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Critical Introduction

What makes something stay with you? Be it a game, a book, Netflix show, life lesson—there are a variety of factors that make things last within a person. The preface of *Play to Learn* informs us of the ways games can help a lesson stick, writing that games can aid learning by meeting players on several axes, listing “They can help people understand alternate points of view... (create a) personalized learning experience... and reach the same learning outcome... games can provide critical spacing and repetition of content, which helps cement memory” (Boller/Kapp, Preface). Undoubtedly, the design of games for classrooms offers an alternate route of providing information to groups of students, as it places students in an autonomous position, creating engagement.

Early in the process for the creation of *The King in Yellow*, we considered a similar question, though the notion of conveying any sort of “objective” information was far away. Rather, we wanted to create a learning opportunity for our own peers— to give a gift. We were not teachers, but people, and our job was not (for the most part) to create a game that held information within, but rather to bring an audience to a point of learning that only they could ever have access to— we wanted to teach them to believe in gods, to wonder, to see things in a new way— each in a way unique to them. From the start, we set a simple goal: *Break past the inertia of belief*.

The King in Yellow was a durational immersive experience designed for an audience of five, which invited them, on their own terms, to understand the value of decay and the divinity of trees. After a series of interviews, audience participants were led into the history of the first Fall, as told by the trees who were there at the beginning of time. Over three weeks, the participants

found themselves implicated in the stories they learned about, as well as in each others' narratives and lives. Through a series of live scenes, puzzles, and scored interactions, the participants eventually made their way together, where with the knowledge they've gathered, they were left to discover the truth of the King in Yellow... and how to save themselves from fate. The piece culminated in a twenty-seven hour performance open to the public, which created a space to celebrate decay, and create a new god.

The King in Yellow cannot be easily categorized as a game— it is also a play, and a religious observance, and a place, and a group of real people. At its core, it sought to subvert its own game-ness. At the End (both a time, a place, and a score), each audience member was instructed in something that we as creators found to be true over the weeks: in order to reach the end of the *game*, it had to stop being a game. It had to be real. We had to believe fully in the King in Yellow as a god and an entity, and we had to believe that we were people with the power to bring him back. These beliefs were all reached through the game that had taken place over three weeks— and for the creators, much longer. The fundamental concept of the “magic circle,” which many have used to fundamentally categorize games as a space separate from life, which allows the game to be experienced as “a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place” (Caillois 6).

Of course, the experience of *The King in Yellow* did fit Callois' definition, for the most part. It was an optional experience that didn't risk the safety of its participants— but in a way, the win-state of our game was the breakdown of the magic circle. It ended when, for a moment, you were able to let the fiction become real, with all of the implications of that reality laid upon the players. *Break past the inertia of belief*. This critical introduction will put *The King in Yellow* into

the language of game design, but remember: you can do the same with any religion, speak about the core dynamics and mechanics of Catholicism just as easily.

The King in Yellow is broken down into four sections of gameplay. Here, I will break down the core dynamics and mechanics for each of those sections:

Section One– Pre-Audience (Stages 1-3 in the rulebook.)

This section is the most difficult to put into the language of dynamics/mechanics, because in some ways it is more the process of designing a game than of playing one. That said, part of the value of *The King in Yellow* is the experience and learning which takes place in the Stewards, not only the Participants.

Core Dynamics:

-*Construct or Build*– The Stewards will use the resources available to them (The local area + context of the piece) to assemble a team and begin to create a myth. This section of gameplay is a story-devising game, and the prompts come in the form of the world, of time, of conversations about what the players believe. Remember, the game ends when everyone believes in the King.

-*Matching*– as the stewards choose participants and begin the interview process, their job is to match the experience and desires of the participants to the myth they have already begun to spin. Through the recognition of similarity and tension between these parallel narratives, the game begins to take on the quality of a *gift*, which is all-important.

-*Alignment*– With the story created and connected to the participants, the job of the stewards turns to alignment, as they use the information gained from the interview process to logistically/creatively/emotionally fit the participants' experience together. How do the rhythms of the Fall, of the participants' schedule, and of the emotional beats of your story align to make the whole piece work?

