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Spontaneity and the Supernatural: Simulating Improv on Twine

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Thesis of Angelica Zadak

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
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SPONTANEITY AND THE SUPERNATURAL: SIMULATING IMPROV ON TWINE

A Thesis

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Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Angelica Zadak

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Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

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Abstract

This thesis is an improv-based digital role-playing game (RPG) created on Twine titled *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. The game synthesizes Dustin Edward's scholarship on remix and digital rhetoric, Kathleen Blake Yancy and Stephen J. McElroy's application of assemblage theory in composition, and Viola Spolin's improv theory and practices to take improv from the stage to a digital space. This game uses Twine as a development tool to deliver improv concepts, such as Spolin's ensemble, environment, and intuition, procedurally. To incorporate these elements into the game, the thesis engages potential players with a narrative that suggests all players can practice improv through mechanics that include choice-based responses, timed responses, and suggestion entry via text boxes. Finally, this thesis examines the possibilities available to writers and game developers to teach players improv practices using digital games.

Keywords: improvisation, video game, Twine, digital rhetoric

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Introduction

It was my first day working with a new improvisation, or improv, student. I observed her body language, noting a gaze avoiding eye contact, hands folded in a metaphorical shield against the unexpected, and fingers fidgeting with nervous energy. From this student's body language, it became clear how much courage she gathered to see me. She wanted to learn how to use improv as a tool to build her self-confidence. Over the course of the following years, we would play games and perform scenes that focused on what caused her stress while interacting with others, treating improv as a rehearsal for life.

I was a lot like my student before I learned about improv. I would shut down when confronted with uncertain situations, like interacting with someone new, but all the fear seemed to melt away while practicing improv as well as playing video games. Both experiences allow me to focus on achieving goals rather than focusing on what makes me self-conscious. Video games, in particular, help me strengthen my identity, self-confidence, knowledge, and critical thinking as they allow me to roleplay as strong heroes, like Spyro¹ and Sly Cooper², who possess qualities I do not otherwise allow myself to explore beyond digital worlds. Simulations games allow me to experience things I would otherwise not and translate my new experiences to the real world. For example, playing the *Catz* and *Dogz (Petz)* series taught me rudimentary lessons for breeding and caring for animals as I adopted virtual cats and bred new species of dogs. In

¹ Spyro is the determined purple protagonist of the *Spyro* series of games. He is often portrayed as the smallest and most headstrong of the dragons tasked with saving his kin from the antagonists that appear in the various renditions of the series.

² Sly Cooper is the protagonist in the noir-styled platformer *Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus*. He is portrayed as stealthy, acrobatic, clever, and calm under pressure.

The Sims series, I learned empathy as I experienced many different lives as many different characters across many different generations. Computer games like the *Nancy Drew* series taught me how to problem solve by presenting me with complex puzzles and about new topics such as gothic monsters, French fashion, Aztec culture, and orcas. Ian Bogost explains in *Persuasive Games* that video games are often created to represent real-world entities and systems, and in doing so, they afford players opportunities to experiment with the procedures and practices that may occur in those systems. When it comes to video games, playing can often feel safe and freeing because games allow us to explore new experiences and practices in an interactive way and without fear of embarrassment upon failure.

Improv, on the other hand, consistently disrupts my sense of comfort while still providing possibilities through play. Improv is an immediate act of composition that focuses on process and collaboration commonly associated with stage performance (Alda; Spolin; Wasson). Improv also occurs off the stage. Improv is practiced in workspaces, classrooms, and therapy clinics. The growing popularity of adapting improv for new spaces results in prevalent improv companies and many players teaching participants how to combine improv with other practices (Alda; Leonard and Yorton). Players, or those who participate in improv, understand improv's value comes from building a playful mindset for approaching uncomfortable situations. All players initially feel discomfort when enacting scenes with little to no preparation. The discomfort never goes away, but much like an action-based video game, the uncertainty of the situation becomes fun with practice as it allows players to explore new perspectives to a multitude of problems.

Despite the endless possibilities of and applications for improv and the belief that “everyone can play improv,”³ there are emotional and physical barriers that keep various kinds of audiences from participation. One of the most common barriers is the fear of getting started. Alan Alda believes many people begin with no desire to perform improv but inherit the desire once they begin the practice. Unfortunately, the initial fear of performing in front of others is too much pressure for the very audiences who may benefit from improv the most. Physical barriers also prevent some people from participating in improv and other theatrical practices.⁴ Audiences who experience these physical barriers may not be able to participate in standard theatrical activities or performances and must seek out special drama programs to have the same ability to participate as others (Krajnc Joldikj; Sills; Unwin). Due to this potential for inaccessibility, many are left without the benefits of improvised play. In contrast, personal computing devices and mobile technologies are highly accessible platforms which provide a variety of play formats, and as such, they are well-suited to serve as sources for learning and practicing improv.

