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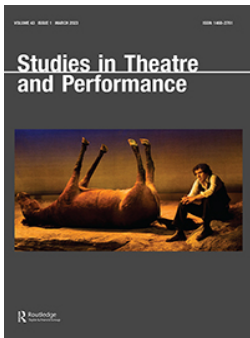
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Testing scores for performing placestories

Phil Smith

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experimental project conducted by artists/researchers Crab & Bee (Helen Billinghurst and Phil Smith). The project was put together in response to the Covid Lockdown restrictions during 2020 in the UK and drew upon an art and performance practice that had been unfolding since 2018. 'Testing Scores for Performing Placestories' describes the testing of a group of scores (with accompanying avatars, gameboards, narratives and images) for participants to perform in their own homes, for their effectiveness (or lack of it) in encouraging participants to make displaced performances by 'fictioning' with unhuman agents. The scores were based on narrative features of a terrain around the Tamar river system (a post-industrial landscape of former mining sites, ruined quays and hollow lanes, with a troubled ecology and a varied folklore) gathered by Crab & Bee during performative visits to these sites. The players were encouraged to use the games to immerse themselves, in displaced domestic settings, in the materials and folkloric revenant of the wounded terrain and then invited to respond to their experiences. The second half of the paper addresses what the 22 detailed responses from the participants reveal, and draws some provisional conclusions.

KEYWORDS

Performing; fictioning; web walking; immersion; placestory; games

Introduction

The following paper is a description of an experiment – *Dr Skulk & Dr Guiser's End Game 2020b* – in which myself and Helen Billinghurst (as Crab & Bee) sought to advance work around 'placestories' we had begun in 2018. At the beginning of 2020, we had just put our written and visual materials for a new book about this work, *The Pattern* (Billinghurst & Smith 2020a), in the hands of a designer, and were writing grant applications for two community-based projects – *Mercurial* and *Quicksilver Mysteries* – to extend the performing, art making, walking and exhibiting of our *Plymouth Labyrinth* project of 2018/2019 (Smith [under consideration](#)) to new sites. However, it very quickly became clear that everything was about to change due to the unfolding Covid global pandemic; we abandoned our applications and began to re-think what was possible as the first Lockdown regulations loomed into view.

During our first projects together – Helen coming off the back of five years experimenting with walking as part of a studio painting practice, my own practice being in walking arts and site-specific performance (initially as a member of *Wrights & Sites*) – we

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had drawn from the ‘string figures’ and ‘speculative fabulation’ of Haraway (2016, 2) to evolve a method of interwoven research and art making that, with a nod to Deligny’s (2015, 33–6), we called ‘web walking’. We had followed Deligny’s speculation about the spider in a nook – ‘if indeed the spider sought out the nook, we can also say that the nook was waiting’ (33) – in seeking to immerse and engage with a cat’s cradle of unhuman performers and agentive materials in any particular place, inviting its ‘others’ – animals, soils, flora, stories, rocks, revenants of the dead – to push us, make actions with us, lead us into unpredictable forms of art making and performing.

In the work that unfolded during 2019, we sought to combine an intense ‘being there’ (Billinghurst & Smith *Forthcoming*) with close attention to placestories; webs of stories that are not only representations but key performative agents in making places, in shaping their identities and those of the people in them, privileging some parts over others, limiting or expanding visions and ambitions, holding up and pinning down things and people. Through improvised installations, spontaneous rituals and postcard art, we had developed ways to quickly responding to placestories and to webs of unhuman performers and agentive materials. All the time, aware of how such vibrancies were always spinning out beyond their boundaries in assemblages that intermittently generated what we identified as a haecceity-affect: ‘a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects . . . a climate, a wind, a fog, a swarm, a pack . . . the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 289). Through participatory and immersive performances, exhibitions and in pamphlets, we invited audiences/participants to similarly entangle themselves, to share their agency with rhythms of weather, light and darkness, place narratives, animal others, ambiances and *genii loci*.

After the *Plymouth Labyrinth* project, generated by repeated walking in the margins of Plymouth (UK), we had spun our workout to the Isles of Scilly and along parts of the Ridgeway and Icknield Way and their hinterlands, seeking traces of performative or performance-like patterns and narratives in the landscapes, responding in poetry, paintings, drawings and prose. Some of our responses were published in ‘The Pattern’, expanding what we had begun in an 84 page pamphlet *Plymouth Pantheon* (Billinghurst & Smith 2019a, 2019c), including our assembling of ‘casts of characters’ (actual, invisible and fictional personalities associated with specific places), scores for ritual-like game playing, and a provisional directory of ‘privileged points’ (sites that the philosopher of technology Simondon 2011, 412] describes as ‘draw[ing] into itself all the force and efficacy of the domain it delimits’, places for intense encounters of unhuman with human).

Under Lockdown in early to mid 2020, unable to further extend our walking, we used our mandated daily exercise time to explore the terrain either side of the River Tamar, gathering folklore and narratives of silver mining, saints and trade, while worming our way around empty hollow ways, abandoned quays, mine spoils and overgrown wells. Unable to gather people together for immersive or participative events, we decided to pass on some of this unexpected immersion around the Tamar in a pamphlet of maps and paintings, scores and games, informed by stories from that landscape: *Dr. Skulk & Dr. Guiser’s End Game*. We were aware that any response to the pamphlet was most almost certainly going to be displaced to the reader-participants’ homes. At the same time, the Covid restrictions and the extra work-free time for some of those furloughed,

shielding or isolating, also offered an opportunity for us to gather more feedback about the uses of our scores than we had previously managed when under the pressure of producing back-to-back projects in 2018–19.

