PLAY ALONG: COMMUNICATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF PLAY
WITHIN AN IMPROVISATIONAL COMEDY TEAM

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my fellow improvisers and the amazing world of improvisation. Through this wild and amazing art form I have learned more about myself and the ways in which our interactions can make the everyday extraordinary. I will forever be grateful to the college hooligans of Stop Laughing, Mom! who introduced me to the power of our own imaginations. Had I not been swept up by these rag-tag band of artists, my life and its level of playfulness would be severely reduced.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by
Hayden L. Harrower
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Many organizations are trying to mimic the successes of companies like Google by emulating their work culture; a culture of playfulness, flexibility, and diversity. Organizations not only have created modern environmental designs, but also have employed playful people, encouraging them to toy with new ideas in ways that they become the innovations of tomorrow. In fact, organizations are now bringing in experts to help teach and guide employees to become more playful, improvisational, and cohesive in their collaborations with each other. Often, these experts come from the world of improvisational theater. This study aims to understand the process by which adults develop and maintain this playful style of collaboration. By participating and observing a new, practicing, improvisational comedy team, I investigated the ways that the team got to know each other, improvised, and collaborated. This ethnography observes the team as they discover the dynamics of play, while also investigating the forms of communication facilitating or inhibiting play. The rich data gathered over a four-month observation period revealed three major phases of group play development: a yielding/matching phase, a posturing phase, and a predicting and teasing phase. The overall finding of this project is that the understanding of group play should not be describe a collective state, but as a series of initiating relationships. In addition, a spectrum of support/competitiveness emerged as a tool for qualifying play. Implications for these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Play, Improvisation, Collaboration, and Cohesion
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CHAPTER 1

DEFINING THE ‘SLIPPERY’

When we are kids our main objective is to find something fun to do and play that for as long as possible. On warm summer days of vacation, eating and sleeping are only done so out of necessity, play is the main focus. As we transition into adulthood we end up having taken on responsibilities that we are promised will lead to even more play. However, many lose sight of their initial objective and become focused on the obstacles and forget where they are even headed toward. We have all met adults who seem to never play, and ones that play more than most. Common characteristics of people who seem to always be playing are an infectious smile, a thirst for life, positivity, and humor. What’s remarkable about these people is they manage to take care of their responsibilities but they didn’t lose sight of that goal to ultimately goof around when all the hard work is done. However, an even smaller number, a very small number, blend their work with play. The two are sides of the same coin for these fortunate individuals. This research serves to inquire in how anyone can construct play, not just the fortunate few who either had conditions favorable for a playful existence, or were blessed with a fundamentally positive perspective. Further, this research seeks to find how anyone can construct play in any situation. Some literature surrounding play and communication will be discussed in order to derive at research questions aimed to address this topic.

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF PLAY

Play and leisure time may be the healthiest aspects of a job. Internet streaming and movie rental service, Netflix has recently announced that new mothers and fathers can take up to a year of paid leave if they choose to (Dishman, 2015a). Paid leave for mothers has demonstrated a quicker career recovery time, than those without paid maternal leave (Houser & Vartanian, 2012). Companies like internet marking leader, Hubspot and tech startup
Motley Fool, have given their employees unlimited vacation times and have seen performance skyrocket because they find that when employees have the freedom to take time off when they need to, they do so without affecting their tasks and performance at work (Dishman, 2015b).

Not only is time off conducive to the productivity of employees, but their mental health is critical as well. South Korean companies, which are the hardest working in the world (Jung-a, 2015), are mandating that their employees take time off; Kim Pan-Jung, a director at the Korea Employers Federation said, “in a knowledge-based economy, longer working hours do not necessarily mean higher efficiency” (Jung-a, 2015, para. 10). In fact, research in the hardworking culture of Japan, has revealed that there is a significant correlation between long working hours, income, and suicide rate, with a smaller correlation between increased leisure activities and suicide rate (Takeuchi, Sakano, & Miyatake, 2014). This research cements the idea that the work-life balance is not only necessary for productivity but for health reasons as well. Play must be a focus for any healthy organization and employee.

The work-life balance becomes even more important when considering the effects of a too work-heavy lifestyle. Stuart Brown (2009a), a leading researcher into the health benefits of leisure activities and play, has found that play deprivation can lead to a host of problems. Brown’s original work started by noticing a consistent history of play-less childhoods and upbringings in the lives of mass murders. Ultimately, play and leisure time can be beneficial to creative companies, like NineSigma, a company that fully endorses “slacking off” at work (Jakishca, 2015). Play is important to the health, creativity, and satisfaction of employees; McGregor and Doshi (2015) claim that it is the “most powerful motivator of all” (para. 11). Within these innovative, forward-thinking companies are people at play. People who show up to work as if it is sandbox waiting for the newest experiment or creation. In order to understand how these companies can constantly innovate in the creative, innovative marketplace, it is important to understand how engaging play at work requires the construction of a particular type of environment.
WHAT IS PLAY?

Understanding what it is to play, what it is to be playful, and the crucial components of playful communication necessitate observing and analyzing the process of playful collaboration of a group of people. Unfortunately, defining play has been quite the task for researchers. Nachmanovitch (1990), a creative writer and musician, articulates that “in play all definitions slither, dance, combine, break apart, and recombine” (p. 43). Barnett (1990), has been one of many people that have shifted the point of emphasis in defining play, indicating that “rather than regarding play as what the child does, the better way is to focus on play as a characteristic of the individual. Thus empirical attention should be focused on the playful child, rather than the child at play” (p. 320). This marks a shift in play research, examining play for its intention rather than its products. This intention can be expressed through pure play (play for play sake), or through games where rules are negotiated and the pursuits of players are focused on being the winner.

Conventionally, when people imagine adults playing, they think of games, sports, and other contests with a goal, and an ending that leaves either team as the loser or the winner. These examples are considered more “game” than “play.” It is important to understand the distinction of play and game, as they are not interchangeable. Frasca (2003) understands and adds to the dichotomy laid out by Caillois (2001) as paidia and ludus. Paidia is a form of play most often seen in young children (imagined play scenarios, building sets, and other improvisations), ludus refers to games that have social rules (baseball, checkers, and other sport-like games). Ludus play has an end result, a stopping time, a last move. This kind of play is purposeful and there is usually “the point” of the game. Paidia is play for play’s sake, it’s only interested in the process of playing, and is defined by “more open goals, exploration, experimentation and improvisation” (Mäyrä, 2012, p. 57). In one game, a player may go from playing just to beat everyone to actually just enjoying the process of playing, and back again. However, games are events played by adults all of the time, there are rules that tell adults how to drive so that they can get to their goal destination. Free play though, reflects the process by which creative adults go about their “work.” In the realms where there is no higher judge to declare whether something is complete or not, artists and the like must create for the sake of creating, hoping that the quality comes on its own. Playfulness is what some researchers call this internalization of pure play.


**PLAYFULNESS**

Playfulness has been the focus of many personality researchers as well as those researching child development and positive psychology. Play may be difficult to define but the operating construct within play has had more theoretical and denotative grounding in recent years. Barnett (2007), through her numerous efforts to demystify playfulness has depicted it as follows:

Playfulness is the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment. Individuals who have such a heightened predisposition are typically funny, humorous, spontaneous, unpredictable, impulsive, active, energetic, adventurous, sociable, outgoing, cheerful, and happy, and are likely to manifest playful behavior by joking, teasing, clowning, and acting silly. (p. 955)

So playfulness can be understood as the disposition of the player, as observed by certain defining characteristics. Much of play research is focused on playfulness due to the observable qualities that come from the playful participant, this is sometimes referred to as the ‘play state’. Much of the research has concluded that play is built on the intention of participant and not the activity itself (Barnett, 1990, 1991, 1998; Brown, 2009b; Gray, 2008; Proyer, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

**NOT PLAYING AROUND: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLAY AND PLAYFULNESS**

In understanding play, a distinction must be made from the interaction of play and the disposition playfulness among its participants. When someone is playful, it may be easier to see them as a playing, but the disposition of playfulness alone does not constitute playing, as any small child will tell their parent when they have not received enough play time. Playfulness is the disposition that “enables people to transform a situation or an environment in a way to allow for enjoyment or entertainment” (Proyer, 2012, p. 989). Playfulness is not the cheerful, spontaneous or humorous communication that comes from the sender, but is the disposition of the sender that elicits such form of communication. Often, these styles of communication will elicit a similar response, according to the play intensity matching hypothesis (Palagi, 2007). These communicative offerings of play set the foreground for the constitution of play, it is in these moments, and more importantly, the acceptance of these moments that are of primary focus for this research. Studying the communication of
participants cannot adequately address states of playfulness, but it can, however, help us understand the communicative acts that stem from a playful state of being, it may well be the antecedent to the desired social environment that most often nurtures the interaction of play.

**PLAY AS COMMUNICATION**

It is important for communication scholars to not necessarily try to understand the intention of its playful participants, but instead attempt to understand play as a communicative process. One theory of game play is concerned with ‘affordances’ of the game a player (Pincheck, 2009). By understanding the limitations of the game, a player understands the relationship it has with the game and other players. Players always have the opportunity to quit, as is implicit in the definition of playing. When rules change, all players must agree to them in order for it to be included in the play. If one person plays differently and the rest of the players don’t agree, then they can all quit and the play will cease. This perspective on play implies a transactional model between players as they constantly negotiate the game at play.

Bateson (1955) saw play as a meta-communicative act, such as where small animals ‘play fight’ resulting in playful nipping. This is both a communicative act and a meta-communicative act, because it both, “denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (p. 121). For Bateson and others, the act of play itself is a conversation, the series of moves within play communicate something to the other player. The player can play within the fantasy by actually communicating on the surface level, or the player can interpret each move as its own utterance and can converse in playful moves that shape, heighten, or change the game.

Duke (1974) compliments this view by proposing that games are capable of carrying a message. When people simulate new realities this becomes a way to explore different ‘future’s’, where players can collect new methods of problem-solving in a holistic fashion. This is why Duke (1974) calls gaming ‘the future’s language’ (pp. 49-50). Finally Mäyrä (2012), interprets playful communication as the “simultaneous construct[ion] and express[ion] [of] social identity . . . it becomes harder to distinguish what is meant as factual communication, and what is a fictional, ironic or playful gesture” (p. 66). Stated another way, play “is based on the combination of semiosis (meaning making through symbolism and
representation) and ludosis (meaning-making through playful action)” (Mäyrä, 2008, pp. 18-19). Play can be understood from a communication perspective as both a form of communication, and as acts of meta-communication. Play between two or more individuals can be seen as a series of varying complex communicative acts negotiating order and meaning with each move. Through these acts, a group environment is being created and negotiated. The quality of the group environment is foundational to the existent and the form of play.

**GROUP DYNAMICS AT PLAY**

Group communication literature can help to understand the nature of play within groups. Play needs openness, creativity, and spontaneity (Barnett, 2007), as is the same for teams and groups accomplishing goals. Between many different prosocial elements of healthy group environments, collaboration and cohesion facilitates play acts as the conduit for cohesion and collaboration among team members.

**Cohesion**

Group cohesion can be understood as the sum of all the factors causing members of a group to stay in the group or be attracted to the group; it is the social glue to a team (Festinger, Back, & Schacter, 1950). Cohesion is multidimensional, dynamic, instrumental, and emotional. Group cohesion can be generalized from team sports to small groups within organizations (Carron & Brawley, 2000). Through decades of empirical investigation, researchers have drawn out components of cohesion to include social attraction (Hogg, 1993), group pride (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990), and task commitment and interdependence (Guzzo, 1995).

Not only is group cohesion beneficial relationally, but also has shown positive correlations with performance as well. In a meta-analysis teasing out the relationship between group cohesion and group performance, cohesion was found to have strong correlation to performance behaviors, and cohesive groups were said to have the advantage when “efficiency is an important goal in the organization” (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003, p. 998). Group cohesion is also strongly correlated with the willingness to participate and the commitment to learning within an organizational setting (Wang, Ying,
Increased group cohesion can be seen as a major priority for the development of working groups, and playful groups as well due to the naturally cohesive nature of play. Interestingly, factors such as academic major and GPA served as predictors of *individual* performance in students, but were not predictive of group performance. Two of the four variables responsible for group performance were group-cohesive related (Gosenpud & Washbush, 1991).

While cohesion is very supportive to task goals of groups, the construct can also be understood as an essential outcome of group play. Research has found that playful people gain significant social and cognitive effects from their playful habits. Play is found to sharpen the control the prefrontal cortex has over responses and decisions, leading to more nuanced reactions and being more flexible and adaptable (Gordon, Burke, Akil, Watson, & Panksepp, 2003; Pellis, Pellis, & Himmler, 2014). Playful people have been described as energetic, active, sociable, outgoing, and cheerful (Barnett, 2007). Playfulness in general, has been found to be a correlate of closeness (Baxter, 1992). Even though playfulness can be seen as a purely expressive style of communication, it has a strong correlation with an instrumental style of interaction (Bozionelos & Bozionelos, 1999). Playful people are also very impactful with their intended goals of interactions. Although the study did not account for play between individuals, one study did find that playfulness was significantly correlated to high performance and efficacy was heightened as well (Potosky, 2002). Therefore, it is easy to draw a connection between play and effects on group cohesion. With an increased level of cohesion, groups become more skilled at collaborating, the active process of play.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration is defined as multiple people working together to realize the same overall, shared goal (Marinez-Moyano, 2006). Collaborative communication is theorized as co-construction of ideas, leading to new insights and discoveries as a result of diverse perspectives working together (Damon & Phelps, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978). This co-construction can lead to a greater rate of innovation and creativity. Scholars have historically looked back at “small world networks” where artists would collaboratively live among each other, inspiring and co-creating along the way. The research found that those within a small world network were more creatively productive, financially and artistically (Uzzi & Spiro,
One comprehensive study found that group performance was predicted by the members with highest competency, meaning that the level of work rose to the highest abilities within the group (Laughlin & Branch, 1972). That is to say that collaborative group work can elevate the production of individual team members. A contributing factor to the positive impact of collaboration is the diversity of skills and task-related knowledge (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007). Match the diverse skill sets with a hyper-connected playful brain (Brown, 2009b) and suddenly a group can innovate to a greater degree. When adults play, not only are they making unexpected connections within their own brain (Gordon et al., 2003), but also are introduced to novel and arousing experiences, which has been found to increase relational satisfaction (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000) among players, enhancing play among members (Wagner, Eggert, & Lindemann, 2010). Further, play facilitates and nurtures individual qualities that enhance collaboration and even influence people to work collaboratively (Hughes, 2009; Parten, 1932).

Cohesion and collaboration are integral to play and the communication within play. Some believe communication is the foundation for which collaboration and cohesion are facilitated (Keyton, Ford, & Smith, 2008). Thus, as the investigation of play within groups continues, consideration for collaboration and cohesion is warranted. By understanding the role of cohesion and collaboration within group development, the quality of play can be analyzed with greater depth. The review of literature will now further investigate the social elements of play specifically.

**SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT FOR PLAY**

Play tends to arise out of similar group dynamics. Playful groups act in certain ways that seem to nurture and encourage playful behavior. Not all scholars agree, Barnett (1998) suggests that “play be better viewed from the point of view of the player and that the environment is only of secondary and relatively minor importance,” (p. 98). However, once a player has made a playful move, there are certainly environments that are more sustainable to play in than others. Mäyrä (2012) outlined three fundamental components of playful cultures: “(1) the service supports spontaneous use (‘free play’), (2) it promotes surprising and unusual combinations and contents (‘creative fun’), and (3) it signals that the service is open for fun activities for their own sake (‘non-instrumental leisure’)” (p. 58).
The first major quality of sustainable play within an organization is agreeableness and flexibility. As previously stated, someone can possess a quality of playfulness, but for play to become engaged outside of that one person, all parties involved must allow play to happen and reciprocate the playfulness. In a similar communicative function, collaboration was found to be more fruitful when an organization forms a collective identity, when identity lacked so did the propensity for inter-organization collaboration (Koschmann, 2013). This collective buy-in can be interpreted as a multitude of agreements made by people of the organizations, when people refuse to play or quit the game collective identity suffers.

Flexibility and ambiguity in organizations, or groups of people, is an integral part of playful environments. In an attempt to articulate the nuances of playfulness within classrooms de Jong (2015) found that ambiguity about the task was greatly appreciated by students and was a big contributor to why a task was enjoyable and playful. Companies like Mindvalley, Google, and others have begun to release the constraints of traditional office culture by encouraging employees to choose their working hours and investing time in themselves. This flexibility allows people to improvise within a system so that they can manipulate and play with their environment. They can focus more on the process of work, rather than showing up for the routine already pre-set. Countless management and organizational leadership scholars have written about the necessity for organizations to improvise and to create structures that allow their employees to improvise as well (Crossan, Lane, White, & Klus, 1996; Crossan, Vera, & Nanjad, 2008; Cunha, Clegg, & Kamoche, 2012; Dennis, 2014; Leybourne & Sadler-Smith, 2006). It is this freedom to play and the freedom to explore, experiment, and improvise that truly defines paidia-style of play that allows adults to relax and be their most creative and innovative self (Barrett, 1998; Lewis & Lovatt, 2013; MacDonald & Wilson, 2014; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Improvisers demonstrate this well. Musicians create more creative works (Dolan, Sloboda, Jense, Crüts, & Feygelson, 2013), and become more relaxed while improvising (R. Allen, 2013; Kim, 2005). Through anecdotal evidence and research, improvisational theater players have had similar experiences (Jagodowski, Pasquesi, & Victor, 2015; Sawyer, 1997). In addition to the similarities between organizations and improvisation teams, improv is a context where 1) players go to a specific venue to do it, 2) they play with people already in the improvisation context, so groups form not necessarily based on attractiveness, familial ties, or personality.
similarities. The improvisational theater is a context like organizations, in that it happens distinctly from other aspects of life and players/employees must actively choose to participate in it. By focusing on the context of improvisational theater, a context where adults’ aim is to be playful and more flexible and spontaneous communication is a norm, a greater understanding of the development and maintenance of play in adults can be reached.

**IMPROV: A CASE STUDY**

**What is Improvisational Theater?**

Considering what we know about play and playfulness and the necessity of ambiguity and improvisation present within *paidia*, improvisational theater may be one of the most consistent settings for nurturing and facilitating such play in adults. The art form of improvisational theater began with the minds of Johnstone (1987) and Spolin (2013), in attempt to understand theater games and their capacity for truly enlightening creative works. While Spolin and Johnstone were independently developing their own ideas about improvisational theater, they saw its potential first in the play and learning among children. Improvisational theater was essentially a more structured imaginary play, providing enough structure for a game, but the flexibility (and no real end-goal in mind) for free improvisation. Spolin’s son, Paul Sills, and others in the 1950’s and 60’s, developed a structure of improvisational theater that most resembled a standard three-act play. After rapid increase notoriety and attendance to shows, as well as increased demand for more improv, theater companies and spaces were opening up in the Chicago area where it was founded. Throughout years of nurturing some of the best comedic talent in the United States and Canada, improvisational theater has expanded into every major city in the United States, with most theaters offering original shows and classes for adults to take to better understand how to improvise better.

Most recently, businesses have been looking to improvisational theaters to help sales techniques, interpersonal communication, and negotiating (Balachandra, Barrett, Bellman, Fisher, & Susskind, 2005; Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, 2005; Leybourne & Sadler-Smith, 2006; Scinto, 2014). Not only does improvisational theater transform the way a person acts, but also how to work together in groups. To illustrate the
integral collaborative component of improvisational theater, consider the top rules of improv
given to us by comedy great, Tina Fey (2011):

1. Agree
2. Yes, and . . .
3. Make Statements
4. There are No Mistakes

This list reveals the similarities between the best practices of improvisational theater and the
defining qualities of play. The first rule is to agree with what has been said and accept it as
the reality for the scene. The second rule “Yes, and . . .” encourages not only the acceptance
of previous statements, but also a stimulus to contribute as well. Play isn’t as fun when it is
only given one way. If two young dogs were engaging in rough-and-tumble play, but only
one of the puppies was biting and tumbling, it wouldn’t seem to be a playful scene. The third
rule of improvisation is to not only contribute, but to contribute substantially. In
improvisation, the act of creation is a perceived burden, the limitations of the human mind
are tested within each performance, if one player consistently asks questions or makes phatic
utterances, the burden of creation remains on one player, which then becomes less playful.
The most profound moments of improvisation occur when two players are constantly
communicating new ideas that build off one another and they come from two different
perspectives. The narrative within a scene will shift suddenly due to the differences of
players. What is important in improvisation is the masterful weaving together of seemingly
disparate ideas into one coherent scene. This is the main idea of the last rule: there are no
mistakes. Mistakes are only seen as such if the player calls them a mistake. Great improvisers
adopt a state of playfulness where they accept every offer and focus on making sense of
them, rather than qualifying or disqualifying their existence.

Within an improvisational theater performance are the negotiations of rules, styles of
play, and meta-communicative moves that not only contribute to each scene, but also
communicate to the whole team, on-stage and off, of what the next move is or what is needed
to play the scene. Unlike improvisational jazz or improvised dance, improvisational theater
establishes all of these facets through verbal and nonverbal communication. Whether it is a
response to a line that establishes a relationship between the two characters, or a subtle head
nod to initiate a new scene with a specific player, improvisational theater is an entirely communicative game focused on playful collaboration among a group of adults.

Unlike any other improvisational context, improvisational theater functions through explicit verbal and non-verbal acts of communication. By this token, it is clear to see that improvisational theater teams are a worthy source of observation and academic study, especially within the field of communication. Their playfulness is practiced and honed as they progress through their careers. The art itself is a *paidia* style of play, where there are no real goals or end points. Although some shows try to announce winners and losers, the audience (and the players) get to enjoy the show just the same; they were interested in the process of the performance and not the final outcome. This may be truer of improvisational theater than conventional theater because the same audience can come to the same show night after night and see an entirely different show. If an improvisational theater troupe is well-received, it is because their communicative process is well-received.

Applying what the literature tells us about play to group settings and in one of the only contexts in which adults play through communication, this ethnography seeks to understand the relationship play has to other elements of group dynamics that are prosocial. For this ethnographic research, my working definition of play can be summed to *one or more individuals engaging in activity with a playful disposition, that is to say they are experimenting without expectation*. Groups work best when all members are cohesive and collaboration reaches across factions to produce innovative solutions. Therefore, this thesis will address three major questions.

RQ1: How is play constructed and maintained communicatively within a group of adults?

RQ2: In what was is collaboration essential to the construction and maintenance of play?

RQ3: In what ways is cohesion essential to the construction and maintenance of play?
CHAPTER 2

PLAYING AROUND WITH METHODOLOGY

Improvisation seized my interest from the moment I attended my first performance. Very early on, I realized that improv was just an expression of play. I had casually read the literature on flow in the years prior, and I became fascinated with the topic. I knew improv had a connection to the experience that keeps skydivers jumping, basketball players practicing, and musicians jamming alone in their rooms. Improv was fulfilling in the same way as other more sophisticated art forms. Why else would adults pay to play like little kids with other adults they have never met, and know nothing about? In addition, why else would adults pay just to watch other adults play like children? In a world of over-stimulation, how does an art form that has no set, special effects, or soundtrack entertain? I was driven to understand the anatomy of play and to answer the questions that had begun to flood my mind.

