same material.

A horror game should feel different from a heroic fantasy campaign.

A comedy game should not acquire grimdark visual language because somebody forgot to change a placeholder.

A historical game needs different assumptions from a space opera.

The template gives us a place to put the differences.

This is why the generic versions in this essay use placeholders such as [GAME TITLE], [GENRE], [VISUAL STYLE], [NUMBER], and [SETTING-SPECIFIC FEATURE].

Replace them.

Do not leave them mentally generic.

The more distinctive your campaign is, the more useful AI can become once you feed it that distinction.

Broad models already know what a wizard is.

The interesting work begins when you explain what *your* wizards are like.

15. AI Output as Draft, Asset, and Play Material

Describe

There is a subtle danger in any powerful generation tool: speed can make drafts feel finished.

A generated character list appears beautifully formatted, so we treat it as approved.

A map arrives in full color, so we assume it is playable.

A scenario contains headings and boxed text, so we assume it has pacing.

Presentation can disguise incompleteness.

The appropriate response is not to distrust every AI output.

It is to classify the output.

Some generations are drafts.

Some are source material.

Some are near-finished production assets.

Some are ready for play.

The category depends on inspection, not appearance.

Demonstrate

A useful review prompt after generating an adventure can be written as follows:

Review this adventure specifically as a game-master play document rather than as fiction. Do not expand it yet. Identify any practical problems involving unclear objectives, missing clues, impossible dependencies, encounter balance, unused NPCs, inaccessible locations, contradictory room descriptions, absent statistics, or assumptions that players

must follow one predetermined course of action. Then revise only the problems you identify while preserving the adventure's core premise and tone.

A map review prompt can say:

Check this map against the approved scenario. Confirm that every required area exists, exits connect logically, token movement is possible, no GM-only secret is revealed by text, and the area key matches the visible map. Correct inconsistencies while preserving the approved visual style.

A character review can say:

Check these pregenerated characters for mechanical legality, duplicated roles, repeated names, missing required abilities, and obvious gaps that would make the sample adventures difficult to complete. Preserve the core character concepts while correcting mechanical or roster-level problems.

These are quality-control prompts.

They make the AI critique its own output from a different frame.

Debrief

Self-review by the model is useful, but it is not independent verification.

The same system that made the error may fail to notice it.

Human review still matters.

For mechanical details, compare against the actual rules.

For maps, look at the image.

For scenario pacing, imagine real players.

Better yet, play the adventure.

Tabletop games are wonderfully hostile to assumptions.

The players will ignore the door you expected them to enter.

They will interrogate the decorative NPC for forty minutes.

They will adopt the monster.

They will decide the obviously evil machine is “probably fine.”

They will fail the easy roll and succeed at the ridiculous one.

They will sing.

Possibly off-key.

No generated scenario can pre-simulate the full behavior of a real table, and it should not try.

The job of the prepared material is to give the director enough structure to respond.

This is why simple NPCs, clear locations, accessible clues, concise motives, and visible statistics often outperform elaborate generated lore during actual play.

We are not writing a database for its own sake.

We are building things people can use.

16. The Human Director Remains the Integrating Intelligence

Describe

At this point we have asked AI to perform an impressive number of tasks.

It has helped create characters.

It has helped calculate or organize statistics.

It has produced portraits.

It has generated tokens.

It has laid out printable materials.

It has proposed monsters and NPCs.

It has turned those characters into short adventures.

It has generated maps and keys.

It has reorganized the same information into session-specific references.

That can sound as though the human game master has disappeared.

Quite the opposite.

The human role becomes more visible because somebody must decide what belongs together.

The AI does not know why a particular joke works with your group.

It does not know that one player becomes anxious when scenarios feel time-pressured.

It does not know that another player will spend the entire session attempting to negotiate with anything capable of language.

It does not know which generated NPC makes you laugh.

It does not know when a mechanical mistake is harmless.