Those persons we chose to send the pamphlets to (with an invitation to respond by questionnaire or email) were not selected according to any social-scientific procedure, but were members of an existing and growing web of enthusiasts, friends, collaborators, participants, eco- and community activists, enquirers and audience members that we had sought to nurture. Not with a view to their becoming regular consumers of our work, but, rather, as deployers of that work in their own lives and practices. The only other criterion was that there be a spread of those local to Plymouth and those more widely dispersed. They eventually included a school teacher, a community volunteer, university academics in India and the UK, an eco-artist based in Australia, a publisher, two walking artists, a retired college administrator, a neighbour of the RAAY gallery (where ‘Plymouth Labyrinth’ showed), an environmentalist, an educator/researcher, an actor, a violinist, an ornithologist, four locally based visual artists, a performance poet, a mindfulness teacher, a theatre educator, and four leaders of a community arts group. The aim of the questionnaire/email was not to attempt to test the likely effectiveness of the pamphlet’s strategies among a general public, but, rather, their usefulness or otherwise in drawing others into our cat’s cradle of placestories, into interactions with their unhuman agents in non-privileged ways, all of this within the specific limits and circumstances of a nurtured web of persons.

Methods and materials

Our multi-modal methodology in the first stage of our research (2018–19) included making numerous performances and other representations as a Practice as Research project: improvising spontaneous ‘rituals’; marrying ourselves to wolves, creating ash sun-wheels from burned poetry, instant art making and more reflective painting and drawing, a fictive diagramatisation of the nexus of affects/terrains/stories we had encountered on our walks (supported by desk-based research drawing on local history websites and publications), and a shared auto-ethnography in which we attended to, and documented in notebooks and drawings, the effects of the terrains and built environments on our immersive presence.

We were, from early on, drawing on a set of theoretical lenses assembled to support our ‘web walking’ that, along with the ideas of Haraway, Deligny, Simondon and Deleuze and Guattari listed above, included ‘fictioning’ as advocated and practiced by ritual performers and artists *Fantastique Plastique*: ‘the production of untimely images – that speak back to their producer, and the layering of motifs to produce an accretion of sorts . . . that is specifically object-oriented . . . to extract a certain objectness (something unhuman) from an all-too-human subject . . . a practice [that] nests its own fictions within itself’ (O’Sullivan 2016, 83–4).

What we then sought to explore in the *End Game* experimental project in 2020, was the idea, just emerging for us from practice and research, of ‘placestories’. These are stories that are not only from or about a place but active in making that place, changing its shapes and affecting its perceived meanings, and seem to connect readily to a web of ‘placestories’ that had stepped forward during our previous projects in ‘surface patterns . . . ancient chalk figures and esoteric graffiti with chance hill contours, zodiacal

chartings and the Jungian imaginings of the likes of T. C. Lethbridge . . . [a] densely and meaningfully tattooed . . . surface . . . but also a story-tattoo' (Billinghurst & Smith 2020b, 193–6).

In spring 2020, with support secured from University of Plymouth's R1 fund, we set out with the intention of testing original scores for connecting people to their own wider 'tattooed' landscapes (and back into their own virus-threatened bodies) by providing participants with maps, games and mental and physical techniques for having their own adventures and immersions in a re-enchanted landscape, through the medium of their own homes. We partly intended this as a means of countering the prevailing disembodiment and alienation of the pandemic, intensifying a culture of ecological depredation in climate crisis and (for UK residents) international isolation in the shadow of Brexit.

After the first phases of lockdown in the UK in early 2020, as restrictions eased, we used a car to extend the reach of our visits, exploring the system of local rivers: Tamar, Tavy, Hamoaze and Lyhner. Our primary method was our 'being there', attending to whatever we found and then allowing the patterns, images, objects, narratives or symbols as they stepped forward, to become our guides to future visits. Each unfolding added to a web of places and stories that was partly assembling and partly being assembled.

We repeatedly encountered old trading routes on hollow lanes, the remnants of mining for lead, tin, copper, arsenic, silver and zinc, numerous abandoned quays in quiet creeks, holy wells and the stories of 'Celtic' saints. We were already aware of some local stories (like those of the goblin-like 'knockers' in the tin mines) and we added to these from church pamphlets and information boards where we read the legends associated with the places, such as Dando and his Dogs (a multi-variant tale of a high-living medieval cleric's encounter with the Devil) set both in a pool within the Lynher river and along George's Lane near Shevioc, or of the smugglers Black Joan and Finnygook, the latter named for disguising himself in the 'gook' headwear of the Bal Maidens who sifted ore at the mouth of the mines.

In response to our walks, Helen made a series of paintings of snaking mud, water systems, a medieval well, a redundant forge at a remote crossroads, tidal patterns, windblown ripples and long-legged and horned spectres. She drew a map of the terrain and later, as we began to talk through a possible frame for a pamphlet based on our walks, she drew a caricature of ourselves in the personae of Dr Skulk and Dr Guiser, who had been emerging as the latest of a series of wordplay names (Crab & Bee, Smoke & Mirrors, Snake & Badger, Pompous & Git) representing different facets of our collaboration; the 'Drs' referencing our recent doctorates, our paper on 'Whovian space' (Billinghurst & Smith 2019b), the 'o, you're two doctors!' scene from 'Fawlty Towers' and the plague doctors who were then appearing on social media (and occasionally on the streets) in response to the pandemic.

