

INCIPIENT GAMES:  
RESTORING THE PAST THROUGH PLAY  
IN HISTORICAL REENACTMENT

by  
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## ABSTRACT

### INCIPIENT GAMES: RESTORING THE PAST THROUGH PLAY IN HISTORICAL REENACTMENT

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This thesis is an ethnography of an historical reenactment group which stewards a living history village portraying the nineteenth-century “Wisconsin frontier.” I analyze productions from improvisations, to scripted vignettes, to a “whodunit” mystery game. Across their practice, reenactors are met with a host of challenges including ‘authenticity,’ balancing constructionism and objectivism, visitor engagement, educating the public, and the bleeding together of period techniques and modern thinking. Such challenges push against the boundaries of analyzing the project of reenactment (or larger social life) as theatre. Given terms like “play-acting” and “role-playing” in the space of reenactment, I examine this phenomenon employing Richard Schechner’s theatrical notion of “restored behavior.” I apply restored behavior to extend the arc from ritual to theatre to arrive at ‘incipient’ games: the notion that the cultural product emerges in the ‘taking up’ of play. I conclude that games are needed to make something of reenactment beyond theatre.

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In memory of Susannah M. Lloyd.

To my girls, for teaching me the meaning of play.

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## NOMENCLATURE AND ABBREVIATIONS

**Farb:** A reenactor whose historical accuracy are in question (especially with regards to materials like clothing).

**Fictional Composite:** Term use by Roth (1998:58) to refer to personae like “the blacksmith” even if he is a named character. A fictional composite is meant to represent something of an ideal type and is in contrast to a real historical figure (more common among military reenactors who portray particular military leaders, for example).

**Forest Bend:** The name for the site historically. The name retained by Historic Forest Bend to refer to the site.

**Historic Forest Bend:** The non-profit organization including those who manage the site, its reenactors, and member patrons.

**Interpreting:** Reenacting in an instructional or descriptive capacity for an audience. May be either first-person in which the interpreter takes on a persona and describe what they do or third-person in which the interpreter may dress in period clothing but remain largely ‘themselves’ as the expert explaining the period information.

**Larp:** Originally the acronym LARP for “Live-Action Role Playing.” I use the now common lowercase “larp” which has come into use as a word in its own right having established itself in usage much like “scuba.” This also avoids confusion as to whether it should be read as L-A-R-P (it should not) and reduces stylistic awkwardness when writing “larping” (engaging in larp) and “larpers” (those who do so).

**Modern:** Used by interlocutors to indicate the contemporary time. Not to be confused with modernism in this context. (See *period*.)

**Period:** Of the time being reenacted. Herein roughly 1840-1880. In contrast to “*modern*.”

**RPG:** Role-playing game.

**Re-creation:** A replica or simulation of a past material, object, or behavior (rē·krē·ā·fən). Being that this thesis uses a different sense of the term ‘play,’ I use the hyphen to avoid additional confusion with the term ‘recreation’ (rek·rē·ā·fən) used elsewhere to refer to an activity done for ‘fun’ or leisure.

**SCA:** Society for Creative Anachronism.

**Stitch Counter:** The opposite extreme to “farbs.” Reenactors sometimes considered “hard core.” These reenactors place great emphasis on accuracy and, often, complete immersion.

**The site:** Historic Forest Bend’s geographical footprint. Roughly 40 acres on the Wisconsin River on which a number of period buildings are situated.

**TTRPG:** Tabletop Role-playing game.

## A NOTE ON NAMES AND TYPOGRAPHY

Throughout this thesis, I use the names of characters and their reenactors more or less interchangeably in order to emphasize their blurring. To reduce confusion, typographical “SMALL CAPS” are used for the real-world pseudonyms of interlocutors like HERB, MATT, and RUTH. Their respective character names (even when used to refer instead to the individual playing them) are written in standard case like Peter Wendel, the sawyer, Ole, and the French trapper.

Interlocutor names and the name of the site and managing organization have been changed. The names of nearby places and historical figures have been changed only where including them along with their reference would disclose more than ethnographically necessary. For example, Janesville, Grand Portage, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Jean Baptiste Du Bay remain unchanged because they are not referenced with enough context so as to disclose interlocutors’ identities. River City and Peter Wendell, on the other hand, are pseudonyms.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible were it not for significant support and assistance.

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I would of course like to thank the citizens of Historic Forest Bend for their passion, labor, expertise, and—perhaps most appropriately—time. This thesis is in so many ways about that time. It is also about community and I consider it a privilege to be a member of yours. I look forward to many more years at Forest Bend as we continue to “restore” the past together.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the First Nations people of Wisconsin. I recognize that this work touches and relies upon traditional Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi homelands, especially those along the banks of Meskousing, the river where Historic Forest Bend now sits.