Overall, my goal is to make improv more accessible by creating an improv-based digital roleplaying game (RPG) called *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* (<https://lycanangel.itch.io/spontaneityandthesupernatural>). There is not much academic work on the intersection of improv with digital games, but there is rising interest in

³ One of Viola Spolin’s favorite phrases to entice participation (Alda; Spolin; Wasson).

⁴ In 2020, COVID-19 emerged as an airborne virus, so many individuals were forced to social distance to avoid becoming infected. Many improvisors became inactive without the ability to conduct performances or rehearsals on the stage or with large groups of people. As a result, well-known improv training centers such as the iO in Chicago and Upright Citizen’s Brigade (UCB) in New York closed their doors permanently. Other improvisors scrambled to find new ways to play; many improv companies such as The Second City began offering fully virtual Zoom classes and performances.

“playable theatre” (King). In a call for proposals for a special issue of the *Well Played Journal*, Brad King explains the importance of research in “playable theatre,” or “immersive theatre,” and its rise in popularity. He describes a theatre company, Third Rail, experimenting with more immersive experiences for their audiences in shows such as *Then She Fell* and *Punch Drunk’s Sleep No More*. Juggernaut Theatre Company in Miami created a similar experience with *Miami Motel Stories*, a series which allows audience members to walk through a hotel in Miami, learn history and cultural information about the location, and interact with the actors. Audience members sometimes become a part of the characters’ narratives through improv. Evidence of a rising popularity of improv-enriched playable theatre can also be found in web series such as *Critical Role* in which voice actors perform and play *Dungeons & Dragons*. However, there are few, if any, digital games that offer immersive theatre with a clear emphasis on improv strategies.⁵ *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* fills this niche by offering players improv theater games in a digital format through procedural and remix rhetorics that have players connect to digital improv experiences through playful metaphor.

⁵ There are some simulation games that lend themselves to this kind of immersive theatre but do not explicitly reference improv. *The Sims* series provides players the stage and characters to create their own narratives in the games, while walking simulators like *Dear Esther* allow players to interact with the story as it unfolds around them.

Literature Review

Historical and contemporary approaches to improv heavily influenced my designs for *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*, including those of Sam Wasson, Alan Alda, and Viola Spolin. In *Improv Nation*, Sam Wasson describes improv from its beginnings as an experimental form of theater at the University of Chicago to its current cultural acceptance as a widely popular form of comedy entertainment on the *The Colbert Show*. He exalts improv for its ability to free players from the confines of scripted dialogue that often accompanies theatrical performances. Instead, players react organically to the audience, the other players on stage, and their environment. However, not all practices of improv are created equal. Alan Alda explains people often associate the practice of improv with ‘improv comedy’ where players perform comedic sketches and show off their quick wit on the stage (6). In improv comedy, players rely on rules to remain in agreeance and obtain reliable results when performing in front of a live audience. Some of these rules are applied in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* with modifications to account for the digital format. These rules move players through the game’s dialogue by encouraging players to agree with other characters and specific action options.

Players are also asked to act in accordance with the rules while playing the improv games implemented throughout *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. One game implemented in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* is called “Yes, And,” which is a cornerstone exercise in improv comedy. Wasson notes the “Yes, and” rule “makes cohabitation [on stage] possible.” The “yes” has both players agree to what is deemed reality on stage. The “and” calls for the players to “enhance” or add to the established reality (51). Thus, a scene moves forward with agreement among players. Alda argues

that though the rules provide predictable fun for audiences, they are not what improv is about intrinsically. He refers to Paul Sills⁶ and Viola Spolin's theory of improv as concepts that allow improv to exceed the stage (6). Like Alda, my methodology for implementing improv in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* builds on the foundations of improv put in place by Viola Spolin. I follow Alda's methodology in implementing Spolin's theory in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* to help improv exceed the stage through a digital platform. Three major components of Spolin's theory—intuition, environment, and ensemble—appear in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* as attributes players can increase through their in-game choices. Spolin believes as people exercise these three components of improv, they are more easily able to experience spontaneity.

Viola Spolin provides a framework for teaching improv to inexperienced players, and I implement these strategies in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. Viola Spolin is widely recognized as the founder of improv and provides a foundation for improv theory and practice in her book *Improvisation for the Theater*, which serves as a manual for those both new and experienced in improv. The book is required reading for schools like The Second City Training Center and is referenced in nearly every improv handbook. Spolin asserts that once players utilize intuition and the environment, spontaneity becomes possible. Spolin suggests spontaneity is the goal of improv play, defining it as a “moment of personal freedom when we are faced with reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly” (4). I use Spolin's ideas to support my designs for *Spontaneity and the*

⁶ Paul Sills is the son of Viola Spolin and advocates for her theory. Sills is the first recorded player to use Spolin's theory as a means to performance through the establishment of the Compass Theater (Wasson).

Supernatural, specifically my considerations for new players who might find themselves introduced to Spolin's theory for the first time in a digital format.

