

Reading fan mail: Communicating immersive experience in Punchdrunk's *Faust* and *The Masque of the Red Death*

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Abstract:

This article draws on a qualitative analysis of a very specific kind of discourse in order to consider how the live performance event might be valued and communicated beyond the moment of encounter. Comments submitted to theatre company Punchdrunk via their website during the runs of *Faust* (21 Wapping Lane, 2006-7) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (Battersea Arts Centre, 2007-8) reveal how audience members describe immersive experience. Themes across the comments are examined to propose a vocabulary of what is valued in immersive experience in theatrical performance, and the consequences for current theorisations of immersive theatre. The article thinks through the practical ramifications of considering this kind of discourse and proposes that studying fan response contributes to a further understanding of how immersive experience is both created in the moment and discussed afterwards. The article identifies a highly engaged community of Punchdrunk enthusiasts, and concludes with a reflection on the development of their fan base since their earlier shows, suggesting that the area would greatly reward further enquiry.

Keywords: immersive theatre, immersion, Punchdrunk, fan studies

Introduction

The term *immersive* has experienced a surge in popularity in recent years, and as such is often applied loosely. In 2012 Lyn Gardner noted that '*immersive* is theatre's new buzzword' and expressed irritation with its often vague and unspecific application, commenting on 'marketeers who seem to be applying the term "immersive" to practically anything that isn't a play by David Hare' (np). Beyond this distinction, immersive theatre has developed certain physical and aesthetic signifiers. It may be defined as a genre of theatre where audiences

share the space with the performers; usually a scenographically rich and multi-sensory environment, through which spectators are invited to wander with the possibility of individual interactions (see definitions by Nield 2008, Machon 2013, White 2013). The productions of theatre company Punchdrunk are certainly immersive in terms of their structure, frequently resembling a combination of promenade performance and art installation which the audience is invited to explore. Their productions may also be considered immersive in reference to the *experience* of this form of theatre: what happens inside the walls of the building. Immersion in this context refers to a sensation of high engagement. Of course, by this definition, *all* theatre can be considered immersive, as a state of intense engagement can occur in the audience of any kind of performance. This article is interested in the relationship between these two interpretations of 'immersive': form and experience, with a focus on experience. The article draws on a specific kind of discourse to explore a potential means for building a vocabulary and set of approaches to the study of immersion in this context. This article is interested in how the experience offered by Punchdrunk's form of theatre might resemble, or differ from, 'immersion' in other forms.

Comments submitted to Punchdrunk via the company's website (www.punchdrunk.org.uk) during the runs of *Faust* (2006-07) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-8) are valuable documents for considering relationships between audience and production. These raise questions about the notion of interactivity, and the concept of immersive experience as something to be communicated outside of the performance space. The language and the subject matter of these comments reveal, or make manifest, a relationship to the shows, to individual performers within them, and to Punchdrunk as a company. Trends across this discourse, such as a description of overwhelming sensory excitement or childlike fascination, reflect the ways immersive theatre as a whole is often described, understood and talked about outside of fan discourse. Indeed, members of Punchdrunk and marketing rhetoric around immersive theatre frequently draw upon similar themes of individuality, excitement and exploration. I am interested in what people talk about when they talk about Punchdrunk, and what fan mail discourse might reveal about immersive theatre, immersive experience and the language of a specific community. Further trends in subject matter across the comments include cryptic references to one-on-one encounters, descriptions of joy in discovery, and accounts of the social resonances of audience members who visited with a group. This kind of interaction with the company is more than simply an honorary curtain call or a giving of thanks: it functions as a means of claiming ownership over immersive experience, and as such may provide a useful resource for researchers interested in how theatrical experience is discussed. This article reports on the findings of an initial exploration into fan discourse and shows how a community is defining itself and its experiences. The article ends with a discussion of the current state of Punchdrunk's fan community, and a consideration of the potential advantages, ethical considerations and practical ramifications of further study.

Dark, twisted love: reading fan mail

I am in dark, twisted love with your theatre group.