Why do we sacrifice so much energy to our art? Not in order to teach others but to learn with them what our existence, our organism, our personal and repeatable experience have to give us; to learn to break down the barriers which surround us and to free ourselves from the breaks which hold us back, from the lies about ourselves which we manufacture daily for ourselves and for others; to destroy the limitations caused by our ignorance or lack of courage; in short, to fill the emptiness in us: to fulfill ourselves.

— Jerzy Grotowski

# Introduction: Historic Forest Bend

## Prologue

Not wanting to use more of their remaining candles than absolutely necessary, the innkeeper and his wife sit down to dinner while the sun still casts an evening glow over the Wisconsin River. A modest woodstove stands in the next room radiating what it can keeping them and their supper warm. A Jack of all trades, Peter Wendell had decided some years ago to make the journey from the eastern United States to the wilderness of the Wisconsin Territory. He settled here at a stretch of river known as Forest Bend. In the span of a few decades the territory became a state and the war came, went, and lingered on. In that time, Mr. Wendell was a farmer, a storekeeper, a lumberman, a postman, and a ferry operator. The wilderness demanded it. While it is unclear what possessed him to venture a thousand miles west, one thing is certain, the gambit was not without lasting effects.

Their words are clouded by years and muffled across ages, but the couple speak. Anna scoops a ladle of soup into Peter's favorite wooden bowl. The river outside composes her familiar song, the role of orchestra played by wilderness as it prepares for Fall. The river's power is at once silent and deafening, fruitful and murderous. There is certainly a pattern to it only now familiar. The Wendells have made do. Through the pattern, the shadow of Peter Wendell echoes as if preaching what the river and forest have taught him, "You learn things out here only by doing, and then, only in time."



A century and a half later, Peter returns from the hibernation of history to sit at a long oak table in the main room of the inn. Fresh paint and new old furniture dress the scene. The modest stove has been replaced by a replica of one owned by Mary Todd Lincoln. Guests have come by car

to visit with the Wendells. Appropriately enough—over the last century, Peter has developed something of a reputation as a partier. Today, the couple is embroiled in something of a mystery here at their home at Forest Bend. Guests have come to unravel whatever tale there may be to tell.

“Lieutenant Clayton has registration cards all drawn up here. They’re signed and everything. I just need to take down your information.” Peter says to one young man among the guests evading his question. “Can I mark you down?” He holds up a slate and a piece of chalk.

As it turns out, Forest Bend holds more mysteries than this. Foremost among them is the mystery of the past itself. How did people live? What motivated them? This presents another mystery—the question of history, of authenticity, and of the thread which seems to connect the past to the present in this place. There is a mystery to reality itself. What *is* Forest Bend? For me, there is the mystery of cultural forms. What and why do aspects of the social world get taken up and maintained?

As it turns out, many of these mysteries are solved much the same way today as they might have been one hundred and fifty years ago. You learn things out here only by doing, and then, only in time.

### **Background: Historic Forest Bend**

This thesis is an ethnography of an historical reenactment group in central Wisconsin called Historic Forest Bend. The preceding account is willfully disorienting and represents, first, an imagined historical reality. Peter and Anna Wendell were real people who ‘settled’ Forest Bend circa 1840. What followed was a snapshot of a contemporary reenactment event featured later in this thesis. The two narratives are linked by a statement: You learn things out here only by doing, and then, only in time. The central aim of this ethnography is to examine the “doing” of

reenactment at Forest Bend and how it ‘restores’ such doing through time. Naturally, Richard Schechner’s (1985; 2002) concept of “restored behavior” (explicated further throughout) provides a helpful initial framework for understanding reenactment as theatre.<sup>1</sup> But, given my deeper interaction, I came to realize the “doing” of the reenactors at Forest Bend pushes beyond the limits of where the theatrical lens can see. Looking at historical reenactment in game-like terms—while still seeing behavior as never independent of the past—helps produce a clearer picture of reenactment (in its “taking up” and its “making do”) as an incipient<sup>2</sup> cultural form.<sup>3</sup> I argue that reenactment’s explicit reliance on bringing the past into the present, in its rather measured way, reveals something about the relationships between ritual, theatre, and game and that, through this relationship, games, and the play that makes them, are not exceptionalist forms.

Situated on the bank of the Wisconsin River and deriving its name from a segment of the River also known historically as Forest Bend. “Forest Bend” still refers to this section of river, but, today, the name “Historic Forest Bend” refers also to the non-profit organization which stewards the site. “Historic Forest Bend” is likewise the name for the site itself—a ‘living history village’ made up of seven main buildings and a few auxiliary structures like sheds, an outhouse, and a welcome shelter (See Figure 1). Radio and newspaper ads and locally-posted fliers invite community members to “join us out at Historic Forest Bend.” The members of the reenactment group and organization itself refer to themselves as the “Citizens” and call their monthly meetings “Citizens Meetings.”