As I studied the literature, my mind wandered to the question how does play get started? How is it enacted? So far, I had found that there were major differences between playing and not playing, that it was better to play than to not play. There were even snippets of conversation that revealed what was play and what wasn’t. However, this information seemed black-and-white. What was the process that took participants from a non-play state to a play state?

An ethnographic approach was ideal for addressing these questions in that it allows for the opportunity to witness this organic growth of play. Ethnography was perfect for filling the gaps with rich text that revealed the play process and allowed me to reflect on each and every communicative act in the process of developing group play. Because play is so difficult to define, interviews with improv performers were rife with idiosyncratic analogies and metaphors that also helped to understand play. But even still, play is difficult to recall clearly, because of its relationship to the flow state, where often people can feel like they
“blacked out” because they were present in that moment of play. Investigating play from both participant observation and from interviews with the performers was critical. Finally, the blended participant/observer role allowed for an even closer understanding to the construction of play, not only in the moment, but also in relation to the long-term group play development.

This chapter offers a description of the context where I researched play, the methods I utilized to investigate and gather data about play, the methods utilized to analyze the data, and the decisions I made about representing the data the way it is presented in the results chapters, three, four, and five.

**Playing Around in an Improvisational Context**

Improvisational theater is the context for this ethnography, located in Southern California. This ethnography follows a completely new improvisational team as they get to know each other, develop cohesion and trust among each other, and play. The team consists of six members that were chosen by the theater to form a team. By focusing on an improvisational theater team, we can be sure that the group will seek out this state of play, rather than avoid it, because play is essential to technically sound, collaborative improvisation. What’s more, is by observing and participating on an improv team, we can understand how this sense of play is developed through communication, as the art is supported by communicative acts.

**The Theater**

The site of this observation takes place at a small cabaret theater. It sits nestled in the back of a historic, 5-story hotel. Adjacent from it is a red velvet, vintage piano bar. It is not uncommon for people coming from the bar to notice the theater and stay for a few shows. The entire complex is white, painted wood that resembles the colonial style of houses found in the southeast.

The entrance to the theater is a humble, dark grey door that looks more like an employee entrance than an entrance to a theater. A rustic red arrow, six feet tall is mounted on top of the building, making the theatre more conspicuous. The arrow is rounded at the bottom so that it points diagonally down toward the theater. The sign reads “IMPROV” and it
framed by large light bulbs that dot the arrow’s edges like old movie theater marquees. There are three doors that enter into the theater; the main door opens to the theater bar and lobby. Another door from the inside of the hotel also opens to the bar and lobby from a different side. Finally a third entrance is found along the same side as the main entrance, just 25 feet south. This also looks like an inconspicuous side door. This door is where all coaches, teachers, students, and players enter.

The entrance to the backstage area is first comprised of the lobby area. This fifteen feet by eight feet small room connects the practice room to the door to the stage. It is lined with thick square, grey, pads that fit together like puzzle pieces with tiny bumps for texture, like the padding you would see in a preschool. The far left corner contains the door to the practice room. The white door has a small, square window that peeks into its occupancy. The room is basically non-descript as it is more of a waiting room; waiting to practice or waiting to go on stage. Fold out chairs line the walls and a table can be found to the left of the door with random items that people may have forgotten in a class or in a practice, like hats, jackets, or a tutu. Old, computer printed posters of former masterclasses coat the wall to the left and rises up to meet the ceiling. All along the tops of the walls running under the ceiling promote these master teachers who taught in the theater in the past. Directly to the right upon entering this lobby is a mounted small television with a live feed of the stage. Two windows look out on the right wall. The door to the stage is at the end of the right side.

The navy blue door represents the threshold into performances. After entering the door the blue and green lights bathing the stage leak behind the black curtains that shroud the side wings of the stage. Pulling black curtains reveals a wing off the stage in front of the curtain. The audience's faces comprise the backdrop now. Turning to the left, a step up is the stage. The stage is black and littered with shoe scuff marks and glitter from a production months ago. Some spots on the stage feel solid, others have enough give and bounce to them that it feels like it could finally give out any second. Dressing the stage are black curtains that run all the way across the back edge. The curtains are draped over a simple metal pipe structure that erects a door in the center of the stage and a window frame to the left of the door. These set pieces add extra dynamics and depth to the scene work on stage. Lining on either side of the door and in front of the curtains are four chairs. Two red, two black. They are not solid wood, but they have been tested through many, many scenes where improvisers
use them in all sorts of ways. They are light so that they are easy to pick up and move around. The right wing of the stage also features a lip of elevated floor, but a step below the theater. In front of the lip is a piano and sound system used during productions and musical improv. Adjacent to that is the lighting and sound booth. It is hugged against and iron beam that juts through the theater vertically. A raised black leather chair sits next to the booth.

The audience sits on small wooden chairs that clump together in messy rows. Every three or four chairs is partnered with a small round table for food and drinks. They are wrapped in MAD magazine clippings that are paper mâché’ed on. In the center of each table is a small glass that houses a small fake candle in it. Behind the flickering, electric candle is a plastic holder with a paper sign slipped in advertising the latest news from the theater. The first four rows all sit at ground level, parting in the middle for a path to walk through. One row of tall chairs and tables sits behind the rest. A walkway forms behind this row and behind the empty space tall chairs and tables are pushed to the back wall of the theater. In the middle of this last row are two swinging glass doors that open after each hour of programming. The doors are covered by large sliding barn doors that are black chalkboards framed with reclaimed, darkly-stained wood. Another door in the back left of the theater also leads to the lobby.

**The Practice Room**

Venturing back toward the backstage waiting area, through the white door with the small window is the practice room. The practice room is a white wall, rectangular room with chairs along the left and right walls. It’s a worn in room. A white board covers the back wall with improv scribbles on it still up from the last class and also faded in the background of days past. A head of a unicorn made out of cardboard is mounted above where the white board is. The blue carpet is worn into the floor. The left wall is painted sky blue and on it are two windows with standard, muted beige artesian blinds. Directly to the left are two white wooden desks that face toward each other. On the other side of the desks is a sort of counter and cabinet area that stores an eclectic menagerie of items. Everything from juggling pins, to a board and rolling pin to balance on, to old costumes and masks. The desks are cluttered with books, paperwork, and office supplies. Along the edge of the desks all the way across the room runs a rod that holds up a curtain that acts as a partition to the players in the
practicing and the people working for the theater. This serves as a temporary arrangement while the theater continues to expand and grow.

**The Group**

The theater and coach of the team have consented fully to the process of this research. After gaining IRB approval, the owner of the improv theater allowed me full access to a team that was planning to be formed around the start of my research. After auditions, I met with the team on their very first practice. There are six players and one coach. They had never played with each other before, and didn’t even know each other that well, despite being in a small niche community. The coach was also new to coaching and this team was his first attempt at the endeavor. They varied in age, ethnicity, and even citizenship. Essentially they were strangers. After the first night together, they stumbled on the name Duck Republic after joking around about a duck-ruled world inspired by a beer poster on the wall of a pizza place down the street from the theater. What follows is a description of the coach John and the six players, including Hannah, Andrew, Ethan, Robert, Alex, and Vanessa.

John, the coach, was one of the most enthusiastic coaches I had ever been around. A shorter, stalky figure that moved with intensity. He wore dreadlocks that he wrapped up in a loose bun. Some small grey hairs were sneaking out in the front of his mane. He wore thick rectangular glasses. John is into comics and is a self-proclaimed nerd, but he is much more smooth and personable than a stereotypical nerd. He often wore a zip-up hoodie over a button up shirts, with jeans.

Much to my advantage, John was a play enthusiast. He conveniently facilitated much of practices to be the most “playful” in his vision. When he coached, his face would come to life as he would talk about the thing he loved. I don’t believe I ever saw John with a frown, and he always had a big laugh that would pull back all parts of his face. John was almost always sitting in practices and when debriefing or critiques were made, the group would sit as well. John would almost always focus on the positive feedback after shows, beginning each post-show session with a “What are the five things you liked, go!” and hold up his open hand with all five fingers ready to be closed with each contribution by the group. Overall, John is enthusiastic and expressive.
Hannah is one of the improvisers with the least amount of experience (recently passing her first full year), but possesses a great deal of talent. She often clicks in and out of characters that are all dynamic and add a certain energy to any scene she is in. Improv became an outlet for her and she became very enthusiastic about learning and improving her abilities. She is an average height woman, around 5’10” with a curvy figure. She has light brown hair that parts to one side, although it is a constant battle to get it just right. She has a strong jaw line and blue eyes that complement her fair complexion.

Hannah acted as the facilitator in most instances. She had the ability to lead the group, but actively chose to stifle herself in order to let the more quiet members feel heard. In scenes Hannah would act as the one who would get everyone on the same page. She connects with her fellow players easily constantly checking in with them visually and guiding scenes by the details clear through constant communication. Hannah holds the group together.

Andrew is a player with over eight years of experience and has performed many times throughout his tenure. He is a light-hearted and kind player, a husky man around the same height as Hannah. His round face is covered in a dark curly beard and he has a full head of dark hair to go with it. His round face and cheeks dwarf his eyes into squints when he smiles, which is often. Andrew is very articulate and able to express himself and his viewpoints effectively, but will not do so unless prompted. He is unassuming and polite. In the beginning of the formation of Duck Nation, Andrew didn’t attend every show or even the L.A. bonding trip, so his politeness seemed to come from a lack of familiarity. As the group progressed he began to speak up more, but always remained considerate and pleasant to be around. When he would laugh his whole torso and shoulders would bounce while he giggled. His giggles were usually heard from the side wings of the stage during a show. He would often laugh hard at moments that no one else did, giggling away with short, nasally, staccato giggles, only heard for a moment before he turns away hand balled in a fist covering his mouth.

In most scenes Andrew is calculated. He doesn’t look to be the start of the show, but the side character that ends up stealing the show, and often he succeeds. His choices are subtle, yet impactful. He once made the entire audience erupt by simply walking on the far end of the stage as a random bystander who walked into a scene where one player murdered another after a brief pause he turned around and left. He had the power to make people laugh without even talking. Andrew is considerate and very supportive.
In every group there is at least one member that serves as the lightning rod for attention and presence. Ethan fulfills this role. He has performed for over ten years, but does not have a lot of formal training, learning mostly through performing in front of others. He is confident, but humble. Ethan is a tall, average build man with shiny dark brown hair grown past to his shoulders. It is mostly kept in a bun, but sometimes is draped over his shoulders, revealing small curls at the ends. His olive complexion gives him the appearance of always looking like he came back from a day at the beach; his slight accent and general demeanor connote that as well. Ethan is laid back and is often smiling and trying to make his other teammates laugh, that is his greatest joy. He is the first to speak up and is usually the loudest one on stage. He cares about what others think and being heard, but he also stays true to himself.

Ethan is a player that is not afraid to try out new things and fall flat on his face. He enjoys taking leaps of faith, or making fellow players take the leap with him. During scenes he will often expedite the action, rather than delay the action as most improvisers do. This can sometimes force players into awkward situations as his humor can often go “blue,” or go to places that are taboo, lewd, or inappropriate for most contexts. Although he makes bold choices, he loves supporting others and is very open-minded. Ethan is full of energy, somewhat reckless, but very well-intentioned.

Robert may be the most amorphous participant in the group. Robert is a quiet and observing man. Short in stature, his wardrobe is always changing. He could stroll in with a plain black shirt and sweatpants, or a cardigan with a button up shirt and horn-rimmed glasses. He constantly took notes on his phone, Robert had taken many classes all around the city and at the beginning of this project was committed to something improv-related every day of the week. A fact he himself found bittersweet. Robert had short, closely cropped black hair and a darker complexion. He held his shoulders together and hunched slightly in his natural position.

On stage, Robert was quiet. Sometimes half of a set could go by without seeing him on stage. In the opening monologues that the team does to start each show, he would often be the absurd character that would deviate from any pattern of characters that the rest of the team would create. He wasn’t a quick player, a quality he has admitted to. He isn’t always the one making the game moves, in fact he rarely is, but he has enough experience and
training to make some very inventive character and plot choices. He is open, but neutral in affect, which leads to him to take much longer to get closer with people than more expressive players. Robert was the wild card in the group, he always seemed to surprise.

Alex is a gentle, large, towering figure at around 6’5”. He is the tallest in the group, but tries to change that fact by a slouching his presence and resting his torso on the back of his hips. Alex is soft-figured and has a round face. His thin wire glasses are always on his face; to see his face without them would render him unrecognizable. He has short dark brown hair that has a sheen from the gel that holds it loosely into place. Alex is the kind of person who always wears shirts that are obscure, pop culture references or subversive logos that facetiously poke fun at other well-known cultural artifacts. He is smart and knows a lot about the world of comedy, namely the lesser-known comedic writers and podcasters.

On stage Alex is a consistent, quiet force. Alex has the potential to play the most interesting character, but he often blends in with the background of the scene. He needs space to be heard and for him to express himself. He is an intelligent player that creates character with depth and motivation. He really excels in matching other people’s communication styles. He is very quick to hop on board to other people’s ideas and creates new ideas when his partner is at a loss. He is not expressive in his everyday demeanor, but completely expresses himself in scenes. Alex is dependable and creative.

Vanessa is perhaps the smallest player on the team standing only 5 feet off the ground, but was one of the most respected players on the team. She had been on numerous teams and was married to another improviser that was well-respected in the community too. She led quietly and by example. She is short and thin, with pale complexion and dark hair. Vanessa is an immigrant from Eastern Europe via Canada. Her accent is not thick, but juts out when speaking certain words. This may be because of her Slavic influence, her Canadian influence, or both. Her slightly drooping, wide eyes were a primary feature, which led her to play authentic and believable, submissive characters. She is extremely intelligent and very quiet. In the beginning, Vanessa was shy, but willing to put herself into the middle of scenes or to do relationship-building work with other members.

On stage, Vanessa’s characters were ones that the audience could root for. As almost a polar opposite to Ethan, it never felt that Vanessa made any choices that were to affect the audience. Her choices were natural to a character, which made her a great player to set up her
scene partners with all of the humor. She is very adaptable finding clever ways to connect two seeming disparate plot points. She was patient and knew how to slow down a scene to really play with it. During the development of the group, John had challenged her repeatedly to be more assertive with her play, and she responded. Vanessa often became big characters that were similar to Ethan’s choices. Although she doesn’t escape her small frame, which leads to ironic juxtapositions of power dynamics. She would often get up on chairs and use exaggerated gestures to assert her dominance in a scene. When Ethan or Hannah is not present, Vanessa organically rises to a leadership position. She never attempts to take this position, she possess it by sheer natural ability. Vanessa is the reluctant leader, intelligent and articulate, but reserved and quiet.

**Playing Around with Participant Observation**

Participation observation, or fieldwork, is a method of writing any and all observations that may be relevant to addressing the research focus. These notes serve as raw data for the researcher to draw patterns and outline phenomena that help understand the research focus. Researchers will often participate in the context as well to not only understand the culture from a distance, but intimately as well. Interviews are one-on-one or sometimes group sessions where the researcher can ask the participants directly about observed phenomena as it relates to the research focus. This tool can be used to explore the inner-workings of participants and helps to elucidate perceived motivations and behaviors told from the participants themselves. This method can elicit narratives asking, “take me to a time when. . .” gaining insight to the intimate nature of a specific instance. The observations participants have of the events can be instrumental to understanding complex communicative interactions. Finally, introspection is used to “achieve ‘intimate familiarity’ with their data by rereading it many times, making notes on emergent trends, and then constructing themes or patterns concerning aspects of the culture” (Ellingson, 2009, pp. 54-55). The collection of these methods best serve to address a complex, and ambiguous communicative process such as play.

All time spent in the role of participant observer was focused on the communicative patterns that may have connections to the construction of play. Field notes would reflect any
patterns observed or moments of play or playfulness. These moments would serve most useful as they could be dissected and explored for some answers and even more questions.

In total, I spent over 75 hours attending every practice, show, and most events the group engaged in to bond outside of the improv context. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in the context of the theater, whether that be on the stage, in the practice room, or at the lobby bar. The process took around four months, from attending the first practice, to one of the last shows before Vanessa left the troupe. Mostly, field notes focused on interactions that players had with each other. Improvisers are naturally playful and humorous, so most interactions were ripe with interesting, qualitative data that could be used for analysis. Everything from nonverbal cues to semantic play, communicative patterns and phenomena were the central focus of the observation sessions. Field notes were taken in the form of scratch notes in a field notebook. Most of the sessions were followed up with a formal write-up of events based on the scratch notes taken in the field (Tracy, 2013).

**Playing Around with Interviews**

Interviews are “guided question-answer conversations” (Tracy, 2013, p. 131) that give the researcher direct access to the thoughts and accounts of the participants. Through my interviews with the coach and all the players, I gathered data on perceived playfulness, collaboration, and cohesion. Interviews served to inform the direction of the research. Accounts and narratives can often provide new rationales, explanations, and justifications for behavior not previously conceived by the researcher. Interviews address perceptions of group cohesion, collaboration, and play and ask participants to narratively account instances of these phenomena to ascertain intimate knowledge to observed phenomena, such as moments where a participant feels that the group is collaborating well or when actions prevent collaborative efforts. An interview guide was used to keep interviews focused on the research questions and understanding group play (See Appendix).

Interviews were conducted one-on-one in varying locations away from practice and performance spaces, to ensure what is being said is stated in confidence. Participants were reminded that their participation is voluntary, and although their names are kept confidential through a coding scheme, which, admittedly is a formality in terms of the group’s knowledge of each other’s role in this ethnography. All interviews were transcribed shortly after, in
order to be used for data analysis. Interviews and transcripts were recorded and locked safely along with any and all data collected. I and my research advisor were the only people accessing participants’ data.

**PLAYING AROUND WITH INTROSPECTION AND FIELD NOTES**

Introspection was the catalyst and was central to all discovery during the research process. Not only did I reflect on the processes I was witnessing in the group, but I was also meta-aware of my process conducting and writing this ethnography. Questions about the nature of work and play were constantly in the front of mind as I worked through the ethnographic process. Almost facetiously my research would mock me to “work” hard at reporting and analyzing “play” and “playful” moments and scenes. These roadblocks and periods of frustration have ultimately led to insights in the implications of the findings of solo-play and creativity while alone. These implications will be discussed later on in this thesis, but it is important to note the importance that introspection had on these findings.

All observations were first recorded in a field notebook that accompanied me through all practices, shows, workshop sessions, field trips, and reflection periods. I carried the mid-size, black leather journal with me everywhere day-to-day in order to catch any insights I had on play inspired the mundane motions of the everyday. Often it was the mundane action that some of the clearest moments of insights arose. Play is everywhere in many forms. Whether it be between a mother and son playing with a ball in the park, faculty presenting and workshopping their own research among like-minded individuals, or the aimless fiddling of playing an instrument, it was hard not to see play in some form. Tracing a thread through these contexts and the data collected was the essential process of this ethnography.

To keep these notes detailed and organized, I would furiously take down any notes during interesting moments between players or moments of insight on my own. After each practice, show, or interview I would set aside time to journal and reflect on the events that preceded. I have over 50 hours of formal reflection time, with countless hours of ruminating introspectively throughout the last 6 months. A system formed through the process of collecting data where initial field notes were taken, moments were then reflected on. If a moment seemed to stick out because it seemed to show something interesting about
interaction, then a vignette was constructed and explored with rich detail. After the initial
draft of the vignette was on paper, I moved on quickly to the next moment or the next round
of insights. I did not want to become entrenched with one mindset of what was “going on” in
the scenes I observed. I wanted to remain flexible and fluid in interpreting the
communication within each session.

PLAYING AROUND WITH DATA ANALYSIS AND
REPRESENTATION

The first phase of data analysis began with reading through the complete data set,
which includes 150 pages of transcripts and 200 pages of field notes and reflections that were
recorded and written during the seven months I engaged in this ethnography. Through the
process of reading and re-reading this collection of data, patterns began to emerge from the
voices of the participants in the interviews and field notes. Close attention was paid to certain
wording and certain metaphors that appeared in more than one interview.

The second phase of analysis then was writing down and reflection on an overarching
pattern, which was the description of play as “energy” being shared and communicated with
other partners on stage. Through the descriptions of “being in sync,” I began unpacking the
complexities of play. I became more and more curious about the aspect that make-up play, or
its components. Concepts such as flow, meta-communicative coding, and relational
maintenance were the center of my focus.

What I realized in a third phase of analysis is that in the territory of “why do we
play?” and “what makes play special?” there were “sets” of interactions that led up to and
accompanied moments of play and players “being in sync”? It was clear that performers get
tired of playing the same and are always experimenting with play that facilitates innovation,
collaboration, and growth.

In the fourth and final stage of analysis, I realized that the best way to represent what
the data revealed, was not by fragmenting the data into pieces that represent elements of play,
but instead to reveal the ways that performers communicate with one another building toward
and enacting the flow of play as holistically as possible. Reviewing interviews and field notes
once again, I selected three longer vignettes that see the process of play in its developmental
form. I wanted readers to see the complexity and nuances of play through the three selected
vignettes represented as Act One (Chapter Three), Act Two (Chapter Four), and Act Three (Chapter Five). Interwoven into each of the vignettes are, what I am calling, *Interpretive Interludes*, that draw out the complexities of play as revealed in my reflections on my participant observation and the voices of performers from the interviews. The Interpretive Interludes pause the action at moments where some phenomenon warranted further investigation. They are marked by asterisks sectioning these contributions off. Any italics are used to convey internal monologue during the narrative, and the interludes serve as reflection at the time of writing and constructing this thesis. I begin each Interpretive Interlude assessing what exactly is happening so far in the scene, and then use my prior knowledge of improv, my reflections of the scene, and the voices of participants to draw out the complexities of play.

In responding to my research question, the three acts represent the group: **yielding and matching** in Act One, **posturing their roles** in Act Two, and **predicting and reacting** to each other in Act Three. While the Interpretive Interludes drawn out these elements, more discussion on these elements and overall conclusions will be the concern of the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter Three presents the first vignette as Act One. It tells the story of the development of the group. At the beginning of this ethnography Duck Republic was an entirely new group. They didn’t know each other, and hadn’t played with each other already. Thus, this first series of stories represent the initial stage of constructing play that the group experienced: not wanting to “step on anyone’s toes.” The group began to earnestly put in the effort to get to know each other and to let others take the lead, when someone finally chose to do so. In this session, I observed the varying ways in which play and relational development are initiated. Every exchange was illustrative of the very beginning of group play development. This trip marked the first major activity outside of practice and served as the first launching point into comradery.

Chapter Four presents the second vignette as Act Two, which is my participant observation of a practice session. In the practice room, I had the most interaction with the team. It started just by asking me for a word to start off a series of scenes, then it was small bits of feedback, and after a few months I was sharing just as much about my life at the beginning of practice as they were with theirs. I also went through initial warm-up exercises
with them. I knew that the best work that would get the data closest to the action would be imperative in understanding how play is constructed. Naturally, the practice where I actually improvised with them stood out as being useful for representation. This point marked the groups’ preliminary understanding of their roles within the group and how their roles meshed with the others in the ensemble. I used participant observation to not only observe how bonded the members were, but the stark difference (apparent in my narrative) between my comfortability in play with them, and their play with each other. This section serves to give an inside look at the communication and relationships between players in their own practice space, where some players have said that they are most playful.