Core Mechanics:

-There are two groups of players– the Stewards and the Participants. For section one, only the Stewards are playing (except for the interviews).

-Using the Lore provided, the Stewards create a story that fits their time and place by observing the world around them.

-The Stewards choose the Participants in whatever way fits their self-determined story goals for the game (the participants should not know each other)

-The Stewards design the experience for the Participants, informed by a series of three interviews

-The Stewards break down the story into three weeks, creating one piece of the story's experience for each participant on each day.

-The Stewards may change the rules, dynamics, and mechanics of the game in whatever way they see fit

-The Stewards *Believe* in the King

Section 2– Week One. The next three sections are broken down into the three weeks of the participants’ experience. Any dynamics and mechanics written here are suggestions/heuristics, and will vary depending on the context of the game in each iteration. In these section, the written dynamics/mechanics refer more to the experience of the Participants, as the stewards’ job is just that– to steward the participants as they move through the weeks

Core Dynamics:

-*Exploration*– This is the participants’ introduction to both the story world as well as to the aspects of the literal world around them that the Stewards want them to discover. Both narratively and physically, week one is all about finding new things.

-*Collecting*– The notes and objects found by the participants throughout week one each give them a piece of the story, as they start to understand their context within what they learn. The pieces they discover may also matter as puzzle pieces later in the game.

-*Solution*– In week one, there may be some light puzzle aspects, such as a message that must be interpreted to find an object in a certain place. This allows the players to become engaged, and to get used to solving puzzles ahead of the next weeks.

Core Mechanics:

-Participants learn the story through several different mechanics, laid out by the Stewards. These include

daily schedules

- Notes left in places that intersect naturally with the participants’

daily routine

- Performances viewed by the participants in the course of their

and objects at certain times and/or places

- Hints, which lead the participants towards performances, notes,

- Participants do not interact with each other throughout week one
- Maple, if they exist, cannot speak to the stewards or other participants
- Participants are led by Stewards to discover the tree species they are

connected to

- At the end of week one, participants are invited to embrace decay in order to advance to week two

Section three- Week Two– During week two, the participants come into alignment with each other, and learn to break Maple’s curse. The core dynamics and mechanics change between each participant, as each has a very different experience.

Core Dynamics:

-*Rescue or Escape*- At its core, week two is about saving Maple. Only Maple knows how to save themselves, and they cannot communicate with anyone. Throughout the week, they must collaborate with other participants in creative ways to engineer their own freedom.

-*Collecting*– The participants will continue to gather materials that will be answers to puzzles, down the road. In addition, each participant will find a black rock over the course of week two, which, when gathered, will free Maple.

-Solution- As the participants start to find each other, they will have things to do and problems to solve. These problems are meant to give the participants a reason to interact with each other, as well as the story.

-Alignment- At the end of week two, the participants must find the right time and place to perform the ritual to free Maple's voice, and gather themselves and their rocks to do so.

Core Mechanics:

- Throughout the week, the participants begin to meet each other
- The participants solve puzzles together by filling in the gaps left from being alone in week one (a key received by participant A in week one will open a box found by participant B in week one, once A and B meet in week two)
- Throughout the week, participants each find a stone that will allow them to free maple's voice, once all the participants are in the same place.
- The participants are all in the same room for the first time at the end of week two
- Maple has the most story knowledge: when their voice is freed, they lead the participants to put all the pieces of the story together, allowing them to solve the first piece of week three.

Section Four– *Week three*– During the final week, all the participants work together to solve a puzzle in order to summon the King in Yellow

Core Dynamics:

-Race to the Finish- In week three, the participants are working to free themselves from the king's clutches before time runs out. The time limit can be literal or figurative, but there should be time pressure on the participants.

-Rescue or Escape- The Participants are working to escape their fate by solving puzzles and triggering the return of the King in Yellow.

-Collection- in order to trigger the King's return, the participants must perform a second ritual, which needs different pieces than the one which freed Maple. They will find these throughout the week by solving puzzles and progressing through the story.

-Alignment- Once they have the pieces, the participants must discover where and when to perform the ritual, much like in week two.

-Solution- Throughout the week, the story progresses as participants solve puzzles, much like in an escape room.