It does not know when the beautiful image is wrong for the tone.

It does not know what you meant until you tell it, and sometimes it does not know after you tell it either.

Welcome to collaboration.

Demonstrate

The complete workflow can be described as an iterative production cycle rather than as a single mega-prompt.

The director first establishes authoritative game context. A rough player group is generated and mechanically checked. Approved characters receive canonical portraits and VTT tokens. The same characters are placed into printable cards

and token sheets. A varied roster of simple NPCs and adversaries is generated, validated, illustrated, and converted into tokens. Short adventures then draw from the approved player and NPC rosters. Adventure-specific reference sheets reorganize existing statistics for faster play. Maps visualize the locations described by the adventures, while separate area keys preserve GM-only information. Every stage is inspected before it becomes the source for the next stage.

When an asset is wrong, the director revises that asset rather than automatically restarting the whole pipeline.

When the conversation becomes confused, the director reintroduces the canonical source material.

When an instruction has become contradictory, the director resolves it explicitly.

When the model generates something unexpectedly excellent, the director is free to keep it.

That last part matters.

Control does not mean refusing surprise.

Role-playing games live on productive surprise.

Debrief

The best metaphor for this workflow may not be "AI game master."

It may be "AI production room."

Imagine having a room containing a very fast junior writer, illustrator, layout assistant, brainstorming partner, formatting clerk, continuity assistant, and intern.

Now imagine they are all the same strange creature.

It works at remarkable speed.

It never gets tired.

It has read an absurd amount.

It can suddenly produce something wonderful.

It can also confidently put the villain's portrait on the hero card.

If you treat it as infallible, you will have problems.

If you treat it as useless because it makes errors, you will miss what it does well.

If you direct it, check it, and keep control of canonical material, it can reduce a substantial amount of game-production labor.

That leaves more time for the part we actually care about.

Playing.

17. A Complete Reusable Workflow for Online RPG Asset Production

Describe

The prompts presented so far can be used separately. Their larger value appears when they are connected.

A role-playing campaign contains relationships among assets. A player card refers to a character. A token should resemble the portrait on that card. An adventure should use approved NPCs. An NPC token should resemble the NPC's portrait. A map should represent the scenario's rooms. An area key should describe the map that actually exists.

Consistency is not achieved by asking AI to "be consistent" once.

Consistency is achieved by building later artifacts from approved earlier artifacts.

The workflow becomes a chain of authority.

Rules establish mechanics.

Approved character records establish character facts.

Canonical portraits establish visual identity.

Approved NPC records establish encounter statistics.

Approved adventures establish locations.

Approved maps establish spatial representation.

When a later artifact contradicts an earlier authoritative asset, we know which one should win.

Demonstrate

A reusable master instruction for this process can read:

We are building a connected asset set for [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM]. Work in stages and treat approved outputs from earlier stages as canonical source material for later stages. Do not silently redesign approved characters, change statistics, alter equipment, rename NPCs, or modify scenario facts merely to make a later artifact easier to generate.

For every new artifact, identify which approved earlier materials it depends on and preserve those details. If two source materials conflict, report the conflict before choosing a replacement fact.

Our production sequence is: game context and rules; sample player characters; canonical portraits; player cards; player VTT tokens; printable token sheets; NPC and adversary roster; NPC portraits and cards; NPC VTT tokens; short adventures; adventure-specific reference sheets; VTT maps; GM area keys; final consistency review.

Optimize each output for its actual use during play. Keep source information detailed enough for design but compress play-facing references so they are fast to scan.

This is not one prompt that tells the model to create everything at once.

It tells the model how to behave across the project.

That is a better use of a master instruction.

Debrief

A giant prompt requesting fifty assets can be impressive when it works.

It is difficult to debug when it fails.

If the sixteenth NPC is wrong, what do we regenerate?

If two maps are excellent and one is useless, can the successful ones be preserved?

If the character statistics are invalid, every later document built from them may inherit the problem.