Chapter Five presents the third vignette as Act Three, which is my participant observation of a performance. The performance was an interesting show because it showed them without John, and it was two weeks before their last performance as a group. They had also bonded doing a group “escape room” only hours before the show. If there was ever a show that was promoting playfulness, it was this one. The show proved useful as it also featured a recurring narrative that kept building by most of the team. Shortly after this last story, one of the members moved because her career relocated her and her husband to another city. This performance marked the pinnacle of comfortability and friendship the group had created with each other. The vignettes come from a performance on stage where I trace a developed scene that ends up appearing in the show four times. It features all but one player’s contribution to the narrative. It is a good illustration of the messy communicative process of improvised collaborative communication and maintaining play. There are miscommunications, and narrative inconsistencies, but there are also supportive moments, synchronicity, and moments that are often described as “twisting the knife,” or in a sense, teasing. In this final act, the players seek the leadership of each other, letting each other take the lead. These three acts capture the slow and spontaneous growth of play within a group.

And now, I present the results as play in three acts, Chapters Three, Four, and Five.
CHAPTER 3

“DON’T WANT TO STEP ON ANYONE’S TOES”

I remember trying to find Wilde Auditorium on the college campus that would be my new home. I was excited for the comedy, but even more excited to go with the girl who invited me to go. Had she asked me to go to modernist keyboard concert dual, I would have gone. I remember the bustle of students filling the small theater that held around 100 people in it. The lights went down and the players ran out. I had seen “Whose Line is it Anyway,” I never really thought that more people actually did that kind of stuff.

I will never forget the moment that first hit me about five minutes into the show.

“. . .and we are going to make it up all on the spot. Right here!” the lead player explained.

My concern for my hopeful date dissipated and my focus was consumed by these seemingly normal people creating some sort of art for a lot of people. I watch them quickly construct scenes and worlds using their imagination, and inviting everyone in. “I can do this” I whispered to myself. I had never had that thought about anything in my life. This was different. Finally, a way to express myself that only uses talking, that was all that I was good at.

Up until their trip to L.A., Duck Republic hadn’t spent much time together as just people, and not characters. I knew there was going to be a lot of interesting data that would glean from this trip, and it proved to be the case. Major questions that struck me as I entered this event: Under more focus and scrutiny on the playful aspects of conversation, what would the normal introductory communicative cycles reveal about constructing play? What is constructed in this stage of group cohesion that would serve as a foundation for play later? What does play look like when it first begins?

This act helps to elucidate the complex and nuanced process of getting to know other people. Not just other people, but people who belong to the same group or team with a
similar goal in mind. The players in Duck Republic were all trying to not just get to know each other, but to begin to create a trusting relationship where they can be counted on in the middle of a scene, in front of an audience. How does a group bond with intention? If people are intentionally trying to bond, what communicative patterns emerge?

**ACT I**

“I still feel like we are figuring things out,” Robert.

5:45 p.m.

Once we arrive at the theater, we look to rendezvous with the others in line and wait for will call. It is a picturesque Los Angeles afternoon. We beat traffic on the ride up and manage to find the theater just as they were dispensing early tickets for the show. We walk from our car down a gum-littered grey sidewalk illuminated in the orange glow of the sunset. Billboards as wide as buildings tower over the boulevard letting all of us know that this fall, there “is one TV hospital drama that you’re not going to want to miss.” Some tall buildings and malls pass us by as we make our way to the group. We walk up to the others that already in line. The line bustles with excitement growing from the gate to the theater bending left around down the street on the sidewalk.

“. . .and then I turned around,” Hannah turns her body toward the out part of the circle with her head checking back to her audience, “and Jason Bateman brushed right by me.” Vanessa, Robert, and Alex react with raised eyebrows.

Alex quickly follows up, “Yeah, I have seen a few cool people here before. I saw Bill Hader sitting a couple of rows in front of me one show I was at.”

“THEATRE” stacks vertically with white letters in a font businesses used in the 1950’s, on a big black sign attached to the building to the right of the alleyway. Attached to the black sign is a basic, square, marquee with letters inserted to spell “Largo at the Caronet.” Our group is about fifty people away from the front. We clump together toward the end of the line of people bending out and to the right side of the theater. Only a group or two stands behind us.

I notice immediately while turning back toward the group, that all of the members seem to always want to face each other, often standing in a circle. Even as we approached just moments prior, the circle swung open and a newer, larger circle was formed. As we
stood around trying to kill time, they joke with the excited energy of elementary students on a field trip. Hannah quite literally jumps for joy. She wears a Cheshire cat smile for the majority of the time in line. Each time I notice that she is brimming, she bashfully reminds me “I am literally so excited to see this group.” Hannah was the one who suggested that Duck Republic take this field trip to watch a live performance of improv comedy podcast. The group really tries to be inclusive of everyone’s voice. My attention ping-pongs around the group as the give and take of the conversation shifts constantly between different parts of the circle huddled together on the sidewalk. Each player is so generally excited and enthusiastic, there are many moments when two people go to speak at once. Vanessa and Alex both make a motion to add their story to the mix. Alex’s hand draws up to motion the beginning of his story while Vanessa pops her head up and toward the middle of the circle. They both utter a vowel before there was a moment of quick start and stops. They glance and immediate defer to each other.

“You go first,” Alex says shaking his head, gesturing to her with his long arms reaching over halfway across the circle. Vanessa proceeds with her story, and Alex goes right after. This is just one of many moments of conversational politeness. Everyone is heard at some point, with a few being heard more than others. After we reach the front of the line, Alex grabbed and held onto the tickets for everyone, almost automatically. A quick action I only notice later. Alex immediately tucks away all the tickets for everyone, never even thinking to scatter them among the group. Alex stands at the ticket booth receiving all the tickets and says to Hannah, “I will just keep them so no one will lose them.” Alex and Hannah were the planners of the trip it. Between the two of them, no one was going to be late or miss the show. I don’t even think to worry about my ticket. We leave an hour later, I notice that I don’t have it and I am comforted by the fact that Alex has all of ours, already out of pocket and in hand. They both lead us out of enclave and to the sidewalk again to the same spot that we initially met earlier.

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A lot of interesting interaction takes place here. Immediately, the group makes a concerted effort to be inclusive. The circle they stand in ensures everyone is equally a part of the group figuratively, and literally. The interaction between Alex and Vanessa was one the many instances of conscious moves to be considerate of everyone. During their pause, Alex
and Vanessa immediately attempt to defer each other. Their first instincts are to give control of the conversation to each other. This exchange felt the way a conversation would feel on a second date; somewhat familiar, but overly polite.

“That is why I am self-conscious about how I interact with each player. . . . I am yielding because I don’t think her type of play on stage meshes with my absurd characters,” - Robert.

These moments can be likened to the play bows of puppies. A yielding takes place on both sides to establish that both parties are indeed playing the same game. Perhaps all players must communicatively bow to each other, in attempts to create an understanding that allows both players to play and not compete. Animals feign inferiority in front of smaller opponents to even the playing the field, to make the invitation for play more appealing. Perhaps considerate communication, such as being courteous lays the ground work for play, making the invitation more appealing.

We all stand in a relaxed circle just talking and playing hypothetical situations out in real time, acting out the characters in each narrative. Improvisers call this doing ‘bits’. They happen seemingly out of nowhere, but make conversations more of a game than a true exchange of information. For example, this is a bit that was constructed on the car ride up with John and Ethan: “How are you doing, Hayden?” Ethan yells tilting his head up leaning it back on the head rest of the “shotgun” seat. The windows are half open in the two front seats blasting in the cars, buffering the radio at mid-level and any voices.

“Good!” I yell back tilting my head up as well, as if we could literally talk over the radio playing in the background. “My students are pretty funny, they will sometimes begin a story and realize they are talking to a teacher so they will sterilize it midway through. My girlfriend and I were alone in my room…holding hands and having deep conversation,” I use as an example.

“With our clothes on” John adds from the driver seat, we laugh reactively. Immediately opening the gallery up for similar comments.

“Very deep conversation” Ethan throws in.

“It was over pretty quick though, and my girlfriend didn’t seem too happy about that” John chimes in.
Bits like this are the primary occupation of improvisers while in conversation. In moments just like this one there is not a true exchange of information, but it is entertaining as conversation can be. There is a productive feeling about this. Someone will say something true to their life, and another could immediately follow with a more facetious narrative of the same form, and the joke would make everyone laugh. They tease each other, inspire each other, and build off each other. When someone takes the focus, they all turn to watch. These people don’t know each other longer than a month and they only see each other a handful of times, yet they were laughing like old friends.

We have about two and a half hours to spare and some empty stomachs to fill from the car ride up. Ethan starts to squirm a little digging his toes into the ground and pivoting his heal, just slightly. He bends down momentary, folding in his naval with a straight back bowing down. Because I was in the car ride up with him, I knew that there was another sense of urgency: Ethan had to use a restroom for the last 45 minutes.

“Hey are you all hungry? We should start waking somewhere,” Ethan said looking to the others with a slight squirm. With some disregard of Ethan’s dilemma, we continue to chat, laugh, and add on to each other’s jokes. There are seven of us today. Laughing and having a good time just talking about nothing.

Finally, Ethan chimes in, “Should we go eat? I have been needing to use the restroom for a while now.” We all willingly comply, shifting the inertia toward the sidewalk, heading right out of the theater. As we walk, the bits continue. We walk as wide as the sidewalks, two or three to a row. Each row has their own conversation mid-stride. Sometimes I would get glimpses of them in the breaks of my own conversation. The orange filter is now red. Ethan and I talk in the front of the line, he jokes with me but also is frantically scan each place we go by.

7:00 p.m.

Ethan said to me light-heartedl, jogging out, with a laugh in his voice, “I didn’t want to break up the conversation, I was balancing wanting to go pee and to keep talking.” For Ethan, it is hard to leave the conversation and stop people from enjoying themselves, even if that means suffering though his bladder screaming for relief.

We walk by small bistroes serving Greek food and pizza, we stroll past a hole-in-the-wall Mexican food place with four dollar burritos, and finally a restaurant in a box shaped
building with two patio areas on either side. It was a black building that shined like obsidian, glass doors held open by gold plated handles. Ethan, mid-sentence, decides that this was the time to relieve himself.

We all stop and wait. The group feels like a herd sometimes, standing in a clump milling about until the group is complete, and they move together in unison. It’s as if they all are instinctually following the same implicit rules of etiquette. While Ethan uses the bathroom, this organic circle arises between us once again. There is urgency in the conversation, a pressure that demands that someone needs to keep the general conversation going, someone manages to add a new bit, idea, or story within each beat. Something that people can relate to and respond to.

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Sticking together is the main motive for the group thus far. This moment shows us that for play to work, this dictum must be broken at some point, because people have individual needs. Of course the group complies, but the play involves an active force against disrupting the current state of things, as Ethan pointed out to me. This scene shows us that the group’s play priority is to be a cohesive unit; to be the herd moving together. I wonder if this remains an active choice or one that they do by default, like, at some point decisions have to be made. Does play require the group to remain cohesive, avoiding any assertion of individual preference?

“This is all made up. It’s all like, it may work, it may not work, but you have to have this level of trust . . . and they got your back and they’re not going to tease you. They’re not going to make fun of you” – John.

Perhaps there is a layer of trust-building going on with this stage of the group. By supporting each and every decision, other players can become secure in knowing that they are supported in whatever they do. This may be what liberates a player from acting completely out of self-consciousness awkwardness. There is a level of safety here.

“There are moments of pause when a conversation runs its course, and then someone else steps in. They throw out conversation topics and jokes toward the middle of the circle,
like witches around a boiling cauldron. Any eye contact toward a particular person is by chance. When Ethan comes back out, the herd moves toward finding a place once again. As we walk, none of them are particularly alert or even attentive to finding a place to eat. They look at each other mostly, not even noticing where we are headed to next. We could walk out of LA at this rate.

We stop at a place called “Norm’s”, which I have come to understand as a LA version of Denny’s. It has an angled roof that resembles an origami diamond being bent to a 45 degree angle. The sign is a large pole with white diamonds stacked upon each other and orange letters filling each one. The diner was held up by walls of windows, revealing groups of people sitting in burnt orange booths with lights hanging down above each table. The inside is furnished with wooden tables and chairs, warm lighting, and homely people. It seems spacious and cheap. Since there are seven of us, we choose it by default.

This was another instance of indecisiveness of the group. We all stop because someone subtly proposed, “should we go here?” This question lofts toward the players mid conversation. Most that heard the request continue on their conversation to avoid answering the question, ultimately not making a decision. I almost speak up here, assuming a position of leadership that I normally assume, but I stifle myself. This is a moment, where I made a conscious choice attempting to not change the group. I was very curious to see who would eventually step up, and how long this process would take. I remember being very quiet in this stage of the trip. Chatting paused for that brief moment, but everyone began in the circle again, assuming the lax positioning we had earlier, as if to procrastinate the ultimate decision to decide anything. We are not walking, we just stand enjoying the conversation outside of Norm’s. Still, no one confirms or denies the plan for dinner.

After about five minutes, Hannah starts motioning and walking toward the door, “I am just gonna start walking,” she says whispering to me while exaggerating a slow motion walk toward the door to Norm’s. I follow while checking with the others to see if this would be where we would eat. As a member of the herd, I feel insecure to instigate any decision making. The group hasn’t been together to really know what anyone liked or disliked, so pleasing each other is the main motivation for any decision-making. It is as if by making a decision you were taking a risk of doing something that you yourself were not that interested in, but could be something that someone else really wouldn’t want to do. So when decisions
are made, everyone cautiously, but also slyly, checks in with each other to see if that was okay. They really quick glance to each other nodding to signal consensus.

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It is interesting to see how I embody, what I perceive to be the feeling of the others during play. There is a great deal of insecurity in these moments, because no one wants to simply play in a way that proposes a direction that might be at odds with how someone else is feeling. The group checks in with each other a lot during play because there was a good deal of uncertainty between each other. It was difficult to make a decision about the direction of play that was known to be favorable, because no one knew what each person considered favorable.

“But in some other scenes you worry right? You’re like oh there’s nothing a game that you’ve latched on so you keep worrying okay what’s the funny thing that I’m going to latch on so,” - Vanessa.

The interaction here is very interesting in the construction of play, because there is the beginnings of the outspoken few proposing things, and the rest of the group not necessarily reacting to the play moves at all. This non-action can be deciphered as apathy or just an unwillingness to commit to one direction. However, when Hannah begins to motion for the door the group accepts and supports that play move. No one in the group seemed at all disgruntled by this move, no outward disagreements were made. In essence, this stage of the group’s development of play can be characterized as being courageously paving the pathways for future play sessions.

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The group has no problem wanting to play in ways that brings them closer or more intimate, but they do not overtly communicate affection to each other. We are shown a long row of brown booths on one side and orange chairs on the other. Each individual in the group does this awkward dance of ‘who sits where?’ by shuffling toward one side and then looking up to make sure any action doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s. It is only resolved after people like Ethan and Robert, openly declare “I’ll sit here.” We all sit down, but at first we need to scrunch together due to some bad table positioning, and so some of the group sit in the booth and chairs next to each other so close it doesn’t even make sense, however no one
initially complains, they would have sat uncomfortably the whole dinner. Ultimately, the
waitress allows us the extra space and we settle into a more comfortable arrangement.

The metal chair with a brown leather covering, still slightly moist from the busser
cleaning it off only moments prior. Burgers, eggs, burnt coffee, and the ketchup spread on
the booth table behind me combines for the aroma of the diner. The place is warm from the
LA weather, but also from the heat of bustling patrons filling almost every table in the
restaurant. The conversation around our table opens to everyone, but it remains functioning
in slight factions.

To my right I hear, “Have you seen this group perform before Hannah?” John asks
slightly leaning on top his crossed arms over the table.

“No! I have never seen them live, but I have listened to every podcast. Do you listen
to . . .” Hannah says leaning in slightly too as she adjusts her positioning on her seat. She likes
to sit with one leg under the hinge of the other. Usually draping the left leg over the folded
right.

To my left, complete different conversation springs up.

“What other shows do you watch?” Vanessa asks Ethan, glancing at him and then
Robert and Alex, widening the angle to face both of them to her left and across the table, her
back toward me. I eavesdrop easily the tiny sitting stature of Vanessa. Glancing down at her
straight, dark brown hair parted down the middle of her scalp and wrapped around ears, the
back of it falling straight down, brushing her shoulders and base of the neck.

“I really like Flight of the Concords, have you seen them?” Ethan replies facing away
from the end of the table toward everyone else. He glances at the menu as he finishes his
sentence.

“They are genius,” Alex immediately replies lifting his hands and flicking the open
palms once, to emphasize “genius.” “Have you heard just their music. . .” My attention
bounces from one side to the other. This is pretty cool, this is where it all begins. In these
conversations they will learn about what makes them tick, and how to best help each other
make art. These conversations are almost the training ground for the faux conversations that
happen on stage.

I sat in the exact middle of the group on the side with the orange chairs. Ethan and
Vanessa sit to my left in the chairs and Alex and Robert sit at the booths. John and Hannah
sit to my right, across the table from each other. Any pairing within this group creates a dynamic duo. The left four members converse and then get interrupted by something someone says among the three to the right of me. Some of them hop in, throw in a few jokes and then conversation resides to the respective sides. They flow seamlessly from one large conversation to smaller ones. Robert sits across from me and begins talking to me. He leans in to hear to what I have to say above the noise of a diner and starts asking me similar questions to the ones I answered earlier in the car ride up: “Where are you from?” Even though this brief moment starts out with just the two of us, Ethan and Vanessa listen in at times as well. Everybody tries to get to know everyone at the same time, and it is hard to miss any of it.

There are collective bits, and smaller ones within the factions, but the conversation is a healthy mix of jokes, laughter, and sincere character-revealing information. When John, or Hannah or someone make a joke, they lean over to the center so that everyone can hear. They talk among each other and when the bits are funny enough they share promptly after to the group. Everyone generally holds a smile and laughs with each other. Their eyes scan around the group for the newest thread of conversation. They shovel diner food into their mouths while staring up at whoever is talking. They try to acknowledge each joke or story told in their moments as a group. No story is cutoff or overrun by another.

**8:34 p.m.**

After our dinner at Norms we head back to the theater and go into the bar within the complex. It is outside of the theater, but within the gates of the building. The lobby is sort of a typical lobby, but without any sort of a roof. The night sky blankets over the experience, bringing out the luminescence of the hanging light bulbs draped over the alleyway/outdoor lobby. The bar we enter, to the right of the lobby, is much darker than the warm glow of Norms. It is lit like a dark cabaret, only hanging lamps and shades mounted to the walls, and small red cups with candles in them light the place up. Small circular tables populate the main seating area, and an empty, small stage raised up two feet, hangs out at the far end of the room with a lonely microphone. We all stand next to the bar even though only two or three of us get a drink. After standing around a bit, two tables with seven chairs open up. Ethan notices and begins the movement toward it. “Hey guys, a table just opened up,” Ethan says while maneuvering around the banister and toward the small set of stairs down toward
the seating area. Everyone follows with a drink in hand. We reach the tables and people look to all of the seats in disarray around two circular tables. Again, there is an extra minute of trying to decide how we would push the tables together and who would sit where is needed. *Everything is done with a bit of awkwardness with this group.* Two different people pick up chairs and move them in opposite directions.

After the unnecessarily complex moment, Ethan blurs out jokingly, “that’s teamwork”. We all sit enjoying drinks. “So which guy from *Key and Peele* is performing tonight?” I ask leaning into the table to hear what Hannah was going to respond with. She had established herself as the knowledgeable one for this event.

“The tall skinny one,” Hannah replies.

“Isn’t it funny how we all know exactly who she is talking about from that,” Alex looks around to everyone when he says this, punctuating it with a laughter. Again, the conversation breaks into smaller factions and seamlessly moves from entirely inclusive, to functionally exclusive.

As we get closer to show time, we start to leave, Robert wanders off into the other part of the lobby, and Vanessa tries to chug her beer before we go in. They don’t go in without first waiting and only proceeding if they know someone will get them or if the other person says to go on without them. I go to tell Robert that we are going in, and he replies “I will find you in there”.

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The interaction of getting everyone situated at Norm’s and at the bar next to the theater was interesting as it became a subtle introduction to taking on tasks as a group. The hampering consideration for each other ultimately led to a simple task becoming complex. Little communication was actually imparted to each person moving the chairs around the bar tables, other than a couple starts to a given direction only to be interrupted by their own action. When Ethan facetiously declares, “that’s team work,” it punctuated a sequence of events that was so clearly clumsy that everyone could name it.

“So in order to be yourself, you have to get down the basics and I feel like they’re getting really good at the basics and like every week, they’re mastering it and they’re getting just a little bit better, which allows them to be more of themselves. I know what they want to do, but they’re not there yet,” - John.
“When he asked this at the end and I don’t think anyone answered. He didn’t answer it. He said, ‘What was really going on?’. . . And I realized I wasn’t aware of what actually was going on” – Vanessa.

After leaving the bar, things had started to change as we made our way to the theater. This was when I remember seeing a real transition in the team. In just a couple of hours they had gone from the politeness of new acquaintances to the beginning of true consideration and compassion for one another. There was a great deal of concern to keep the group together. This is turn of events begins to feel different than the initial trek to Norm’s. There was a sense of belonging and no one wanted to leave anyone behind.

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We all made our way into the older, early 60’s looking theater. It has all the conventions of a theater: red velvet curtains, flip down seats, a floor that subtly curves upward toward the back, and an upper deck and light crew manning the controls. The group is excited to see the show and they remain in conversation until the usher prepares us for the show. Vanessa and I make conversation about seemingly random topics that stem from her work as a neurologist. She seems much more comfortable around me and in making conversation, not avoidant, but happy to be there. This is an important step forward for my own integration of the group, as Vanessa was initially one of the only members to meet my ethnographic role with hesitation. I notice the change by her use of my name in conversation and also the inclusion of myself in her thoughts among the group. During the show, the whole group laughs at different parts. John and Hannah had little moments throughout that seemed to stem from an earlier conversation. The show itself was zany, fun, and star-struck.

10:32 p.m.

After the show ended we talk about our favorite parts and stand in line to meet the stars of the show. Hannah is very excited because she is a big fan of the whole cast. While standing in line the group continues to make its usual circle, much to the chagrin of one of the ushers that tries to make the line single file. It appears that they have to be inclusive in their body language and positioning. We meet the group and even took a group photo.

11:01 p.m.

Afterward, we make the circle outside the theater in almost the same spot hours earlier where Ethan managed the dialectic of further conversation or relieving himself. We
talk for around 15 minutes, for no particular reason than just to joke around (seeing great improv always seems to really spark the energy of fellow improvisers, including myself). There is a tension present between the group remaining where they are, Robert’s exhaustion, and Ethan’s wanting to go to a bar or something of the like. This marks the first open disagreement among the group. Ethan tries multiple times to move the group in the direction of a bar, but nobody budges, furthering casual conversation, instead of moving. Robert even attempts to split because he is getting too tired, but the group remains intact.

11:25 p.m.

We start to walk to the parking structure and as we climbed the slight hill of the one floor garage, we make yet another circle next to Robert’s car. We talk about movies, forms of improv, and fake conversations or events (more bits). We stay long enough for one of the cast members of the show to walk up. We immediately try to humorously soothe his concerns about appearing to stalk him.

He casually replies, “This is an improv circle, I know improv circles. I have been a part of many myself.” We all laugh it off, but that strikes me as a profound statement. The fact that this circle formation is consistent with other troupes seemed to be a sign of something.

12:07 p.m.