Dr. Skulk and Dr. Guiser's End Game is a bound A5 booklet with card covers of 56 pages; Helen's drawings and paintings are placed throughout. The games and stories are presented and narrated by our Dr Skulk and Dr Guiser personae. The pamphlet opens with a general introduction and a 'fictioned' narrative of how the pamphlet was assembled; it then introduces the principles of the games being offered and describes the practical and metaphorical versions of the 'gameboard' on which they can be played. Mutable game boards are described both as made of 'Stuff' and 'Matter' (Billinghurst & Smith 2020b, 10) and as symbolic. Participants can play the games 'in the land' (5) as well

as at home; an invitation to shift the scale of the playing between representation and being present, between performing and being. While always partly dependent on pandemic restrictions or the participants' distance from the Tamar, there was always the intention for the domestic gameboards to be fictionally present in the actual terrains and the actual terrains to be fictionally present on the domestic gameboards. We took advantage of the restrictions to experiment with the kind of 'nesting' of fictions described above by O'Sullivan.

Similarly, the pamphlet describes the two doctors as avatars that the players should 'assume', and then introduces a third autonomous character 'The Joker' who is to play some undefined role in the games (the joker is wild). Such ambiguities were added to encourage players to attend to the (intentionally) overly detailed game rules, while obliging them to acknowledge that all aspects of the game were susceptible to subjective interpretations and the necessity for 'cutting corners'. So, the introduction invites the player to deploy a Transcendence Card '[I]f you find you are losing yourself entirely in the game' (8), but then explains that no such card exists. Just as the Joker character is 'nested' with the avatar doctors, so the non-existent card is 'nested' within the player as an enigmatic 'Joker' that the player must invent in order to play.

The pamphlet contains nine scores for games (called 'Ludens'); all but one of which are (in theory) possible for a solo player or a small 'bubble' of family or friends. These scores all teeter on the edge of what is practical. Multiple household items – balls of wool, plates, flour, coconut shells, pencils, chairs – are required. The games include a hypnagogic visualisation exercise, a mapping in flour, a dialogue game for two people, making an installation of objects, designing a coat of arms, a shamanic ride for a small group of friends and a variation on Twister. With these scores, we intended to push the participants increasingly to the edge of what might be possible or acceptable, aware that we risked the volunteers simply balking at the prospect, but that even refusal, side-stepping or failure might leave a powerful impression and lead to something else, something unpredictable.

The second half of 'End Game' consists of stories and poems from our visits to places of mining and trade and scenes of folkloric narratives around the Tamar. For this interweaving of visits, history and fiction we deployed two of what David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan describe as the 'technics of fictioning' (Burrows & O'Sullivan 2019, 6): 'the generation of different worlds and communities that are the potential of, and alternatives to, existing worlds' (6) and 'the fictioning of different realities . . . producing perspectives and models as parallel or multiple worlds' (7). Our 'fictioning' worked across legend and documentation, and across porous boundaries of place, body, imagination and several temporal layers.

This final section was intended to provide extra context for the games, including accounts of real but fantastical events – like that of Sir James Tillie who had his corpse, fully dressed and with books and regularly replenished refreshments, seated in a chair for two years overlooking his silver mine under a snake-like kink in the Tamar – and documented folklore, plus zoological details of an evolving local ecology with multiple agents that included nuclear radiation, longstanding metals pollution and numerous species of turbating worms in the mud of former quays. Stories of werewolves and a Dandy devil-huntsman, of magician-saints Budoc, Indract and Dominica, were woven around former industrial sites and a beach of giant Pacific oysters opposite the

nuclear submarine ‘graveyard’ and the ‘apocalypse village’ where the navy’s rescue services practice their response to chemical spills and other catastrophes; all tied together by ragworms, catworms, *anthomedusa* (from the Caspian Sea) and Lovecraftian conical colonies of *hartlaubella gelatinosa*.

The information sheet given to participants receiving the pamphlet described our research project as an ‘[A]ssessment of the effects of using performative games based on stories from trades routes around the Tamar Estuary in bringing people to a closer understanding of local ecologies and histories’ (June 2020). This description is knowingly mundane and restrained. Similarly, the open and rather bland questions of the questionnaire (‘what was the booklet about for you?’, ‘can you describe how you experienced the paintings and drawings in the booklet?’); we were trying to avoid clouding any information about ‘fictioning’ or ‘webbing’ on the part of the participants that might arise from leading suggestions in the apparatus of the research.

Aim and questions

The underpinning research aim of the *End Game* project was to test the effectiveness of a mythopoetic pamphlet in guiding its selected users to the ‘generation of different worlds and communities’ in a co-working with unhuman others. Our main research question was: what elements should such a handbook for mythopoesis and ‘fictioning’ include to be effective? Subsidiary questions were: what function could games serve in such a ‘fictioning’? If stories of trade or travel were taken on a journey of their own would they accumulate or lose meaning? How effectively could the two figures (Skulk and Guiser), taken from a ‘cast of characters’, introduce the scores? What, if any, effect would using diagrammatics of actual places as spaces of play/ritual have?