There is a considerable theoretical basis for the study of fan interactivity. Jenkins notes that fans 'become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings' (2006: 4). Fans often have a highly sophisticated critical gaze towards the work they love, rather than the passive non-critical adoration of the fan stereotype. Fan studies is a relevant context for Punchdrunk's fan mail for *Faust* and *Masque*, as well as the more explicit fan activity accommodated by the company's later shows *Sleep No More* (2011-) and *The Drowned Man* (2013-4). Hills (2003) and Duffett (2013) consider the state of fan research and culture, and Barker and Mathijs (2007) propose methodological approaches to long-term research into fan response. Lewis (2002) emphasises active, reciprocal relationships between fans and the producers of the original work. Abercrombie and Longhurst provide a continuum of audiences that describes a move towards active production as consumers become fans. 'Consumers' rise through enthusiasts, cultists and fans, with 'petty producer' at the far end of the spectrum, engaged in actively producing additional texts (1998: 141). Studies of theatre fandom are rarer, and Freshwater argues that theatre studies as a whole might consider paying more attention to theatregoers: 'audiences are beginning to be trusted by practitioners and by industry. But it seems that theatre scholars have yet to develop this trust' (2008: 74). Discussions of immersive theatre and Punchdrunk have been considered from the perspective of anonymity (White 2009) and intimacy (Gordon 2013), and increasingly it has been possible to chart changes in audience behaviour as the company's work has become more popular (Silvestre 2012, Jakob-Hoff 2013). Abercrombie and Longhurst consider fans and enthusiasts 'a form of skilled audience' (1998: 121) and this theorisation enables detailed discussion of the effects of a work.

Clapp comments on the changing nature of a Punchdrunk audience in her review of *The Drowned Man*. In this later show, 'aficionados poke eagerly into a place, suss out whether there is any action and move on [...]. There is less baffled loitering and fruitful lingering. That is something of a loss' (2013: np). Comments like these suggest that something intrinsic to the *experience* of immersive theatre is lost when an audience becomes increasingly aware of the rules of engagement. Such comments in turn imply an understanding of what those rules of engagement are perceived to be. Clapp prioritises slow exploration over excited and deliberate searching, but audience members are given a plot synopsis at the beginning of *The Drowned Man* – knowing that a story is spread around the building, why not go searching for it? I do not suggest that there is an intrinsically 'right' way to engage with immersive theatre. However, I do hope to demonstrate that audiences who feel they have had a successful Punchdrunk encounter often draw on implicit assumptions about what the rules of engagement are – and moreover feel that in doing so they have gained an understanding of what 'the best experience' actually *is*. The fan mail texts

discussed in this article reveal the ways audience members place value on performance experience in the work of Punchdrunk, and how they communicate this value. What constitutes immersive experience is implied in how they describe it.

The potential overlap between immersive theatre and gaming has been noted elsewhere (McMullan 2014, Jakob-Hoff 2014), and this comparison has ramifications for how an audience member might approach the work. In their influential study of game design, Salen and Zimmerman suggest a multivalent model of interactivity that includes social activity happening outside the (game) system itself:

Beyond-the-object-interactivity; participation within the culture of the object.
This is interaction outside the experience of a single designed system. The clearest examples come from fan culture, in which participants co-construct communal realities, using designed systems as the raw material. (2004: 60)

This definition of interactivity allows fan activity to be considered in creative dialogue with immersive experience.

The Drowned Man's opening voiceover has advice for the audience on the best way to navigate the production: 'I urge each of you to steer your own course. Tonight, your bearing shapes your fate'. In separating its spectators into individuals, Punchdrunk attempt to make literal the theatrical truism that every spectator has their own unique experience. Crucially, in this form of immersive theatre, each individual experience is accompanied by an awareness of others having their own similar but inevitably different individual experience. *The Drowned Man's* voiceover is given to a group, and other masked audience members will be seen during an individual journey through the show. By doing this, *The Masque of the Red Death*, *Faust* and most recently *The Drowned Man* have built into their very form an awareness of multiple similar-but-different individual experiences. This awareness demands to be talked about afterwards, compared and contrasted. Immersive experience in these productions has a life beyond the show, not just in memories but also through discussion with others. Experiences are created in the moment and projected beyond. In addition to conversation and comparison between individual audience members, the construction of communal realities occurs in the creation of art and fiction inspired by the shows and shared between fans, and in the co-creation of comprehensive diagrams, plot outlines, or synopses of the action.