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<sup>1</sup> I elect for a spelling of ‘theatre’ over ‘theater’ primarily because it provides stylistic consistency when compared to terms like ‘theatrical.’

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the use of the term ‘incipience’ over ‘inchoate,’ see *Incipience, Play, and Games* beginning on page 36.

<sup>3</sup> Here “cultural form” is meant to refer both to the product or activity *formed* out of culture. To an extent it also refers to the ‘form’ within (or upon) which cultural activity is built. Unsurprisingly, I reach for this term following Tomas Malaby’s work on games as a cultural form (See Malaby 2009; 2020:23-5) drawing from Bourdieu and Geertz and in the spirit of Lévi-Strauss.

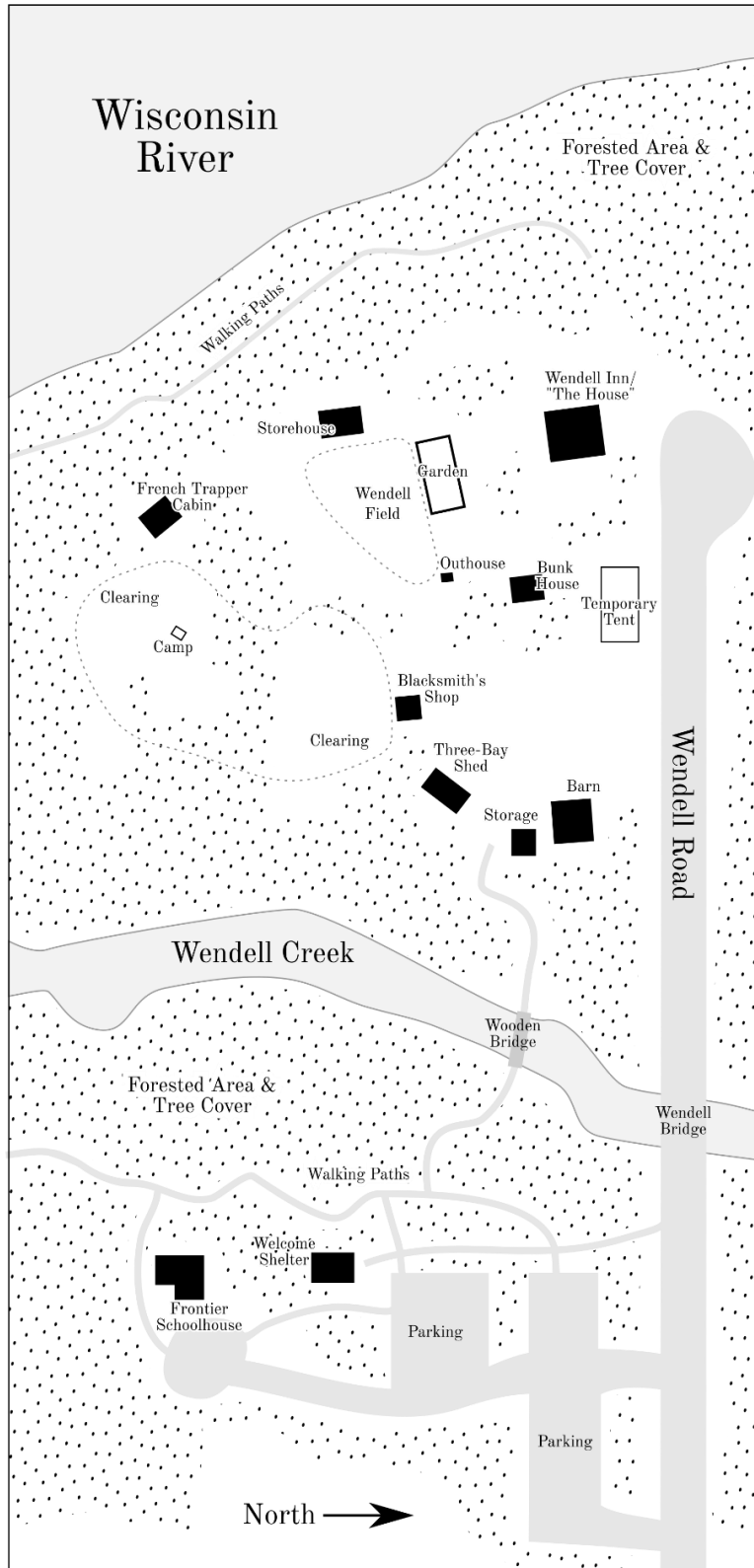


Figure 1. Map of the “Historic Forest Bend” site (by the author).