The *End Game* pamphlet was distributed (mostly by post) to 25 volunteers (another 70 copies were distributed without soliciting responses), asking participants to read it, use it in whatever way they felt moved and respond to an email requesting their reflections on their experiences either by answering a questionnaire or responding by email or posted mail.

The responses

Twenty-two responses were received, in the form of handwritten letters, diagrams, long emails, a textile representation of the ‘spirit of Dando’, a ‘détourned’ evangelical Christian map of the ‘Holy Land’ onto which had been superimposed locations from our pamphlet along with autobiographical comments from the respondent, a long journal, and answers to the questionnaire. The rest of this paper will survey the responses; identifying any strong experiential themes, insights, assertions or practical narratives, any common responses appearing regularly and any emerging overall patterns.

Seventeen out of the 22 respondents indicated that they had actively and in an embodied way played the games with found props or that they had visualised them in a thought experiment form, such as volunteer 14 who ‘did not feel inclined to play the actual rules defined in the booklet but I did feel inclined or encouraged to invent my own games to explore the world’.

Though Skulk and Guiser are described by one respondent as ‘special agents’ able to move across ‘three realms’ (4) of the game’s reality, there is little mention of them being adopted as avatars by participants. Another volunteer joins in the pamphlet’s wordplay to redefine ‘Skulk – a drinking vessel shaped like a scull (sic), used by members of a biker gang. Guiser – a Kaiser in disguise, perhaps a relative of the emperor with new clothes’ (5), but explained that they preferred to use old friends as their avatars: ‘students of Sozialpädagogie – who invented and played a lot of games, physical, cunning, silly, inebriated. With these I will play the game in my mind’. While volunteer 22 wanted to ‘roll up my own character’ rather than adopt either Skulk or Guiser.

Respondents often mention themes of travel or transference – suggesting that there was some resonance in the ‘stories of trade or travel . . . taken on a journey of their own’ – in the unfolding relation between themselves and the games and stories, sometimes as a displacement of ‘placestories’ to new spaces: ‘the little book . . . was the right size to carry around in my little green shoulder bag, a companion for the summer . . . my gameboard was the Ouse’ (1). For volunteer 16, in the North Pennines, there were comparable terrains: ‘a post-industrial landscape designated an area of “outstanding natural beauty” . . . despite reflecting . . . extensive agricultural and mining activity . . . my Important Places, while they may indeed be found at or near the end of a creek . . . are equally likely to be Islands, certain, often circular folds, fanks [sheep pen] or corlan [gathering place] . . . none of this seems to me ultimately inconsistent with [the pamphlet’s] notion of a “second gameboard”’. Participant 22 was initially more troubled: ‘is this a game only for geographies with metal mines?’ but then decided ‘that’s probably not the intention and that analogies can be made to work’. Volunteer 3 ‘read/played Endgame mainly on the train and I felt that the landscapes rolling by became my board . . . journeying through staying still’. For others, the landscape of the game was intangible or imaginal; volunteer 13 described the project as ‘like a quest for visions’; and another volunteer ‘felt able to participate based on my familiarity with similar story structures . . . mythically familiar landscapes’ (4). Volunteer 14 described their ‘transference of the game . . . to virtual landscapes on a piece of cardboard on which a map or diagram of places also acts as a game board’.

For volunteer 4 the ‘games get more and more convoluted. They seem to form a tunnel getting deeper, darker and [more] dangerous’ looping back to the qualities of the mines and adits we (Crab & Bee) had been visiting to prepare the stories and games. Volunteer 7 describes how ‘the specific performative games from the book . . . inspire[d] me to think and explore the area [of Salford] I was in differently . . . stories and games in the book encouraged me to get outside and see what I was missing’; while volunteer 13 described reading the pamphlet with a partner and how ‘we spent some time tracing the place names on the drawing on p.13. Some are very familiar to us . . . Yet at the same time places like Barne Barton and Ernesettle [suburbs of Plymouth], felt suddenly less urban and as though I have never seen them before’.

Many volunteers responded with creative feints and elaborations; reworking the terms of the pamphlet itself. Volunteer 8 ‘want[ed] to visit the dead man on the chair on this hill. [A reference to Sir James Tillie’s corpse.] I do not wish to visit the Dandyhole because the very thought of that scares me to death’, while volunteer 11 wanted to include an ‘instruction or invitation, to express gratitude to all the beings who have participated in

the journey as the game comes to a close'. Volunteer 14 suggested a game based on Magritte's painting *Restless Sleeper*: 'If that image is a game, how would you play it . . . what would a storyboard and film score of this publication look like?'

Volunteer 8 described how after reading 'the stories around St George's Island, the Finnygook, (which was a story that we knew) and St John we got quite interested to revisit (sic) or go further into these places . . . Drs Skulk and Guiser guided us to a new walk and adventure . . . As we get into the next lockdown and weather permitting we are going to walk South to North from Crafhole to the Dandy Hole in the river Lynher . . . We enjoyed mapping our suggested walks on an ordnance survey map and investigating the area with the stories fresh in our minds'. This description, perhaps partly informed (limited?) by having direct access to the sites of the stories, demonstrates both the flexibility of the pamphlet, but also a certain divide in the way it was used; on the one hand, it could be deployed for an enhanced 'revisit' as described by volunteer 8; but for those engaging more intensely with the games, the journey was both inner and outer, material and 'fictioned'. Even when these more deeply engaged readers were not able to visit actual sites they made multi-layered connections: 'when I read about a place that I had never visited it did bring that strong sense of overlay between the imagined place and the phenomenologically experienced place' (10); '[a] hinterland between myth and history, the past and the present, the hidden forces that shape us, the power of the landscape to shift our mood, thoughts, feelings' (17).