A staged workflow makes dependencies visible.

This is basic production discipline, but generative AI makes it especially valuable because generation is cheap enough that users are tempted to skip planning.

Do not confuse cheap generation with cheap correction.

A mistake early in the pipeline can spread.

Verify foundational assets before multiplying them.

Check the player characters before making six cards and six tokens.

Check the NPC statistics before placing the same wrong values on three adventure sheets.

Check the adventure room structure before generating a map.

The faster the tool, the more useful a brief checkpoint becomes.

18. Closing Reflections: Make the Machine Do the Boring Bits, Keep the Game Weird

Describe

Generative AI does not need to become the center of tabletop role-playing to be valuable.

It can remain backstage.

That may be where it is most useful.

The people at the table are still making decisions, performing characters, rolling dice, solving problems, laughing at terrible ideas, inventing worse ideas, and discovering that the supposedly minor NPC has somehow become the emotional center of a six-month campaign.

The AI does not replace that.

It can help us arrive at the session with the materials ready.

The practical value of the workflow comes from a series of fairly ordinary acts: providing context, specifying output, generating a draft, inspecting it, correcting mistakes, preserving approved versions, and transforming material into the form required for play.

That is not science fiction.

Well, technically the fact that we are doing it with generative artificial intelligence is rather science-fictional.

But the workflow is ordinary creative production.

Demonstrate

The complete *Steampunk Beyond* demonstration begins with the game's own identity.

The characters are Bureau of Odd Phenomena agents.

They operate in a steampunk setting.

Music matters.

Each player character has an instrument.

Purple borders identify player-character tokens.

Red and blue borders help distinguish hostile and friendly NPCs.

Character cards are built for printing.

NPC cards are kept simple.

Short adventures reuse the generated cast.

Maps are created for actual VTT play rather than merely as illustrations.

Area keys stay outside the player-facing map.

When the AI forgets something, we ask again.

When it uses the wrong picture, we correct the picture.

When it produces an image instead of a document, we request the editable document.

When conversation context drifts, we re-upload the approved references.

When a prompt contains a contradiction, we fix the template.

None of that requires believing AI is perfect.

It requires using it.

The generic prompts in this essay make the same workflow available for a completely different game. Replace the steampunk clothing. Replace the instruments. Replace the BOP terminology. Change the border colors. Change the card statistics. Change the genre. Change the page count. Change the visual style.

Keep the production logic.

Tell the system what you are making.

Tell it why.

Tell it what must be present.

Tell it what must not change.

Tell it what file or layout you need.

Check the result.

That is the method.

Debrief

There is a tendency to discuss AI tools at the level of grand abstractions.

Will AI transform creativity?

Will it change education?

Will it change games?

Those are interesting questions.

A game master has another question at 11:30 p.m. before tomorrow's session:

"Can this thing make me six usable tokens, a printable NPC sheet, and a map of the haunted railway station?"

Yes.

With supervision, it can.

And that is enough to be useful.

The most productive relationship is not surrender. It is direction.

Use AI where speed, variation, transformation, formatting, illustration, or rapid drafting helps.

Use your own judgment where taste, meaning, rules interpretation, group knowledge, pacing, humor, emotional intelligence, and creative choice matter.

If the model gives you something better than what you had planned, steal it from the machine. It will be fine.

If it gives every character the same surname, change the names.

If it puts seven fingers on the villain, regenerate the hand.

If it forgets the area key, ask for the area key.

If the map gives you an extra room and you suddenly realize that room is exactly where the ghost orchestra ought to be rehearsing, congratulations. The error has become canon.

That is role-playing.

We make things.

We change things.

We improvise.

We use what works.

We discard what does not.

And occasionally we give a man magical bagpipes.

Live trance and prosper.

Appendix: Complete Working Prompt Set with Generic Editable Counterparts

The following prompt collection consolidates the working prompts used across the demonstration. The specialized versions preserve the original *Steampunk Beyond* wording so readers can see the actual production prompts rather than sanitized theoretical examples. Each is followed by a generic form intended for adaptation.