My designs in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* implement Spolin's theories by asking players to consider intuition in their decision-making, simulating the spontaneity she describes. My game incorporates Spolin's concept of "intuition" both as metaphor and action. "Intuition" is "the moment when we are freed to relate and act" and is only possible in "immediacy – right now" (4). People often struggle with creating or making decisions in the moment. Spolin explains "intuition is often thought to be an endowment or mystical force enjoyed by the gifted" (4). This quote is the inspiration for the supernatural themes in *Spontaneity and The Supernatural* that evoke thoughts of magic and the impossible through narrative. Players interact with supernatural beings and are thrust into a world that seems beyond themselves until they learn that they are also supernatural beings themselves. Spolin says, "the 'average' person [can] transcend the limitation of the familiar, and courageously enter the area of the unknown, and release momentary genius within" (3). The "genius" Spolin describes manifests through improvised lines and actions that may appear to flow flawlessly on stage. Intuition can be likened to children roleplaying as they have not necessarily gained the experience to understand the roles that they play but still conduct themselves as though they do. Players make a choice and go with it in confidence. I incorporate these actions related to intuition through choice and time constraints in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. Some choices and moments in which players must fill in word boxes with their own original ideas are time sensitive. Players must act "in immediacy" to succeed.

Spontaneity and the Supernatural incorporates Spolin's "environment" by having players experience and interact with the game's setting. "Environment" describes how players react to the space, other players, and the imagined space developed in the scene. Environment ultimately aids players in creating intuitive action by strengthening players' abilities "to perceive and sense the new with the full body" (5). Players experience the environment as "wit" in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* as they make choices that use the game world or their previous experience in interacting with the world, such as using a smartphone flashlight to scare a monster away. Players also play through improv skills such as "Mirror" and "Simulation," which when played traditionally, ask players to focus on the environment. The environment here is essentially experienced on a new stage through narrative descriptions and imagined surroundings. The new stage manifests through the text-based Twine platform which transforms the original rules and expectations of improv. Instead of players imaging their blank stage as a new space and left to determine their choices in that space, they are thrust into a fictional world and asked what choices they would make in this specific context.⁷ The environments and objects that appear in this context allow me to choose the focus of players' attentions. Spolin believes choosing a focus makes playing games and solving problems easier for players. *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* provides players with an overarching focus immediately through the narrative and gives players an ensemble which is always in agreeance as to what the focus is.

⁷ This act is comparable to standard improv practice where actors take suggestions from the audience. In this case, however, the entire story is a suggestion that players agree to navigate.

Spontaneity and the Supernatural invokes Spolin's ensemble to illustrate the power in using individual strengths to accomplish a common goal. The "ensemble" is one of Spolin's most important components of improv and is also one of the most difficult to incorporate in a single-player digital game. The ensemble is the group of players working on a common goal in an improvised scene. Spolin emphasizes "the importance of group response, in which players see themselves as an organic part of a whole, becoming one body through which all are directly involved in the outcome of playing" (5). To clarify, all players must agree on the focus and rules of improv for everyone to continue playing (Spolin 45; Wasson 51). Players should not feel as though they must give up their individuality while playing, instead they must be able to invoke "self-identity and self-expression," contributing their own skills and experiences to successfully complete a scene (Spolin 9). I incorporate the "ensemble" through character development in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. My game provides choices for players to grow closer with non-player characters (NPCs) by listening or being honest with them. Some interactions allow the player to learn the characters' special "gifts" or skills by communicating with them. Each gift, though unique, serves the purpose of defeating the villain of the game. The ensemble is the most evident of Spolin's concepts in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* with allusions to the concept throughout the game. At times, however, the game also pushes against the concept of the ensemble by having players interact with the game individually.

Spontaneity and the Supernatural asks players to engage with improv as a single-player game. The ability to play alone may be perceived positively as Spolin warns fear of judgment and from those players viewed as authority figures often dilutes

individuality. The need to impress can lead to constant questioning which inhibits spontaneity (7, 9-10). Though playing without a traditional concept of an “ensemble” as a group may still seem farfetched and contradictory to the theory, we can look at the “ensemble” to enhance “self-identity” and “self-expression” (Spolin). Alda draws on this idea of “self-identity” and “self-expression” in his book *If I Understand You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?*, which builds on Spolin’s theory by arguing the need for improv as a common practice. Though he does emphasize using improv for communication in the sciences, Alda provides an explanation regarding how improv games are useful for all walks of life, following Spolin’s belief that “everyone can improvise.” Alda’s explains:

Scientists fail better when they’re looking for more truth rather than some absolute true-for-all-time truth. And the rest of us fail better when we give ourselves over to the improvisation of daily life. Things change; we accept that and go on with it. Connection happens between us and suddenly we see things about one another we’d never noticed before; just as in an improv, invisible object become real, and then they transform. (194)

Through his focus on connection, Alda appreciates that people seek individual growth in the pursuit of better connection. Thus, the games he describes may be played with others, but he also emphasizes games that can enhance an individual’s skill in public speaking or communicating with others. Furthermore, Alda describes his belief that people should improvise individually as it increases their ability to empathize similar to how people practice meditation on their own to enhance self-awareness (195-196). For players who wish to learn and practice improv independently, Spolin’s idea of the improv ensemble

can make the practice inaccessible. Thus, Alda's work provides insight on how we might design improv games to address the needs of the individual.