Different participants describe the effects and functions of the paintings and drawings in different ways: '[T]he paintings and drawings . . . became the first grid upon which the gameboard was constructed . . . holographic images of charmed places . . . to be completed in the realm of imagination' (3), 'the images . . . guided me to the text or pages that I chose to read, rather than working . . . beginning to end' (12), 'in themselves [they] had . . . *unheimlich* tension' (19). Volunteer 10 was dissatisfied by the lack of 'texture' and by the absence of an 'affective experience' of the places in the images, yet praised how they were 'strong on symbolic representation'. Volunteer 11 wrote of the paintings and drawings as 'sit[ting] in the space between poetry and mapmaking', while volunteer 9 experienced them '[A]s maps. Apart from the ones that weren't. But mainly as maps. Maps that then became symbols, and then, horned beasts'.

There is a clear correlation between those who most intensely engaged directly or imaginally in playing the games and the effect of the pamphlet in shifting them onto a mytho-personal or mythopoetic level ("I ride the horse and the horse rides me" . . . in this publication the player passes through the landscape and the landscape passes through the player' [14]). Volunteer 13 describes in detail how '[W]e played Surveyor: The Seventh Ludens at home: I used some garden twine to connect my partner's head to his own limbs in the arm chair and then it went spreading out into the room, to a lamp, to the forest of house plants, on to a miniature Smeaton's Tower and back again' and then goes on to characterise the pamphlet's games as representing 'the bigger game that we live within'. Similarly, volunteer 16 'saw that the booklet contained symmetries, variations and differences that resonate with the "game" in which I'm caught up . . . [they] offer me a fresh view of my own "game"'. Where this conflation of the game and the lived world occurred, it seemed to generate changes in perceptions, terrains and relationships: 'It [the twine] made a wide web and we both felt it made the room feel different, like being in a gallery . . . it felt like a different way of relating to one another' (13).

Respondents 15 are the organisers of a radical and strongly community-rooted arts group based in Stonehouse, Plymouth. They were unique among the volunteers in responding (and playing the games) as a group. Along with a photograph of their game-playing (dolls representing the players among bottles of cider, one of the players dressed in an enormous bear head), the group collectively sent enigmatic answers to the questionnaire that spliced poetic insight with ‘absurdist’ jests and recognitions of local terrains: ‘An insight into lost freedom. Having a laugh. Learning how to be great. I think it was deep and meaningful . . . Veins of water running through life and transforming into noise . . . They remind me of places . . . The stolen village sign for St Dominck’s . . . Does Gandalf live in Landulph?’

While a number of participants in the research played complexly, recording detailed responses, uniquely volunteer 22, confined to home and essential journeys due to Covid vulnerability, played all the Ludens over four weeks in practical form while integrating associated reading and viewing (buying and renting books and movies) and original ludic manoeuvres (‘An unvisitable library seen only in dream? 100 points!’) and weaving everyday life with themes in the pamphlet: rejuvenating worms to restart a compost bin, a hybrid St George/dragon. They also allotted the game’s symbolic designations to actual sites: ‘the holiest place on earth . . . the “Roman column” in the grounds of the Parish church . . . the zone of viruses – easily the town centre . . . former industrial zone returning to fecund mud . . . there is “fecund mud” in our overgrown garden’, and then, responding to the Covid restrictions, ‘why not make the garden the gameboard? . . . digging and planting could be a symbolic remedying ritual’. In practice, their gameboard was flexible; the garden microcosm (‘I fear the uncanny of a “web of thorny brambles” . . . It knocks off my hat . . . hides my machete’) expanded to the entire town of Ormskirk (‘Orm is Danish, signifying in English “worm”’) and across the imaginal (‘I fantasise about walking along our street through the gardens . . . like a dry-land version of *The Swimmer*’ [a reference to the 1968 movie in which the main character played by Burt Lancaster jogs home, swimming across a variety of swimming pools en route].) Devoting much time and commitment to experimenting with the pamphlet, volunteer 22 discovered a durational quality in the games: ‘the heraldry is ready – like all the ludens so far, it is set up as a sort of catcher or receiving station with an open-ended, potentially long-term lifespan’.

A number of the respondents engaged with the pamphlet as mutable and ‘absurd’ and described how the games and stories drew them into slippery sensations and states of consciousness: ‘It’s a surreal experience! I wonder if the reader/player would benefit from a dip into the holy well to ingest a worm to aid their journey!’ (13), ‘I want to express the magic and alchemy that I experienced . . . It was also healing. It was also life affirming. It was also life cancelling (in a good way) . . . I experienced the book as a poetic, playful self help guide . . . a “map” to explore my internal and external landscape . . . And a bedtime story too!’ (19), “looking back on oneself in place, even at times *as place*” (22), “[F]inding myself in your Endgame made me giggle, gurgles, a well of sorts . . . I’m not going anywhere except down, my gravitational preferences will take all the Transcendent Templars with me, into the mud” (21), “part deranged compass [moral and otherwise], part spell book, part herbal and navigational

remedy . . . partly DIY mytho-geographical vaccine” (14). To participant 16 the project was an “alchemical” inflection’ resonating with the lead and silver in former mines close to them in the north of England.