Things don’t gradually fade out, but abruptly end when Robert’s exhaustion forces his hand, “Okay, I have to go or I will crash.” He starts to head into the car, we all agree that it was late. The same groups split up into different cars.

Ethan calls out as people began walking toward the cars, “Are we going to switch for the car ride home?” At this point, everybody already starts walking to the cars they came in and some respond to Ethan by looking at the others, but they keep walking toward the cars being carried by the momentum of the moment. I am failing to uphold my commitment to get more time with the others because I am apprehensive to go in Robert’s car. He seems mad, he doesn’t say much else after wishing us a good night. I feel as though that the indecisiveness of myself along with the others might be interpreted as inconsiderate. It is hard to know how anyone really feels about each other. This field trip was filled with a lot more actions motivated by pleasing each other than true stances. Whether that made this trip
more fun, cohesive, and a worthwhile bonding experience, I believe so, but its benefits remain to be seen.

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This marks one of the only disagreements among the group. It might even be too harsh to say disagreement, but a true assertion of a person’s preference to the disagreement of the others. After Robert communicated his stance, the group pretty quickly said their goodbyes and the tone changed. No one had disagreed that it was late, and no one outwardly disagreed with the sentiment, but Ethan’s comment after we had begun to drive home was indication of how stifling the interaction was. Robert seemed mad that he had to assert himself, maybe he felt the group wasn’t responding to his needs as one of the drivers. Sometimes, the relentless yielding to each other can be detrimental when change needs to happen, in this situation or in the moments of play.

“...you can’t be a good improviser without you know, support, vulnerability, dropping, as I always say, the ego...to let go of all my hang-ups, all my baggage, all my me stuff...the more I let go of control...the happier I am,” - Hannah.

When Robert asserts his own needs of energy, or even when Ethan asserted his need for the restroom, action ceases. The group halts to respond to the individual needs of one. If this need comes at the same time that the group is pursuing a group need, the two impulses become competitive. The group members must individually decide which direction they should take, weakening the commitment of the group to one goal. Perhaps, the group was not avoiding conflict at all, but intuitively unencumbering the group by too much individual initiative.

“That’s why I always have to ask people, like what are our agreement is. What’s our form of play? What’s our style of play today? What are we going to accomplish?” - Robert.

“...there is a structure, like, we have a form. It’s not very rigid. However, we have something new. Now, this is where it’s to push them out of their comfort zone is to trust themselves and trust that everyone has their back and that they know the form. It’s like trust the force...” – John.

“...I very quickly realized that this is the community of people that like, they actually like want you to kind of drop your walls... because I felt like that I was in such a safe place and continue to be in such a safe place, it’s emboldened me to make sometimes creepy, crazy, scary, or like fantastic beautiful touching, sweet choices. It’s like, it gives me the confidence to just make strong choices...I’m just like, ‘you know what? Like screw what anyone else has ever said to me that
has tried to push me down or hold me back out of concern. Let’s just go toward that thing I’ve always wanted’” - Hannah.

Improv can be characterized as the fluid initiations and constructions of socio-dramatic games, without overt communication about said game. To play a game, players have to first understand the rules of the game. The boundaries by which they can experiment and commit to action. The players want to work in harmony with their team members, they don’t want to obtrusively get in the way, or do something counter-intuitive to the overall goal.

“I kind of like those boundaries. I kind of like knowing that okay so I can’t do this, but I can do that instead. It’s like when you play a board game, it’s like you have specific sets of rules . . . I like boundaries” Andrew.

In improv, these boundaries are not communicated in the middle of a set for all players to listen to, they aren’t even established by the same person each time. First, the group must establish general rules and boundaries for each other. They must get to know each other, what their sensitivities are, what things they enjoy and know about, and the ways in which they communicate. They need to establish the rules to the game.

“Like and so I think that’s – but I don’t know like I think I would be more respectful of everyone in Duck Republic a little bit more [as compared to an older team], because I wouldn’t want to offend them and I guess this comes down to I don’t know their points of views in life as much right?” Vanessa

“I don’t want my thoughts and feelings to dominate the group. I don’t want anyone else to think that I want to be a dominant force. Because I want to be an ensemble.” Hannah

Within this boundary-setting process, the group was outwardly supportive and enthusiastic to be with each other. Each member wades through the waters of uncertainty trying to take notice of the patterns and the make-up of what is around. The unspoken implication of this stage is that each player wants to be there. There is a voluntary force within each player actively attempting to make sense of the group around them. Without this voluntary nature, a major axiom of play is violated. With the voluntary force of enthusiasm, each player puts in focused effort to not only understand each player, but to begin to understand their role in the group.

“And so that is something that we’re definitely working on and you could see it in sometimes in their forms when they go out and they’re like, they’re very cautious
with the other person and no one is going to initiate. But they’ll get there and it comes with trust” - John.

Although everyone in the group was eager to please and enthusiastic to be there, virtually no one was enthusiastic about asserting themselves as a leader. Everyone was open-minded, but not many were direct, as evident by the lack of cohesion in making a dinner selection or even how to set up the table in the bar. Even Ethan, who was the most extroverted of the group held back his own desires to conform to the momentum of the group when he only subtly mentioned that he had been holding his bladder for the last 45 minutes.

“I guess I don’t always know how to read the quiet people because I’m like okay if you guys aren’t saying stuff then how do I read your cues like how do I know what you’re going to say or do?” - Ethan.

“. . . that’s when I am definitely trying to get them work on initiations, but they fully support everyone. No one wants to step on anyone’s toes, which is great. However, too much of that you get ambiguity, and you go nowhere” - John.

Duck Republic began this process through hesitation and timidity. Essentially, all members had such a respect and an enthusiasm to involve everyone that no member wanted to be the first to assert any form of decision-making or leadership. This is evident in their general, lackadaisical nature in making any sort of group decisions. Through the coding process, I believe this is the first sign that the group is constructing play by using all communicative measures to show support, rather than competition in their interactions. No member want to create any form of competition, but wanted to blindly support, even to a fault. This is nurturing of group play, but unproductive, as it does not allow action to progress. Eventually, some decisions need to be made, and when they finally they are, they are enthusiastically supported. These instances begin to provide evidence for the group that decisions are okay, and that they will be supported either way. This conditioning of making a choice-unconditional support and acceptance, begins to form trust between the members. As depicted in the next act, trust forms the basis for the next phase of construction: developing and understanding the roles of the group.

“. . .nobody really wanted to jump into that position. Nobody’s bad on the team, but I don’t think everybody on the team is meant to do the leading role. I think a lot of them are really good at supporting. And so for the first few shows nobody was stepping into it and I kind of realized that and I was like ‘Alright, if I just step and start doing what I want and directing like the way things would go, things would fall into place,” - Ethan.
Play begins, in the case of Duck Republic, with meager invitations to create relationships between each other. A genuine, enthusiastic presence is postured by all players. Moments of even accidental conversational conflict are met with immediate deferment to each other. However, there were moments of communicating individual needs. Sometimes these would manifest into a newly initiated direction and the group would quickly converge. Other times, they would remain in competition with other members in the group. In terms of the development of play, it was important for the group to get to know each other as people. Just as in relationships, the players benefit greatly from self-disclosure. It helps them understand how best to communicate to that person; call it, learning the rules of a specific player.

So, in essence, play begins by a willingness and openness to support others. Supporting is first instinct in the initial phase, which is conducive to building trust between the players. These bonds are formed collectively, but they are also formed between individuals. Play is also productive, it needs new ideas to be thrown out and to be experimented with. The group created a supportive environment, where players gained confidence in simply throwing out ideas, jokes, or stories, without much criticism. In the few moments of conflict, communicative acts either were out of self-interest, or the perceived interest of the group. When someone competed with the group interest, action ceased. It will be interesting to monitor how individuals interact with this perceived group energy.

This was one of few opportunities that the group took outside of the standard improv contexts. We had been together for twelve hours after the trip was all said and done. From here on out, Duck Republic will mostly be constructing their form of group play in shorter hourly sessions of practices and shows. This development will be split into small periods of time. How will they balance skill-based tasks and their own relational development as a group? How will play be established through mostly feaux-dyadic relationships constructed through improvised scenes? How can improv bring people together?

“It’s nice. It breaks the ice because we only see each other once a week right? So if you were to do the first few scenes it might be like ‘oh, I don’t want to step on your toes,’ right? So, by laughing together... then you’re like okay, we’ve already gone through that. So we can just start playing now. I can be mean to you or it can be like, you know, so it’s okay” - Vanessa.
“It’s just like being on a sports team, you run together, you get made to do pushups together, you suffer together, you win together, you lose together. So when you get off stage you just have that connection . . . I put my trust in you and you put your trust in me and okay we may not talk ever outside of improv but at least I know I trust you and you trust me and that’s enough” – Ethan.
CHAPTER 4

“LEARNING TO READ THEM”

There is a feeling all improvisers get at some point. That feeling of being in sync with the other partner and discovering ideas together. A surge of creative energy flows through. It is the equivalent to the adrenaline rush of extreme sports, that moment of pure mindfulness and presence. The feeling can often happen early on in an improviser’s career, but just once. Just enough to keep them coming back for the same feeling.

The first time it happened to me, I was in my sophomore year of college, it was my second year on the team. My teammate Sarah was across the room from me. The rest of the team sat in the desks of the empty music classroom, waiting for Sarah and me to interact. She looked down and cradled an imaginary bowl. I stared at her for a beat and took a step forward. She immediately reacted by snipping, “Don’t” while pointing her imaginary wish at my feet. My face naturally reacted and the team falls out of the desks laughing. I was still locked into eye contact with Sarah when I slowly took back my foot. We played this game for the next few minutes, and it was an incredible feeling to be a part of something so organic, that also affected people positively. I knew she would do well in the scene, I just didn’t exactly know how she would amaze me. I remember feeling completely different about what I wanted out of improv, it was no longer some side thing I did for a while in college. This was something much deeper. This was play, at one of its most fulfilling levels. I have been after that feeling ever since.

Act II proceeds another month into the development of the group play with Duck Republic. They are comfortable with each other and are starting to understand their roles within the group, and the roles of others. Through their shows and performances each week they start form a deep familiarity with each other, to the point where they can ask about each other’s lives and they can tease each other without hurting each other’s feelings. They have inside jokes, and they have recurring characters that have become social artifact within their
circle. I observed and took part in all of this, but I did not do any improv with them, past some simple warm-up games. I was worried about affecting the play and becoming too close, thereby blinding me from what I was looking to understand.

This scene shows my transition from observer to participant and in the process reveals the point of view of the ‘newcomer’ to a play group. I believe my experience sheds light on some of the behaviors illustrated in Act I. but my familiarity with them, at this point, also speaks to the relationships between them in this phase in their development as well. The practice room is the breeding ground for the group culture. This is where the group spends the majority of their time together.

I remember stepping out of John’s car after practice, opening the wooden gate to my house bustling with thoughts and new questions. What is emerging in this practice context that stems from the introductory stage and continues to facilitate play? How is uncertainty managed as more certainty is fostered relationally? How would players change in response to a great deal of support and trust? How would they express themselves, and how the others react?

**ACT II**

I sat in the middle of the row of chairs against the practice room wall opposite the theater. Next to me, two chairs away, was John, who was using a pause in practice to review his notes. I look to the far right of the room to see Ethan crouched over, tip-toeing out of the room to leave practice early, as he had for the last few practices to warm-up for the holiday show at the theater. He loves performing, but was remiss to leave his still-budding team.

“See ya everybody,” Ethan said sulking slightly while opening the practice room door to leave.

The white door featuring a small glass square window swung open, kissing the white wall behind it. Five players stood in a horizontal line on the blue carpet in the center of the rectangular room. The group was ready to start back up with something, they paced around in place and looked intently at John for the next phase of practice. They stood in a line to simulate the backline they form on stage during every show. John and I, sat ten feet in front of them, forming their audience.
“Alright, I want to finish up by playing cocktail party” said John, still looking through his leather notebook full of scribbles with furrowed brow and neck craned down. He closed the notebook and looked up through his rectangular glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose, “does everyone know how to play?”

Four players nodded their heads, but Alex remarked “I don’t quite remember,” with an arm barring across his torso to hold his other arm up to his face.

“Okay. Oh, Hayden I am going to need you to step in for this one so we have the full six we need.” John tilts the bottom of his face slightly to the right, toward me while still looking at his notebook, expecting an automatic compliance.

I immediately nodded to myself, having played this game many times with my improv troupe in college. As I stood up, butterflies fluttered up into my stomach. I had been on hiatus from actually improvising, and just the feeling of getting to try some was exciting and a little nerve-inducing. My eyes zoned out, fixed at one spot as they were starting to project what would happen in the next few minutes. As I stood up I quickly found my place in the line-up, pulling my shirt so that it didn’t resemble its crinkled, fixed position it had from prolonged sitting. I stretched my arms over head linking my fingers and bending down, like we were about to run a heat doing the 100-meter sprint. On the outside, I was smiling, joking around, and gently hitting the back of my scene partner, and ready to join, but at the same time, my façade cracked a little. My eyes stared into the strands of royal blue carpet fibers and my smile sometimes dropped while trying to concentrate on the rules of good improv. Rule #1: Yes, and. . . ., Rule #2: What is your character’s want/need, Rule #3 Be on the same team, Rule #4 Start in the middle of something, Rule #5: Listen, remember every detail, Rule #6: Fuck the rules. . . I didn’t want to disappoint or takeaway.

Without being fully present, I swung around my body like a military cadet doing “about face!” standing next to Alex. I glanced over at the rest of the team, I smiled because I was happy to be playing with the team I had watched all this time. This created a very miniscule version of the celebrity effect, it was exciting to be on the court with the players instead of in the stands, stuffing my face with popcorn, analyzing every play with the common person saying “What I would have done. . .”

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Immediately, my player position had gone from casual observer to unexpected participant. I think around this moment I knew that this practice would be one that I would think about a lot for the potential of actually embodying what it must have been like to the group when they first began to play together. I find it interesting that some of the first things that crossed my mind were my own evaluation of competency and noticing my only audience, which happened to also be the other players and John. This is where “fit” becomes salient, I remembered thinking how my style of improvising would go with the others. Without the prior experience, it was really hard to predict, and it felt similar to how we felt in L.A.

“. . . in the beginning, they’re not doing good improv. But because they’re so engrossed in it and they’re having so much fun, like you overlook that because like you just absorbed all that playful energy . . . after they’ve been doing it a while, they start getting like, alright, [need to figure out what he says here], big choices like get in their head and then it just becomes awkward because they’re learning something new,” - John.

Communicatively, what is most prevalent in this experience is the lack of communication. The lack of experience with them as players in a scene. The lack of knowing what it feels like to play with them. The lack of knowing exactly what my role was in this dynamic. The heightened unfamiliarity and uncertainty created a sense of insecurity that made me afraid to fully express any and all ideas that came to my head. Play is stifled with the idea that it may be “totally wrong.” Play is simply building off of ideas and moves, there shouldn’t be any wrong moves. Perhaps I am more afraid of the conflict that an incongruent move would yield. I must feel threatened here.

“. . .if someone is less skilled, you make do so everyone can play and I feel like it’s very true in Duck Republic is that everyone supports everyone and everyone knows that everyone has different skill levels, but no one treats anyone any different.” - John.

“I think what makes me comfortable is that if I say something or do something like they’ll get it, like it’s a very basic thing. Like, I’m not afraid to do something because the other person will deny it” - Vanessa.

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“Okay, so you will get into groups of two and you will act like you are having a conversation like you are at a cocktail party,” John said clearly explaining the rules while sitting down on the row of chairs five feet in front of us. “When I point and shout your group
number, you will chime in like we are jumping into the middle of your conversation,” John’s pointing finger flew away from Alex and me to the group on the other side of the line at Andrew and Robert. “When I point to another group, you will quiet down, and keep pretending like you are having a conversation. It is very important to listen to the other conversation, try and use what they are talking about as inspiration for what you will do next,” John said cheeks carving into the bottom of his eyes, skin folding at the corners; he loved this stuff.

The other pairs were Hannah and Vanessa, and Andrew and Robert. They all stood with arms loose and down by their side, confident and neutral. They began to face each other. They all went through this very quick moment before they started where they moved their bodies slightly through about five different postures to see which one inspired a character. They looked at each other smiling wide, hiding teeth, nodding their heads in approval for what was about to happen, then, right before John began the exercise they looked off, solidifying their choices in their head and stepping into their role. I went through the same four-second routine, but I am sure with more urgency and adrenaline. I could feel my heart beating a bit faster. *It’s just cocktail party, relax, have fun with it.* I didn’t really check in with Alex, I was too concerned with what kinds of things needed to be said, I skipped the part where I glanced over to acknowledge the live person depending on me in the next scene. The players are now in a party, ready to gossip and they already are picking up their imaginary cocktail glasses.

*What kind of humor do they have? I don’t want to overpower anyone or be too weak. I am just a stand-in. I really don’t want to mess up what they already have going, how do I be Ethan . . .?*

“Okay, your group will be talking about paleontology,” he said pointing his straightened finger in a staccato movement back and forth to Alex and me with all of his teeth in smiling full view clenching down on each other, creating definition in his jaw line. Your group will talk about soup,” pointing to Hannah and Vanessa, and “your group will talk about haircuts” pointing to Robert and Andrew. “Make sure you listen and find out ways to try and naturally interweave your topics.”
He points to our cluster first with the same stretched out, excited finger that stretches the skin tight over each knuckle “Group 1”. He rocks back and forth in his seat to get comfortable as he prepares to watch the exercise unfold.

“So I said to the man, ‘there was no such thing as the brontosaurus. It was a mistake by the academy and we have to correct it,” I began, talking very similarly to my normal voice, but with an air of prestige. My back was straight and my nose slightly lifted, as I talked I became more and more the trope of the rich, white, aristocratic elite, nasally, unapproving tone and all. All the while not knowing almost anything a paleontologist would talk about.

Alex swayed back and forth in conversation, he took his usual posture of sitting his spine to the back on his hips, rounding his large, lumbering back. He used his ‘nice person’ voice reserved for childhood friends and characters of the sort. This persona always came with bright eyes and an almost clown-like smile, “Oh you are so smart, have you talked with Kathy over in the geology department, and . . .”

“Group 2!” John interrupted while launching and leaning forward onto two legs of his folding chair. He punches his voice at the group to our left, in a calm, assertive tone facing and hunching toward them directly while doing so.

“. . . and then he came in with that cheddar broccoli soup, you know the kind that smells?” Hannah immediately chimed in with a sassy New-Yoker woman flare. Hannah really milks her character work, she juts her hip out and creates voices wholly different than her own. One elbow attached to the sassy hip, and the wrist became loose so the hand can rest wherever it laid, which is often bent ninety-degrees perpendicular to her forearm.

“Oh yeah,” Vanessa replied as the immediate, supportive, sassy, friend. But Vanessa mostly, at this point, ended up sounding like a version of herself. This sassy friend was also meek, small, and endearing. Her shoulders hunched slightly, and her head is almost pointed up toward her scene partner with large dark brown eyes. Her hips jutted out more stiffly than Hannah’s did.

“After I had asked him repeatedly over and over again not to. So I had to finally go over and say something” Hannah punctuated every word like a drill sergeant, with the high-pitch nasally attitude of a true New Yorker. She used her hands like a writer would use bold
and italics, it accentuated her feeling and conveyed it nicely. Hannah’s characters take over her whole body. When she said, “I had to finally go over and say something” she hugged her chin down like she just said something *scandalous*.

“No you didn’t!” Vanessa said, her voice taking on interest as a supportive, gossipy co-worker. Her character deepened with this line. Although her voice never escapes her actual disposition described above, it seemed to try to emulate that New York spunk, or the persona of women sitting in a salon with those large, plastic hair dryers hovering above their heads.

These series of interactions are a perfect example of the element of matching in play. First, players **posture** a character by assuming a stance or by stating the first line. Immediately following that choice, the responding player usually **mimics, or complements**, the initial character, **accepting** the initial offer and **constituting** the other half of the relationship that encapsulates both characters.

This happens frequently throughout this act. These elements of play are necessary for players to reach a state of predictability, or certainty, with each other. This process of posturing, complementing, accepting, and constituting help create novel characters, a meta-communicative “game” for the players to engage in, and most obvious, creates dialogue on stage for the livelihood of the performance. This style of dialogue is productive creatively. Ideally, no player’s idea goes lost or unsupported.

Players don’t establish play on their own, it is dependent on the other player. Improvisers know this and will focus heavily on their scene partner. They must be attuning their play moves to each other synchronously, until they find common ground. They may come in knowing who they are, but not necessarily who they are to each other. Because of this, the important communicative aspect in scenes is listening, not talking.

“I check in with her a lot visually, like I really try and connect with her, with our eyes” Hannah.

“Vanessa does have a sharp sense of wit, but she is thoughtful about it. So, I know she is gonna come up with gems and I am almost just sitting there, like wait and see” - Hannah.
“I think everyone has their own that I like, different strengths. I think Ethan just makes big choices so he would know exactly what he’s going for. It’s easy” - Vanessa.

The data begins to show that the repeated cycles of creating relationships among the players have led to aggregate archetypes for each player. Players strive for more clarity and certainty in scenes, so they can then play with the direction of the scene with more control. It is no accident that they begin to recognize roles in themselves and in others as part of the sense-making process of group play development.

Me: “Where do you want to see Duck Republic improve?”

Vanessa: “. . . it’s a little of the following things: like more playful, like bolder, more clear characters. Like after your scenes, I don’t know tighter. Like all of the improv technical things.”

“I guess everybody is very self-aware of what they bring to the table and so nobody’s unsure of how to go for it or like what to do to help the team out . . . So I think everybody’s got a really good set of tools and they are aware of what they have and as soon as we figure out exactly how this tool leads to that tool connects to this tool creates this, I think we’re going to be golden” - Ethan.

The group has drawn the major boundaries in Act I, but seem to be filling in more of the details, and assigning roles. Perhaps communicating labels and organization promotes certainty, security, and trust within the group. All factors that empowered each player to posture ideas with confidence.

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“I did, I walked over and…” just as Hannah was about to give her tale of telling this guy off, her voice was immediately drowned by another.

“Group three!” John yelled, with a big smile on his face, glasses hugging tight to his head, and his whole body hunched over intently watching spontaneous creation. He rocks in his chair shifting his body with excitement toward the new pair. He soaks in the scene by voraciously consuming them with his eyes.

“Are you sure you like this haircut?” Andrew’s high pitched voice lilts with a feminine hip thrust to the right. He didn’t make his woman character into a caricature, but instead infused it with an honest feminine appeal, even through his wide, husky frame and black beard hugging his large protruding jaw line.
“Yeah it looks…” Robert struggled for words, and finally with defeat, “okay honestly, you have had better,” mimicked Robert with the feminine lilt, but all the while he retained his normal speaking voice.

“I knew it! It really sucks trying to find someone new. It is such a big risk. That’s why I never go to anyone but my hairdresser, Christine.” In this moment, Andrew’s gears were in full swing he was set in his character. The arms started to get involved, they swung naturally accentuating his posture. He put his hand out like a gentle traffic cop, spreading his fingers out wide, but letting the wrist go limp slightly. “She is the greatest. I have been going to her for 30 years, and I will never go anywhere, it’s all about loyalty. If she dies…”

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Now in communicating play, each group builds upon ideas from the other scenes, implementing a word or a concept into their own playful narratives. Suddenly, the collaboration has the transcended dyads into a form of play where all three groups of us are exchanging ideas with each other, without even directly addressing each other. The fun challenge of playing this game is trying to find ways to weave the narrative with the other ideas. The other groups play into each other’s stories, serving as an abundant well of creativity to draw upon. Adding to the excitement of this form of play is our uncertainty of what they will do next.