Of the seven main buildings at the site, the claim to fame is ‘the inn’ or ‘Wendell’s Tavern’ referred most often by interlocutors as simply “the house.” The house is not famous as the site of a key event of national, state, or even local history. Nor is it of any spectacular architectural significance. It is a rather typical white-sided, two-story, colonial box with a grey gable roof, pale olive-green shutters, and a chimney at each end. The northern and southern ends of the house have four windows evenly spaced, like the pips on standard dice. The western and eastern sides would have six thusly spaced save for a door replacing the center one at the ground level. There is little, in this way, to tell the difference between the ‘front’ and the ‘back’ of the house apart from “an understanding” that the ‘front’ would have sited towards the river.

It is this point on the Wisconsin River that makes the site particularly significant. As a result, “the river” features regularly in interlocutor narratives about the place itself, the reenactments the citizens of Historic Forest Bend create, and in this thesis. Reenactors place a great deal of emphasis on this arrangement and the fact that the house stands where it was in the early 1840s. Forest Bend, the segment of river, was selected as the site of a settlement within the “Wisconsin wilderness” because, in contrast to rougher segments to the north, it marked the beginning of the Wisconsin River’s navigable waters en route to the Mississippi.<sup>4</sup> Forest Bend was then likewise taken as the name of the settlement and, today, the reenactment site in its stead.

Since the 1840s, a small city of about two thousand people and a larger city (referred to in this thesis as River City) of just shy of twenty thousand have developed across and just up river respectively from Forest Bend. Both of these cities, and half a dozen surrounding villages and

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<sup>4</sup> One interlocutor credits a glacial margin which cut through the area 30,000 years or more before present. Others identify the significance of this location with respect to “a Native American route” crossing the state from east to west “for thousands of years.” I will touch briefly in this thesis on the autochthonous quality of the site and river, but sadly do not here have the space to extend to the time depth these elements might otherwise warrant.

towns, emerged with economies largely dominated by the paper-making industry—itsself tied to the same river.<sup>5</sup> Some locals draw subtle connections between the lumber industry and the river of 1840s to the wood pulping paper industry boom of the turn of the nineteenth century (and to its decline now in the 2020s). The use of dams and hydroelectric power by each of the three mills solidifies the way in which the river is a dominating force—and a thing to be dominated—upon the landscape. But this is not a thesis about dominating natural features. This relationship is worth noting, however, because River City and the surrounding communities are the sources of membership for Historic Forest Bend. These stewards of the small stretch of period landscape surrounded by the modern<sup>6</sup> world are largely local business owners, laborers—often in connection to those very paper mills, and, most significantly here, members of River City Community Theatre.

As an officially “not-for-profit” corporation of “Historic Forest Bend, Inc.,” these members and reenactors participate on an entirely volunteer basis. The organization is run by a Board of Directors made up of nine voting members elected at an annual membership meeting. Historic Forest Bend also has a non-voting secretary, treasurer, historian, and chairperson. A president and vice-president are elected from the board. From there, they operate on a committee structure used to organize events, report on fundraising efforts, and so on. All this is in support of Forest Bend. According to their bylaws: “This organization is dedicated to the preservation and

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<sup>5</sup> Given more research, much more could be said of River City as an “industry town” trying to find its way in the arts and recreation as the industry which supported it for so long is in decline and the effect this has on sites like Historic Forest Bend, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> In the context of this thesis, “modern” means contemporary or closer to the present than 1860 and not “modern” in the sense of *modernism*. Despite that potential confusion, I use this term (largely without quotation marks) because my interlocutors do. The two related terms used to refer to clothing, techniques, and so on are “period” (here mid to late nineteenth century or before) and “modern” (everything since). In this sense, as one interlocutor put it, “1880 is a *bit* too modern” for Forest Bend while the parking lot and bathrooms are also modern amenities.

restoration of the Wendell House and the historic settlement of Forest Bend in Central County, Wisconsin. It will protect the historical, archeological and natural features of that site and perpetuate the written history of Forest Bend and its former inhabitants.” Interestingly, their bylaws only specify this ‘written history.’ Nowhere is it officially stated that Historic Forest Bend will conduct reenactment. One question I will return to is: why, then, is reenactment performance so much of what Historic Forest Bend does?

*The Site: “This Side of the Creek”*

The modern Wisconsin December would not have disappointed a visitor in search of an ‘authentic’ winter experience.<sup>7</sup> HERB, a regular with a long institutional memory and recently long-time organization president, stood in the main clearing at the site in view of the house. We were situated at what felt like the center of a clock face, albeit a rather askew one. The numbers were patches of wooded or brush-covered area and the majority of the buildings were interspersed among them. Everything from what was left of the grass to the forested area to the buildings themselves were bare, brown, and grey. There was only a small dusting of snow on the ground—not enough to produce a crunch when one walked, but the frozen grass more than made up for it.

“We tried to keep them a little bit separated by the trees. It helps keep a sense of scale,” HERB said about the buildings at the site.