Spontaneity and the Supernatural also builds on Spolin's theory by combining and applying it with different scholarly concepts. Spolin's theory of improv is adapted frequently to accomplish various goals, including enhancing corporate team performance, supporting communication skills, and understanding psychological dilemmas. Though the original intention of improv is not quite the same, those who participate in the games Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton prescribe achieve success in teaching people how to improvise using play and procedures. The release of books such as *Yes, And* by Leonard and Yorton demonstrate improv's transition as a tool for performance to a tool for improving skills associated with collaboration, active listening, and creativity. Leonard and Yorton offer corporations solutions in a tidy "improv tool kit," which advertises itself as having an improv game for any given situation. Their improv business techniques are rephrased, typically focusing on the games Spolin prescribes to help the ensemble work better together⁸. Leonard and Yorton inform how I incorporate improv practices and remix them in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*'s digital format. Though the research is extensive for remixing improv to enhance other skills, there is a lack of research about transitioning improv into a fully digital context; the closest being *Improv for Gamers*, which instructs players how to build characters and tell stories while playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. Thus, to fill the gap, I specifically examine the adaptation of improv into a digital format.

⁸ Spolin's emotion exercises which are meant to help tap into intuition are remixed to become Emotional Option which Leonard and Yorton label as a tool for corporate "co-creation" (220).

Spontaneity and the Supernatural combines traditional improv play with digital gameplay to move the trajectory of improv toward technological accessibility. This emphasis on technology may raise concerns as to whether improv play integrated into digital gameplay may alter the nature of play. However, play itself is already quite hard to define. Brian Sutton-Smith aims to define play despite its ambiguity by using rhetorical characteristics in his book *The Ambiguity of Play*. He contemplates the purpose of play's variation biologically as a way to adapt successfully to various situations and psychologically as a natural "virtual simulation" where players can obtain control over chaotic situations (231). It is interesting to examine Sam Wasson's timeline, which illustrates the evolution improv continuously undergoes to stay relevant among American society. The evolution of improv Wasson describes mirrors Sutton-Smith's explanation of play's survival through variation. *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* may be described as a game that gives improv an opportunity for survival through variation as it seeks to serve the purpose of implementing improv games and techniques in a way that would make it more accessible.

There is, however, some disagreement amongst scholars as to how much focus should be placed on play in digital formats. Miguel Sicart explains that while many attempt to define play, they often place vast amounts of importance on the means that help in expressing play such as games, objects, technology, etc., rather than play itself. His work implies that the players in games such as *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* will lose the creative freedom (as Wasson describes it) that is intrinsic to improv. Instead, Sicart claims that the game designer would be the only one to experience creative expression, casting players as merely actors in a "play" that reaffirms the game designer's

message instead of creating their own (73). In *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*, there is an effort to provide players with some areas of agency for expression. In these areas of the game, such as when the player character uses Animal Characteristics, players may enter text which then affects how their actions unfold. However, even if a digital game allows players expression, Sicart still asserts the use of technology will privilege those who have access to games or development tools (86-87). I agree that play should be accessible and allow creative expression, but I am not exploring the same type of access Sicart describes. I describe instead the access to improv as a resource for personal development. I believe digital games can provide access to players who feel uncomfortable playing in groups. Essentially, the aim in moving improv play to the digital is not to erase the group play in the physical space entirely, but to provide another option for people who play improv to express themselves.

Improv traditionally allows players to express themselves on a stage, where *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* allows players to express themselves digitally. Though digital games are not always performative in the theatrical sense, Ian Bogost argues players engage in performance and participation through procedural rhetoric in his book *Persuasive Games*. Sicart critiques Bogost's theory as being too focused on the objects (136). Players no longer have freedom to create and express themselves. Players effectively become actors who participate in the narrative of the game when they perform tasks in digital games. Bogost identifies "procedural rhetoric" as a new way to interpret games and the claims they make. Procedural rhetoric specifically analyzes how computational systems persuade their users through processes (2-3). Bogost notes user interaction is not always present in procedural rhetoric. Sometimes player agency is

limited in simulations that make claims about the real-world processes (40). Bogost's persuasive game analysis in conjunction with Spolin and others' theories illuminate the need and ability to offer improv on digital platforms.

