

## Reflective Report on *the Exorcists, an Experimental Game Performance*

- The Concepts of *the Exorcists*

### Gameplay as Skeleton and Theatre as Flesh

The research themes for the final three sessions are game and ritual and the production topic I offer is exorcism. So after building up a game database with collected theatrically expressive games and a close examination of all of them, the main gameplay, the focus of interaction, as we decide, is light. Light exists as a tangible, perceivable, and shapeless being and this feature relates it to soul and spirit. With all lights off, shadow and darkness overwhelm the whole space transforming it to the soul world of the possessed. Color, shape, intensity, and movement of light are exclusive languages of this psychic dimension. Four lightened candles are placed in four corners representing the nodes that support the network of a soul according to beliefs of some Asian religions. Three of us play 'spirits' and inhabit three nodes from where they guard the soul. Each of them has a torch and a gel of designated color to be easily distinguished and directed by the player who also has a torch with gels of all colors. One node, however, is vacant, which is responsible for the invasion of evil spirits from without. The first gameplay of light is to require player to prevent the evil ghost to possess an unguarded node. The player stands in a corner using a torch with gels of certain colors to instruct good spirits to move between nodes (the evil moves more slowly than the good does). After a certain amount of time comes the second level: the evil ghost gets mad and contaminates all the good ones by turning off the candles they guard. Now another in-game character, the old shaman (the player is the young shaman) will take over the player's torch, which means the master is ready to make self-sacrifice to save the possessed and promote the young apprentice. The player shall protect the master by playing certain shaman instruments whenever the light spots of evil spirits reach the old shaman's. The bad light spots will bounce away once the shaman instrument is played but attack again and again. So the player, must run to relight the candles and protect the master at the same time.

The two lighting games explained above constitute the skeletons of *The Exorcists* so the rest is to work out its flesh - the parts of theatre/performance. We don't have an intricate story - not mainly because the length of the work doesn't allow that but as far as a game performance is concerned, its vital storytelling must come from in-game interactions generated by players. So, what we have is a subtle framework: a shaman master guides the apprentice to drive away the evil spirits from within the soul of the possessed. The ritual succeeds during which the former sacrifices himself/herself and the latter are exalted. Another reason against a well-made story is formal - game and theatre are both powerful art mediums that compete to dominate the ways of outputting information. Players must digest a game theatre piece simultaneously in two ways as information is sometimes presented in the form of play and sometimes in the form of performance, so they won't have enough attention for a complicated story. Principles of improvising are applied here. Simple and interactive, set and props collaborate - candles and torches make lights of colors in the dark and project changing shadows on the wall in correspondence to our main gameplay. The old shaman plays instruments, mostly an African tribal drum, to make live sounds. The rhythm made by the drum generates a sacred atmosphere

(and for this reason live sounds are necessary) and plays a part in the gaming by guiding the player, e.g. reminding him/her whenever the evil spirit is about to grab an unguarded candle.

### Framing

The hardest part is 'framing', i.e., how to make clear that this is a game theatre and the codes of attending a game theatre to players before, during, and after the production. These two questions are worth an article of in-depth discussion but within our limited production time we have to solve them quickly and simply. Game theatre is still in nature a form of theatre - this decides that smooth expressiveness instead of functionality of a gaming system matters more. The sense of being 'mechanic' brought by gaming rules must be evaded as one participant vividly points out: 'it shouldn't look like we are passing levels in a game - it should make us feel in a theatre.' She is right about it because that is one of the obstacles concerning the foundation of game theatre. So, in the *Exorcists* we deny an overt 'game host' to present the codes and instructions. Instead, I as a production staff wait outside the door informing players of what people usually hear before a play starts in theatre. Once the player steps into the space, the old shaman takes over instructing, whilst in role. Still, the old shaman's lines are subtle and vague when it comes to storytelling but crystal clear and simple while unfolding gameplay guidelines. However, the common hindsight is that this handling with framing is not satisfying at all but quite 'cheap and tacky'. To find a proper way of framing for game theatre has been bothering me since I started researching it last year in Trinity with my classmates. It is one of the more complex issues in embodying my research as it needs to address how theatre and game can interconnect.