This layout is why Winter events at Historic Forest Bend are unusual. The abundant deciduous trees in their various stages of growth are all bare. Unlike the lush boundaries formed in the Spring or Summer for the Pioneer Festival and Whodunnit or the scrim of red, brown, and

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<sup>7</sup> Across this thesis, I switch frequently between past and present tense. While I acknowledge the use of the ‘ethnographic present’ has been largely abandoned, I do so to enhance the conflation of historical and present realities.

gold separating the ghostly stations of the Spirit Walk in the Fall, Winter, the great Grotwoskian director, undresses the stage and places the audience on all sides within view of everything.

Moments earlier, I had walked across a wooden bridge covering Wendell Creek to bring visitors to this portion of the site. “We want to keep to about a twenty-year period on this site. 1840 to about 1860 or a little bit past that.” HERB had clarified about the portion of the site east of the river but west of the creek. Both run mostly north to south, the creek hooking west and feeding into the river south of the site. “The eastern portion we are free to be a bit later. That’s why the schoolhouse is out there. It’s dated more late [18]60s. All the modern stuff is that way, too, the parking, obviously. It’s really this side [of the creek] where we try to keep it to our specific period.”

Clomping towards this primary portion of the living history village any other time of year means meeting a lush wall of vegetation formed by a sharp curve in the path just after that bridge. Ascending a slight incline as the trail curves back, the forest opens like an archway to the past into the clearing bounded by historic buildings and still more trees where HERB and I now stood. Not so in the Winter. Instead, the sense is a free-flowing connection between anything but discrete spaces and times. The creek itself provides the crispest boundary separating the two halves of the site and, from the perspective of reenactors, the two times. But, with the skeletal foliage which lurks over it on either side, even the bubbling creek bed provides more open space than limit to gazes along or across its path.

Given the central purpose of ‘preservation and restoration’ of Forest Bend, it is worth taking a moment to go into some detail situating us there.<sup>8</sup> The site is today, as it was in 1840,

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<sup>8</sup> For a map of the site, see Figure 1.

roughly forty acres.<sup>9</sup> Of that, roughly ten acres make up what I and interlocutors call ‘the site’ where the re-created buildings are located. The site is bounded to the north by a modern residential road still named for the Wendells and which cuts through the total acreage. It begins paved to the east and turns to gravel a short distance past Wendell Creek. As HERB says, the area east of the creek is devoted to visitor parking, a welcome shelter—a roof supported by timber pillars covering a handful of logs cut lengthwise and turned into benches, and the Frontier Schoolhouse. There are a few modern houses across the street from Wendell Road and, according to interlocutors, their residents make fine enough neighbors, occasionally lending a hand to the volunteers. Because of this configuration, Historic Forest Bend is not as ‘off the beaten trail’ as other ‘open-air museums.’ Reenactors are acutely aware of the need to cordon off the reconstruction as evidenced in the examples of deliberate placement of more modern elements east of the creek and of buildings among the trees to produce a sense of scale.

Likewise separated from areas for parking and the welcome shelter by a span of woods, The Frontier Schoolhouse sits up a small hill. A “traditional one-room schoolhouse,” it was moved five miles from its original location in a nearby town to Forest Bend by the organization. Since its placement at the site it has also become the location of modern wheelchair accessible bathrooms and a modern kitchen in the basement. For a time, its foyer also functioned as a small giftshop selling period-appropriate odds and ends like corn cob pipes and corn husk dolls. Today this area houses a few shelves with informational packets. Another addition to the location is a number of flower beds curated with native plants as ‘butterfly gardens’ in the hopes of bringing in various species of insect.

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<sup>9</sup> This figure will feature again in *Chapter 3: Walking with Ghosts*.

While interlocutors like HERB note that the schoolhouse is “too modern” for the other side of the creek, this distinction is largely lost on guests who fail at first to notice the electric lighting. Another white box, the building is reminiscent of the main house. After climbing a few steps to a small blue-painted porch, guests are met with a green door flanked by a window on either side. Wood floors creak as one passes through the foyer into the one room for which the school is known. High ceilings are covered in embossed tin sheets. Three rows of antique desks fill the majority of the space. A teacher’s desk sits at the front. In the back, near the entrance, sit a woodstove, a writing desk, a few bookshelves, and a large ceramic crock with a water spout. Tan beadboard runs around the room at waist height. The front of the room and one side are dressed with black chalkboards upon which a daily schedule and practice alphabet are scrawled. A U.S. flag, though aged, hangs above the board at the front of the room. Its 48 stars betray any remaining chance the re-creation has of belonging on the other side of the creek.

The two main routes into the 1840-1860-portion of the site—the path across the creek or down Wendell road—travel toward the river east to west. Standing in the clearing, we are oriented that same direction. An area west of us about half the size of a football field grows with waist- and shoulder-height native prairie grasses and brush. The citizens refer to this largely as “Wendell Field.” West beyond it sits a storehouse—a short grey wood barn-like structure with low wide doorways on either end. Beyond that, a tree-line runs north to south obscuring the otherwise audible river. On the field’s northern edge, a roughly fourteen- by seven-meter area is enclosed in a wattle fence forming the “heirloom garden” where reenactors endeavor to recreate a vegetable garden of the era with the help of local ‘master gardeners.’ The house lies just north still nestled among a few unkept shrubs and a handful of mature trees.