Project Design

Audience

Spontaneity and the Supernatural is designed for casual gamers. Jesper Juul describes casual gamers as those who prefer “positive and pleasant fictions” and dislike “difficult games” (29). *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* brings players into a fictitious world that requires no background knowledge on the story world or gaming. Furthermore, the game is easy to play as players proceed through the game via “Next” and option buttons, which they must click on the computer or touch on a smart phone. The main challenge presents itself to players in the form of timed responses. All improv games have a countdown timer set to 15 seconds to implement Spolin’s idea of intuition by creating a sense of “immediacy” for the player (4). Initially, players learn improv games with the ability to have the timer run out, and the only repercussion they face is the need to repeat the game section. However, if a player runs the timer while encountering a character named Beast, they risk gaining a Fear point. Fear is related to player inaction as a metaphor for the need to abandon fear and to take up intuition.

Fear is perhaps the most important attribute that appears in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. Fear symbolizes fear of failure and disapproval, which are often noted as the reasons people avoid participating in improv play (Alda, Leonard and Yorton, Spolin, Wasson). The persistent presence of Fear in the game represents the constant presence of fear in people’s lives when making choices; however, choices must be made to progress. No matter what actions or choices players make, they inevitably obtain 1 Fear point in the first chapter of the game when the player character dies in a dream. Karen Wenz explains the appearance of death in a simulation game is important because players relate the

avatar or player character's death to their own mortality; thus, the game death highlights Fear as an "obstacle" they can "control" and overcome (314). Furthermore, players experience death-of-self if they obtain 3 Fear attribute points, causing the player character to transform into a Beast, which is a feral Shapeshifter stuck in its animal form and driven only by fear. Though the negative experience of Fear may act in opposition to casual gamers' desire for positive experiences, the Fear metaphor assists in creating serious gameplay.

Spontaneity and the Supernatural is designed as a serious game for those seeking serious play. Ian Bogost explains "serious games are created under the direct influence and guidance of institutional goals," and these goals may be political, for advertising, or educational (55). Serious gamers seek out the training serious games offer (Clement 202). *Escape from the Man-Sized Cabinet* by *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* team is one example of a Twine game which utilizes procedural rhetoric to achieve serious goals. In this Twine game, players must help Stephen Colbert escape a man-sized cabinet that leads to a fantasy environment where they are given a quest by a centaur. Only by accomplishing the quest can players hope to help Stephen Colbert return to his dressing room. The game utilizes concepts from 'improv comedy' to integrate humor, and Second City satirical humor is evident through the references to *Dungeons and Dragons*, pixelated imagery, and silly choices offered in sections of the game such as "To-Do List," "Death," and "Wizard." *Escape from the Man-Sized Cabinet*'s goal is to advertise *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, which the game achieves by immersing players in a gamified 'improv comedy' sketch that takes them through the procedure of helping Stephen Colbert so that he may begin his show's newest season. On the other hand,

Spontaneity and the Supernatural uses serious play to educate serious gamers about improv.

Text

Spontaneity and the Supernatural is a serious game with the goal to educate players about improv theory and practice. One way *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* acts as a serious game is through game mechanics that parallel improv practices. In other words, the game simulates the procedures improv players typically encounter during improv games. Ian Bogost explains that if “behavior corresponds with the sort of content that an educator would positively reinforce in the material world, then the videogame serves a (potentially) commensurate purpose, both in function and value” (236). The improv games that appear in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* are Eye Contact, Mirror, Animal Characteristics, Yes And, and Once Upon a Time. These games all appear in Spolin’s text as exercises for one or more improv skills (e.g., Yes, And strengthens intuition and ensemble skills in real life). *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* also demonstrates how each game focuses on different skills by having different procedures in place for each game. Yes, And asks players to type their next moves into a textbox while Mirror and Eye Contact have players pay close attention to the text that appears on the screen before making their choices. These procedures connect players to their in-game character as well as the game’s NPCs.

NPCs in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* also explain how the improv games strengthen their associated skills when teaching them to the player-character. The game relies on characters to move the story forward just as improv relies on ensemble to move scenes forward. Spolin says, “any game worth playing is highly social and has a problem

that needs solving within it” (5). Even so, *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* does not allow for any form of multiplayer mode. Instead, NPCs introduce the social aspects of the game. Each character the main character befriends provides the opportunity to learn an improv game that can be used later against the Beast. Upon learning an improv game, the player-character also learns more about its associated NPC, earning a character-specific fight sequence against the Beast. For example, if a player-character chooses to learn an improv skill from Elvis, the player learns Animal Characteristics and is rewarded information about Elvis’s humble demeanor as a bartender and experience his ferocity as a bear. The player-character determines how characters are ultimately utilized, adding variety to the overall experience of the game.