Player Token / Reference

Original Working Prompt

Please create a Steampunk Beyond RPG VTT tokens with the provided portrait rendered as a high-detail vibrant colorful closeup portrait photograph taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting, the person in the reference image is dressed in a bright colorful Steampunk costume holding a magical TYPE musical instrument with a harmonic resonator attached to it. The profile photo is surrounded by a bright royal-purple circle token border; the circle photo is on a 1:1 square canvas with a transparent background. Think carefully. The token will be used with a VTT program to play the Steampunk Beyond RPG online.

Generic Editable Version

Please create a [GAME TITLE] VTT token using the provided portrait as the character reference. Render the person as a high-detail [VISUAL STYLE] close-up portrait appropriate to [GENRE / SETTING]. Dress the person in [CLOTHING / ARMOR / COSTUME] and show them holding or associated with [WEAPON / TOOL /

INSTRUMENT / SIGNATURE ITEM]. Surround the portrait with a [COLOR] circular token border. Place the token on a 1:1 square canvas with a transparent background. Keep the face clear at small size and leave clean transparent space outside the border. The token will be used for online play in a virtual tabletop.

Rough Player Group

Original Working Prompt

Please create six steampunk beyond characters, 2 men and 4 women, provide a bare-bones list of name, stats, foci, musical instrument, and equipment with three-sentence bio of each character. Please check your math and make sure all stats are correct.

Generic Editable Version

Please create [NUMBER] sample characters for [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM]. Provide a bare-bones entry for each containing name, required statistics, skills/foci/specialties, signature equipment, setting-specific feature, and a three-sentence biography. Make the characters varied in concept and useful as a group. Check all point totals, derived values, and game statistics against the supplied rules before presenting the final roster.

Rough Player Cards

Original Working Prompt

Place all the characters with their profile image on a single A4 doc with 1" margins with each character with a portrait and their info in a bright royal-purple square or rectangle

arranged on the document, a row for each character, for simple printing and cutting out for demo players. Include name stats with focuses, instrument, and equipment with three-sentence bio of each character. Please have a little space between each to make cutting easier. Make sure the document is appropriate for a black-and-white printing so no color backgrounds. Return an editable document.

Generic Editable Version

Place all approved player characters and their profile images into a single editable [A4 / LETTER] document with 1-inch margins. Give each character a separated card or row containing portrait, name, essential statistics, skills/foci/specialties, signature equipment, setting-specific feature, and short biography. Leave enough white space between cards for cutting. Use [ACCENT COLOR] only for thin borders or headings and avoid dark or colored backgrounds so the document prints clearly in black and white. Use readable type and return an editable document.

Player Token Sheet — A4 DOCX

Original Working Prompt

Please create a printable A4 doc with 1" margins with these colorful character tokens arranged in grids of 1 inch by 1 inch squares for each token so they can be cut out for use in tabletop play. Repeat the tokens to have multiple sets on the page. While the tokens have their bright royal-purple circle token borders, have a dotted cut line between each square and space between each set for ease of separation in preparation of multiple demos. Return an editable document.

Generic Editable Version

Create a printable editable [A4 / LETTER] document with 1-inch margins using the approved character tokens. Arrange them in a grid of [SIZE] squares for cutting and physical tabletop use. Repeat the complete token set [NUMBER] times where page space allows. Preserve each approved token image exactly. Add light dotted cutting guides between squares and a larger gap between complete sets. Keep the page background white and return an editable document.

Player Token Sheet PNG

Original Working Prompt

Please create a sheet of VTT tokens for these characters all rendered as high-detail vibrant colorful photographs taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting, be sure to show them holding their musical instrument , the six images each surrounded by a bright royal-purple circle token border; all six circle sketches arranged on a 2:3 canvas with a transparent background with space between each token for easy editing and separation later. think carefully. these tokens will be used with a vtt program to play the Steampunk Beyond RPG online.