- Re-examination of Some Key Ideas of Game Theatre

#### Is Theatre Compatible with Game?

The production of *The Exorcists* is a bold but not very successful experiment as it is overstretched to explore at the same time the relationships between theatre and game and those between ritual and game. Beyond a lack of time for brainstorming and production, we must go back to the original thesis: is theatre compatible with game? Is ritual compatible with game? I have touched upon the first one in the last paragraph and there are more to examine with *The Exorcists* as an example but conclusively speaking, all the relevant issues relates to '**de-systematizing**'. For instance, randomness of player's interactions provides a challenge to the preset frameworks and tracks. Since game theatre acknowledges the player as principal meaning maker, the preset frameworks must be resilient enough to accommodate player response. The resilience we are looking for must be theatrical rather than be facilitated by a well-rounded gaming system. As for acting, there is a good illustration in *The Exorcists* of how system-like gameplay affects improvisation: in terms of the rules player must beat the shaman drum to bounce the evil spirits away from the old shaman. But our player then was also running to the candles so he couldn't beat the drum in time. Though we had this situation rehearsed but somehow we were expecting him to do it right, which made our actors unable to focus on their acting. It is like one wheel gear waiting to respond to the other. It is probably because this is a gameplay inspired by a video music game. Even though it is distilled to be a live game it still carries the logic of programming.

To de-systematize, we must free our players and actors. They shall respond to each other sincerely - they are equivalent meaning makers. We need game without complexity of system and rules in which sense such game approximates 'play'. In the eyes of anthropologists play is a less structured form compared to game and this idea might sound like a regression. Though it is not the case for game theatre where play refers to a structure of playful interactions that is less bound by rules and system but more free and expression-centred - this decides the games integrated in a game theatre must be at least simple.

### Is Ritual Compatible with Game?

There are positive answers for the second question as dicing game exemplifies a good compatibility of ritual and game. And as Johan Huizinga's in *Homo Ludens* proposes, 'when Held concludes from the sacred significance of dicing that games in archaic culture are not entitled to be called "play", I am inclined to deny this most strenuously. On the contrary, it is precisely the play-character of dicing that gives it so important a place in ritual.'<sup>1</sup> He believes to examine 'play' in different cultures, 'our point of departure must be the conception of an almost childlike play-sense expressing itself in various play-forms, some serious, some playful, but all rooted in ritual and productive of culture by allowing the innate human need of rhythm, harmony, change, alternation, contrast and climax'<sup>2</sup>. In a nutshell, the holy (serious) and the playful is born as one. This is my initial inspiration to pick game and ritual for final ensemble production with other sorts of gameplay.

However, the real praxis of this theory is full of tricky questions as formal conflicts are felt between game and ritual. The core of game is interaction, to restlessly do, respond, and redo with everyone being equal players. Ritual, as Richard Schechner in *Performance Studies: an Introduction* points out, 'contributes the set patterns, repetitions, and the systems'<sup>3</sup> with 'the hammerhead of authority'<sup>4</sup>. *The Exorcists* exemplifies how game can deconstruct ritual, one of the possibilities when the two meet each other in game theatre. Both build themselves on make-believe, a temporary contract for its participants to embrace the illusions they make. Theatre achieves this by, for example, the fourth wall and game does by playful interacting. Play diminishes respect and interaction interrogates the unquestionable. The formal nature of game theatre determines its only way of representing ritual is to destroy it. However hard Huizinga tries to prove the oneness of the playful and the holy preceding even birth of civilizations, modern people like us feel trapped while representing ritual with game.

### ● Summary of Conclusions

1. Light proves an exciting element that includes strong theatricality and lots of gameplay possibilities.

2. Storytelling in game theatre should be simple to make way for the chemical reactions made by the collaboration between game and theatre. It'd be better to take the shape of a general and subtle framework whose deeper meanings are to be created by players.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Huizinga, "Homo Ludens, A Study of The Play-element in Culture" (London: Routledge&Kegan Paul, 1949), 58

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 75

<sup>3</sup> Richard Schechner, "Performance Study: An Introduction" (New York: Routledge, 2002), 101

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 89

3. The framing of game theatre is still the most difficult unsolved part. The framing codes of theatre still apply here but the question is how when there are games involved.

4. Game is compatible with theatre as long as it is de-systematized - free, simple, and expression-centred.

5. There is full of possibilities between ritual and game; in the case of *the Exorcists*, game deconstructs ritual by its playful interactions.

## Bibliography

Huizinga, Johan, “ Homo Ludens, A Study of The Play-element in Culture ” (London: Routledge&Kegan Paul, 1949)

Schechner, Richard, “Performance Study: An Introduction” (New York: Routledge, 2002)