In *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*, the choices of the player have procedural implications for player agency in the game. Anastasia Salter defines “player agency” as the ability of the player to make choices in the game. In her article “Playing at Empathy: Representing and Experiencing Emotional Growth through Twine Games,” Salter proposes Twine as a useful tool for fostering empathy in therapy and education because most Twine games offer limited choices. So, while players may know a real-world solution to an in-game problem, they will be limited in coming to a solution based on the choices the game offers. Salter believes limited player agency builds an empathetic bond between players and characters, because players are forced to experience the same choices and consequences for those choices as the player-characters. While, limited player agency is not ideal for facilitating play (Sicart, Wasson), limited choices emphasize important topics, and in some cases, create metaphor for players (Bogost 2; Friedhoff). I use limited agency in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* to highlight

moments when players are given more freedom, such as while filling in textboxes. Thus, as the game's protagonist experiences newfound freedom in the game, players find agency.

The connection between the player and the game's protagonist is an important aspect in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*'s development as a serious game. The connection between player and avatar is arguably one of the most important components in player immersion.⁹ Players often view the avatar as both a manifestation of themselves and as a separate digital object (Gregersen and Grodal; Rehak; Johnson). Bianchi believes the awareness of "both self and other" provides players with the freedom to experiment with their identities (129). Customizable player-characters allow players to connect with the actions of the character and immerse themselves in the game. The avatar creation in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* asks players to intertwine their identity with the game's protagonist by making choices about their gender identification, hair, and name. I offer these affordances to players with the hope that once these choices appear throughout the game, players will become invested in their character and the narrative.

Spontaneity and the Supernatural uses attributes to further immerse players in the story and to teach improv skills. The attributes and proficiencies in the game are like the proficiency points in the roleplaying game, *Dungeons and Dragons*. *Dungeons and Dragons* immerses players in various storyworlds by making players feel as though they are heroes with various layers to their player-characters through proficiency points, which include perception, wisdom, and strength. The proficiency points system provides players

⁹ Ian Bogost believes immersion is an important component in creating more realistic, and therefore, more affective simulation games for serious play.

with another way to experiment with their identities. Players often use proficiency points to further customize their characters while playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. For example, players may initially customize their avatar by creating a Halfling Bard, but customize their character further by building proficiency points in strength because they want their character's signature closing battle move to be smashing instruments on their opponents' heads. Players earn proficiency points by leveling up through experiences, and *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* uses the concept of proficiencies from *Dungeons and Dragons* to persuade various types of players to engage in the game by offering customizability (for casual players), familiarity (for experienced players), and empathy (for serious players) and to teach improv.

The proficiencies in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* introduce players to Spolin's theory of improv, and the improv games in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* introduce players to the practice. The attributes fall into three categories that follow the attributes Viola Spolin considers valuable in improv: Ensemble, Environment, and Intuition. Ensemble, however, is switched to Wit to better reflect the *Dungeons and Dragons*' wisdom and intelligence points while incorporating the environmental intelligence Spolin associates with Environment. Thus, players have three distinctly different proficiencies that they might imagine their avatars possess, giving them reason to choose one over the other for the sake of customization or to establish a connection to their character. The player chooses an attribute they will be proficient with during the tutorial, when a character known as The Voice asks what brings the main character comfort. Each of the responses is associated with one of the attributes, and the option the player chooses becomes the player's proficiency.

The proficiency system in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* provides a skill advantage in a skill similar to *Dungeons and Dragons*. As a result, some options are more easily made available because they require a player to reach a certain number of proficiency points. For example, in the “Spontaneity and the Supernatural: Chapter 1,” players may learn the improv exercise Eye Contact if they achieve 3 Ensemble proficiency points when the option becomes available. The procedural proficiencies support the narrative and role-playing aspects of the game because the player-character must demonstrate they are part of Julie’s ensemble by gaining enough trust to learn the skill Eye Contact from her. Skills the player-character learns remain with them throughout the game, making other options available to them as the story progresses. By allowing players to learn certain skills by earning proficiency points, I utilize Bogost’s concept of implication to teach players how mastering certain improv concepts can assist in learning powerful improv skills, which can unlock more stories in improv play just as it unlocks more information about *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*’s storyworld.

Spontaneity and the Supernatural also engages players by using “Nightbound” as the inspiration for the narrative, which offers a narrative with transformative and improvisational implications. “Nightbound” is a simulation and roleplaying game designed for Android and iOS devices that immerses players in entertaining stories, diverse and customizable characters, and choice-driven control. “Nightbound” begins in tragedy as a monster attacks the main character (the player) and their friend. The attack leads the main character to seek answers about what the monster is and why it attacked. The search immerses players in a new world full of secrets, cultural discovery, and supernatural characters. *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* draws from the fantasy of

“Nightbound” because of the magical and seemingly unobtainable qualities mentioned previously regarding Spolin’s concept of intuition. Unlike “Nightbound,” however, the player-character in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* becomes immersed in the supernatural world through a journey of transformation, becoming a werewolf at the end of the game.