Generic Editable Version

Create a VTT token sheet for the [NUMBER] approved characters from [GAME TITLE]. Render all portraits in a consistent [VISUAL STYLE] and preserve each established character design. Show each character with their defining [ITEM / WEAPON / INSTRUMENT / TOOL] when practical. Give every player-character token a [COLOR] circular border. Arrange all tokens evenly on a [ASPECT

RATIO] canvas with a transparent background and clear space between circles for easy extraction. Keep the scale and border thickness consistent.

NPC/Villain Sheet — A4 DOCX

Original Working Prompt

Create a multi-page document NPC/Villain sheet of 18 original SIMPLE enemy monsters/ghosts/alien creatures and friendly NPCs for STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG demo games with six NPCs on a single A4 page in a 2 × 3 arrangement, with each NPC in an individual bordered card containing the matching profile portrait high-detail vibrant colorful photographs taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting and their name, title, type , Role, Stats and Foci, Defense, Health, Karma, Power, instrument, equipment, and one-sentence description. Have a variety. There is clear spacing between the six cards plus an inner dashed cutting guide, so they should be easy to print, cut apart, and hand directly to demo players. provide a printable multi-page document of 18 cards, six cards/NPCs on each page with each character/creature on a single row, one column only. Return an editable document with 1" margins. No color backgrounds, printable in black-and-white.

Generic Editable Version

Create an editable multi-page [A4 / LETTER] NPC and adversary document containing [NUMBER] original, mechanically simple characters and creatures for [GAME TITLE]. Include a varied mixture of [HOSTILE TYPES], [NEUTRAL TYPES], and [FRIENDLY TYPES]. Place [NUMBER PER PAGE] cards on each page in a clearly specified [ROWS × COLUMNS] arrangement. Give each

card a matching portrait, name, descriptor, type, role, required statistics, skills/foci/specialties, Defense or equivalent, Health or equivalent, resources, powers, notable equipment, setting-specific feature, and one concise description. Check all mechanics against the supplied rules. Use 1-inch margins, white backgrounds, readable type, and optional dashed cutting guides. Return an editable document suitable for black-and-white printing.

NPC/Villain Token Sheet PNG

Original Working Prompt

Please create the multi-page SHEETS of VTT tokens for all 18 original enemy monsters/ghosts/alien creatures for STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG demo games, all rendered as high-detail vibrant colorful photographs taken on a Canon EOS R5 with a 35mm lens, f/2.8, warm vibrant studio lighting, be sure to show them holding their musical instrument , the six images each surrounded by a bright RED circle token border for enemies and monsters and bright BLUE circle token border for friendly NPCs; all six circle sketches arranged on a 2:3 canvas with a transparent background with space between each token for easy editing and separation later. think carefully. these tokens will be used with a vtt program to play the STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG online.

Generic Editable Version

Create VTT token sheets for all [NUMBER] approved NPCs and adversaries for [GAME TITLE]. Preserve the approved identities and visual features. Render the portraits consistently in [VISUAL STYLE]. Use a [HOSTILE COLOR] circular border for enemies and monsters, a [FRIENDLY COLOR]

border for friendly NPCs, and [OPTIONAL NEUTRAL COLOR] for neutral or unknown characters. Arrange [NUMBER PER SHEET] tokens on each [ASPECT RATIO] transparent canvas. Leave clear space between tokens for easy extraction and maintain consistent portrait scale and border thickness.

Three Demo Adventures

Original Working Prompt

Please create 3 two-page A4 STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG adventure scenarios for demo play with BEGINNER players. Each scenario should have a simple intro and contain 4-5 of the demo villains/friendlies provided, make sure you use all the NPCs at some point and may re-use a villain in more than one scenario. You may not use a NPC more than once in a single scenario.