“. . . comfort level I think, I feel more relaxed, knowing what to expect from each person. And I think over the past two months or so that I adjusted my . . . lens, in terms of ‘what have I seen this person do? What do I know about this person’s dialogue? How do I roll with the punches?’ I suppose” – Robert.

“I feel like I know what I can expect from Steven, Vanessa, and Robert like again they’re really good at what they do, but I still haven’t learn to read them” - Ethan. Ethan seemed to have a frustrated tick while admitting he couldn’t quite “read” his teammates. For all the uncertainty welcomed within the games of scenes, relational uncertainty is adversarial to easy, fun, play, it seems from the interview data.

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“Group one!” John’s finger swung over to our side.

“Look, I think you are a great digger, but maybe John didn’t take you because you have been moonlighting for the natural history museum, you know how he feels about loyalty,” Alex said now with more closeness and familiarity between the characters. He kept
his ‘nice guy’ voice, but had a little more maturity this time around. His voice was a little more natural and less childish than before. His demeanor matched this energy, straightening up some and becoming more pronounced.

“Well maybe if he paid me more, I wouldn’t have to moonlight! This is so unfair, the ONE dig I don’t go on, and he finds Atlantis…” I said, adding a little more angry zeal to the character. As I said “ONE” my character swings his arm from the bottom pointing his index finger to the sky and stopping it in front of Alex’s face.

“Group two!” John chimed in again, this time yelling louder and chuckling a bit as he looked intently for the perfect moment to edit each interaction.

“…and that’s how we ended up dating. If it wasn’t for that broccoli soup, we would have never ended up going out, dancing by the moonlight and just connecting on such a deep level” Hannah said continuing her story from the original conversation, but now she told the story with a romantic disposition and a sense of sappy, lovey-dovey tone.

“Wow, Diane you are so lucky, I was going to use this for my husband and I, but do you want these tickets to that Atlantis resort, we were going to go but…” Vanessa added, with a little more depression in her voice. Her face became sullen and she bowed her head down.

“Group one!”

This time, I decided to implement my favorite aspect of the game which is the passage of time within a party where people are drinking: intoxication.

“…look man, we don’t need all those (hiccup) guys. We’ll find our own bones…” “Yeah! Who needs John anyway…?” I said slurring my words a bit and leaning on Alex for a little support. He leaned on me a little back, even pushed my shoulder in a way to say that we are guys goofing around.

“Group three!” John smiled ear to ear, he enjoyed every second and was perhaps one of the most enthusiastic coaches I had ever seen. This was apparent from this new vantage point.

“You know, my little Johnny goes to this great place we just found, and they can figure out almost any haircut when kids mess it up. Boy did his father really do a number…” Robert said in his manner that was both confident in being in front of people, but also in a
way that seemed like struggling to find the next word. He had this tick to push air through his nose as he created new ideas, like a steampunk era improv robot.

“Group two!”

“I know this seems quick, but we decided that if we have a boy we will name him…” Hannah said, as she added a little alcoholic looseness to her voice and demeanor as well. She was smitten and was in love with sharing her sappy love.

“Group one!” John lets out a loud, one-time “hah!”

“I WOULD NAME IT JOHNSUCKSASARUS.” John laughed again, punctuating this first abrupt, loud sentence. “That . . . would be (giggling) the best name for our new dinosaur . . . wait . . . wait. . .” I said fully overlaying the drunken trope to the interaction. Alex matched my behavior and began patting me on the back and embodied more loose movement as well, swaying back and forth and leaning on me like we were in a boat in rough seas.

“Group three!” John was literally on the edge of his seat.

“Did you try just naming your haircut? Call it the ‘avant-garde bohemian bang look’, people love bohemian…” Robert added in again, keeping his composure and energy down more so than the other two groups.

“2!” We were changing so quickly, John needed a shorthand command.

“All of our walls will be earthy and bohemian palette” Hannah continued spreading her arms and hands above and in front of her as if she was imaging the sprawling walls of her imaginary home right in front of their eyes.

“1!”

“And we will let EVERYONE in EXCEPT JOHN. EVEN THE EARTHY AND BOHEMIAN HIPPIES!” I yelled, now much louder than any other voice in the group. My voice echoed a bit, and in this moment I snapped out of the drunken stupor and realized that I was in a room and I probably prompted someone nearby to think “what the hell is going on in there?”

“I love you man.” Alex replied in a very ‘brotherly love’ sort of way.

“You are my bessfriend” I slurred out, half closing my eyes, now much quieter.

“2!”
“You have the perfect life. . .(crying) I just love you and everything you do. Help me be like…” Vanessa said, as she raised her volume adding a lot of emotion to the scene. Her sad character was endearing when mixed with her meek, small disposition. Her sadness seemed more hopeless than if the boisterous Andrew were to be playing it.

“3!” John was calling the scenes so quickly, we could feel the game nearing the end.

“I honestly love it, I don’t know why I do now, but (finishing his cup) iz amazing. I want to be just like you…” Robert added pretending to be a quieter, messier drunk. He seemed to have caught on to thematic inebriation.

“SCENE!” called John while he laughed, clapped his hands, and scooted his chair forward in one-swoop motion.

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Looking back on John’s interaction, it is evident that he was also instrumental to constructing play. He set the initial rules and minimized the uncertainty where it may have impeded playing, by directing which dyad got the focus. He was just as much the author of the play as the players were. Just like an editor is vital to a film, John communicated in ways that helped time each scene, and intentionally picked certain groupings for certain reasons. He had a vision for the overarching scene at play, his scope was much larger than ours. His feedback of the scenes, by laughing or sounding excited while switching scenes, communicated support of our forms of play as well. I would feel a slight endorphin rush, if something I said produced a sudden burst of laughter, or when I thought of something that I thought the audience (John) would enjoy.

“I think they’re at a state now where they’re really comfortable . . . we’ve been building trust. I’ve been intentionally doing ‘roses and thorns’ and it’s just a way of them connecting on like a very real level, what’s going on in everyone’s life, and whether they’ve experienced it or not, like everyone can relate to that and it’s just something a building that rapport and building that level of trust. I feel that once they have that, they can allow themselves to be more vulnerable” - John.

“. . . I dropped the mindset, like I don’t want to step on anybody’s toes and it was kind of what John was talking about today, you just got to go for it. And not be afraid” – Ethan.

Although the game was led by John, it was truly co-constructed by everyone. One change in a move could inspire changes all around. By choosing to play the scene as my character becoming more and more intoxicated, all of the other groupings eventually
followed suit, complementing to the reality that time was passing at a cocktail party. Their actions are a form of support, not only for me as the player but for the details of the scene and the game. Everyone was listening, and taking those ideas for construction of their own. Ideas were up for grabs and were thrown all around. That is part of what is so intimidating about playing with an entirely new group, a new member can impact the entire set greatly if they have a strong enough presence. The construction of play mandates that change is welcomed and celebrated.

“...I think the level of playfulness might be even more in practice because once you again find the game or go make the bold choice and everything then you have more room to play” - Vanessa.

We all started laughing immediately snapping out of our drunken stupor and giggling at the scenes we created. This immediate release of giggles was a consistent phenomenon observed in improv. It was like the real player was inside the body just watching the scenes from within saving all of the laughter until it boiled to the surface like an active volcano. It erupted with the command of “scene!”

It was good to make things up again. There was something so freeing about being someone else and staying true to a whole new internal viewpoint. The feelings were also met with some insecurity as well. Was the drunken escalation too much? No one else was really yelling like that. Did I affect the groups’ improv too much? These feelings swirled as I returned to my normal observation stance, back in the seat a chair away from John.

“Circle up” John said, and the group grabbed chairs from the room making a circle around John.

The group began to debrief the exercise, talking about what felt good and what was difficult. They listened to John’s feedback about what this exercise did and how it applied to their scenes. They all listened intently and then chimed in after he was done.

Vanessa chimed and said, “it was hard to listen while also miming a conversation and not looking at the other players.”

Hannah added “I liked this game because it was a good way to learn how to use what was one stage for another scene.”
As the group finished practice, talking about the last exercise and details for the show coming in a few hours, I couldn’t shake the feeling of a crossed boundary. It wasn’t that I didn’t like the group, but the play dynamic just didn’t belong to me. I didn’t help construct it and experience it. Through each practice and show, I had come to realize, another brick was put into the wall. The first couple of shows and practices may have seemed like random sampling, but after many practices and many shows, a pattern emerged from the chaos. I hadn’t contributed to any of the pattern, meaning I was trying to fit in to something that I wasn’t sure about, which affected the experience of the player afterward. Which in my case, led to the feeling of “did I do this right? Did I at least not mess it up?”

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It felt good to improvise, but very strange to play with Duck Republic. From the very beginning it felt like a broken-in shoe at a thrift store that is your same shoe size. It fits, but just not quite exactly to your feet. The experience these players have had helps in constructing play with each other, in getting to know one another, and in becoming friends. The experience of knowing what was too much or too little and to what makes play work is about crafting play skills to fit the group, not just how the group can fit to certain skills. What accelerated this process was the time in the practice room, a space that welcomed experimentation and all that came with it. Through these sessions practicing, trying to improve and expand, the team forms a bond having seen them in such a vulnerable state, where the biggest risks are taken and the wackiest of ideas come out.

“We don’t have that luxury on stage, so I think that is why I need to adjust from person to person and kinda gauge what the energy is of each player during the practice. So that it looks a little smoother on stage.” – Robert.

“I used to hate practices because I was going for laughs and I couldn’t get them whereas now I like show up at practice and it’s the last thing I’m thinking of just because it’s a comforting zone and I know it’s going to happen anyway” - Ethan.

“I feel like I have gotten closer, faster with these people than I have with my other teams, even though with my other teams I am playing with friends. . .none of my other teams. . .haven’t done things so specifically to emotionally bond with each other as teammates” - Hannah.

“. . . I know Ethan wouldn’t care if I grabbed him anywhere. Just knowing that there is that freedom with him, like again I do try match energy, although if I have a really strong perspective, character, or status that I want to play within a scene, I know that I can do it, and that he will support me.” -Hannah.
“I think they’re at a state now where they’re really comfortable, because if you think about it, in other words, you’ll really be playful and to do what they do is they have to have a level of trust, and over the last few months, we’ve been building trust” – John.

Players began to manage the uncertainty of constructing play by not only observing and understanding the patterns and roles of other players, but also they also configured roles for themselves as well. This vignette, through contrast, reveals the bond the group had formed through their comfortability juxtaposed with my uncomfortability. Secondly, as I had reflected earlier, my insecurity is a good representation of the beginning steps in this phase of constructing play and communicating support. Players, like myself, all took chances by volunteering our own ideas with the courage that can grow from a place of trust and support. How these ideas are received are still a mystery in this stage, the roles and norms are still being formed. Players know what is off limits, but what is liked and appreciated by the other players is still being discovered. Some members became closer with others quickly and needed more time with others.

“There are certain players that I can instantly click with and we can create scenes together, because I think we’re on more similar frequencies. But there are one or two that I have to like sit down and deconstruct it; figure out what it is and, again, fine tune the way I respond to that person. So it is more cohesive” – Robert.

“it’s easier for me to recognize the game with Hannah and with Andrew because I have a reading, of who they are and what they’re going to do” – Ethan.

“I find it easy with Alex because Alex is a very, like, his facial expressions usually say a lot so I can just like react off of him” - Vanessa.

Choices in this stage are more pronounced, which although seems selfish or competitive, is actually another form of support within the improvisational context. There is an imperative while performing; the audience is attending to be entertained. Therefore, major ideas are seen not as a competing idea, but a constructive one that is a relief to other players without the idea. The group converges their effort for one common goal. The five other players and I were all attempting to essentially ‘fill the air’ and for our dialogues to have some sort of progression. John, the coach, quite literally places the imperative on each player as he points at them. By making quick decisions that are bold take the pressure away from the remaining people. However, there must be a balance. Too much individual fulfillment
can lead to a silencing of other voices, taking away from the collaborative element of play. This was the main concern in my reflections after playing with the group.

“What bothers me on stage is when like I can just have a show where you feel like you and your teammates aren’t clicking because that means we’re not having fun on stage together like we may be trying to have individual but we need to be having the group fun. . .” – Ethan.

“. . . during the show I’m more focused on other people . . . I’m more focused on the scene, more focused on—it’s less of I think it will be good for me to try this and it’s more of I just want to maybe play. I want to support what does this scene mean?” – Vanessa.

With more time and observation of each other, the players reported feeling like they were beginning to “read” each other. Some described it as getting “energies in sync.”

“A common thread . . . is checking in. Because I know that if I don’t stay connected to either one of them, whatever is happening can derail really fast” - Hannah.

“We’re recognizing the game like we’re tapping it out. I’m not necessarily like anything we do, it’s just a feeling. I have to think about it more to describe because it’s like a certain energy that’s on stage and you can just tell like everybody’s having fun” – Ethan.

“The thing that makes play in any context of play so fun is when you feel like you are tapped into the other people that you are playing with. You almost feel like your energies are in sync” - Hannah.

“. . . I don’t know, we were checked in. We were on board. It felt like we were so connected. And I think that I goes back to connection because the exercises was to like lovingly happily, say yes to one another. I think it made us connect all the more quickly in the scene. It was just so fun” - Hannah.

Within this connection players trust each other completely and have found a pattern together that they both can match. This can lead to situations where more certainty is felt in addition to a slight predictability of the other player. Players seek to make this connection so that they can begin to engage in the most productive and creative state of play. They would like to predict the moves of the player, but in this stage the connection is mostly facilitating a bond between players. They understand that they won’t be judged or ridiculed for anything they say, so they begin sharing more authentic or sincere characters or versions of themselves.

Me: “‘If you’re going to use another word or sentence to describe reading a person how would you do that?’

Ethan: “Predicting.”
CHAPTER 5

“WE’RE ALL TELLING THE STORY TOGETHER”

One night, my current group, We Krooked Swedes, had one of our first shows together in a coffee house with two other teams. Just 30 minutes prior, we were doing mock shows in the parking lot across the street, hoping to get all of the lesser ideas out for more creative and productive ones. We got a lot of the lesser ideas out. As we headed toward the coffee shop I didn’t feel great about putting on a good show, but I knew this show would be low-key considering its guerilla style of venue and advertising. “There is only going to be like two people here anyway. . .” I thought. My body loosened up in the cool night air, I felt like whether we pulled off an amazing show or fell flat on our faces, it didn’t really matter, and there weren’t many consequences.

As we entered the coffee shop, I was pleasantly surprised at the pure crowdedness of the crowd. In this small overflow room, every foldout chair was taken, and the “stage” was merely a small rectangle of space where people weren’t sitting, to the left of the entrance. I looked around standing still at the entrance of the door. The energy was excited, people’s conversations melded into one larger muffling sound. The smell of tired coffee and day-old pastries snuck in through the wall and door leading into the lobby of the coffee shop. Our troupe was about to attempt, for the first time, a new form with a new team that had practice maybe a handful times before.

“Please welcome to the stage, we . . . Krooked . . . Swedes!!”

The beginning of the set was slow, quiet, and so nerve-wrecking. It takes a lot of composure to not start singing and dancing like a monkey desperate for positive audience reinforcement, especially when things are quiet. We had good pacing, and built a solid foundation for the scene. We could hang in that scene for a while, something that is harder said than done. Then, something wonderful happened. I stood to the left of the “stage,”
standing upright next to around 10 people huddled over watching me from a mere foot or two away. My other two partners, sat off to the right. The scene took place in a laundry mat where roommates were sorting out some issues in the household. My two scene partners were, by all accounts, gay with each other, but hiding their relationship and sexuality secret to me. Of course, the real me could spot this plot point, but my character was failing to realize the signals. The dialogue forced a point of recognition, they were about to spill the beans . . . or maybe, my character already knew about it, and was playing ignorant! Now, this may seem like a simple move that flows logically, but ten minutes into one improvised scene, thoughts like this are genius.

The part I remember most thought, is the feeling of this thought. That feeling that bring every improviser to the stage, even when no one is watching. The feeling of discovery. I didn’t have the thought before I began enacting it, they were two halves of the same initiative. The thought fired and before it turned into flame, the action happened. I was talking while thinking, creating the exhilaration of uncharted territory, one without fear or doubt, or even any other thoughts. Pure focus and presence was all that was felt. I was hearing my own words come out, I noticed, “wow this is actually really good!” My scene partners, being their brilliant selves, recognized what I was doing and supported the ideas further. We were no longer just aimlessly trying to stay afloat, we were creating art accidentally, and no one knew where it was going or when it would stop.

The third stage in the construction of support during the process of play involves a solid foundation of trust between players. Players not only know they will be supported, but they expect it. Enough practice, show, and hangout time has strengthened the bonds between players deep enough that begin to feel like they know what they can expect from their players. Players begin to enter the phase closest to absolute certainty between players.

ACT III

I walk through the practice room door to find them laughing. A joke was just told. The group is loose, they are standing near each other, all wearing smiles. They are making physical contact with each other more than I had seen them, patting each other on the back, playfully shoving of the arms, and leaning next to each other. This immediately strikes me. When I enter they are half-heartedly clapping in unison finishing a warm-up game, they are
off beat, and the circle they are standing in is loose and is barely holding together. Alex peels out of the circle and grabs his phone, Hannah looks to Andrew and starts a conversation about the couple of hours they had as a group before this. And everyone else goes to their respective things and gets situated before the show starts in the next few minutes.

“. . . I was freaking out the whole time, because time was running out, and I couldn’t remember where we put that key!” Hannah says as she is tucking her things under a chair before the show starts. Andrew laughs with his head up and walks past me into the lobby in between the back door to the stage and the practice room.

They all laugh and recount the day’s activities. This Saturday they had come from a group team activity, an “escape room” where they all had to pool together their ideas to unlock puzzles under the pressure of a time limit. Inside jokes are exchanged. Overall, more smiles are displayed on average.

“I think those are important though in just that you have—when your team has memories together outside of improv and then just life experience, just hanging out as a group like hanging out with the people, your teammates . . . I don’t think it necessarily helped, like made our show the way it was tonight. But I mean, I’m sure it’s beneficial for what’s to come for the team let’s say” – Andrew.

Everyone engages in their own exchanges creating a cacophony of boisterous storytelling and random thoughts. I stand around the room observing how close they have all gotten to each other in such a short time. They all mill about this small space, but seemed to be entertained constantly either talking to each other or looking around the room, waiting for the show to start. When they first met, they were quiet and still. Now, they are assuming and flowy in their movements and interactions with each other.

“Where’s John?” I ask. It was not like John to not be there to coach up his team before they went out.

“He can’t make it tonight remember?” Ethan replies.

Ah...this could explain the lackadaisical nature of the group. They all start to file past me standing by the doorway, into the room that connects the practice area to the stage. This small room is where every team gets loose for their performance. Duck Republic is no different, they mill around in this makeshift lobby, joking and having meaningless light conversation. They seem to conversing like crowds keeping the beach ball in the air at a concert. They sprinkle in energy by talking to each other. The engagement alone conjures a
gentle smile back and the conversation brings some volume to fill the space, which is more noticeable now that the team has quieted down.

Each take a different approach to getting ready for the show. Ethan bounces around while talking with the others, Alex goes on his phone, which he seems to do to kill time. Robert walks around with some nervous energy, his body stiff in the torso, and he wrings his hands. Hannah engages with conversation with everybody engaging with each one, she is smiling, excited for this moment inserting characters’ voices in her banter. Andrew is sitting, shifting attention between fellow players and his phone on a foldout chair against the wall the right wall, caddy-corner to the stage door. I am standing on the wall separating the theater from this back stage area, just to the right of the door. Behind me is a wall of plywood cubbies with blue painter’s tape on the inside of many of them with a name written in Sharpie in all caps, for the house team players. Vanessa talks to Hannah and engages with me about her upcoming move to a new city.

“You excited to move?” I ask her craning my neck down toward her small stature.

“Yeah, I have heard great things about San Francisco,” she replies gently nodding her head and speaking lightly. The room grew quiet as the music from the stage area diminished, each of the players looked up at the 27” monitor showing the live stream of the stage. The lights are down, signaling the beginning of the next block.

They huddled together and started to quickly tap each other’s shoulders, and briefly hug to let each player that they “got your back”. Unlike the first show, when the team hesitantly smiled when first wishing each other well, this show feels like good friends, but different in the sense that they are on the same team. They have a shared goal in mind, similar to family, but again still different. The warm, light embraces make everyone excited as the last people hug quickly.

The announcer’s voice carries from the stage through the stage door. “Welcome to tonight’s block of shows! I am your host. . .”

They then all put their arms over each other and formed a huddle, doing the exercise where they count aloud up to 21 as a group, with their eyes closed, each feeling out the time when to say the next number; an exercise to get on the same ‘wavelength,’ practice patience, as well as ‘giving and taking’. Vanessa takes John’s role and begins tiptoeing around the huddle, whispering coach-speak to the team, things like ‘remember to connect with each
other, have fun,” sincerely trying to help, but cracking a smile as she and the rest of the team realizes the humor of the juxtaposition of Vanessa’s version of coach and John’s. The difference between John’s smooth, inspirational whisper, and Vanessa’s higher pitched, Eastern European whisper was comical.

John’s absence has opened up an opportunity for the group to be communicate a more playful group dynamic. They seem looser, when they laugh, they laugh harder. This is interesting to pay attention to the nature of the group’s play without their usual guiding force. Vanessa stepping in to initiate a moment of focus in the play, is no accident. Someone needs to take charge before and after the show, to set the tone and the intention of the play session. Without that stable figure, the group seems a bit more chaotic in its play. The group played together through an activity for a few hours before the show. The combination of that play without John and the bonding it constructed, the group constructs a more childish form of play for this show.

“It’s funny, we were doing the count to 21 thing and we’re like who’s going to whisper encouraging stuff to us? And then Vanessa did it, and just Vanessa being her timid self it was just hilarious” - Andrew.

“We’re all connected, and we’re all like counting you know, like 1 to 21. So I think that is a sense of it’s like okay checking in, no worries that you can like get caught up in, so I think we are more playful that way” - Vanessa.

The group’s play was loose and fun. Vanessa’s choice in role was in line with this. Her choice to play John, and to do so in the awkwardly-facetious manner she did, was another piece that serve to constitute this aloof style of play. Other improvisers may have tried to reign it in and be more focused and serious right before a show, but Vanessa’s move here really subverts any efforts like that. From the observation, the group seemed to be completely happy with their lack of seriousness. Communication between the group was collectively aloof and insincere, a state completely supported by each member at some point with their own contribution. Everyone was happy just to be on the same page, I think.

“This show was more of just like it was basically fucking around, but it was fun though. There was nothing wrong with that . . . sets like tonight are more playful” - Andrew.

“I think what I enjoy is like, yeah, the easiness and being in the moment because you don’t need to think as much” - Vanessa.
The music infiltrates the backroom from the stage. Slight vibrations invade my
clothes. This cue for the current performers that their set has ended. I look past the huddle to
the left at the monitor, the host swings his arm up motioning for the next group to come on
stage. The blue door to the stage rushes open and improvisers from the previous set flood
into the backroom, music still blaring from the cut out cue. They are loudly recounting their
set, like they just finished an exciting rollercoaster ride, collectively remembering the rises
and exciting drops. Duck Republic lines up ready to run on stage. Music and laughs swirl
around. The aroma of taters tots and French fries waft in. I stand next to the door, giving the
team high-fives, I have become a bit of their cheerleader at this point.