The social element of fan engagement with Punchdrunk's work is worth considering, in spite of the common framing of immersive theatre that emphasises the singular audience member going on an individual journey:

even if you're holding hands with your loved one when you arrive we'll make an effort to try and separate you because you'll have a better time when you're fighting for yourself and you're selfish for once. (Barrett, 2014: talk at 'Experience Economy' Remix Summit)

Jenkins reminds us of the importance of fan communities' social qualities: 'For most fans, meaning-production is not a solitary and private process but rather a social and public one' (1992: 75). Popat's discussion of online dance communities proposes interactivity as a means of experiencing rewarding social engagement, as well as an opportunity for developing creative practice: 'in a situation where the group members perceive themselves to be connected in some way, a single individual interacting on behalf of the group can lead to a strong sense of participation being felt by others within that group' (2006: 32-3). As the fan mail comments below demonstrate, an audience's individual experience within the moment of the live encounter has social values as well as private ones. Many comments refer to friendship, family, work or school groups, and the richness of the experience for being simultaneously separate and shared.

Punchdrunk only kept a minority of the vast number of comments they received, and so the audience response data had already been curated into a smaller selection prior to my research. The comments in this article are drawn from an archive of little over a hundred. These often contain highly personal recollections of an audience member's experience, and frequently use the language of shared relationships, particularly when discussing one-on-one scenes. This is especially relevant in relation to a theatrical form that invites the creation of relationships. Punchdrunk's website allows communication in an instant: a relationship between audience member and company, established in the performative moment, is made manifest as soon as the comment is sent. Many responses emphasise this close proximity to the moment of encounter: 'I've just got back from seeing *Masque of the Red Death*'. 'Last night was a dream sequence I am unable to leave behind'. The comments are mostly very short – rarely more than a few lines – and together build up an impressionist description of audience members' best experiences of *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death*. Through this interaction audience members can share individual experiences of theatrical immersion, with the act of communicating revealing the values placed on this experience.

Drawing on the discourse of fan mail has potential ethical and practical ramifications. Firstly, the comments studied in this article were written for Punchdrunk, and were not intended to be read by an outside party. However, as part of the Punchdrunk Archives these comments are extremely useful for thinking about how audience members communicate immersive experience, and so Punchdrunk has given permission for them to be disseminated in this context. The comments were already anonymous, and I have changed any names or details that might lead the author and their co-attendees to be identified. Secondly, the nature of these comments means that positivity shines out from them all, with negative experiences unlikely be communicated or archived in this manner. The people who voluntarily contacted Punchdrunk after the event generally indicated an extremely pleasurable experience, linked to a particular eagerness to respond to Punchdrunk's invitations for multisensory exploration and to lose themselves in the work. However, fans and enthusiasts are only one type of attendee within the larger audience. While the

audience members quoted in this article responded very positively, it is therefore important to acknowledge that this is not always the case. Nield (2008) and Freshwater (2011) discuss the possibility that too much physical freedom can have a negative effect, leaving audience members alienated or unsure, certainly unimmersed. While acknowledging the potentially limiting specificity of the fan demographic, this article focuses on the vocabulary that enthusiastic audience members use to place value on immersive experience. As Abercrombie and Longhurst's 'skilled audience', fans are likely to experience the work they love with a detailed and critical eye.

'Better than sex': the intense pleasure of a Punchdrunk experience

The most common purpose of these comments was simply to provide feedback of short, intense praise.

I have just been to the Masque of the Red Death this weekend and was completely blown away by the production! An absolute inspiration!

The Masque was the best thing I'd been to in years.

I enjoyed "The Masque of the Red Death" more than immensely.

Astonishing. Please do something else soon.

I was at The Masque of the Red Death last night and it was quite simply the most amazing show I've ever seen in my entire life.

I have just had the most brilliant night out I have had in a long time.

What these all share is an evaluation of the experience overall. More is revealed about these reactions through the longer comments that reference the specific elements people loved. Particularly reviewed are the relationships audience members felt they had formed with single performers. Most often this occurred in the one-on-one experiences. These moments are often remembered as a formative element of the theatrical experience: something the audience member particularly wants to tell Punchdrunk about, and for which they want to thank them and/or the performer:

I finally managed to see The Masque of the Red Death. Amazing. I wish I could go back and dance with Tom Lawrence again! Thank you.