Have 3-4 rooms for each scenario and some combat and some puzzles. EACH SCENARIO SHOULD BE APPROPRIATE FOR 1-2 HOURS OF PLAY

Players will be playing 3-4 of the sample PCs provided so make the scenario balanced for that level of player.

Each scenario should fit on a single A4 sheet in 12 point font.

Output an editable docx file with 1" margins with all six adventures in the file. DO NOT USE COLUMN LAYOUT. Please give each adventure a unique title and plot.

Generic Editable Version

Create [NUMBER OF ADVENTURES] short [GAME TITLE / RPG SYSTEM] scenarios for [PLAYER EXPERIENCE LEVEL] players. Each should support approximately [PLAY LENGTH] of play for [NUMBER OF PCS] sample characters at [POWER / LEVEL]. Give each scenario a concise introduction and use [NPC RANGE] approved NPCs, enemies, or allies. Across the full set, use all required NPCs at least once. An NPC may recur across separate adventures but should not appear twice as separate instances within the same scenario unless the story specifically requires that.

Give every adventure [NUMBER OF AREAS] rooms, scenes, or encounter locations and include an appropriate mix of combat, investigation, social interaction, puzzles, or exploration. Give each scenario a unique title, problem, development, climax, and several possible resolutions. Balance encounters according to the supplied rules.

Format each adventure as exactly [PAGE COUNT] [A4 / LETTER] page(s) in approximately [FONT SIZE]-point body text with 1-inch margins. Do not use a multi-column page layout. Return a single editable DOCX containing all [NUMBER OF ADVENTURES] adventures.

NPC/Villain Adventure Sheet — A4 DOCX

Original Working Prompt

Create a multi-page document NPC/Villain document with a single page of NPC/VILLAINS for each of the six demo adventures, each adventure scenario sheet contains all the NPC/VILLAINS for that adventure.

Repeating some of the 18 original SIMPLE enemy monsters/ghosts/alien creatures that repeat in the adventures for multiple pages, for STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG demo games with six NPCs on a single A4 page in a 2 × 3 arrangement, with each NPC in an individual bordered card containing the matching profile portrait simple Black & White Line illustration in the style of Will Eisner and their name, title, type , Role, Stats and Foci, Defense, Health, Karma, Power, instrument, equipment, and one-sentence description. There is clear spacing between the six cards plus an inner dashed cutting guide, so they should be easy to print, cut apart, and hand directly to demo players. provide a printable multi-page DOCX of THE ADVENTURE cards, six cards/NPCs on each page in rows. Output an editable docx file with 1" margins with all six adventures in the file. DO NOT USE COLUMN LAYOUT. Please give each adventure a unique title and plot. Printable black-and-white document.

Generic Editable Version

Create an editable adventure-specific NPC reference document for all [NUMBER OF ADVENTURES] approved scenarios. Give each adventure its own [PAGE / SECTION] containing only the NPCs, enemies, monsters, and allies used in that scenario. Repeat an NPC card on different adventure pages when the same character appears in more than one scenario.

Preserve the approved statistics and identities. Arrange up to [NUMBER] cards per page in a [ROWS × COLUMNS] grid. Each card should contain a matching high-contrast black-and-white line-art portrait or other chosen portrait style, name, descriptor, type, role, required statistics, skills/foci/specialties, Defense or equivalent, Health or

equivalent, resources, powers, equipment, setting-specific features, and one concise description. Use 1-inch margins, white backgrounds, readable text, card borders, and optional cutting guides. Return an editable DOCX suitable for black-and-white printing.

VTT Maps

Original Working Prompt

Create a VTT Map for online STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG play of EACH the scenarios, make the maps colorful and useful for players and game masters. Do not put labels on the map but do describe the areas in text after the PNG render. Do put the title of the adventure in appropriate STEAMPUNK Font on top of the "STEAMPUNK BEYOND RPG" title in the lower right corner of the 3:2 image. Put the PNG map on a plain gray background. Be creative and realistic but maintain the above-view of a VTT map. Provide an area key for each map. Think carefully.