The metaphor of werewolf transformation in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* most closely relates to the werewolves depicted in Eastern culture. In his book *Lost Wolves of Japan*, Brett Walker explores the perception of wolves in Eastern versus Western culture. He describes wolves are often described benevolently as guardians, messengers, and deities by numerous regions and religions in Japan (83) and humans as generally corrupted beings (63). However, humans could have children with wolves in which case the offspring would be viewed as beings of honor (62-63). The wolf’s Eastern honor is eclipsed by the Western fear of the animal as European settlers take control of Japan during the 19th century Meiji era. Though wolves are seen in a “supernatural” light as godlike beings, modern industry and the introduction of fictitious fear gave people reason to turn on their connection to traditions that tied humans to nature. The werewolves in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* are also benevolent beings, implying the skills the player- character learns are benevolent too. Furthermore, just as Western beliefs introduced fictitious fears about werewolves being malevolent, players who give into fear in the game transform into the being invented by Westerners’ fears: The Beast. Intuition is likened to the idea of intermingling with the divine wolf and leaving the corruption of fictitious fear behind through a journey of transformation with the help of discursive and procedural rhetoric.

The metaphor associated with the werewolf and improv is powerful and persuasive because the story is experienced in a digital game. Bianchi proposes werewolf avatars place players in a position to participate in a “human-animal” connection through the act of ‘becoming.’ The symbolism of ‘becoming” parallels the werewolf tradition as Bianchi explains, “both digital games and lycanthropes operate through the process of becoming” (132). The actions the player-character takes are important because not only is the character mastering their animal hybridity, but the player is also mastering the procedures necessary to be a master of their augmented digital state (142). Thus, I enable becomings in the game for players as both improv masters (literally) and of The Supernatural (metaphorically). By allowing Fear to consume them, players’ characters may also become Beasts. The Beasts are malevolent forms of The Supernatural which “become” by allowing fear to overtake them, which operates as a form of death in the game. *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* shows preferential value in the connection of lycanthropy to the values of Spolin’s improv theory and assists in having the player connect more deeply to the experience through the metaphor attached to the werewolf character.

Context

In the context of digital rhetoric and game design, *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* is a work of assemblage driven by invention and remix. Dustin Edwards describes remix as “transforming already-existing materials into new texts for new audiences” (42). Edwards definition of remix supports the goal for this project, which is to offer a new text from which new audiences may experience improv; however, it does not quite capture the digital components of the project. Thus, I also use Douglas Eyman’s

definition of remix to support my work. From the lens of digital rhetoric, Eyman defines remix as “digital rhetoric in action which uses invention in a creative way.” Eyman’s definition supports the process of my work, which transforms improv theory and practice into a digital game (128-130). Eyman also defines invention in digital rhetoric as “searching and negotiating networks of information; using multimodal and multimedia tools” (65). The networks in negotiation in this thesis are improv and digital media, specifically digital games. The goal is unique in that there are no games which negotiate these two networks. Thus, finding a conduit which would ease the negotiation of this unexplored pairing is essential. One of the most important multimodal tools necessary for the invention of *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* is Twine.

The Twine development platform afforded me the option to focus on why I want to design as opposed to how to design *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. In “Untangling Twine,” Jane Friedhoff examines Twine as a platform that enables new developers to shed light on unique and marginal topics. She attributes the affordances of Twine to the ease of the software’s use in comparison to other game development software, including *GameMaker*. Initially, I tried using *GameMaker* because the software’s website marketed the option to create visually appealing games with no background in coding required. However, the more I navigated through *GameMaker*, the more I realized how much I would need to learn about basic coding, digital art, and copyright to get what the website advertised. James Kalmbach explains creating digital media assemblages¹⁰ requires multiple “engagements” or “pieces assembled during composition” (60). Kalmbach

¹⁰ In *Assembling Composition*, Kathleen Blake Yancey and Stephen J. McElroy explain assemblage to be “redefining, redirecting, reorganizing, or renewing the old world” to turn the familiar into something new (150)

continues to explain the need for creators to be able to negotiate with these engagements to create a successful product. Thus, I used Twine, which is comparatively easier to navigate because much of the design can rely on traditional writing practices. In “Untangling Twine,” Jane Friedhoff examines Twine from a platform studies perspective, highlighting the resources and ease of use for new developers and creatives in other fields (such as writing). Friedhoff notes that Twine users are also offered a sense of familiarity in the aesthetic of Twine, which looks like a storyboard or mind map and adds visual appeal to the programming process. Easy navigation and game construction make a large task like creating *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* less complex and more about how to perform a task (which often can be answered by the Twine community).