The door to the stage remains open, the team looks into the theater ahead, focused
and relaxed. The announcer ends his interlude with “. . . and now, DUCK REPUBLIC!!” In
that moment, “Danger Zone” by Kenny Loggins blares through the speakers and the team
runs on to the blue lit stage, facing silhouettes ready for another half hour of made up
entertainment.

“We are Duck Republic, and we need a word of a country you have always wanted to
go to” Ethan says to the audience standing in front of the back line of the rest of the
ensemble.

“Portugal!” a silhouette shouts out.

“Portugal, thank you” Ethan replies. The rest of team mumbles “Portugal . . .
Portugal. . .” under their breathe as they search for their place on the stage. A spot and a pose
that strikes them. Duck Republic utilizes a form where each player assumes a role in a statue-
esque manner, and each player takes a turn at using the given word to inspire some lines that
would come from the character. The give and take flows from one player to the next, often
without looking at each other.

Hannah, to the right of the lineup begins with a “valley girl” accent, her wrist bent,
and her hip jutted out toward the opposite direction. She puts forth her line of dialogue
inspired by the suggestion of “Portugal”.

“Oh my god, I told my parents I wanted a gap year, and they sent me to Portugal. It’s
cool and stuff, but I really wanted France, ugh . . . it’s just the worst you know? Parents who
don’t listen—“
“Big storm is comin’” Ethan interjects, now asserting his character’s point of view, inspired by “Portugal”. He commands center stage, with a proud chest and two hands grabbing to ends of a three-foot wide ship’s wheel. His voice is deep and stoic. “We have to get the traps up before we lose them all—“

“Really?” Vanessa says incredulously. Standing to right of Ethan and to the left of Hannah, she inches forward to make her character seen and known by the audience. “Really, you want to fight here in front of all these people? Really?” Her voice getting more aggressive, like she had just heard conflicting words from an imaginary scene partner. The audience laughs a little with each first line, but the aggressive, lasting look Vanessa gives to the empty space in front of her causes a man to guffaw loudly, alone.

“I am sorry, I thought it was part of Spain” Alex says with embarrassment and guilt in his voice. The audience erupts in laughter. Through the laugh break, Alex increases his character’s sense of shame, hunching his shoulders and looking defensive in his face; a mixture of “I know I did wrong” and “this is sort of your fault too.”

A voice creeps in front the very left of stage. Andrew is curled up in a fetal position, shifting his eyes to either side without turning his head. He gently rocks back and forth, quickly and nervously. “If I just I hide here for a long time, they won’t find me and arrest me for being a Nazi.” This hits right to the core of some of the audience members, as shown through their loud hyena laughs that seem to come from surprise and shock value. “Just be patient” he says, as to comfort himself.

All characters have established their point of view, so they now continue solidifying their characters created on stage and let other characters chime in with their own points of view as well. They all flex their “give and take” muscles here, by saying enough to get a new piece of information added, but also restrain from taking up too much ‘air time’ and allowing other members to develop their thoughts as well. The benefits of this are two-fold: 1) more depth characters = more relationships and complex motivations that are inherent in everyday life, and 2) more material for the other players, not speaking, to grab for future scenes.

Vanessa picks up like there was no break in her conversation at all, “Really? You brought me on this trip to test our relationship? Really?” Her voice pauses for small slight dramatic breaths that create a sense of hurt in her voice.
“. . . and it’s just like, you know, like it’s not even like the Portugal thing. Nobody listens to me and I don’t know why, I have a lot of thoughts, I have things to say.” Hannah chimes in, now loosening up slightly on the “valley girl” layer of accent for a more real character expressing a want. Her arm still resting on the jutted hip, looking authentic in her want to be heard, but still lacking a sense of urgency of energy in her body.

“I am so glad the world has forgotten we started slavery,” Ethan declares, looking stoically with squinted eyes into the imaginary nautical horizon, hands being moved up and down as the wheel jostles back and forth over the center. The audience erupts again. Through the laughter, Alex continues, “I am sorry I don’t ask questions! I always think it’s going to turn out okay,” flinging his hands up, trying to defend his position and mistake.

“I can survive on the spiders and such, and just, you know, wait for everyone else to die and then I can live a normal life,” Andrew says, as if he is trying to convince himself of a happy ending. He stares at the ground as he talks, his voice sounding calm and light, despite his imaginary circumstances.

“No, babe, don’t look away. No, no, no just look at my eyes, we can—“Vanessa says quietly shifting her position from the one in control to the one losing it. Her voice is soft and longing, pleading for her imaginary partner to reconnect. Before she finishes her soft statement, she is interrupted.

“YOU STUPID DECKHAND, JUST LOOK WHERE WE’RE GOING!” Ethan screams, head crane downward as if he is yelling at a shipmate on the deck below.

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This sudden shift in play is an instance where a player is “stealing the focus”, as they say in the improv community. It is interesting to note when players simply take the play focus that is given to them and when players playfully steal the focus, where two different players essentially take from the same offering, one overpowering the other. In this instance, Ethan plays in a way that aggressively communicates his character’s point of view. In this instance, each player talks without regard to each other, so it is not as destructive, but within a scene, a competition of ideas, or in a sense play, contributes to a stifling of ideas.

“. . . then after a while, they will become like so awkward, and then it just becomes where they’re, that they just say, ‘fuck other rules, I know it and then at
that point, it becomes very freeing. . . they don’t even think about improv, like they just do it” - John.

“. . . I like writing so I think that’s where it kind of stems from. Where it’s like it should go this way, but it’s also fun to be reminded like, ‘No, it’s an ensemble. We’re all telling the story together,’ so it’s fun like that” - Andrew. In this stage, and in this moment specifically, players are beginning to bend the rules of the game and take chances on impulses that are instinctively theirs. With more security in their own voices, players can most acutely posture ideas and characters that serve as very original and creative expressions for the other players to work with.

“I think a good show is the one where we are playful and things flow. Like there’s a sense that it’s easy,” - Vanessa.

“How was I supposed to know that that was illegal?” Alex asks, again with a sound of defensiveness in his voice.

“How was I supposed to know that we would lose?” Andrew, the hiding Nazi asks in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, looking at the audience.

“How was I supposed to know that our relationship was in trouble?” Vanessa asks with a quiver and sadness to her voice.

“How was I supposed to know that we ran ashore?” Ethan says as the pompous captain, now taking his hands off the large ship wheel.

“How was I supposed to know that I am supposed to try at life?” Hannah says as the entitled “valley girl”, still holding onto the attitude within her stance, the question only pronounces the sense of entitlement evident in her lazy speaking manner, and least-effort-as-possible stance.

The audience laughs and the players drop their characters and scramble in all directions off stage. As the players leave the audience claps. The preamble to the show’s format has passed. An array of scenes begins based on the character vignettes shared between the players.

The introduction to the Duck Republic show is unique to them. The team liked the opening because they all wanted to play with more narrative-type scene work, and with so
many diverse characters already established, they could more easily play off of one story line. The intro also does not put a lot of pressure on one character to play it out a certain way, as anyone can jump in whenever and however they would like to play it. This style of intro also establishes a sort of rhythm of play among the players, with each of them giving and taking the focus of the play on stage. Usually, the first scene plays out with a strong direction because of the moves already set in motion at the beginning.

“The style of show that they do is very exploratory. It’s a lot of storytelling. And this is the cool thing and the beauty about it is that it organically formed . . . We came to it by saying ‘alright, what do you guys like? What don’t you guys like? Let’s experiment.’ And then it became organically, it became them” - John.

“Everything was just kind of clicking . . . we’ve just been feeding off each other. I think we’re getting to the point where we all kind of know each other” - Ethan.

The sense of ownership comes with clear understanding of the group play dynamic. Where players might have been more concerned with understanding each other on an individual basis, they are now making sense of the play as a whole. Their individual roles add up to a larger brand of play. Their form of improvisational show is a reflection of this aspect.

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The stage is empty for a moment, and then Andrew gets back on stage pulling a chair from upstage toward the middle, and plops down. Hannah walks on from the other side. She is hunched over like there is a low ceiling. She starts out with a German accent.

“So vait. . . you are telling me you have been hiding here for. . .how many years?”

“Uh . . . forty” the audience erupts in laughter. Andrew says this matter-of-fact-ly, with no trace of a German accent. “. . . And I know it’s ironic that I am in an attic . . . I know. It’s just, I would really appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone.”

“The thing is . . . people are looking for you back home, so . . . I am really impressed you lost your accent,” Hannah explains still standing to the right of Andrew sitting on the chair, center stage. As Hannah finishes her line, Ethan sneaks around the back of the stage cloaked by the rods and curtains that make up the little set design that is given to the improvisers. In the middle of the structure is a black door, often used to introduce new characters or serves an entrance to an imaginary house. The audience hears a knock at the door.
“Just a bookshelf, nothing behind it,” says Ethan out-of-view, in a German accent. Another laugh from the audience, I even chuckled at this part.

“You are not supposed to be here?” asks Hannah, while tensing her body, realizing the levity of the situation.

“No! No one is supposed to know where I am!” Andrew replies in a hushed exclamation.

“Why did you ask me to come visit you?” Hannah asks, vocalizing a high squeak when she said the word “visit.”

“I miss you! You are my wife!” Andrew replies fervently. The audience responds with a quick burst of laughter, some people clap out of joy.

Hannah begins to sink into her part of this newly created relationship, becoming more dramatic and thickening the story line. She looks off into the audience pacing forward. “I was doing really well. I have a whole ‘nother husband—“ just then, she realizes what she said, but like many improvisers she sticks with what was said and justifies by repeating the statement with more confidence, “I have a whole ‘nother husband,” the audience laughs with Hannah in this moment, realizing the spontaneous nature of the scene. “. . . I have children.”

“Really” Andrew says slumping in his seat, head drooping toward the floor.

“You left.”

“Well, you were supposed to wait for me,” Andrew replies in his similar matter-of-fact tone and demeanor. He acts as if this is conversation one has in everyday life.

“Okay, that was not implicitly written down in our marriage agreement,” Hannah, still keeping the accent, swallows the “r” in “agreement”.

“You have to be specific when you write down your, your vows?”

“I was, were you not? I wrote in there, ‘If my Wilfred goes away for more zen two years, than I can dissolve marriage and move on,” Hannah says confidently penning the statement in the air as she recounts her vows.

“The vows were so long, I kinda like…”

“You did nod out a little bit, I thought it was cute how you—“ Hannah makes this cooing sound twice while doing this quick shiver, like the memory is so cute it necessitates a physical manifestation, “You would snore through the vows, I thought it was so cute. I miss your snores.”
“I miss you,” Andrew says carrying the “you” a bit longer to vocalize a matching accent. He stands up and reaches for her hands.

“Oh it’s coming back! Oh your accent is coming back!” Hannah exclaims clapping her hands together in dainty excitement.

“Oh, kid me though . . . talking to someone from the Old Country . . .” the rest of his remark his drowned out by the audience laughter. There was only a slight response to Hannah pointing out the inconsistent accent, but a great laughter in its justification. Ethan and Vanessa run across stage to punctuate the scene on a high note.

Alex and Robert make a scene where they accidently end up in Portugal instead of Spain. As Ethan and Vanessa switch out, Ethan taps her on the shoulder and gives her a head nod while still cracking up, as a way to acknowledge “good moves.” These short scenes derived from the opening character monologues begin to look like interludes for the “Nazi hiding in the attic” scene.

Through the claps of the last scene, Hannah and Andrew walk on to stage and grab two chairs and bring them toward the front of the stage. They sit to the right of the door, leaving it available for use in case any other characters come in. They outstretch their legs and lean back. Andrew balls his fists and contracts his arms toward his chest, to give the impression of holding a blanket over the both of them in bed.

“Vell, we are back here again,” Hannah says in her character’s German accent.

“Yeah” Andrew replies letting out a breath, as if it were repeated a practiced pattern.

“You know, I thought I would miss your snores. But I didn’t,” she says as she looks at Andrew.

“You didn’t” Andrew replies arching his eyebrows toward the center, conveying vulnerability.

“I thought I did. I thought I missed the snores, but hearing them . . . Sorry for waking you up by the way—“

“Oh that’s okay,” Andrew replies cheerfully, he smiles bigger as he says “it’s nice to have company up here” a few audience members laugh.

Hannah laughs but tries to keep her composure, “Forty years is a long time to be alone,” she says as she holds in laughter with each word.

“Yeah. . .”
“You have developed a sort of chainsaw snoring thing going on.” Hannah says while still stifling her laughter.

“Well you never were there to always correct me, I suppose,” Andrew says turning his head away from her, speaking longing about lost time.

Ethan bursts through the stage door. “Mother! I heard strange snores!” He gasps interrupting the loud, stereotypic German accent he has adopted to play Hannah’s son. “Who is this man in our attic I have never seen before?!?” Hannah immediately stands up, while Andrew still holding on the blanket sits in the middle between the accusatory Ethan that barged in, and Hannah standing to the right of center on stage. Some laughter comes from isolated voices, energy seems to have been injected to the theater.

“Gustav,” Hannah says in an embarrassed hushed, motherly tone, “I told you to stay down stairs.”

“I could not bear it mother! I heard noises coming from up here.” Ethan replies in his high-pitched ascending, German accent.

Andrew: “There was a scene where I was in the bed with Hannah and the kids come in. It’s awkward because you’re basically naked on stage. You’re not saying anything. You’re just listening.”

Me: Does that make you feel more playful or less playful do you think when you feel vulnerable like that?

Andrew: I guess it makes me a little less playful. But again, I think it’s definitely needed though. Because it is all about like trying to get into the moment. I was really, like off guard when they came in, because I thought Ethan was coming in as the other husband, and then he came in as a kid.

“I had to make eye contact with him. That I had to emotionally open up to him, and he had to do the same for me . . . you don’t have the opportunity to have your guard up” - Hannah.

Hannah, frazzled for a moment, finally gets out, “I told Gustav it was Gustav and Papa time, you go back to be with Papa,” Hannah’s accent morphs into a stereotypical Chinese accent for this sentence. At the first “papa” Ethan begins to crack a smile, making it even more to swallow at the second mention of this endearing term.

“Papa is very . . . nervous about what is going on up here too” as he lets out “nervous” his smile is fully on display, now laughing slightly. The audience seems to laugh as one of the players begins to. What is funny is recognized by all people in the theater, even on stage.
“Did Papa send you?” Hannah asks after she laughs at the dialogue before it. It is hard to tell what they think is funny, the spontaneous ridiculous details of the story, or the accents used to tell it. Either way both players take turns holding it together to get a line out, and laughing slightly through the shell of the character listening to the response. They continue going back and forth. Hannah on one side of Andrew, Ethan on the other, shifting his weight back and forth with the energy of the young son. Andrew holds his character not saying anything through this exchange, just watching the tennis match that he is in the middle of.

“Yes . . . in a vay” Ethan replies in a way that conveys a lie is being told.

Hannah scrunches her face, the audience laughs at the reaction. “In a vay?”

“In a vay!” Ethan exclaims again.

“Okay, in what way did Papa send you up here?” Hannah says, laughing at the end of each sentence. The other players watch on the sideline, laughing just as much as the audience. Normally, their postures would be leaning in to the stage, perhaps even having a foot up on it, ready to come in with a new scene, but they sit back and enjoy the scene as it is happening.

“He said, ‘I think something is going on with your—’” before Ethan finishes, Robert steps through the door to complete the sentence.

“—Mother. . . .” Robert matches the tone and volume of Ethan. Hannah rolls her eyes and sighs as if to connote a controlling relationship between husband and wife.

Within a second of Robert’s entrance, Ethan exclaims, “it’s my vittle seester!” Some young women in the front row bend over laughing.

I never did ask Robert about this, and too much time has passed for him to recall a specific moment in a specific scene, but I am pretty sure he was coming into the scene as the father. The timing of his entrance, and the reaction that Hannah had connoted that there was a romantic relationship between them. Here, however, we see the collaborative aspect of improv. Robert didn’t have much of a chance to name his own character before Ethan did it for him. In order for the scene to press on smoothly, Robert must accept and now justify his previous behavior and attune his future behavior in this role. Roles can be created by a player, or for a player, what is important is that he/she steps into the role with confidence.
“. . . It reminds me a lot of my favorite improv group, and how they just make each other laugh and everything. I think that makes a good group, a group where you’re just like fucking with each other” – Andrew.

“People supported not only my good choices but people even supported my bad choices,” Hannah.

Scenes are now communicatively constructing their own uncertainty, posing challenges for one player or the other. The uncertainty of not knowing anything about the scene gradually fades with more information, but a new, constructed uncertainty is forged by the decisions of either player that move the scene in a new direction. One player becomes the leader, and the other must blindly follow. Not just follow, however, but confidently encourage and even try to lead themselves into the unknown. Both players maintain this state of play by enthusiastically supporting any and all ideas and creating complications and extensions on said ideas communicatively. The back-and-forth of creative, collaborative, communication becomes a game and inspires a friendly competition of knocking each other off balance within the scene.

“I think that’s the fun of improv, because then you have to be like, ‘oh shit, my preconceived notions were totally not valid, so I have to go along with what’s happening” - Andrew.

“Katina, come over here,” Hannah says in a loving motherly tone, extending her arm and waving toward her. Some audience members laugh as they repeat the newest German name made up on the spot. “Katina . . . did papa send you up here too?”

“Yes mama!” Robert replies in an even more inauthentic German accent.

“Why did he send you?” Hannah asks.

“He is very nervous, very nervous up here, mama,” Robert says this while his accent transforms into a stereotypical Norwegian accent. The audience laughs at certain words that pronounce the ridiculousness of his accent. A woman lets out a high shrill like the air is being twisted out of her at the last “mama” from Robert.

Hannah turns to Andrew to explain, and says quietly to him, “I told you I got married and had more kids, well, um—“ Hannah struggles to find the right words, because she has now created an unexpected plot point. As her eyes scan to create a justification, Ethan interjects.
“More kids?! I am not zee oldest?! Vat is thees? My inheritance Mama!” Ethan exclaims smiling from ear to ear as he seems to be enjoying continuing Hannah’s mistake. He seizes center stage as he yells. The audience laughs with him as they see this exchange for creative control in the scene.

“Oh, sweet Gustav. I have always told you that you were my oldest baby and it is not true.” Hannah says in a comforting way, warmly smiling at the ignorance of her pretend-son.

“You have lied to me zis whole time!” Ethan says with sadness in his German yelling.

“Well there was—“

“WE SPLIT KINDER EGGS MOTHER!” Ethan exclaims. With each outburst the audience laughs. Hannah is laughing trying to gather herself for the next line.

“We do split—“she begins to laugh when Andrew finally chimes in.

“Gustav, Gustav right?” Andrew says as he stands and begins to approach Ethan.

“I still do not know you sir! Do not talk to me!” The audience is now laughing with each beat. It seems that whatever Ethan says in his high-pitched German accent, seems to be the trigger for laughter.

Robert, as the little sister Katina chimes in, “We will keel you!” Hannah immediate goes over to calm her children to diffuse the situation, she hushes Robert and with arms out gives a motion to steady them. She turns back to Andrew.

Andrew tries to get back to what he wanted to say, “Look, look—“

Hannah interrupts and then gives a quick introduction between Wilhelm and the kids. She motions to Wilhelm for the kids and the kids for Wilhelm. The formality is slight and quick, but it mediates the commotion of ideas being tossed from both sides.

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Hannah’s mediating role in this instance becomes apparent in reflection. This role is important as it balances the energy of the scene so that it does not build too quickly and with louder and louder voices. It also gets everyone on the same page. Sometimes a player can ask questions like “what is going on here?” to make it clear for themselves and for the audience. When everyone knows what is going on and what characters are who, and can listen to each other, play is likely to be fostered. All players have to know what game they are playing to know what to play.
“. . . Ethan and I will speak up a lot and really voice our opinions and then the others, you know, Andrew, Vanessa, Alex, and Robert are all like quiet and like their gonna, they will respond and they will speak their voice, but they take a beat . . . I don’t want anyone to ever feel like they don’t have an opportunity to state their piece . . . I actually want people to say their part” - Hannah.

Me: “. . .so in improv, like, you may agree with this as well but, once it’s clear what the game is going on then it’s very easy to play right?”

Vanessa: “Yes.”

The players are already well within this scene, so it is fair to say that this insurge of mediation is an instinctive maintenance strategy for play. Everyone must initially agree to the rules of the game to play, but as it changes, all players must still be aware of their bearings within the field of play. By communicatively tying up loose ends, Hannah ensures the narrative doesn’t begin inventing too quickly for the minds of improvisation. Too much creation without true acknowledgement of new ideas, can lead to convoluted scenes and an even more confused audience.

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“Vilhelm,” a woman from the audience laughs hysterically from the name and repeats it while chuckling, “what did you want to say to the kinder?” Hannah putting on her most warm and polite, motherly voice.

“Uh, well. . .” the audience begins to laugh at Andrew’s positioning within the scene, just him beginning to search for words arouses laughter from certain members of the audience, “don’t be so hard on your mother, you know? People make mistakes, and. . . .”

Ethan interjects again, “Until this time, I vas under the impression that I was the man of ze house while Papa was out fishing, so I am not quite ready to take orders from a random man!” He puffs his chest out and points his finger at him while doing so. His character is entitled and can’t be intimidated easily, however from his voice and demeanor toward his mother, we understand this character is still young.

“Okay, he is not random,” again Hannah assumes a much more relaxed character seemingly trying to calm the situation with her hands facing down as if she is literally stabilizing the energy of the scene. “There was a time before papa, and I was married to someone else, and his name is Wilhelm.” She puts her hand on Andrew’s back and rubs it fondly.
Ethan, looking down and shifting his eyes back and forth, as if he is cracking the case as he speaks, says, “Mama. . .was a person. . .before Papa?” looking up at Hannah as he reaches the end of his conclusion. Audience laughs, but now seem simply tired from the repeated laughing fits. Vanessa takes the opportunity to edit the scene there running on to the stage. The four players exit off quickly. The crowd claps like at the end of an act of a play; a sign of honor to improvisers. Many scenes get laughs, but many less get applause. Audiences typically applaud after longer scenes that have a narrative fidelity.

Robert takes the stage on the left side and immediately starts sweeping the floor. Andrew stands around and notices Robert.

“Oh don’t mind me, I am just going to be cleaning,” Robert says in a soft voice.

“Oh, yeah, go right ahead and clean. . .” Andrew says awkwardly shifting in place, unsure of his own wherewithal in this dyad.

“This attic always gets dirty,” Robert says with an ambiguously ethnic accent. Some audience members erupt realizing that this is now part three of the reoccurring bit with the Nazi hiding in the attic.

“Yeah. . .” Andrew takes a pause like he is working up the courage to say something. His eyes follow where Robert is cleaning, off to the very left of the stage. Robert doesn’t look back at him, but instead just routinely cleans. Andrew after a beat says, “So . . . you’re new.” A pocket of the audience erupts again. “You’re not the usual cleaning gentlemen.”

“No, no. Maria Luz, she got sick,” Robert says as he brushes his imaginary dusters over parts of the attic.

“Okay,” Andrew nods his head as if this is a tough pill to swallow; a new adjustment in his hideout.