In contrast, for at least two volunteers the pamphlet was a practical and pragmatic guidebook (‘I am not a game player’ [20]) without any of the challenges to imaginal lives described by volunteer 10 as ‘[T]ransformation of places into living imaginaries. Transformation of humans into fragmentary beings incorporated into the fabric of places’. In trying to make sense of the whole of the responses, it is important to address this minority pragmatic use of the pamphlet alongside respondents like volunteer 18 for whom it was an ‘invit[ation] to conspire’ on behalf of ‘little lives . . . navigat[ing] an infinitely larger structure like raindrops on a landscape’.

Most participants could not visit the locations of the narratives, yet a certain embodied relation to place emerged: ‘I went on a walk in my chair holding the guidebook in my hand, my token is my pencil . . . to imagine was to walk’ (4), ‘I love these ideas for deepening conversations . . . with the material world around us’ (11), ‘I started to experience a version of the places in my imagination . . . an amalgamation of the known qualities of the landscape and common features, combined with the text and images from the booklet’ (12).

Among the responses sent were numerous accounts of dreams (at least one of which occurred after reading the pamphlet immediately prior to sleep) and waking reveries, suggesting that participants were engaging with the games and stories at an instinctual or unconscious level. Yet not simply as fantasies; so, the account of the sleeping dream of volunteer 2 connected them to a real landscape of creeks and fields that Crab & Bee had explored, and around which she had grown up: ‘I see the lie of the land in its estuarine trance and I look further into the mud to see a white snake/slug, large as a blind whale, oozing through the liquid . . . Reaching tentacles into other possibilities, The end game has unerved [sic] my ancestral heraldry, let sleeping worms lie/lie’ (2); the conflation of ‘unnerve’ and ‘unearth’ is possibly significant. For volunteer 16, ‘Skulk & Guiser’s thoughts . . . return me to the role of wolf in my imaginative life, to the theme of transformation through being “consumed”, and to the nature of dreams’. A similar marriage of ‘fictioned’ landscapes with a state of consciousness (‘a mythical mode of being that is trapped in the now of the virus’ [4]) seeped into the waking hours of volunteer 3 who describes how they had ‘the vague but persistent feeling that I was playing the game simply by moving through my day’, likewise 12 for whom ‘whether or not I was focused on a particular game, there was a sense of still being a part of a larger political, cultural, ecological game’. For volunteer 13 the games ‘made me think about the bigger game that we live within and how that feels so confusing’, while volunteer 14 described navigating an interaction ‘between the 2-Dimensional board game and the 3-Dimensional, multi-sensory and Live map of walking a landscape’. Similarly, unpicking the game/everyday binary, consistent with Burrows and O’Sullivan’s ‘fictioning’ as ‘an invention in the realm of life (a technology of immanence as it were)’ (Burrows and O’Sullivan 2019, 2), volunteer 9 wrote that they ‘already play versions of some of these games . . . which leads to all sorts of slips into slightly shifted realities and uncanny states of being’.

Despite (or maybe because of) the pamphlet's 'absurd realism' (4), the participants retained a sense of real places; playing the game by reading in the bath: '[M]y inner eye sees [the village of] Antony, incinerator, rotting subs at the docks, derelict train lines & various perspectives of the Tamar. I regret I don't have Thieves Oil to put in the bath water Instead, I smell rotten fish and goarse (sic) and have a metallic taste in my mouth I want to walk all along the side of the Tamar' (5). Some responses clearly echoed the pamphlet's 'absurd realism'. 'Maybe I have lost the ability to be rational' commented volunteer 5, while volunteer 9 saw the pamphlet as 'a manual of practical magic'. A number of respondents recounted their dreams: 'I woke up this morning in full dream recollection mode, I was fishing out reams and reams of dream it's partly a struggle engaging it, as it is a struggle to put together my piece in response to [this] book' (1). Volunteer 6 initially had a very negative and pragmatic response to the scores, 'I was not in the mood for a game and experienced strong resistance on[c]e we got past the setting up. Even during it. I didn't want to do these things. I didn't want to do more work, I wanted more work to be done', but eventually found another way in, '[T]hen the dreams came. And kept on coming. Dreams of rivers and cellars and dying and car crashes and a yellow d-shaped door on a pale blue background and straw horses and insects in boxes and tauf and painted acorns. The flow was extraordinary. It was much more hypnopompic than hypnagogic, but I counted it in Ludens the Third' (6). (Ludens the Third is a score for a hypnagogic experiment.)

Different participants responded to different aspects of the same place. Volunteer 4 conflates the reclamation by mud of Blaxton Quay (only able to access it through an online image of a painting of the creek by J. M. W. Turner) with their own dream-like and poetic engagement, which loops back to the actual site: 'The Quest of Blaxton Quay becomes mytho-poetic the game becomes worthy to play. To play is to walk, to walk is to play. As one plays it (walks upon the game-board that is set up by Turner, Beckett greets with his advice on losing better). The exchanging of sweat of the body for jewels of earth invokes Elliot's Wasteland (sic). The play is now nothing but ways of being in this wasteland, as a response to it, or as a lack of total response to the life of land laid waste (4)'. Yet, responding to the same story, volunteer 16 moves beyond the hauntological appearance of the site into the biological regeneration by the worms in the mud (accepting the pamphlet's invitation, like volunteer 9, to explore 'possibilities that might emerge from ecological breakdown') and seeing a parallel, local to them, in a 'small local town Here too mud and water and both growing and slithery things are not only slowly trashing the already crumbling traces of past industrial activity but also appear to be starting work on many of the aspects of local manifestations of the entropic culture of possessive individualism'.