That Red Masque show was great. The man (actor!) who locked me in a closet with himself (scared the living daylights out of me for 30 secs) must shake his

hand! Or buy him an absinthe -- top show cheers PJB MUST BRING MY PALS
TO SEE YOUR NEXT PROD!!

In the quotes above, the spectator, in recollecting the experience, separates the fictional character from the charisma of the performer. This has implications for how immersive experience manifests in the moment. Although frequently positioned as an overwhelming experience that leaves little room for additional thought – as in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory of psychological 'flow' – immersive experience does not exist as a binary from critical distance. These audience members have a sense of the artifice of the production, as well as sharing the memory of a particularly intense moment of performativity. Something similar has been identified by Reason (2010), who dismantles the theoretical binary between critical distance and immersion in his discussion of dual perception in young audiences.

There is also a sense of shared knowledge in comments that mention a one-on-one encounter. While it might be obscure to somebody who was not there, the performer being discussed, and/or the anonymous mastermind-like Punchdrunk, know what is being referred to. This sense of a relationship comes through even more strongly in comments that, rather than sharing knowledge explicitly, hint at a secret that only the intended recipient will be able to understand.

LOVED the show, especially your attic vault and the bedrooms and the tall blonde young guy who gave me a very seductive experience in the boudoir room!

A quick note to say congratulations on the production! I attended last night at the BAC and came away feeling that I had experienced something very special. A particular mention of thanks to the actors behind 'Madeleine' and 'the Nurse' characters whose interaction with me on a 1:1 basis left me thoroughly moved by the intensity and immersive nature of their performance. From the man in the red sweater and stripy scarf!

These kinds of comments are phrased in a way that suggests an interaction rather than describing the sequence of events. They have the tone of the in-joke, cryptic reference or secret code, in accord with the atmosphere of secrecy and discovery that characterises the invitation offered by Punchdrunk's work. Some place the author in a temporal relationship with the production they saw, giving the specific date. Revealed here, perhaps, is an assumption that a certain interaction or moment of performance occurred only once. It is assumed that the performer will remember exactly the interaction and audience member that is being talked about. This is particularly relevant in relation to a theatrical form that so emphasises the importance of emotional, visceral reactions, and the creation of what are positioned as being unique experiences. It is important to emphasise, when coding fan responses in this way, that making these observations is not to diminish audience members'

experiences. Rather, the intention is to reveal the extent to which immersion might depend on a sensation of true uniqueness or interactivity, whether or not this was actually the case in terms of how the scene was created and performed. In other words, it doesn't matter if the experience created is truly bespoke, not to be repeated for other audience members: rather, what is at stake is that is *felt to be* personal.

The one-on-one encounter has been cited as the pinnacle of immersive experience in a Punchdrunk production: 'A one-on-one, for me, is the purest form of Punchdrunk; it's distilled Punchdrunk' (Barrett in Machon 2013: 162). These scenes are tightly scripted and the performer remains in control at all times. However, they represent interaction at its most explicit in terms of the attention paid to the audience member, and the feeling that it makes a difference that they are there, and that the performance has been crafted for them alone. In the web comments, however, while immersive experience is frequently expressed in terms of relationships to performers, this is not the only way. A second trend among the comments – and one that complicates the notion of immersive experience as a private sensation – is that many are very social. They often place the author of the comment within a wider group. While expressing joy in their individual experience, commentators often also situate these in relation to the social group with whom they came to the show:

I came to see Masque last night and would just like to say congratulations on what was, for myself and the friends I went with, quite simply the most amazing night out we've had in years. Part dream part film set, in our wildest dreams we could not have come up with anything remotely as fantastic. Can we come back, please?