“She no longer work, it’s me . . . this is my bucket” He grabs his imaginary bucket from the left side of the stage and places it more toward the center.

Andrew examines Robert and his work, he puts his finger to his mouth like he is working all of this out as they go along. “Hmm. . .How did you get in?” Immediately one or two people find this hilarious, the subtle tension between the characters, playing a very slow drawn out interaction. “There’s supposed to be a bookcase in front of. . .” audience interrupts with laughter, “in front of the entrance to. . . to the attic.”
“I was just exploring the house and I said, ‘Oh! Another room.’ So I come clean,” he moves and cleans another part of the attic, and with a sigh says, “The other room. . .” He proceeds to what my mind filled in as a sort of chest, he grabbed the lid about three feet off the ground.

“Don’t open that!” Andrew exclaims before he opens the chest. He laughs immediately after yelling the command as a way to soothe concerns, but the façade is comically transparent.

Robert pauses for a moment staring at Andrew and says, “Now you have my curiosity,” the audience erupts at this line.

“Ahh, there’s no need, no need to open that,” Andrew hurries over to the chest and places his hand on the top. “You can clean anything else in here, just don’t open that chest,” he says using his hand to display all of the other parts of the room he can clean, rotating his body with him. As he leaves the chest to give his line, Robert proceeds to open the chest.

Robert gasps.

This serves as a great example for the meta-communicative aspect of improv and play. Here Andrew tells Robert “not” to do something. I can recall an actual improvisational teacher telling me once, “if someone tells you not to do something, you do it. That’s what we all want to see.” As soon as Andrew, says “don’t go in that chest” the game of the scene becomes going into the chest. This progresses the action and now provides an opportunity for both parties to create the object that Andrew’s character did not want Robert’s character to see. There is a conversation between the two players using the statements and phrases of their characters as directives.

“I love giving gifts, like being told, ‘oh, and he has a crying baby.’ Like, I didn’t know it was a crying baby, let’s try this. I immediately hopped on board, said yes” – Hannah.

“. . . I forget what it was, but it just got me. And I’m sitting there like really hard not to laugh but I’m laughing and the audience sees what’s going on so they’re laughing even more and I’m like I’m trying to hold it in and you hear people in the audience like, ‘he’s not going to do it, he’s not going to do it, he’s not going to do it” - Ethan.

This segment represents another example of the willingness for players to let go of control and act in accordance to the direction of the other. The players of Duck Republic not
only accepted change caused by the other player, but they embraced it. I believe the underlying assumption is that “whatever I create by myself will be boring or too straightforward,” therefore sudden, unexpected turns create surprise and uncertainty that forces the player to become, or remain reactive. Perhaps play is more reactive than methodical.

“. . . I understand the mechanics behind it, but I can still be at awe that they can execute those mechanics so quickly and seamlessly.” – Robert.

“I just told you not to open that,” Andrew says disappointed dropping his arm that previously was held out to stop him.

Robert picks up the item in the box, his right arm bent holding this long item close to his body, and the left outstretched cradling the bottom. It would appear that Robert was holding a large rifle. He looks at it in his hand and then swings it around, landing on pointing it toward Andrew.

“Don’t point it at me!” Andrew exclaims, quickly jumping out of the line of fire. “Jesus!”

“It is the largest. . .” Robert looks down at the item again, “fish I have ever seen!” The audience erupts from the odd turn the scene took. Even Andrew is seen recalibrating his reaction towards the fish and his perspective on it.

This is another example of how one idea can be transformed into a completely different idea. Here Robert seemingly knew that Andrew would not be expecting a fish, but instead a gun by the way he was holding it and Andrew’s response to Robert pointing it at him. This could be a moment of teasing, in the sense that they are controlling the fate of the other player, because improvisers so consistently agree with what is in front of them. Players know that the other player will always commit to the scene. Why do players do this though? Isn’t the point to eventually merge at the point of certainty, when all players “find the game” and begin to play it? It must be pretty entertaining when a player creates the uncertainty themselves.

“I love being given weird and unexpected things to do . . . I love the opportunity to be like ‘I am gonna take a stab at that’” – Hannah.
“I think in those moments I try to react as the character. So, I feel like if someone comes in with an agenda, I want them to—you need to let them take the lead,” Andrew.

Communication within improv functions not as a courier of truth, but as a discoverer of it. Any information stated is now “known” in the realities of these characters. The more information stated, the more the characters discover the world they live in. That being said, it is hard to pin down whether play is constructed by the information communicated, or the manner in which it is communicated. Is play constructing content, or form?

Andrew waits another beat before he begins to try another line. He begins the line with a half a word in three different ways, but finally lands on, “Yes! You should take home the fish, and leave right now,” as a thinly veiled plan to remain in hiding.

“I knew it was you when I first saw you . . . man living alone here,” Robert begins a short monologue explaining the new fish narrative. He remains holding the large fish walking around the pretend-attic, looking around the room while talking. “Legend has it, the past forty years, man feed village with magic fish!” Robert’s voice inflects upward at the end in astonishment.

The audience laughs to this offering and probably because of Andrew’s reaction. He doesn’t look puzzled but more accepting of things he does not know what to do with yet. Cocking his head back and nodding in ambivalent agreement.

Finally, Andrew breaks his hesitant position, and exclaims, “Alright, its true!” The audience laughs and begins to clap as Hannah runs across the stage to ‘wipe’ the scene.

After the scene is swiped Hannah and Andrew enter the right side of the stage. Quickly Ethan comes on the left side and has a loud exposition.

“Okay, we have to find the last Nazi, he’s hiding in Portugal!” Ethan is holding a gun and looks side to side with his head tilted up. Robert mid-sentence follows him up and fills the role of the second soldier.

“That’s why I brought my backpack!” Robert says with the same amount of action-hero masculinity as Ethan had started with.

Separated by a mere 5 feet, Andrew very calmly starts talking softly, “If I just stay perfectly still in here, nobody will find me—“
“Wilhelm!” Hannah whisper shouts while standing straight up along the right edge of the stage. Andrew is sitting closer to the center but toward the back of the stage in a sitting fetal position. After she calls him, he looks directly at her. “You can see me?!” she whisper shouts again.

“Oh fuck, you can see me?” His calm demeanor falls away.

“Yes I can!” Hannah says continuing her whisper voice. She starts to panic stepping in place very quickly and flapping her hands up and down.

“That open window up there,” Ethan, on the left side of the stage points up and toward the other side of the stage, creating a viewpoint for the audience that now lets us imagine the right half of the stage as the higher attic. “I heard voices up there that sound slightly German, I bet they’re in there.” Ethan and Robert strongly march closer to center stage.

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In this moment, we see another instance of players being playful with each other. Moves like these, ones that poke holes in the suspended disbelief of the stage, meta-communicate a sort of teasing affect. One character begins to make life harder for the other. The control is in the hands of Ethan at the moment. This move also adds energy and direction to the scene. The contribution made what happened before it a plot point of a much larger vision; taking what was said previously and building upon it.

“I can play fine with the whole team but when I’m doing something with somebody who I’m able to read and predict that’s like ‘okay cool, now we’re killing the bad guys with an extra weapon that they can’t defeat’” – Ethan.

I believe these interactions are approaching the pinnacle of play. When the game and the rules are established, and players begin to play against each other a bit. Slight competitiveness to make each other laugh, or react to a newly created predicament is healthy in the construction of a deeper sense of play. Improvisers seem to compete to be the best supporter.

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Andrew gets up, and says, “You know what? I think I have to do the right thing.”

“No don’t do it!” Hannah whisper pleas.

“I have to do it. I have to do the right thing,” Andrew replies valiantly.
Ethan proceeds immediately after turning toward his soldier buddy, Robert, saying, “I am gonna throw a rock up there.” Ethan bends down and hurls it up to the pretend attic.

In this moment, Hannah whispers to Andrew, “I think I am falling back in love with you,” she crouches a while she says this, as if to say these words in this frantic moment was too unbearable to say standing straight up.

Andrew instinctively sets up the motion to time with his perspective, by saying, “What?” turning his head, and then ducking from the incoming rock suddenly yelling, and “Whoa!”

From the left frame, Ethan yells up, “Hey, we can here you up there! We are just looking for any Nazi’s you see ‘em?”

“No!” Hannah yells still cowering in the right edge of the stage.

Both Robert and Ethan begin to yell something, they both stop, and awkwardly pause. They look at each other, and finally Robert yells up, “Is there a magic fisherman, that feeds the village up there?”

Hannah immediately starts whisper confirming this with Andrew, she was unaware of this aspect to “Wilhem.” Meanwhile, Ethan the soldier approves of his soldier buddy’s tactics, saying, “That’s a good code. That’s a good code.”

Hannah looks to Andrew and whispers to him, “Are you also ze magic fisherman?”

Andrew, also keeping his voice down, explains, “Yes, I felt very bad about what I did back in the Nazi days, so—“

“Can you speak up?!” Ethan yells, “We can’t hear you down below!”

Andrew now fully standing up, and rotates more toward the audience and less toward Hannah on the right side of the stage. His voice projecting much more loudly and quickly in this second version of the exposition, “I FELT BAD FOR ALL THE NAZI THINGS I DID, SO FOR THE PAST FOURTY YEARS I HAVE SERVED FISH TO ALL OF THE TOWN!” There is a small laugh break for absurdity of the situation. Andrew continues, “I KNOW IT DOESN’T REALLY RECONCILE ANYTHING I DID BACK THEN, BUT IT’S ALL THAT I CAN DO.”

“Despite all of his atrocities, he is a very lovely man!” Hannah shouts standing on her tippy toes and outstretched her neck so that her voice carries over and down into the fake ground below the attic.
“He is the magic fisherman. . .” Robert says to his soldier buddy.

“And he has a good recommendation, that woman sounds honest. Except for that time that she lied to us two minutes ago,” Ethan explains to Robert. The audience laughs at this realization.

“It’s about forgiveness,” Robert declares.

“I am done with this violence,” Ethan replies. “We’ll forgive you if you let us up!” Ethan yells while waiting for a way up at center stage, or the outside of the pretend first story of the multilevel house.

Andrew looks to Hannah in surprise. “Really?!” Andrew yells down to them. Hannah begins to say incredulously, “That’s . . . that’s so easy.”

Ethan turns to Robert in this moment and whispers, “We’re joking right? We’re joking. . .” After a moment has passed, Ethan confirms to Andrew, “Yeah! Let us up we’ll forgive you!”

“Oh boy!” Andrew yells naively. Meanwhile Hannah’s concerns are growing frantically trying to get Andrew’s attention that this is a bad idea. Andrew gathers things by the pretend window seal and throws down what I would imagine to be a rope ladder. He looks down as he throws it, although they are literally standing right next to each other.

As Andrew throws the ladder, Hannah is convinced this is a trap, yelling in a high pitched whisper, “Too easy!!” toward Andrew’s back as he is busy with the ladder. “Here’s the ladder!” Andrew yells down standing at the imaginary window sill, placed at center stage facing toward the left side of the stage. One man in the audience lets out a big laugh at the convenience of the move.

Ethan and Robert look at each other satisfied, Ethan comments with a grin, “That was really conveniently placed!” While Ethan and Robert begin, “climbing the ladder”, (which was essentially stomping on the ground and outstretching one arm over the other while looking up), Andrew and Hannah frantically whisper-converse about what is happening. They are making direct eye contact, Andrew a good three feet away from Hannah, who is at the edge of the right side of the stage.

“I think it is a trick!” Hannah whispers to Andrew.
“Nonsense, I have fed them fish for forty years!” Andrew says with a big smile, cheeks rising on his face. Just then, Ethan gets to the top of the “ladder” and sticks his right leg toward the right of the stage and ducks his head at the same to mime going through the window. He steps in the room.

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Andrew makes a move that is opposite of egoic. He willingly puts his own character’s “life at risk” to move the game further. We all want to see what happens when these characters collide. Again, Andrew meta-communicates the affirmation of this game by willingly help the soldiers arrest him. What’s more, is that it reveals depth to the character. After this move, the audience sees a nobility an integrity within a character that in other contexts, would be hard to relate to. Further, this act now puts an exigency on Hannah to react to losing her longtime first husband.

Me: So is that part of it too? Just like, ‘oh you have a barrier, let’s knock that barrier.’ I mean, let’s twist the knife, as they say . . . It’s like let’s put them in a worse situation?

Andrew: I think it can be part of it for sure. I never really thought of it like that before, I’m just pushing. For me, I’m always thinking, ‘how do we push the story?’ I guess . . .

By agreeing to support and build the momentum of the scene, rather than save the personal interests of the character, the scene becomes productive in terms of opportunities for creative reactions. By agreeing and following the lead of another, space is made for just one idea, rather than more than one competing. Now, players can co-construct the same idea, rather than many different half-ideas running parallel to each other.

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“So you’re the former Nazi,” Ethan says in a way that someone would had they heard about a mutual friend and was doing a polite fact-checking.

Andrew and Hannah both hesitate and begin to say together, “The magical fisherman . . .!” they say as a polite correction to the fact-checking.

“Yeehhhhhh. . .” Ethan says in a high pitch waning to a lower pitch, “still having problems getting past the first one.”

Hannah begins to interject with “But. . .” and “He. . .” but Andrew steps toward Ethan and takes the next line.
“You know what that’s fair,” Andrew starts with defeat in his voice. He turns around to Hannah and finishes his thought in that direction, “I have—have to—I have to give in.”

“No!” Hannah says longing for a new solution, with outstretched arms toward him. Ethan and Robert grab Andrew from behind and begin to pull him toward center stage. “... but he is quite a lovely man, I just want to be a family with him again,” pleading with Ethan, stepping toward the middle of stage.

Andrew, with a surprised look on his face, while being held at the wrists by Robert, “You didn’t want a family for forty years!”

“When you were talking to my kids and you ver very stern with them, it stirred up feelings,” she says with a sense of discovery in her voice, excited at the possibility of reigniting the relationship. There is a big audience response to this plot point.

“Being harsh and ruthless?” Andrew says smiling and laughing at the last few syllabus. His shoulders and jaw bounce with his stifled laughter.

“I am very German,” Hannah says grinning and about to laugh as she delivers the line. Laughter erupts, and the scene is immediately edited by the house lights turning off. The audience is clapping, and music blares from the speakers. The lights are drawn up again, and the team is found laughing together making their way toward the center of stage, bowing, and then running off to the left toward back stage.

The button of the scene, is what improvisers would call the end. It is a felt point in the scene where the game has been played and heightened to a summit. Then, after it hits the audience, the lights go out to capture that set at its peak. Hannah’s reaction to the situation comes from a natural place for her character. Luckily, Andrew still remembers the details of the narrative and reminds us of the humor of the situation. This of course leads to a back and forth that finally lands on the button. These last moments seem most playful. Their accents break and they laugh while speaking. The logic of it all tickles both the analytic side of the brain, as well as the creative. Remembering the “truth” of the game is usually humorous, because there are often inconsistencies within improvised narratives. In other media they would be consider weaknesses, but in improv they are opportunities for laughter.

“The other thing I love is . . . when you say something that makes the other people on your team break . . . When I can do that—like when we were warming up
today and I got Hannah on the five things. I just felt really good and I was like ‘ha, ha! This is fun,’ and I was laughing and enjoying it” - Ethan.

There is a distancing of the self from the product in the process of play. The outcome of play is not necessarily the reflection of the self. Since play is both communicative and meta-communicative, the simple communicative aspect is a product disassociated with the creator. This makes laughing at narrative inconsistencies and “mistakes” easy, because the ego does not identify with it. “Well it’s just improv,” people often say to remind themselves after particularly bad shows, and in cases, after particularly good ones. Improvisers mostly judge themselves meta-communicatively, assessing whether their moves helped ideas grow or stifled them.

The focus of play in this context is on the process of creating. Improv is an art form that naturally discourages appraisal of the final product, because to do a particular good show is a matter of fortune, and a bad show is seen as a lack of experience in the eyes of performers. Even perfectly technical improvisation can be boring and dry (Napier, 2004). I believe play is to be judged in a similar manner, not by what play accomplished, but by the fact it accomplishes things and at the rate it does so. It may be too much to expect this type of play to get to a particular answer, but in contexts where any answers are welcome, this style of play would be very useful.

This narrative rendition of this live performance marked one of the last shows that Duck Republic had as the original formation of the group. This would mark the pinnacle in overall looseness, familiarity, comradery, support, and playfulness in the group’s short history. Lines are reactive and quick. ‘Games’ were found and played out. Meta-communicative teasing was layered into scenes. The scenes were highly collaborative, as all but one player managed to add a character with creative plot points. This show marked the group’s presence within the third phase of construction of support within play.

Players now were adept at predicting communication from their partners, affording them a level of certainty, that, for the sake of play, they would willingly subvert to implicate a level of intentional uncertainty toward other play partners. Players would arrive on stage to fill the stage with new ideas taking established relationships to different places. Players would force characters into humorous situations, where a player had to improvise a way out.
Since the beginning of their time as a group, and at the beginning of each scene, players start off completely detached from each other and from that starting point they begin to focus their attention on each other to co-create a relationship well understood by both parties. This is hastened with familiarity between the partners and ability to adapt to each other. In this stage, uncertainty is not only managed, but is overcome with a sense of certainty between players. They begin to become ‘in sync’ with each other, thus reaching a point where control can be implemented in the scene and play becomes most collaborative and fun.

“I try to see if there’s anything I can add. Because this is my favorite thing. I love to support, I love to be in the third character that adds a little tick or something. .because the third person you’re really just like added, like shifts the status or between the original two people. . .You come in just adding that little plus. . .It’s like, it’s my favorite thing to do. I feel like I can add a little bit, like lightness to it or just like add pressure to it” - Andrew.

In this way, improv represents a sort of tennis match between players. Each player loft another idea to the scene. What’s important here is the equanimity needed to co-create. Throughout the show there are moments where the creation of a scene is fairly equal (Andrew and Robert’s construction of the cleaner and the Nazi hiding), and other times it is more dominant (Ethan’s little boy character disagreeing with his mother). However, the show in its entirety was fairly equal as far as the creation of scenes, ideas, and responses from characters. It is in these moments that can best illustrate healthy group play and construction of support.

“It was like watching a Lego city being built. Like they keep putting pieces on and finally you saw what it was. And that was amazing to me. Again, gifts are like, you go in with one idea, but like ‘nope, you are this and this.’ And it’s like, if you just keep saying yes to it you are like, ‘that ended up being such a fun scene, so beautiful’” - Hannah.

Each player actively listens and responds. In this stage each player is firing on all cylinders, but the number of responses is more determined on their speed of play they are naturally attuned to. Instead of looking to fill every gap, they are working for the right moment. Why? Because they know what their role is in this game, and overall as a group member. They maintain play by simply being. They fill their role in the group that has been configured through hours and hours of practice, with the vigor and excitement as when they
first came in. And by doing so, they are playing their equal part helping to co-construct a playful, creative, and collaborative product.

They also get the benefits of having experienced and shared ideas in such a fashion. Many of them talk of the positive benefits for themselves, but also toward group members. Many of them talk about shows like football players talk about games they just played. In both cases the game creates an imperative, either against another football team or the expectations of audience members and a time slot. Having gone through that imperative with other people was observed to form a sense of comradery after the show. This comradery strengthens bonds and forms friendships, even if it is only formed in that single context, it still creates something to look forward to for the next time.

I exit the theater and run around the front toward the backstage. One of them let me in the back door to the backstage area. I hear five conversations had between all of the players. They are all laughing while getting their stuff together.

Noting that John, their coach isn’t there, Ethan says, “It’s weird not having John give us notes.”

“Yeah, I want to know what he thought,” Andrew replies. They all continue reminiscing about different points of the show, and getting to talk about their own perspectives throughout.

“I had no idea what you were going to do when you said. . .”

“Haha! “Magic fisherman”. . .”

“That was such a funny character you did, I was trying not to smile. . .”

All of the players share their brief experiences, and when they gather all of their belongings they stand in a circle for a few moments, letting their playful energy burn out. They turn to me, “What did you notice about the show?”

I immediately smile, not knowing exactly what to say, of course I had ideas, but I wasn’t used to giving notes after a show. All of a sudden, I realized how important the phrasing of the notes after a show were. These players are riding a fun, high energy, how do you give positive or constructive feedback and impede on their joy? I do my best by just pointing out some scenes that I thought went really well from the audience’s viewpoint. They seem to appreciate the kind words, but I clearly didn’t suffice the role of coach. They start to finish up their rehashing of the show and the funny points in it. They all contribute pretty
equally to this ritual, everyone shares their own perspective, and everyone points something someone else did they liked. Eventually they fall on the topic of what everyone is doing next.

“I have to go, I have to be somewhere later tonight, so I am walking to the parking lot,” says Vanessa.

“I think I am going to stick around to watch some other shows, does anyone else want to?” Ethan asks.

Some agree to stick around and watch, some go to the parking lot together. Although the energy has died down some from directly after the show, they all still talk about different topics walking side by side to their destinations. Another show in the books.
CHAPTER 6

PLAY’S INITIATIVE

I remember standing in my kitchen when he said it, “Why don’t you just study improv?” I was looking at the laminate kitchen floor, iced coffee in hand, gazing as my mind went through a quick exchange: you can’t just study improv that seems . . . It seems too simple? No, actually that’s perfect, it is a communicative art form, what’s not to love? I looked straight across the dining room at my roommate into his cool blue eyes framed by black rectangles and smiled widely. Finally, the project I am excited to work on!

I had no idea that that moment would six months later lead me to dig deeper to find an even more pervasive construct: play. I began to recognize play within every aspect of life, and I began to move away from the study of improv. After consulting with a colleague about what to focus this project on, I was interested in observing how play was constructed in work environments. Call it an excuse to get an insight into companies I wanted to work for, but I couldn’t imagine a more important context; the place we spend the majority of our time, more than with our families, friends, and on the things we love to do. However, after a series of misfires on how exactly to implement that plan, I was left feeling directionless. Until a new opportunity presented itself.

One day toward the end of the summer, I plopped down at my computer feeling disappointed that by the beginning of the school year, I didn’t have a committed context. I pried open my computer and checked the email that came in the afternoon since lunch. I nestled my palms into the groves they have made on the fake metallic laptop casing. My eyes scan and see the message subject: “AUDITIONS: New members for House Teams!” I have to admit, my malaise first influenced the reaction of I don’t have time, delete. But luckily, I realized the stroke of luck that had happened upon me. These auditions would mean an entirely new team would materialize. This would serve as an even better opportunity than observing a work office, because relationships had mostly likely formed and solidified by the
time I would arrive. In addition, teams in the community have a wide array of players that are
different genders, ethnicities, races, and ages. I was hoping that this ethnography could
observe a coming together of vastly different people with much different backgrounds, and
no experience with each other prior. A critique can be made for data that lacks diversity and
unfamiliarity, labeling it as anecdotal or context-specific.

I met them the first day of their practice and was given the opportunity to introduce
myself at the very beginning of practice. I had some familiarity with some of the players in
the troupe, but not a lot. The faces all lined up around a circle of chairs we were sitting at,
partly smiling and agreeable, and partly raised eyebrows feeling insecure, conspicuous, or
undecided. Within the following two weeks, I gained official approval from the team and
from IRB. The team already began to get comfortable around me, nicknaming me “The
Scribe.” Throughout the next six months, I came to know this group from very meager
beginnings to the end of its tenure as its original ensemble; one participant had a career
relocation at the end of the field sessions. Two players have been added since.