Generic Editable Version

Create a VTT map for each approved [GAME TITLE] scenario. Base every map directly on the locations and encounter areas described in its scenario. Render the map from a clear top-down or near-orthographic perspective suitable for token movement. Use a [GENRE / VISUAL STYLE] aesthetic while keeping floors, passages, doors, terrain, and encounter spaces readable.

Do not place room labels, NPC names, secret information, or GM-only notes on the player-facing map. If desired, place only the adventure title and game title in [LOCATION]. Use

a [ASPECT RATIO] image on a [TRANSPARENT / GRAY / OTHER] exterior background.

After each map, provide a separate numbered GM area key explaining locations, exits, clues, hazards, NPC positions, and scenario functions. Verify that the map and area key correspond exactly and that every required scenario location appears on the map.

Final Note for Adaptation

The prompts above should be edited.

That is not a warning. It is the point.

Change the game title.

Change the genre.

Change the character count.

Change the border colors.

Change the instruments into swords, staves, scanners, spellbooks, pistols, cameras, tricorders, enchanted frying pans, or whatever your game requires.

Change six NPCs to four.

Change three adventures to twelve.

Change A4 to Letter if that is what your printer wants.

Change photographic portraits to ink drawings if that better serves your table.

Most of all, replace vague assumptions with the actual rules and needs of your campaign.

The prompt is not the game.

The prompt is a production tool.

The game begins when people sit down together—physically or virtually—and do something nobody quite expected.

Which is rather the whole reason we play.

Brian David Phillips

Brian David Phillips is an educator, academic, minister, hypnotist, entertainer, and many many other things. An American, Dr. Phillips has lived in Taiwan for getting awfully close to forty years. He is an Associate Professor at National Chengchi University in Taipei, Taiwan, and lives in Luodong with his wife, daughter, and a multitude of cats. Dr. Phillips completed his doctoral dissertation in 1998 specifically on interactive drama: titled *"Interactive Drama: Critical Perspectives on Freeform Role Plays as Drama"* (a critical approach to the theatre-style freeform live action roleplaying game as theatrical game form). He founded the Journal of Interactive Drama in 2005, providing one of the first homes to peer-reviewed discourse on live roleplaying within a multi-disciplinary context. Today, he continues to introduce young people to interactive frama style salon LARPing in class and outside of the classroom. He also now devotes more time to research in educational applications of Artificial Intelligence. Web: http://www.WakingDreams.org

VIRTUALITIES
Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs

Call for Papers

The Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs (ISSN 1994-1250) is an online peer-reviewed journal on immersive narrative experiences such as scenario-based interactive drama freeform live action roleplaying games, virtual reality, and other immersive literatures, providing a forum for serious discussion of virtual reality, LARP, narrative constructs, live roleplaying game theory, design, and practice. Two to three issues per volume are published annually. The journal provides a forum for the discussion of any of the various scenario-based theatre-style live action roleplaying games, freeforms, interactive dramas, virtual reality experiences, immersive theatre, and invites contributions in all areas of immersive literature, theory, design, and practice for educational, entertainment, and recreational roleplay. Formal and informal essays, articles, papers, and critical reviews are also welcome.

This is a peer-reviewed journal that may include formal papers and informal essays for and by the roleplaying community from a wide variety of disciplines. The focus is general enough so that authors should feel comfortable submitting material of either a formal or informal nature within a rather generous range of contexts, albeit all submissions are subjected to a blind peer-review and should be appropriate to a serious and thoughtful discussion -- we encourage articles, essays, and formal papers on all manner of immersive narrative, live roleplaying, freeform, interactive drama, and virtual reality topics. Discussions of related immersive narrative, ludology, techniques, and good solid critical book and roleplay scenario or event reviews are quite welcome as well. As this is a multi-disciplinary journal, material related to a wide range of immersive experiences, scenario-based learning, social psychology,