For some participants, the pamphlet creates a time out of time: 'The narrative of the past intertwining with the present and the future a clear rejection of oppressive narratives an invitation to play whether in real time or within my head (12). Sometimes this is a shift to memories of the past: 'Brownies at Cratfhole dancing around the fly agaric Singing in Shevioc until we became wise' (2), and sometimes it is a temporal looping of a player back to themselves now 'truly a time machine to make me aware [of] the present – I have "stopped being in it"' (4). At the same time the pamphlet establishes its own terrain, both a microcosm and a stretchable field: 'this booklet contains within itself a world "being there" becomes "being" + "there"' (4), 'the

atmosphere of Endgame's journey followed me . . . by wandering these narratives I've somewhat wondered through doubles of those locations . . . a feeling that the landscape, any landscape, is flooded with feeling' (3).

One participant noted how '[S]ourcing the stuff needed to play began to become difficult' (4), another 'found it quite confusing trying to make sense of the text and following how to play the games' conceding that 'possibly because this might have been their aim' (7). Another participant described the pamphlet's games as 'a set of instructions for a game I couldn't quite fathom' (13), while volunteer 17 'intended, at first, to play them, but quickly realised that I could not mainly because I found them too dense'. Even volunteer 22, who made a month-long hands-on performance of all the Ludens, noted that '[A]pproaching the game feels quite daunting due to the slipperiness of the rules and combination of open-ness and specificity'. Indeed, we had intentionally created these games to be almost impossible to complete and challenging even to begin; yet, as volunteer 4 noted, there was a 'kindness . . . when fragility appeared, leading to inability to play . . . to not play is also to play'. Volunteer 14 noted, correctly, that 'the publication may be intentionally oblique and ambiguous to avoid interpretation and allow readers to get lost in translation in the minds (sic) eye and on foot', while volunteer 7 described how the ambiguities 'meant I was a bit lost and this opened up possibilities to where my mind might go', and volunteer 19 'felt led to integrate internal + external through the metaphorical and practical application of a game'. Playing in whatever way the players wanted was validated in the text: 'There are some very good rules for living in this game, but nobody sticks to them' (Billingham & Smith 2020b, 5).

It should be noted that the email asking for responses had not asked people to respond with dreams and poems or textile puppets; the questions of the questionnaire were straightforward and open such as 'Are the games viable: were you able to play them and, if you did, did they have any interesting effects or consequences?' and 'Did you know of any of the places referred to in the pamphlet? If yes, did the booklet affect your understanding of them in any way?' So, to receive so many poetic responses and artistic outputs was striking for instance, this from volunteer 6 who was initially resistant to playing: 'I have begun painting acorns and stuffing horses and boxifying insects. It started to become a commitment and I began to be agentive. That fell away and leaves me hypnopomping. Or being hypnopomped. I think your book may have opened me up to being hypnopomped . . . thank you . . . for helping dreams find their way back into my daytime in spite of my resistance' (6). This kind of description of waking-dreaming applied to a number of the responses that were sent in; like the 'vague but persistent feeling' described (above) by volunteer 3, and the 'imaginary reveries' described by volunteer 10 for which the drawings and paintings served as 'anchor points'.

Some provisional conclusions

In *Dr. Skulk & Dr. Guiser's End Game*, we (Crab & Bee) attempted to craft particular roles for games, stories, and paintings/drawings. Stories and drawing/paintings were intended to serve as contextual information for the games and their playing. The majority of responders, however, where there was any kind of intense personal engagement, took the games as a kind of information (so, volunteer 11 was critical of the pamphlet for introducing ideas too early: 'I would like to enter the game without too much of this

type of context'), while for most responders the stories and drawings/paintings functioned as the practical maps and performative texts for their activity in imaginal, ludic or art practice modes.

While it was not clear to Crab & Bee what we might provoke, we were specifically seeking and testing how far the pamphlet enabled participants to perform their own mythopoiesis. Indeed, descriptions of a mythopoetic agency were the most common kind of response received: in dreams, daydreams, walks, maps, theorising (behind a fence), narratives (invented in the bath), poesy and game playing (as a party or a month-long personal project); volunteer 11 described their own participation as 'a form of landscape/earth-based medicine, efficacious and welcome in this time of pandemic and digital takeover'.

With the exceptions of volunteers 8 and 20 who addressed places mostly in a touristic mode, (though one with 'mytho psycho-geographical' [20] awareness), the places directly referenced in the pamphlet were not visited in person (though some expressed the intention post-Covid; 'I feel compelled to go and visit but also don't want to ruin the imagined myth that's alchemicised in my thoughts'[19]). Instead, these places (or rather their representations and narratives about them) seem to have become a mythopoetic map, a distant stage, a part real/part representational gameboard on which participants could make their own stories, art works or act out a subjective self-making, such as volunteer 16's 'parallel ... processes' as multi-faceted 'lone' player in response to the Hypnagogic Masks game.