For these authors, as well as sharing memories of *The Masque of the Red Death* with Punchdrunk, these comments gesture towards memories that exist between the audience members themselves. The comments usually thank Punchdrunk for providing an amazing individual experience that is a joy to talk about with other people:

I'd love NOTHING more than to go back there, but part of me feeling like that's cheating. Greedy even. Like going back in time and meddling with events, not to your advantage nor disadvantage, but just because you can. If I think about it rationally, I'm MORE than satisfied with my memories of that one night. As well as the stories of S—'s, S—'s and L—'s (My companions TO, but not AT, the Masque) experiences of the Masque, which I'm sure we will talk about for years to come. Only trouble is, it's hard to be rational about something as breathtakingly indulgent as this! This was so close to my heart it's uncanny! Thanks, LOADS!

The importance placed on individual experience, with each audience member actively encouraged to make their own journey through the show, informs how the production is

talked about and remembered afterwards. Arriving in a group, and then either splitting up or not, affects how a Punchdrunk show is experienced. It is the difference between, as the above comment puts it, companions *to* and companions *at* the Masque. Choosing to separate is a decision. This decision may be aided by the suggestion of Punchdrunk in the form of ushers, voiceovers, reviews, and word of mouth, but it is a decision that consciously has to be made by participants. The decision reveals implicit assumptions about the 'correct' rules of engagement with the work. Comments that inform Punchdrunk of this perhaps also express the spectator's sense that they have understood what the correct rules of engagement are, and followed Punchdrunk's suggested route to the best possible experience. The joy of attending in a group is often what the author of the comments specifically wants to thank Punchdrunk for: providing an opportunity for group reminiscing, storytelling, and comparison. The individual experience in itself becomes the basis for further social interaction. Here, these two levels of interactivity – the individual and the private – begin to affect each other:

My partner and I attended last week - we decided to split up immediately and each go on our own journey throughout the production - which was a great idea - on the way home we were abuzz with how different the experience had been for each of us - some rooms having not been visited by one - and a discovery being made by the other - we had had the most incredible and unrivalled theatrical experience [...]

I went to see Masque of the Red Death on Saturday. To say I found it completely bizarre is to undervalue the different approach to theatre. I have to say thank you as I went as one of a group of five and we all had different experiences and saw something different to the point we could have gone to five different events. The finale, big band and dj were fantastic and worth going for those performances in their own right. My only regret is that we were too late in the season to see it once more to attempt to see other rooms I didn't find at my first attendance.

The very existence of these web comments suggests that the act of sharing memories with Punchdrunk can be just as much a part of the pleasure as sharing with friends after the show. The act of communicating immersive experience has an interesting connection with Punchdrunk's emphasis on individual journeys. The sense of discovery as one travels through the production might indeed be heightened if a spectator explores as a lone wolf: but in addition, splitting up means a spectator can learn about not only their own experience but that of their companions. The above authors might call upon other audience members to fill them in on the 'other rooms [they] didn't find'. In this way, immersive theatrical experience extends beyond the confines of in-the-moment, and even beyond the individual.

The comments function as honorary curtain calls, allowing an audience member to thank performers when the show's form, or the end of a scene or moment of interaction, left them unable to do so in person via conventional applause. Describing particular moments or the production overall in terms of a sense of sensory/emotional overload suggests that, for some people, immersive experiences are a state of intense engagement. Describing this experience either with friends or through writing to Punchdrunk functions as a means of claiming ownership of one's own immersive experience: a means of stating that such an experience took place.

As well as friendship or family groups, several comments refer to attending as part of school outings: either as a student or as the group leader. In either case, comments sometimes refer to having gathered inspiration for their own projects. Thanks are given to Punchdrunk not just for the show itself, but for the resonances that continue afterwards. The examples below reflect a desire to continue engaging with immersive experience from the perspective of creation and design:

I took my group of A level students to see your production last night. We came away inspired, moved and very excited, thank you. Feelings like that are not evoked very often from a piece of theatre. It was a triumph.

Hi — I just wanted to say myself and my whole drama class came to see *The Masque of the Red Death*, and we all thought it fantastic, we've never ever seen anything like it before. You've really opened our eyes to what theatre can do, and really inspired us as we're starting our A-level devised coursework projects at the moment! Thank you, and good luck with all your shows and future projects!

These comments are characterised by a sense of shared discovery. Another trait that is central to the definition of immersive experience is an emphasis on a state of childlikeness. A further relationship might be created, or made manifest, here; the relationship between the author and their previous experiences of theatre and performance.