East of the field and garden, three relatively young apple trees provide a modicum of shade on hot days. A ‘bunkhouse’ has been constructed next to them. The newest building on the site, it

is of modern construction but using period materials and techniques. Post-framed and planked like many of the other structures, its two halves mirror one another. It is home to eight 'bunks' (four on each side) with straw-stuffed mattresses, a quaint iron stove in the center with a long smoke pipe in order to radiate as much heat as possible, two square tables near the entrance ready to hold artefacts for interpretation, and rafters for storage.

North of the house, is a cleared area resembling a cul-de-sac at the end of Wendell Road. This gravel area is used by busses when school groups visit. Between this clearing and the house, a basic split rail fence separates present past and present day. It runs east along Wendell Road to where it meets a brushy patch and reconstructed barn. The barn is a simple structure with a gable roof and wide front door. A modest fence encloses the opening to create the illusion one might find an animal or two inside, but Historic Forest Bend points out they do not have the expertise or resources to maintain livestock like "some of the bigger operations." The floor is covered in hay and sawdust and the building is used to feature period farming equipment including milking buckets, massive wooden yokes, plows, and a hand-cranked corn husker. A period-looking shed sits next to the barn but tucked somewhat more inconspicuously into the wooded area where the footpath enters the site. It hardly looks out of place made up of planks that match the barn. This smaller shed is never opened when guests are present, so I asked about it. It is a storage shed for lawnmowers, chainsaws, and reenactment props like axe throwing equipment that are only used for certain events.

*Working Spaces (And a Camp)*

The footpath enters the clearing, orienting guests to the river as they emerge from the bush having crossed the creek-defined threshold of the eighteen sixties.<sup>10</sup> To one's left a short, long, narrow building runs roughly east-west. Unlike the log structures on the site, this one is post-framed and covered with planks. On first glance, the front of the structure looks solid. Closer inspection reveals the long front is made up of three double doors each forming a stall for activity. Citizens refer to this building as "the three-bay shed." The interior is not divided. Rather, the spaces flow one into the other from an 'icehouse' on the eastern end to the 'sawyer' on the west. The middle area has a workbench and table and a few additional woodworking tools. This building, from west to east, comes to represent a sort of life-way of lumber at Forest Bend, beginning with the timbers themselves, sawing and making lumber, the use of that lumber to make homes, furniture, and other objects, and, finally, the use of sawdust to insulate the icehouse. I will describe this 'thread' again when I take up the icehouse and an ice harvest event in the conclusion.

West of the three-bay shed, the blacksmith's shop is made of the same post framing and vertical planks. Its footprint is square and its doors open onto the clearing. Its roof is notably steep and features a "widows peak" overhanging the door uncommon among the other gable structures at the site. The forge is centered on the western wall. Its corresponding red brick chimney produces an unmistakable smoke and smell of charcoal and hot metal across the site when it is in use. A massive stump turned worktable, an anvil, and stave bucket of water sit ready in the center of the room. The walls of the interior are covered with all manner of metal materials and implements. There are horseshoes, nails, broken implements like wheel spokes, springs, and barrel rings, as well as iron and steel 'blanks' in the form of sheets, rods, and rings ready to be shaped.

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<sup>10</sup> I do not here have the space to take up as I would like the significance of the modern storage being placed, perhaps unconsciously, as closely as possible to this threshold.

There are hammers, mallets, awls, clamps, tongs, mandrels, calipers, brushes, and unrecognizable contraptions all, I am sure, suited to the artifice of blacksmithing.

A small window on the blacksmith's south wall opens to see a kidney-shaped clearing extending southwest from behind the shop. A small patch of trees divides the space and the entire shape, just shy of an acre, is surrounded by denser woods. Cleared but without dedicated buildings, this space is used frequently to represent "camps." A semi-permanent stone fire ring sits at the center of the southern portion for this purpose. Who is camping there depends on the event. Frequently, they are Native Americans.<sup>11</sup> In these cases, the location is important because it is well-separated from the house but near the French trader's cabin where reenactors see it as important to accurately portray French and indigenous relations. Civil War soldiers are other common occupants of the camp. Anachronism notwithstanding, Forest Bend recognizes that "you can't really talk about 'around 1860' without sometimes pointing out the [American Civil] War is just around the corner." In this case, there is a certain irony in the camp. On the one hand, it is still far from the house and can be used to separate the home front from the war front. On the other hand, it is close to the trapper's cabin. Where Civil War soldiers represent the *terminus ante quem* of reenactments at Forest Bend, the trader and his relationship with the area's original inhabitants represent the *terminus post quem*. The camp is also used as a catch-all location for other non-recurring personae. We will see one such example later in a pair of ghostly lumbermen.

