

# Notes for a Symposium

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

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## Notes for a Symposium

*When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes  
by casting lo.*

(Matthew 27:35)

The intellectual stubbornness of *I'm playing!* took root long before the world health crisis. During the months of institutional observance, telematic captivity and governments determining the emotions we experienced, it continued to be the object of a congenial conspiracy and a kind of obstinacy; when it seemed clear that the pandemic and its related world views had come to stay, some of this conspiratorial determination was used to avoid the immunological controls and draconian protocols that threatened to prevent this symposium from being held as we had wished; and to *play* with the odd and sometimes wisely demented rules of the new immunocentric device — perhaps thwarting them (in French there is a play of words on *jouer* and *déjouer*). Faithful to its thematic missions, the committee of *I'm playing!* engaged in juggling a thousand adaptations, maliciously reinterpreting the sanctimonious rules of the educational New Order and sportingly accepting the dizziest changes of perspective: to frame the symposium format in a topology that closely resembles one that structures a strategy and survival game. I thank the fearless and frantic players of that game (Carles Batlle, Óscar Cornago, Constanza Blanco, Jordi Fondevila, Ferran Adelantado and Marta Borrás) for believing that the *symposium* could honour its etymology and again be a meeting of exaltation and thought: a “boat rocking on the waves”, as attested by the graffiti of one of the old beneficiaries of these Hellenic feasts. And thank you for believing with me that we could finally reunite here. “The difficult thing is coming together,” someone said with exquisite and obscene ambivalence. The synchrony of pleasure is the primitive charisma of any game. It is also its greatest challenge. I do not care if this very ambivalence sounds directly cynical in view of the moral paranoia and sexual suspicion of

the recent scandals at the Institut del Teatre (in fact, I gleefully welcome it): in my view, the preventive paraphernalia of the new protocols is the pursuit of immunology by other means. And I think that, just like the “war against the virus” (omnipresent by default, insidious by definition, looming by divine decree), the recent and successful crusade against abuse promises for the time being only further incursions of experts and auditors, sent to reduce with excel spreadsheets, regulations and brief courses the ethical and intellectual complexity of the educational game — nothing to do with Eros or with Ethos —; the same crusade infallibly provides new generations of crooked players, very prone, with the best or worst of intentions, to recreate the invariably obtuse rules of any immunology and perhaps to have fun with them. The match between dramaturgy and thaumaturgy, between the diabolic and the symbolic, has never been so prevalent.

*To play*: ‘perform’, ‘act’, ‘impersonate’, ‘enact’. Beyond the fact that the metadiscourse turns it into a commonplace, the semantic specularity of game and theatre — almost a twofold metaphor — is perfectly lexicalised in most languages. It is worth asking ourselves whether the many ambivalences, exogenous tendencies and lines of deterritorialisation that the theory has identified in the recent postdramatic turn over do not simply refer to ambivalences and arborescences that are endogenous to the universal paradigm of the game; whether it is not possible to imagine the millennial theatricality as the coherent unfolding of the genetic jocularity inherent to any idea of theatre; and whether the dramaturgies that play — aptly put — with the analogy between theatre writing and playful programming, or between performance and *match, game, move, run*, far from being exotic or anomic, do not represent a radical extension of the modern project that, for theatre, was involved in exploring the most reviled or silently biased side of its ontology by rescuing it: all of which, far from tracking the ontological foundations of theatre in ritual or religion, enabled us to define its singularity based on centuries-old notions of risk, pleasure or scepticism, at the antipodes of any religiosity. Considering theatre as a metagame allows us to understand the game as the wildest metatheatre: an unruly genealogy of fictional languages. In many aspects, the *revival* of the recreational as a “genealogical experience” of theatre, or as an appearance of its metachronous substance, might legitimise brand new theatologies: oblique sciences, capable of methodically not only embracing the phenomenic environment of the game, but also the taxonomies that, from anthropology and sociology, have striven to describe, classify and interpret that environment. If, as an example, we limit ourselves to the now classical division of Roger Caillois, who redirects all games to four essential diagrams — *mimicry* (mimesis or role playing), *agon* (conflict or competition), *alea* (chance) and *ilinx* (vertigo and frenzy) —, it will be logical to wonder whether recent theatre, by revoking, demystifying or discrediting the prevalence of mimetic rules — which still linked it with *mimicry*, the “pretend” of the children’s universe — has not simply chosen to integrate into its poetic habits those recreational categories that a still prevailing socioeconomic strategy has lucratively redistributed into non-theatre areas of leisure and consumption (betting shops, sports grounds, amusement parks).