Saw the performance last night and was blown away. It's good to know that at 43 years of age I can still be surprised and challenged. Thanks!

Comments that refer to friendship or school groups are the few contexts where the age of the author is implied. But a childlike openness and willingness to explore are often seen as the ideal states of a Punchdrunk spectator, with many comments referring to being in this state. Experience, and age itself by virtue of the childlike metaphor, become unhelpful baggage: pre-formed ideas of what theatre ought to look like. Only letting go of these preconceptions enables a full commitment to getting the most out of a Punchdrunk show, in order to return to the 'childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and

experience a real sense of adventure’ (Punchdrunk 2014). These comments reveal how immersive experience might manifest outside of the spatial and temporal boundaries of the performance space. The comments below all refer to what could be called an immersive theatre ‘hangover’ after engaging thoroughly with a Punchdrunk work: they all express a wishing-to-be-back. Whether the metaphor is a parallel universe or a dream, the experience becomes something that has left the respondents physically changed:

Last night was a dream sequence I am unable to leave behind. All day today has been like the dream and the reality is me still in those corridors looking for another room watching from behind my mask the life and death struggle of the actors. Truly brilliant theatre as it hits hard into the sub-consciousness and stays there. Please put me in as a friend of Punchdrunk.

Thank you very much for “The Masque of the Red Death”. I went to see it three weeks ago, and I still feel as if I’m waking up from a dream. You have given flesh to all my darkest gothic fantasies! I’m coming back to “Masque” in March, and bringing lots of friends. Can’t wait to see it again, and I’m really looking forward to your next projects.

My wife and I are still reeling from our experience at the Masque of the Red Death last night. It was simply sublime, and we’re pleased to be attending it again in April for our anniversary.

Thank you for one of the most amazing experiences at Masque of the Red Death; I’m still feeling withdrawal symptoms. I’ve never known theatre to be so addictive!

I attended the 29th December performance and was wondering if you could divulge the recipe for the perfumer’s atomizer cologne. I think it’s lavender and rose, but I’d love to replicate it for personal use. Thank you and can’t wait to attend your next production.

I’ve just had the privilege of performing with some musicians at your late night Masque soiree at the BAC. We also saw the whole show and I just wanted to say it was the most amazing thing I have ever attended and I loved it! Atmosphere detail and the whole psychology of the interactivity – just jawdroppingly brilliant. Head’s still buzzing about it now! I actually feel I left the country... Big thank you to the inspired creators and performers and just, well all involved!

As the discussion of Punchdrunk's current fan communities below demonstrates, some spectators do attend multiple times, rather than simply wishing that they could or being satisfied with their limited time in its world. These audience members will have a different framework of knowledge on which to build each time they experience the show, and different expectations that affect how they engage with the work.

A comment that begins by placing the author in a group (of students) introduces a final trend. Punchdrunk are placed in a relationship to what are perceived as theatrical conventions and traditions:

Dear Punchdrunk, I went with my school's A-level drama students to see your and BAC's production of *The Masque of the Red Death* and quite simply since then my eyes and soul have been opened to what theatre and performances should really be like: emotional, inspirational and immensely powerful. Thank you Punchdrunk!

'What theatre and performance should really be like' refers to the emotions stirred and the visceral reaction experienced, rather than what specifically happened in the show. The compliment focuses on the atmosphere and emotional impact of the production. It is the same decision, and has the same effect, as choosing to write *a very seductive experience* instead of *a kiss*. Its emphasis is on how the performance felt rather than what it specifically included. Immersion is characterised as an experience rather than a specific set of actions: it is the result of the production's form rather than its content.

The comments below situate their praise of Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* in relationship to wider ideas of what theatre could or should be. In this way, they demonstrate an adherence to the 'correct' rules of engagement with immersive theatre: finding that its very form opens up different *uses* for theatre. These respondents inform Punchdrunk that they had the 'best' experience possible. The productions either revolutionised what theatre can be capable of, or confirmed an earlier idea of what makes good theatre:

Hello, I was recently abroad based in London this fall and was fortunate enough to see my first performance of Punchdrunk. I would just like to thank you for an amazing, unforgettable experience that has challenged my definition of live theatre. Thank you so much.