critical theory, performance studies, popular culture, design, virtual reality creation, and more as they intersect with immersive interactive drama and virtual realities are also welcome. Pure design pieces related to experience creation, scenario construction, and review are also encouraged. Each issue will typically showcase one to three longform or four to six shortform interactive drama freeform live action roleplaying scenarios; creative scenario submissions of this type are very sought after. Scenarios for submission should include a section of self-reflective critical thought and formal designer's notes that discuss issues related to the creation of the piece as well as a formal section which reviews the author's performance experiences with the scenario. Designer's notes are also encouraged.

As an international journal, the language of publication is English. Submissions are accepted throughout the year.

Submissions are vetted by the submissions editor and assigned to editorial board members for blind peer review. Hardcopy submissions are not accepted.

E-mail submissions are accepted at brian@briandavidphillips.com.

Include a cover page with your submission containing Your Name, Qualifications and Rank, Institutional Affiliation, Address, Email, Telephone, and a copy of the abstract for the submission. Please also attach a brief author's biography of 75-200 words to be included in the contributor's notes section of the published journal. The text of your submission should not have any identifying features.

The journal is published online at
http://www.interactivedramas.info/joural.htm.

Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs

A Multi-Discipline Peer-Reviewed Journal of Immersive Narrative Experiences

Notes for Contributors

Electronic submissions should be sent to: Submissions Editor,

Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs
E-mail submissions are accepted at brian@briandavidphillips.com.

The Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs (ISSN 1994-1250) is a peer-reviewed journal which publishes one volume per year, with one to three issues per volume (depending upon the number of accepted submissions - we do not have a set schedule or quota for publication). Both Microsoft Word (6.0 or above, Windows format) and txt files are acceptable. Once received, manuscripts will be sent to reviewers immediately.

1. Manuscripts submitted to The Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs should follow the style sheet of the current MLA Handbook as appropriate. Scenario submissions may use informal formatting conventions as long as they stay within the guidelines here.
2. If your submission has notes, please use footnotes, not endnotes.
3. The font used is Times New Roman (12pt) – creative pieces, such as scenarios, may use other font sizes but should stay within the same font type. If you use a special font that is non-system, you must include a copy of the font file with your submission. ***Please do not use columns in your piece***.
4. Use a separate sheet to include your name, title, affiliated institution, and contact information (email) as well as a brief author's biography of 75-200 words to be included in the contributor's notes.
5. Include a brief summary or abstract of the submission. 100-150 words.
6. You may not use illustrations or photographs in your submission.

7. Please note that this journal evaluates submissions on an Accept or Not-Accept basis and does not have a provisional revision option. You will receive a notice of Acceptance or Rejection for publication in a timely manner and will not typically receive any comments regarding the piece from the reviewers.

Publishers wishing their books, products, or other materials reviewed may send hard or soft review copies to the editor's address above and a reviewer will be assigned.
The journal is published online at http://www.interactivedramas.info.

Questions regarding the journal can be addressed to brian@briandavidphillips.com.

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Notes for Reviewers

The editors and the entire editorial board of The Journal of Virtual Realities, Interactive Dramas, and Literary Constructs (ISSN 1994-1250) gratefully acknowledge your support for the journal. Your involvement is crucial to the journal's success. Your suggestions and contributions are always welcome.

If you deem it inappropriate for you to review this particular article, please kindly inform the editors and return the materials as soon as possible. We take pride in providing authors with quality reviews as well as informing them promptly the status of their submissions. We would appreciate it very much if you could return your final review notification to the editors ***within three weeks*** of receiving the materials. Please use e-mail for journal correspondence.

In addition to general considerations, please take the following points into account: Significance and contribution
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,
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Submissions E-mail: brian@briandavidphillips.com
Journal Webpage: http://www.interactivedramas.info/journal.htm

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