The French trapper's cabin (the far southwest extreme of the built site) sits at the end of this clearing timber-and-plaster construction, it sits, as the house does, with an otherwise identical back and front 'facing' the river. While not original to the location, interlocutors often tell the story of its acquisition. The cabin was discovered "on land originally owned by Peter Wendell"

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<sup>11</sup> I use the interlocutors' vernacular.

more or less fully intact but covered by the façade of a modern building. It was donated to Historic Forest Bend provided they would relocate it. It was disassembled—to the chagrin of volunteers’ families, this was over a Christmas holiday—and the pieces were labeled. It was then reassembled on site. Since then, they have added a large stone fireplace, hearth, and chimney and a counter to repurpose the building as a ‘trading post.’ The building has chunky solid oak floors matching hefty beams and rafters above. On the south end, these support a loft which reenactors largely use for storage. “Only thing sleeping up there is probably a mouse,” one interlocutor said wryly. A massive dugout canoe sits inverted on the beams consuming the north half of the rafters. “We were real proud of ourselves for finally getting that [thing] up there,” the same interlocutor pointed out, “Now, it’s a conversation piece. It ain’t ever coming down.” The entire space is full of such ‘conversation pieces.’ A Canadian map on the wall shows the region prior to the Wendell’s arrival. Various dried herbs, cookware, and other implements like bear traps hang on the walls. The area behind the counter is stocked with grain sacks and crates, animal pelts, pipes made of bone, and an assortment of trinkets made of beads, leather, bone, and wood. As we will see, reenactors in this space waste no time making ‘conversation’ of these ‘pieces’ with guests and anthropologists alike.

Several times during my fieldwork, HERB, other regulars, and members of the board, said they were offered similar donations of buildings or were looking for a particular kind or another. In one case, they were offered a train depot they thought would make an excellent ticket booth and visitor’s center (on the other side of the creek, of course). They passed on it given the level of disrepair and that “only about a third of it was left in a state close to the period we’re looking for.” They state outright that these sorts of buildings are not ‘original’ to the site. But they see bringing them here as part of ‘restoring’ the site to the ‘sort’ of site it would have been. With the house at the conceptual center to anchor them, all of the other additions and work that goes into them serve

as a sort of ‘ideal type’ for mid-1800s Wisconsin. The sawyer, blacksmith, and voyageur are each representative of what would have been nearby and a part of the lives the Wendells and their contemporaries might have lived.

*The Reenactments: Making Do*

The same ethic of representing how the Wendells “might have lived” used to justify selecting the trapper’s cabin but not the train depot and to choose placement—on one side of the creek or another and amongst the trees—is used to justify a particular type of reenactment event or another. Because it is in the nature of these various types that we will see the play-, theatre-, and game-like qualities of reenactment most clearly, I will here outline a brief set of categories for those types.

It is worth noting what the reenactment at Historic Forest Bend is not. Forest Bend reenactors do not conduct military reenactments.<sup>12</sup> They do not produce rehearsed “battle reenactments” or “combat demonstrations” in which the effort is to replicate a battle’s outcome—often as a performance for a wider public (Hadden 1999). Nor do they conduct “tactical combats” in which reenactors take on the personae of soldiers and commanders to play out what may have happened in a way closely resembling larp<sup>13</sup>—often entirely as a private exercise or with limited spectators.

Despite this, these two forms of reenactment help to illustrate the three axes of reenactment I use to describe the categories relevant to what reenactment at Forest Bend *are* (Figure 2). The first axis identifies whether the event is scripted and rehearsed or non-scripted

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<sup>12</sup> This is entirely despite public interest in them. They are simply too modern for the period portrayed at the site. As a compromise, some reenactors *do* have personae depicting U.S. soldiers prior to the Civil War as a means of showcasing the military technologies of the day. The Civil War soldiers mentioned while discussing the camp area above are the exception which proves the rule.

<sup>13</sup> See Agnew et al. (2020), Introduction, s.v. “Play,” and s.v. “Role-Play.”

and largely improvised. The second axis is the degree to which the intention of the event is to replicate ‘actual’ or fact-based (known) events, techniques, or outcomes. At the other end, reenactors operate on a general guide or principle—such as profit or pure entertainment—rather than facts.<sup>14</sup> And the third axis is the indented audience from reenactors themselves, to a public receptive audience, to—as is the case for Forest Bend but not for military reenactment—an integrated (participatory) community.