Twine’s community and resources acts as a “collective intelligence” that provided me with coding and hosting information for *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. Henry Jenkins defines “collective intelligence” as “the ability of virtual communities to leverage the knowledge and expertise of their members, often through large-scale collaboration and deliberation” (321). The Twine social community is quite large with about 3,000 members on the official Twine Discord channel and about 2,300 subscribers on the unofficial subreddit (Klimas). Twine’s community is known for independently creating tutorials and documentation to help new users get started (Friedhoff). Adam Hammond’s “Total Beginner’s Guide” videos are the most influential in the creation of *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* as they provide an audiovisual and written explanation of how to utilize Twine to create simple features and how to incorporate code to achieve certain functions. The “SugarCube v2 Documentation,” which can be found through twinery.org on the Twine Wiki, furthered my game development as the documentation makes code

available so that the software can perform common functions such as setting a countdown timer. The community on Twitter, @twinethreads, announces updates to Twine and retweets the work of users. The users provide feedback and support on the games of others and new users can gain insights for fixing problems that emerge through their own development. My decision to host *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* through itch.io for free and set the game at a price for play also comes from the advice gained through Twine's Twitter feed. Housing the game in itch.io also allows players to practice improv on their phones and computers; thus, itch.io helps me achieve my goal of spreading improv to new audiences so long as they can access the platforms required to play.

Conclusion

Fear is the ultimate barrier for people who struggle with making choices, solving problems, and connecting socially. My goal is to provide people with tools to overcome fear by embedding improv games in an easily digestible, accessible, and enjoyable narrative-driven roleplaying simulation game called *Spontaneity and the Supernatural*. *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* should act as a gateway to improv for those who enjoy digital games and self-practice. After all, digital games came from the same era of innovation and desire to play as improv but instead of exploring human expression by computerized means (Bogost), people like Viola Spolin, Paul Sills, and Theodore Flicker explored human expression pushed to its limit by engaging in raw interaction with others (Wasson). The raw element or “creative freedom” is what makes improv popular amongst those who wish to break away from the mundane and highly scripted content that floods mainstream media. This is why shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Colbert Show*, which use improv as a tool for composition, are popular media outlets for those looking to get another angle on the news (Jenkins, Wasson). There is also a desire to break away from the mundane and highly edited work environment, too. People grow tired of the hierarchy in their place of work and have begun to dabble in the teaching of Viola Spolin who believed there was too much focus on pleasing a figure of authority in everyday actions, hindering problem solving for fear of not pleasing authority. Leonard and Yorton took Spolin’s philosophy of improv to corporate America by introducing improv’s theory and method by procedural means. The title of their book, *Yes, And* has been a popular exercise in teaching “creative freedom” in a low-risk environment. *Yes, And* was also the first popular book to draw on the playful elements and procedural

rhetoric of improv to teach “serious” (Bogost) skills such as brainstorming, active collaboration, and on-the-spot problem solving. The Yes, And model was replicated to create several books that use improv’s procedures to teach other skills such as character development in *Improv for Gamers* and personal development in *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?* by Alan Alda. Those who teach improv seem to have grown from the problem Brian Sutton-Smith realized in the *Ambiguity of Play* where he mentions play being overlooked in adulthood. Improv fills the void of play adults feel while living day-to-day.

Improv asks adults to take on “playfulness” in thought and action to express themselves. Sicart describes that people tend to put too much focus on the where, what, and how play occurs. Thus, to bring improv’s style of play to digital games would not take away the play but provide a new stage for people to express themselves. *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* accomplishes this by offering players improv theater games in a digital format by implementing Ian Bogost’s procedural rhetoric (to have players connect more deeply to improv experiences through the metaphor) and remix rhetoric (to create a newfound connection between digital play and improv play). I believe the best method for expressing improv digitally would be to place players in virtual reality (VR) or a sandbox, because while *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* take players through improv games, players would benefit more from simulating the same or more freedom of expression similar to that of a physical stage. YouTube game groups such as the *MISFITS* often describe their background in improv and create improvised scenes while playing VR games which place them in different environments and situations. Bogost also describes that when teaching players through simulation, they are better persuaded or

taught when the simulation is as close to reality as possible. However, I created *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* in a way that would provide an entry point for those who are not yet familiar with improv but are familiar with digital games and fantasy elements. Players roleplay as a fantasy character and participate in simulated improv games to advance the narrative. The added layers of game mechanics and narrative intermingled with improv procedure in *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* to make the game enjoyable.

Going forward, I might expand on *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* by including new chapters, rebuilding the story, and including new elements to the game. *Spontaneity and the Supernatural* is only one example of how transmedial remixing may be used to explore what may be possible when developers are willing to ask two networks as seemingly different as improv and digital games to negotiate on different terms. Such utilization of remix is important to consider within the realms of theater and improv. We have seen the push against and towards the digital through crises such as the Coronavirus, which stalled many productions. While some companies were excited to venture into virtual performance, others opposed the lack of human connection. However, I believe with further research and more computing skills, the digital space can be transformed into a digital stage. As mentioned earlier, this is already being done in the Twitch and YouTube communities as “gamers” stream and record themselves improvising dialogue and actions in the skins of many avatars. When it comes to play, we are only limited by our imaginations.

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