Throughout the seven months studying play and observing the troupe, a relational
development lens of play was revealed. The group identity dissolved into a series of
interdependent dyadic relationships between the members. Communicatively, the players
were supportive (to a fault at times), and instances of competitive communication seemed to
weaken relationships and the creative quality of play. Through each story described in the
previous chapters, play is developed moment-to-moment, but from a wider point of view, it
is built in a deeper more lasting manner through the aggregate of the hundreds of minute,
playful moments.

The following the sections formally introduced the main conclusions and finding
from this ethnography. These conclusions are discussed among theories of relational
development, group dynamics, and Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis.. Practical implications
of the ideas on play are discussed in terms of organizational contexts as well as the education
context. Finally, some last thoughts on the future directions of this research and on the nature
of play and work are contemplated.
CONCLUSIONS

The three acts of the last three chapters are representative of the communicative construction of play. They show moments of relational development and they convey a sort of feeling present in the dynamic of the group revealed during participant observation and interviews. In my time with them, their development went through three essential phases, the first being an awkward, clumsy, and concerted effort to yield to each other and not rock the boat, where players like Vanessa said, “I guess this comes down to I don’t know their points of views in life as much right?” when asked about initial yielding behaviors.

Then, a second phase of beginning to understanding each other’s limits, and what some considered funny when others did not. The group had a discussion about their own personal boundaries in scenes, and for Hannah this was a factor in developing play. Initially, Hannah and Ethan had the easiest time playing together. She explained that, “with Ethan . . . he has no boundaries, he will do anything.” Finally, the group understands the boundaries, and they understand their roles within the group. They understand how to complement each player so they can mesh in the most effective way possible. Robert talked most about working on his cohesion with others, saying, “I adjusted my . . . lens, in terms of ‘what have I seen this person do?’” They even gain enough experience that they can predict what the other will do. At this point, the game is visible to both parties, which leaves the control up to whatever player decides to tease the other player by shifting the game so that one of the other player must figure a way out. Players must be adept at leading the game and also stepping back and following. Just like in the initial stage, initial reactions should be to yield, rather than to act upon. Andrew even prefers to follow, saying “. . . if someone comes in with an agenda, I want them to—you need to let them take the lead.” Certainty reached an optimal point where players understood the game, their role(s) in it, and a rapport that made game moves somewhat predictable. Interestingly, when certainty is highest, players begin to deliberately make the other player more uncertain, teasing them in a sense.

Looking back on these three scenes, I am making the argument that play is not a group state or dynamic, but a collection of initiating relationships. In other words, the image of group play is actually just an aggregate accomplishment based on the formation of a series of smaller interactions. It is important to note the initiating aspect of this claim. In play, a relationship is constantly going through the process of initiating, players are actively crafting
the relationship at hand. Play implies an interaction, an other. Even in instances of one person playing alone, they are always playing with something, or in reacting to something.

*The conversation around the table opens to everyone, but it remains functioning in slight factions. . . Any pairing within this group creates a dynamic duo.* – Act I

*As we walk, the bits continue. We walk as wide as the sidewalks, two or three to a row. Each row has their own conversation mid-stride. Sometimes I would get glimpses of them in the breaks of my own conversation.* – Act I

This conclusion that play is a continuous process of initiating relationships is supported by the folk knowledge present within the improv community. Many long-form (the more popular, slower, more dramatic style of improv) improvisers view themselves as focused on the entertainment of grounded, real relationships. This perspective sees the humor in everyday life, and the improviser always tweaks these scenes in some way that deviates from the norm. One of the most foundational rules of improv is the concept of “*Yes, and. . .*” The concept mandates that ideas are always agreed to and built upon, no matter what their content is. This manifests in two parties assertively co-constructing narratives together, therefore, initiating an influence one direction or another. Each bit of information steers the scene one way or another. Each move comes so distinctly from the voice of the player. Play is a constant tension to maintain with the other player. It is a call and response, a game of tennis.

*Andrew:* Well improv is supposed to be more like tennis in a way where it is like in the moment. I think chess is more of like telling the story. I think I have tried to think like a chess player and I think what I need to work on is thinking more like a tennis player.

*Me:* What do you mean by that?

*Andrew:* Just being a lot more in the moment of – I like supporting people but I have a hard time of like, if it’s a two-person scene of knowing like where we should go because I’m trying to think, okay, like what’s the direction we can take. But we have to just say something in the moment.

It would be easy to simply focus on the serve (initiation) and not the return (response), but the data shows something interesting about the responses as well. Through all of the interview data a spectrum began to reveal itself qualifying play. After play is initiated and picked up, it becomes a relationship of responses. Therefore, if we understand the nature and quality of the responses within play, we begin to understand how to characterize it further, and not simply by ways that are categorical (Caillois, 2001).
Play can be constructed between parties that both initiate a part of the relationship between them, but play can manifest in different ways. Play can be aimless and whimsical, or it can be extremely competitive, perhaps even life-threatening (professional contact sports, e.g. American football). All of these relationships can be fit under the umbrella of play, but I believe we can use the spectrum of support/competitiveness to understand and qualify groups and play sessions. The different types of play accomplish different goals and are effective for different situations and different reasons. Improvisational play is best nurtured in a completely supportive environment. Any competition can create cracks in the foundation of a scene. Look at the two example exchanges from the last chapter. The bolded words represent where the player gives to the other player, and the underlined areas are where a player takes what is given, the idea is recognized. In the first example, a sample from the opening character monologues are taken to understand how even standalone dialogue can be supportive or competitive. The second excerpt comes from the middle of a scene from Act III.

Ex. 1  “No, babe, don’t look away. No, no, no just look at my eyes,” we can—“Vanessa says quietly shifting her position from the one in control to the one losing it. Her voice is soft and longing, pleading for her imaginary partner to reconnect. Before she finishes her soft statement, she is interrupted. “YOU STUPID DECKHAND, JUST LOOK WHERE WE’RE GOING!” Ethan screams, head crane downward as if he is yelling at a shipmate on the deck below. “How was I supposed to know that that was illegal?” Alex asks, again with a sound of defensiveness in his voice. “How was I supposed to know that we would lose?” Andrew, the hiding Nazi asks in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, looking at the audience.

Ex. 2  “Well, you were supposed to wait for me,” Andrew replies in his similar matter-of-fact tone and demeanor. He acts as if this is conversation one has in everyday life. “Okay, that was not explicitly written down in our marriage agreement,” Hannah, still keeping the accent, swallows the ‘r’ in “agreement.” “You have to be specific when you write down your, your vows?” “I was, were you not? I wrote in there…”

In the first, the ideas are in competition for a moment. We can tell just by looking at the give-and-take of the exchange. Ethan’s line is not taken up by Alex, he simply offers another idea up. We see what it looks like when Alex’s idea is taken up, it follows a pattern which sets up a game. But when multiple people try to input without acknowledging the input of others, it forms a competition of ideas. This does not promote collaboration and weakens the support
of the relationship. If players support ideas sometimes and compete with them other times, they also become less predictable, and therefore also weakening the relationship, making it more uncertain. This, of course, is but only one small example, which goes to show the ever-changing nature of play as it is constituted in motion. Rare occasions of competition aren’t enough to derail collaboration, but over-time they could prevent further development of the relationship. As the level of support increases, so does the opportunities for relational development. The next sections will discuss the implications of this research on theory, practical contexts, and methodology.

**Theoretical Implications**

We can view each scene as a mock in relational development. By applying the elements of communicatively constructed play to relationships in general, new motives and patterns could emerge. Perhaps playful relationships are the healthy ones. Play does support open communication, immediacy, and spontaneity need for a healthy relationship. Play has also shown to produce relational benefits for people who play together. In addition, much of the improvisational scenes revolved around the tool of prolonged eye contact, a tool for positive relational development as well.

Secondly, I believe this thesis can help enmesh play theory with motivation literature, specifically, goal-orientation. Play is often described as engaging in the task for its own sake, a similar description to mastery goal-orientation, a quality correlated with many positive benefits in terms of productivity, fulfillment, and mindfulness. Many education researchers covet ways to implement mastery-goal orientation in their classrooms, so that students will develop with such a perspective, they would be in common with the most successful students. Play can be thought of as a mastery-orientation therapy, in that to engage in play thoroughly requires the focus garnered by the allure of play. The mastery orientation is said to come out of “autotelic experiences” (Pink, 2011). These experiences are described as facilitating flow and the development of mastery orientation to goals. One necessary condition for these autotelic experiences is the presence of immediate feedback, something that develops over the duration of the ethnography and describes the last act of the results. Players became reactive, and could even predict when moves were coming. The feedback was clearer and more immediate as time went on, enhancing play interactions.
**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The implications from this ethnography can be widely applied to many contexts, and I will argue later of the importance of this macro view of play. But for the purpose of tangible practical implications, I will focus the implications in the organizational and educational contexts. I argue that it is best to concentrate on these two contexts for their mere ubiquity in our lives around the world. In the organizational setting, I will discuss the parallels between the interactions in Duck Republic and those in a potential organizational setting. I will then discuss a specific organizational context to overlay playful patterns over. Finally, I will end with my implications on the classroom; how classrooms can use play to enhance the experience and the engagement of both parties. For both contexts, this thesis addresses the need for consistent engagement and vitality within the work of either school or a career. Blending play and work can be the answer for increased innovation and creativity in the world.

**METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The irony of working hard and procrastinating on a project I chose to commit to, that just so happens to be about playing and promoting a playful mind has been maddening. I paced back and forth from my room to my small living room, head craned down toward the cherry stained wood floors, hands held together, tip of the thumb wedged in between my grinding teeth. How can I make this more play than work? Not only was I discovering how play was constructed among others, but how I could construct play for myself using the axioms I was discovering. At times, this led to analysis paralysis, as play has flow at its core, which cannot be reflected on without being removed from it. By analyzing my own work style, I was only removing myself further from it. The work was difficult until I was in the middle of a good writing session, where I no longer cared about the finish line, but was having fun with the journey. Playing little games with my own ideas appearing on the page. The first moment when I began to notice myself embodying a playful workstyle was while writing the story featured in Ch. 4, “Learning to Read Them”. I felt myself getting lost in the back forth dialogue that I was either taking from the field notes or my own reflection. A colleague helping me edit the story remarked that she began seeing me play while reading it. The story itself had a different flavor from the spice of play. Play is initiating a relationship
with your work. Initiating the relationship means to begin to create a connection about it and care for it. It is also responsive to the context playing within the boundary of whatever game is agreed upon. To play with ideas and how to represent them, we can become closer to actually embodying them, because we are collaborating with them, we connect to them, and we can understand them deeper, than if we remove ourselves from them.

One aspect that troubled my process of writing this ethnography was in the first few moments of working. Here I was with scheduled time to write, a topic I was passionate about it, a good workspace environment, and a good level of energy, but with the inability to want to get into the throes of wrestling with ideas. I would begin to sweat, my heart would race as I stared at the blank white screen and flashing cursor, like they were a threatening chasm that I needed to jump over; ominous and nausea-inducing. Sitting still with that feeling, I had realized certain inner monologues had me paralyzed. 1) I compared myself to my colleagues; where they were at in their own progress and how they are better at certain aspects than I was. 2) I imagined a negative outcome. With no evidence to support this, I was afraid of disappointing people who were committed to this project as well. I was afraid to disappoint or anger my trusted advisor who worked closely with me on the project. In both circumstances, I was competing. Whether that be with my own perceptions of other people, or with myself, I had imagined competitive scenarios that took away from the support of the relationship between me and my work. I had created scenarios where there were extreme right actions and wrong ones.

As I began to understand the support/competitiveness dimension of play, I began making an active effort in supporting my play style, whatever that may be. Often times that would manifest in my short “play breaks” improvising on the guitar or playing quick games on the tablet. This proved to be useful as I not only saved the energy involved in being in an internal conflict, but it also helped the process of creating this ethnography. Freely improvising can be a great way to reduce performance anxiety (R. Allen, 2013). I also stopped guilting myself for not acting in how I should act. I was more focused on how I could enrich the experience I wanted, not trying to sway those wants into what I thought I was supposed to be doing. By embracing play, I embraced my own talents and work patterns which produced a product uniquely my own. Some insights were gained from those breaks fiddling around on the guitar or throwing Frisbee outside. The wildly connective time that
play produces in the brain was instrumental in making conceptual and theoretical connections.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The most major limitation to this study was its field of view. This ethnography, of course, took place in only one improv group. The development within another group might be idiosyncratically different from the one experienced in this group. In addition, this study does not have the data to discuss major ways that play breaks down over time. Some groups end up dis-banning after a string of unsuccessful shows or unrest between group members. This can develop just as play does, and this study would have had to stay with the group for much longer to have found that.

Additionally, this group may have been one of the most conducive groups to observe play, due to the serendipity of circumstances. John, the coach of Duck Republic, happens to be a big enthusiast of the idea of adult play and was just as knowledgeable about the subject as I was. Therefore, a lot of the practice material and coach speak was filtered through the belief that they ultimately needed to play well in order to succeed. This was incredibly fortunate to observe the construction of play because not only did he pick exercises best for the construction of play, but he was also very reliable as an interviewed participant; helping to understand the group through that lens.

At the end of the fieldwork new members were added in to the ensemble. It just so happened that as I was finishing, auditions for the next members were starting. It would have been interesting to understand how new members acculturated to the play within the group, and how they would ultimately affect it as well. Understanding how new members enter an established group would also serve to understand the construction of play even more so, because we would be able to observe the juxtaposition of new members and old. Since most organizations have a starting base of their staff, research highlighting onboarding new members would be hugely beneficial, and is not covered in this report.

Moving forward, I suggest that we begin to try to understand the construction of play in other contexts using this theoretical framework. Observing the construction of play within a true organizational, or perhaps corporate context would be interesting, especially in modern tech companies that do their best to promote a playful culture (Google, IDEO, Facebook,
Ethnographies focused on the group play constructed within the classroom is also an important context. By seeing the group climate as the sum of the relationships between students and teachers, we can begin to understand how group play is or is not constructed in the classroom, and the effects that may have. I suspect, under this notion of play being a series of initiating relational development, that playful teachers have more perceived immediacy and affect, which could lead to higher educational outcomes (M. Allen, Witt, & Wheeless, 2006; Comstock, Rowell, & Bowers, 1995; Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012).

Play can be explored as a motivator. Most play scholars deem play to be autotelic, or doing something for its own sake. It could be hypothesized that repeated play sessions, could correlate to an increased intrinsic motivation and mastery goal-orientation, which is also defined as motivated to do something, do get better at it, or for its own sake (Brown, 2009b). Research on play from the postmodernist paradigm could investigate the relationship between play and mastery goal-orientation and employees or students. Again, these contexts could benefit greatly from research on play because improving the level of engagement with work and with learning could drastically improve the quality of life for an individual and could improve the general intellect of society.

This study suggests an infusion of play within the research of relational development. The measurement and description of play between relational partners, family members, and coworkers would be interesting, especially as they related to other relational constructs, such as immediacy, attachment style, and others. By seeing relational development as play, we could use the support/competitiveness spectrum to help analyze the development of relationships. This could also include leadership-follower relationships. John played an instrumental role within the construction of play, and his absence was felt when he was gone, discussing the role of leadership within the communicative construction of play is warranted after more of a focused effort to study such behaviors.

ENDING THOUGHTS

After completing my first project on the communication within improv, I was tossing around ideas for what would be my long-term project in my thesis. I was travelling around Eastern Europe when the idea of play hit me. It was the first or second night of our stay in Prague. Among a good group of students, I found myself in a club in the heart of the city.
The group of 10 was a mixture of grad students and undergraduates. In this five-story club we were among the few who were there, since it was only 9:00, much earlier than the locals arrive. The floor we chose to hang out was dark, with beaming strobes of color crossing the dance floor in the center of the room. It was sunken down a few feet below the main floor, with stairs connecting the two. The bar encircled the sunken square dance floor. There, amidst the blaring music and strobes were a pack of undergraduates who were doing their best to have fun, but looked incredibly awkward doing so. For some odd reason, I made it my mission to break the ice by being the biggest fool. I wanted everyone to have a good time on the trip and since I was already having a good time, I thought I might as well help the others. I knocked back the rest of the beer I was holding, and strutted down toward the dance floor to play around. At first, I remember the rush of breaking norms among my peers, while dancing around enthusiastically without many people to even normalize it. Then, more people filtered down to the dance floor filling in the empty space. Pretty soon the floor was crowded with groups of people dancing together. I weaved in and out of sweaty, happy people from all around the world.

After admiring the situation, I popped my head up by standing on my tippy toes and looked over at everyone. After scanning around the floor I noticed a man who turned out to be a French-African man who really stood out for his dancing. I admire his willingness to be open to judgement and his generally playful state of being. Something inspired me to dance next to him and essentially play a call and response-type game where one person dances a move and essentially “battles” against the other person. This game carried out and pretty soon a large dance circle formed around us. This two-person game became the arena for a much larger group game very quickly. After we both had our moments, someone else would be gently pushed out to the center to “show their moves.”

In the period of five minutes I had discovered what I wanted to study next. I remember looking at everyone in the circle, the strobes revealing moments of joy and smiling. One person was pushed into the middle of the circle, their arms swinging to regain balance in the middle of the circle. This young man from South Korea looked around, he bowed his head down and scratched the back of his head with his hand, contemplating should I really do this? I immediately decided to cheer him on as best I could in order to give him the confidence he needed. After I yelled, so did my new French friend. More people chimed
in. Like a piece of elastic, he snapped into his dancing self, moving around the circle uninhibited. For the rest of the night, he and his girlfriend who also had her moment to shine, danced more freely and seemed to enjoy themselves even more. I ended up talking to the couple and the French man for some time, sharing stories of how we all ended up in Prague. I remember smiling ear to ear thinking how much power the support of another person could be, to empower someone to fully express themselves, in ways they might not have thought possible of themselves. Play had to be the topic of my research.

The most frustrating part of working on play research is when the process becomes work and not play. The irony seemed to be slapping me in the face as I would tirelessly slave to capture every word of a group haphazardly playing. I began to question the possibility of work and play becoming a true blend, enriching the experience of work. Maybe there was always an aspect of work that would leave it one step short of fully playing. I tried reaching that “play state” where things would flow, and I was feeling great, along with other physiological, psychological, and sociological conditions for doing this work. But after sometime I realized that it wasn’t about reaching a state of being, but by creating a relationship to my work that was playful and that could nurture a fun action. I had to view my work differently, with different eyes, treating it differently.

Perhaps then we must reconsider the initial research question posed in Chapter Two, instead of asking how play is constructed, it may be more accurate to ask how play is enacted. To construct play is to embody it and to be met with an embodiment of it. The interaction in between is play, and like electricity crossing one conductor to another, play strikes between two playful participants. In this light, play is not constructed, but hosted between two individuals. These two individuals constantly initiate this relationship over-and-over again, in order to “maintain play.” Play is more easily enacted when both parties know what kinds of play works best or is easiest to enact and support.

Play is an active process in the model proposed here. This could explain play’s seemingly vast umbrella as it encompasses supportive play found here, and competitive play such as professional sports. They remain two branches of the same tree as they both require constant initiation of relational development between players or from the player to an action. Whether a player is physically wrestling another, or sitting alone in the quiet drawing cartoon characters, both players are actively initiating the development of their relationship to the
action. They respond to the moves and resistance of the other wrestler, or to the visual feedback of watching a sketch come to life in the form of a drawn character. A relationship is formed through the action, not separate from it. So then, “play” and “work,” as they are commonly known, are merely the wanting to initiate a relationship to the action, or the wanting to disengage with the action. In this definition, play encompasses not only the moments of pure joy, but also of exhaustion and pain, because all of these aspects are a part of the process of relational development.

When parents dismiss their children saying, “Go play,” they are inherently expressing a logical fallacy. A child cannot go play, because to attempt to play would be to set an expectation for what play is, therefore taking away from the spontaneity needed to play. A child can, however, act playfully to things and people, and choose to respond playfully cohesive to the other half of the interaction. Thus, instead of telling our children to “go play” we should command them to “be playful while doing things.” If we raise our children with strong playful muscles, they may have an easier time than many other adults who find it difficult to engage with their work playfully, thereby not engaging in play. Which we know can lead to poorer health (Brown, 2009a) and a poorer social life (Hole, 1991), leading to a host of other problems (Frost & Jacobs, 1995; Holloway & Suter, 2004). However, if we make the action that consumes most of our time, our most playful one, we could see a drastic change in the standards of well-being in our society. Parallel to work, if we can impart the playful mindset in the perspectives of the students, than they can begin to see their studies more playfully and engage with it, with more initiative. They can strengthen their creative confidence and solve the next generation’s series of societal issues. It is a grand vision, but one that could be possible with the implementation of play on a mass scale.

Finally, I conclude, as most researchers do, with a series of questions. If we consider Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, than we can agree that many people in this world (not all unfortunately) have the safety and security of shelter and food and water. Long gone are the days of hunting and gathering for survival. Our needs are met, and our biggest priority is not sufficing the need to eat, but the need to be entertained. We seek entertainment in exchange for currency that we earn through our work. Some will admit that they do what they do for the sole reason of it being a high-paid position. With a wider scope of what we consider to be play, is it possible that even the most mundane and boring “work” is a form of play? It takes
the voluntary effort of both parties, there are constructed rules and boundaries, and without it, one could still technically survive. Could all human action, other than action taken purely for survival, be considered play? Could life be one large game, with many games within it. Game theorists might say so. If that is to be believed, than knowing the game and changing it for our favor should be the upmost priority.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening

Thank you for sitting down with me, I really appreciate the time and insight, it is very valuable to this study. I want to remind you that you don’t not have to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable with, and you can stop the interview at any time. Please also be aware that I will be keeping your name confidential, but in the event that this is published and another member of the group reads this research, potential identification of your input may occur.

This research is specifically focused on play and how it manifests itself in group settings. I want to ask some questions about the growth of group dynamics, and some things that are helping and hurting this progression.

Body

1) How would you describe the experience in the group thus far? If you have participated in other troupes, how would you compare this troupe to others?
2) How would you describe your communication between each other thus far?
3) What is the goal of the group?
4) What are your individual goals for participating in this group?
5) In what ways, if any, do you feel that the group has progressed in ways that accomplish group or individual goals?
6) Do you see yourself as playful in this group? Do you think others in this group are playful?
7) Take me to a playful moment and tell me a story of what occurred in that moment—what led up to it, how it played out, and where you went from there.
8) Do you think this is a cohesive group? If so, how so? If not, why not? Take me to a cohesive moment and tell me a story of what occurred in that moment—what led up to it, how it played out, and where you went from there.
9) Do you think this group of people collaborates well? Can you take me to a collaborative moment and tell me a story of what occurred in that moment--what led up to it, how it played out, and where you went from there.

Let’s shift focus for a moment.

10) What sorts of things do you feel get in the way of your group’s playfulness? Can you describe one of these moments?

11) What sorts of things do you feel get in the way of your group’s cohesiveness? Can you describe one of these moments?

12) What sorts of things do you feel get in the way of your group’s collaboration? Can you describe one of these moments?

13) When do you feel like the group is creating the best improvised scenes? Can you take me to one of those moments and describe that scene?

Closing

Again, thank you so much again for your time and input. It is vital to the quality of the findings for this project. Is there anything that I didn’t ask you about that you think would be helpful? Thanks for your time, hopefully we can do this again soon.