The scores for the games were intentionally too complicated to be played easily, in order to disturb expectations and shake participation into unexpected forms. A probable effect of this difficultness was less physical playing of the games than we had expected. It also, however, had the positive effect of provoking many volunteers to make up their own games, maps/gameboards, narratives and mythic terrains. Rather than playing by our rules, they invented or imagined their own. The negative side to the over-complication is evident in the comment of volunteer 17 that instructions were 'maybe descriptive of games already played out to a conclusion where I was merely spectator rather than a participant or player'. For a small section of respondents (possibly those less disposed to engage with the pamphlet's 'absurdism'), *End Game* did not offer an effective invitation for a multi-layered, immersed and personally mutable experience. This begs a question for future research: is it possible to effect a similar level of disruption to 'End Game' while widening the franchise of participants?

Given that there was no soliciting of poetic or 'absurd realist' responses in our information sheet or letter of invitation, it is reasonable to assume that the plethora of eerie, dreamy and psychophysical maps, narratives and theoretical/autobiographical accounts were responses to the pamphlet, while also reflecting the dispositions of those invited. Distant and displaced individuals created their own mental or imaginal 'terrain' on and in which to journey performatively (in both senses of 'like performance' and 'self-making'), drawing on the games as information from the initial immersed research engagement (Crab & Bee) in and with actual 'placestories'.

For most participants, it was not visiting the actual sites, nor even a literal displacement of such visiting to their own immediate locations, which led to the most intense engagements. The two accounts of visits to named places suggest that these somewhat dispelled the intensity of encounter we had hoped for. Instead, for the majority, it was the 'absurd realism', impossible complexity of the 'asks' and the inaccessibility of locations

that created a space for their inventive engagement with the complex of ‘placestories’. This is somewhat akin to Robert Smithson’s charged ‘non-site’: a space of ‘three dimensional metaphor’ which by virtue of the displacement of its materials from its original site combines with its ‘expressive’ fabrication to make for a non-abstract space of ‘physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions’ to which visitors can pay ‘a fictitious trip’ (Smithson 1996, 364). As an apparent result of such a site-specific immersive production and subsequently displaced reception, the games of *End Game* had an impact and intensity for those who engaged with them as information – as ‘placestory’ – that moved their players to their own spatial outputs and performative ventures: ‘a lived response to this Time of Virus . . . it is right . . . that new rites should be invented and enacted’ (14).

By taking the ‘placestories’ of saints, trade and hollow lanes on their own journeys, even around a distant lounge or garden, participants added to and changed their meanings; stories of ‘characters’, routes and materials were often addressed (more often than the gaming instructions) as the texts and sub-texts for the participants’ own mythopoetic dreaming, writing, performing, attending to unhuman others, and working upon themselves. Rather than the ‘placestories’ of our original site-specific exploration around the rivers being further diluted by being re-represented, instead, by displacement and mythopoesis they re-emerged in the vivid forms of ‘fictioned’ creeks, rivers, painted doors, insects, rotten fish, Thieves Oil, car crashes, ‘fanks’, adits and stolen village signs. Instead of rules for playing or texts for performing, the games were more effective in facilitating a performative ‘fictioning’ by the participants.

The characters Skulk and Guiser, taken from a ‘cast of characters’ to introduce the scores, attracted little comment; no one reported on any finding or strong experience while adopting Skulk and Guiser as personae. If they were useful devices for telling the stories, they were not effective as avatars. However, the idea of players developing their own persona or personae was repeatedly mentioned and may have been encouraged by Skulk and Guiser’s presence as ‘fictioned’ examples of ‘haecceity’.

The diagrammaticising of space on the various game boards suggested – on dinner plates, in baths and basins, on sheets of paper or cardboard shields – seems to have had little obvious impact, though it possibly encouraged the diagrams or maps included with responses sent by three of the 22 respondents. Where it seems to have had greater impact is in encouraging players to use ‘changes of scale’, to think in terms of, and across, different temporal and spatial scales; deploying microcosms, bi-location and parallel time zones.

The amount of response material generated (72 pages of A4 text, plus photos, diagrams, puppet, etc.) has been challenging to analyse and assess, partly because much of it has been an articulation of very personal, subjective or mythopoetic responses. That ‘problem’ is a finding in itself: the multiplicity and unevenness of responses (generated in close engagements with material detail, complex stories, real places and imaginal universes) confirms some efficacy in the project in relation to a ‘generation of different worlds and communities’, at least in the first aspect. Due to Covid, the second aspect – ‘community’ – was inhibited by the prohibition on social gatherings; its absence – piling the disconnection due to lack of sociability on top of the pamphlet’s formal dislocations and displacements – suggests that further experiments with this material might be fruitfully conducted, through the communities of performance, once it becomes safe to do so.

This positive finding in respect of making ‘different worlds’, resonant with speculative worldbuilding or ‘worlding’ (Haraway 2016, 13), should, however, not obscure the lack of respondents reporting on the agency of (or their co-agency with) unhuman others, but for a few references to materials, worms, stories and places: ‘the player passes through the landscape and the landscape passes through the player’ [volunteer 14]. So while some of the elements for an effective toolkit for mythopoetic performance may have been present in the *End Game* pamphlet – entangled stories and games as information maps, baffling instructions as an invitation to mythopoesis, spatial displacement of ‘placestories’ as part of the means to ‘worlding’ – as a vehicle for engaging with materials and unhuman others as co-performers, it may, at best, have been a useful starting point of a research project that is far from complete.

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