-Belief- This dynamic is core to the game. The win-state for the entire process is achieved when the stewards and participants believe, fully, in the reality of the King and the ritual, and embrace the value of decay. The game ends once it is no longer a game.

Core Mechanics

-Players solve puzzles to move through an escape-room puzzle format.

Puzzles include:

finding a needed object

- Scavenger Hunts, finding clues to move from step to step until
- Logic puzzles, where a solution must be found
- Cyphers, which transform solutions from individual puzzles into information needed to advance, such as combination locks or passwords
- Performances/Live events by the stewards that convey needed information to the participants

-The Participants must gather a set of five pieces, and bring them to a certain place, at a certain time. Once they do, the King arrives and the piece ends.

-For the Stewards, this is the moment to cement belief both in themselves and the participants. Believe, until it's more than a game.

Learning Potential

As stated in the introduction, our learning goals revolved less around distinct pieces of information and more around self-reflection and belief. We believe that belief creates reality, for better and for worse, and one of the most powerful things to teach is the ability to see and feel.

Our specific learning goals were:

- Make people notice the living things around them, and form a connection with trees as subjects

- Have people reflect on the change happening in their lives through the lens of decay, and teach them to become more comfortable with processes of decay and collapse

- Give people an emotional access point to understanding collapse on larger-than-human scales

- Teach people to give gifts

The learning potential of this game lies in the marriage between game design/theory and the theatrical tradition it lives in. Both educational gaming and educational theater aim to place the learning objectives within a context that personalizes its information for the audience/players.

Role playing games, which in their own way merge the forms of game rule systems and improvisational performance, have been lauded for their ability to connect players to concepts/characters. Marco Arnaudo designates two aspects of the storytelling potential of games which feel particularly relevant to *The King in Yellow*— “The players’ characters undergo some form of change during gameplay,” and “The changing state of the players’ characters is a major source of interest” (Arnaudo 32). These aspects point to the fact that in identifying with characters who are a part of a story, players can become very connected to both those characters and to the story. When these connections are set in the real world— the character being connected with is the tree in your backyard, the story you’re connecting with it the process of Fall that’s happening all around you, then the interest and change that’s happening through the course of the story does not stay in fiction, because it’s literally present in front of the players, *even when the game is not “happening.”* Because of this presence of the game in reality, the game itself allows its values to be easily seen in everyday life, reifying the learning objectives.

Briefly, on gift-giving. This is the major lesson of the Stewards, although the participants can also learn by receiving the gifts openly. The process of being a steward in this piece is the process of allowing yourself to fall in love with a stranger. The game functions much better like this than if all the players know each other beforehand. To give a good gift to a stranger is a practice of listening, and is something *vulnerable*, which asks the gift-giver to show up with an open attitude, and allow their own interests to be molded by someone else. In learning how to give gifts, we learn to be more compassionate members of our communities, both human and otherwise.

The values of decay and collapse are fundamental to the mechanics of *The King in Yellow*. Where many games are repeatable, this one can never be the same twice. It always must be built,

literally, from the ground up. The durational, experiential form of the game, as stated earlier, is meant to let the players break through the inertia of belief in a way that lets something stick with them. When you walk with something for a longer period of time, and it's more fundamental to your life in the time you engage with it, it's more likely to be something that stays with you.

That said, the piece does not intend to teach its players a piece of information that's meant to stay in their minds forever, as lessons in school would often aim to achieve. Rather, the game reveals itself as a set of lessons that are important *because* they will not last forever. The form of theater, and of improv, are ephemeral forms, which cannot last long beyond their event. The mixture of this ephemerality with the game's durationality create a contrasting set of values that the players are left to hold. Everything they learn throughout gameplay will be lost. However, by teaching people to interact with the world in a different way, and to see things around them in a different way, the learning objectives from *The King in Yellow* take on a new half-life— The players will learn differently from the interactions that follow the piece, because they have been shown a new way of accessing the world around them, of listening, of seeing. The things they learn from these new ways of interacting and learning will last far beyond their memory of the specific information granted to them by the game itself, but are nevertheless chemically informed by their experience playing the game.

Cited:

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