Hello, I came to see *Masque of the Red Death* on Friday and thought it was a theatrical revolution! I absolutely loved it, and it has filled me with inspiration.

Everyone involved. This was by far the most extraordinary night I have ever spent in the theatre. Your production gave me the same joy that I had when I was 5 years old and decided I wanted to work in the theatre. What you have

created here should be at the core of ALL we do in the theatre. Thank you for making it so clear what we should all be aiming for. I look forward with great anticipation to your next work. With the utmost respect and admiration.

I was completely blown away by The Masque of the Red Death, it has changed my perception of theatre forever. Thank you and well done to those involved for all the hard, brilliant work you do.

These comments do not mention specific events, instead describing the overall sensation of experiencing the production. Immersive experience is often communicated in visceral, emotional, psychological terms, and it is something of a paradox of immersive theatre that this experience, although facilitated by a production's form, is not necessarily the automatic result of certain logistical, atmospheric or structural signifiers. Being able to physically travel through rooms, interact with performers and so on, are not enough in themselves to create and maintain immersive experience, although *immersive* tends to be applied to productions (including Punchdrunk's) that include these things. Such techniques allow for immersive experience but do not guarantee it. The comments adhere to the 'correct' rules of engagement with immersive theatre by conflating form, content, and effect.

In concluding, the following comment is worth including in its entirety. It discusses the material conditions of viewing, hints at the experience within a production, suggests cognitive and sensory immersion and willingness to navigate both, and initiates a relationship between participant, production, and company:

Last night I attended the Masque of the Red Death. It was my first venture to a Punchdrunk performance, and I was lucky enough to attend only because my friend had won tickets via the Goldbug website. I just wanted to thank you for creating such an awe-inspiring production. For three hours, I was totally absorbed in the performance, and rendered completely oblivious to the world outside the show. As a child, I had a magical imagination - I spent hours roaming the countryside with my siblings, creating alternative worlds that only we inhabited, but as I've grown, my ability to disassociate myself from the wider world has diminished. For the first time in decades, I was a child again. I know this sounds rather trite, but it's the best way I can describe the effect your performance had on me. I was terrified, excited and confused; totally lost in a world that I could never have conceived of myself. Today, I am back in the real world, gazing onto the urban jungle of London from my apartment and mourning my return to the present. Thank you for opening a window into the past.

Of interest here is *how* the experience has lingered; not just that it *has*. The comment above uses the language of dreams, with the word 'mourning' being particularly striking. The

respondent feels a sense of loss, but through (the recognition of) that loss, there is a sense that something else has been gained. Choices of words and imagery reveal how the immersive experience is lingering in everyday life for a spectator, and this in turn reveals what function the immersive experience might be playing for them. The values these audience members are placing on immersive experience is made manifest in their uses of language.

Two final examples have the tone of short, intense praise that characterises the majority of comments, and certainly place Punchdrunk alongside the word ‘relationship’:

Saw Faust last night: alone. Best Valentine’s Day I’ve ever had.

My friend was right - Faust is better than sex.

Interestingly, even when measuring the immersive experience of a Punchdrunk show against *other kinds* of relationship, the latter comes out wanting.

‘Thank you Punchdrunk!’: avenues of further exploration

Studies of fan mail and fan communities can enrich our understanding of immersive experience. Punchdrunk’s *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death* were popular shows that led to an increase in the company’s prestige and established several of the theatrical, atmospheric and logistical trademarks that persist throughout their work. While not suggesting a definitive list, the traits and themes identified here demonstrate varying ways in which spectators at a Punchdrunk show (and any immersive theatre production) might communicate immersive experience. Of course, the comments discussed in this article may have been made by one-off visitors to Punchdrunk’s website who would not necessarily self-identify as fans. Today, the Punchdrunk fan community is larger and more visible, and would better allow for a comprehensive qualitative study. Whilst acknowledging that fans are a smaller demographic within Punchdrunk’s audiences, and should therefore not be seen to speak for all immersive theatre spectators, further work in this area would allow researchers to build an understanding of how particularly invested audience members value immersive experience and contribute to a new vocabulary for talking about these phenomena.