Some of the new dramaturgy has consisted of economically rescuing, reintegrating and de-obviating all these “adult” quadrants of the game, subjecting them to a new discursive negotiation; probably to remind us that this is what that thing called “theatre” is about: a game for adults carried out with selfless puerility. *I’m playing!* seeks to record all these rescues and displacements.

By dusting off the fetishes of civic and moral seriousness for the sake of also politically capitalising on the latest catastrophe, authorities of all kinds have focused on literally “offsiding us”: or, more precisely, urging us to act according to an unseen script of coexistence that does not enable us to play for the simple reason that it removes (or this is what we are told) any “margin of risk”. Meanwhile, and with paradoxical coherence, the Covid governance is made available to the childish adults in the country as the closest to a simplified version of a parlour game: entertaining them without being entertaining (as “educational games” generally do) is in fact its only purpose. State immunology, a true surrogate of a Culture, appropriates the magical axiom according to which it is possible to conjure up any form of transmission, and the space of coexistence can, without becoming completely nominal (and finally “virtual”), selectively dispense with all the frameworks that are prone to any contamination, transmission, contagion, mixing, effervescence; in short, becoming virtual is its only way of expressing the range of the brand new civil “virtues”. The hashtag *Culturasegura* (safeculture) — for the fact of being a hashtag and implying an unconditional surrender of complex thought to biopolitical simplification — is wantonly anti-cultural: it echoes the programmed de-moralisation of ethical exercise with a programmable de-poetisation of any poetic exercise. Incidentally, it turns the performing arts into a branch of archaeology. The expression “tener juego” (meaning that the parts of a mechanism have room to move) is applied to residual and interstitial sites in which what seems fixed, welded and stable can still shift; the fact that the components can move always enables us to contemplate the remote and hopeful prospect of a structural fault (I’m afraid “L’estaca”, a compelling ballad by Lluís Llach, is about something similar). The artistic avant-garde has always consisted of this: forcing the flexible points through oscillations (between tradition and heresy), the connections of the cultural device, to open up new margins of play, or simply expose the “manufacturing defects” and “serial damages” of the same device; managing in the long term the collapse of its misleading statics (perhaps, its *aesthetics*). The mission of art is not to simply flout the rules of the game but rather to paradoxically apply them (for example, stubbornly pressing on the designated mounts and “fixed points”: breaking love after excessive use. Like unruly children, art makes an inappropriate, risky and destructive use of toys that, in order to keep them entertained, are kindly put within their reach. It is a second-level game, fatally perverse.

With that in mind, the poetics represented in *I’m playing!* have been an entertainment for the ongoing exercise of poetic abnormality in terms of the New Normal. This symposium was conceived by tracking the *observables* of a particularly proteiform dramaturgical praxis. Resisting the temptation of introducing them as the theoretical summary of such a plural, dynamic and