Indeed, there has been considerable development in the Punchdrunk fan community since *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death*, with material on theatre fandom and immersive experience having hugely increased. Writing on the politics of spectatorship in immersive theatre, Silvestre describes the activities of ‘superfans’ of *Sleep No More* (2011-):

Since the show opened in New York, it has acquired a cult following of ‘superfans’ who attend the show repeatedly and extend the experience online. One superfan, a woman in her fifties, travels in from out of town to see all the weekend shows – up to 12 hours of *SNM* in two days. Another superfan I spoke with has attended the show 37 times and counting, and runs a blog called They

Have Scorched the Snake ... but not killed it, bitches!, where fans share their experiences of the show, confess crushes on performers, and post fan-art and fan-fiction. On other blogs such as The Bloody Business, the participants engage in role-play, take on personae such as 'Thane of Glamis' or 'Cawdor', and joke about 12-step programs to quit the *SNM* habit. (2012: np).

Since this list was written, some fans can say they have seen *Sleep No More* a hundred times; I know of at least one Punchdrunk/*Sleep No More* themed wedding.

Jakob-Hoff cites a computer game designer 'directly influenced by *Sleep No More*' (2014), and the relationship between immersive theatre and computer games is already proving to be a rich area of study. Erin Morgenstern's novel *The Night Circus* (2011) explicitly cites a debt to the company in its closing acknowledgements. Morgenstern credits experiencing Punchdrunk productions with her desire to (re)create her own: 'special recognition' is due to 'the immersive experience of Punchdrunk, which I was lucky enough to fall into thanks to the American Repertory Theatre of Cambridge, Massachusetts' (295-6). Visitors to the novel's *Le Cirque des Rêves* experience physical immersion in the world of the circus. Once inside, characters experience visceral sensations that sound exactly like the version of immersive experience described in Punchdrunk's fan mail. Those who love *Le Cirque des Reves* the most might join the self-named Dreamers, a group who follow the circus around the world to visit as often as they can. The novel is a piece of Punchdrunk fan fiction; the mysterious semi-magical circus in which most of the story is set is not based on a specific Punchdrunk show, but its atmosphere, organisation, sudden appearance and strange beauty is clearly the invention of someone enamoured with the company's work. Morgenstern's novel allowed readers to become immersed in a fictional immersive experience. Fan response to Punchdrunk is therefore developing in terms of the number and dedication of long-term fans, and the making of work influenced by the company, in theatre and other media. Fans of Punchdrunk are beginning to produce professional work as well as personal responses, becoming active producers of texts.

Drawing on the direct experience of spectators places this article in the wake of Freshwater's provocation in 2009 that theatre scholars should listen to audiences. Considering the specific type of discourse made manifest in fan mail texts can also serve to complexify some of the claims made on behalf of immersive theatre and immersive experiences more generally. In these discussions there is often an implicit assumption about what the rules of engagement should be. Immersive theatre often emphasises the benefits of the individual and the multi-sensory: the uniquely personal journey. Disruption, for example, or stubbornly staying in a group, is often believed to lead to a lesser experience. This article finds that while Punchdrunk enthusiasts often seem to have internalised this expected mode of viewing, individual journeys are often synthesised as part of a communal experience. Also, the relationship between immersive experience and emotional distance comes further into question, with many respondents describing their experiences with a critical detail that suggests a dual perception between, for example, the actor and the

character. This implies a conception of immersive experience often missing from wider discourse: one where immersion and distance do not work as a binary, but instead have a reciprocal relationship, informing each other in the moment.

The assumptions made about the relationship between participatory performance and audience empowerment are under investigation elsewhere (Nield 2008, Freshwater 2011, White 2013). Examining the direct communication between enthusiasts of Punchdrunk and the company has opened up a potential avenue for further exploration into these claims, with this article providing a comparative measure of a successful experience: one where the immersive experience lingers as the memory of a dream, or the hangover from an overwhelming state of emotional engagement, now left behind.

Biographical Note:

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Note:

¹ When quoting audiences' responses, minor spelling and grammatical errors have been corrected but I have retained the original formatting, with multiple exclamations, capitalisation and so on being an integral part of how these texts communicate their subject.