genuinely empirical phenomenon, we rather chose to make it visible: speaking of the game by playing it, and understanding its twists and turns by losing ourselves in them. *I'm playing!* aspires to be a situation rather than a range of contents. The tactic is an immanent form of understanding or reading. What was valid for the strategy game designed and played by Guy Debord in the final stage of his analytical adventure should also be valid for us: it concerned ousting the binary nature of theory and praxis; turning theory into a praxis of active reading of events, and considering praxis as a budding theory; it concerned valuing, once again, the difference between tactical connotations (a range of qualities determined by the unexpected character of the action) and strategic denotation (a planned action protocol) between the game as occurrence and the game as object, between the imponderables of the match and the squares of the board. The form of the symposium is, in all its aspects, an entertaining application of this principle: it is structured as an interactive, shifting and variable map for the unfolding of conspiratorial thought; it embraces different temperatures and qualities of play. *I'm playing!* alternates moments of negotiability (traditional format presentations) and turbulence (*Gran Casino IT*): it enables the speculation to boast of its impurity. *Gran Casino IT*, as its name suggests, is the large gambling parlour in which a sinful and eventful crowd moves closer to different tables to try the risky business of praxis and/or discourse. It is also, if you like, an authoritative image of the fragility of the sector, or a metaphor for the status of precariousness to which most artists are bound, all of them croupiers, players, tricksters, tricked (*casino*, in Italian is all these things: “gambling parlour”, “club”, “brothel”, or simply “chaos”).

Thus, *I'm playing!* seeks to record the *participatory, immersive* and *interactive* dramaturgies not because of the generic intention of political emancipation that usually structures them (if anything, it focuses on deconstructing the comforting prejudices inherent in the notion of *relational aesthetics*, provided by Nicolas Bourriaud to the whole of the Empire of Good) but because of the formal guile, the brand new procedure, the tactical differentials, even the variety of degrees of ideological efficacy they put forward.

*I'm playing!* relinquishes the exegetic comfort of the *format* because it continues to consider participation as a problem of *form*. The fact that the game is generally participatory does not mean that all games are entertaining. The fact that some games are uplifting does not necessarily mean that everybody joins in to play.

*I'm playing!* seeks to achieve the *authorisation* of the audience rather than the *performativisation* (unanimously acknowledged as the most sensitive differential of the participatory universe): it believes that the dramaturgical devices it submits for review are not so much worthy because of the benevolent will of inviting the audience to a generally holistic “direct experience” as because of the malevolent intention of summoning them to an immanent and shared exercise in authorship, writing, composition, calculation, *interpretation*, deliberation, strategy, simulation and — why not? — disloyalty and hypocrisy.

*I'm playing!* does not reproduce the typical exegesis of participatory theatre as a framework of authentication and place of truth. Rather, taking into account interactive poetics as a problem of roles and intricacies, it inscribes them again into the entertaining register of the artifice; to the phantom of the game as a community experiment it prefixes if anything the reality of playing as an associative simulation, with everything this involves as a risk.

Accepting the liminal (and thereby both anomic and culturogenous) nature of the game as margin and matrix of the thing called "theatre", *I'm playing!* reflects on some of the most significant metatheses of recent dramaturgy and emphasises all the poetic procedures enabling a gesture of *programming* to subsume the traditional prerogatives of writing, composition and *mise-en-scène*. This both marginal and matrix gesture of programming, which in the recent praxis addresses the problem of drama in *dromological* terms, introduces as a symptom of ultramodernity what is probably an atavistic premise of the whole theatre civilisation (for the same reason that the impulse is prior and transversal to any aim at *mimicry*).

The panorama of poetic and cultural phenomena that *I'm playing!* seeks to embrace is precisely related to the semantic capital of the notion of programming as a configuration of an emerging system of relations and interactions: it ranges from the design of stage devices to the design of interactive experience; from the creation of videogames to the performative development of the board game; from non-verbal writing guidelines of dance to the organised eloquence of the debate; from the poetic planning of interactive spaces and itineraries to museum management; from computer programming to cultural programming. All these practical-discursive environments have a more or less fraudulent dramaturgical pedigree. They are, so to speak, heterotopias of a heterotopia called "theatre" (or theatres that have emerged in the interstices, basements and attics of the *theatrum mundi*), whose potential for emergence floats in a space of non-determination and relativity, between those who design the experience and those who obey, flout or renegotiate the inherent apparatus. Between the thaumaturges of the game (theatrical, social, cultural) and the dramaturges who agree to play, reprogramme, deprogramme and hack it.

*I'm playing!*, for its programmers and users, is less a museum of relational aesthetics than a gymnasium for highly personalised and rigorously biased practices of aesthetic and poetic relativism.