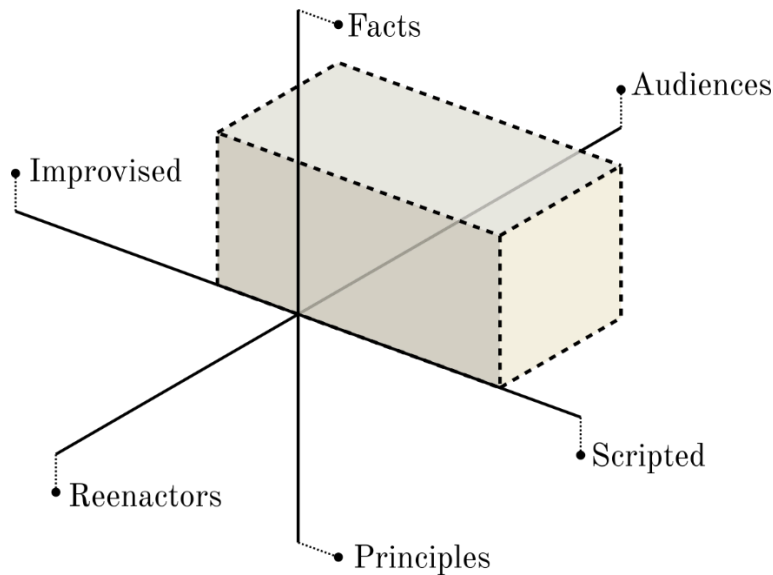


Figure 2. The three axes of historical reenactment. The shaded area represents what many think of as reenactment: semi-scripted, public, and fact-based.

The more common form of reenactment at Forest Bend is what I refer to as “reenactment for guests.” This form is more in line with what people tend to imagine when they think of historical reenactment (Roth 1998:34-7) second, perhaps, to the military reenactments outlined above. On the axes, reenactment for guests is more often rehearsed than not, emphasizes historical reality—even if characters are ‘ideal types’ or what Stacy Roth refers to as “fictional composites”

<sup>14</sup> A variation on this axis includes experimental archaeology in which the intent is to replicate ‘actual’ events, techniques, or outcomes, but the means are not yet known.

(1998:58) rather than particular historical figures, and, is, of course, focused on a public receptive audience.

Reenactment for guests is much more like theatre and takes two key forms based largely on the axis of scripting. The first is reenactment for guest in the strictest sense and is entirely scripted and well-rehearsed, resembling a staged production. Characters are either real historical figures or fictional composites. Their scripts are sometimes even developed from primary or secondary historical source materials. These skits or sketches are performed as vignettes at various ‘stations’ at the site—at the locations outlined above or somewhere in between. We will see this sort of reenactment in a series of scripted ghost stories featured in Chapter 3.

The second form lacks a set script, but still relies on significant general preparation. It still greatly resembles theatre, but is closer to that of an improvisatory nature. Characters are almost always well-researched though minimally-rehearsed fictional composites complete with names, backstories, and motivations. This is the primary mode in which reenactors at Forest Bend perform and accounts for almost half of their ‘regular’ events. It is also the mode of a more unusual event in the form of a ‘Whodunit’ mystery explored in Chapter 4.

Examples of composite characters at the site include the sawyer, the blacksmith, French trapper, and schoolteacher—each prepared for questions about sawing, smithing, trapping, and teaching respectively. Characters go about their days or more-or-less prepared routines ready to engage with contemporary-world visitors. Often, this setting entails semi-scripted responses to common questions or well-rehearsed means of filling silences. Even the Wendells, though based on real figures, are to a degree composites as they have come to represent not only Peter and Anna Wendell, but any man and woman among the early settlers of Wisconsin. Similarly, “the French trader” is interchangeable with historical figure John Baptiste DuBay who was associated with the area, but never directly with Forest Bend. Ostensibly, though, this figure and the Wendells

must have crossed paths, and so they do in reenactment. We will see the French trapper in more detail in Chapter 2, but in a different context—what I call ‘reenactment for reenactors.’

Reenactment for reenactors is in many ways the more interesting form of reenactment. It is what inspired my move to view reenactment as beyond theatre and instead as a form of playing and as incipient game. As a result, I begin with it in Chapter 2.

We might also call reenactment for reenactors site- or world-based reenactment as it is more about interacting with the site than it is interacting with the site’s visitors. Taking De Certeau’s notion that “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements... a practiced place” (1984:117), we might even call it space-based reenactment were it not for potential confusion given science-fiction connotations. More importantly to this context is that this employment in ‘space’ means reenactment for reenactors is unscripted and instead heavily improvised. This is in part because of the second axis; it is guided by principles rather than historical knowledge. World-based reenactment seems an apt term because these principles are what define the world itself. A sort of ‘living *as*’ in living *within*. As its name suggests, reenactment for reenactors is also largely independent of spectators—anthropologists included—though, as we will see in Chapter 2, spectators are readily accepted into the world to become something of reenactors (for reenactors) themselves. In short, reenactment for reenactors is a highly playful enterprise comprising much trying out, riffing, and making do.

### *The Events: Trial and Error*

Forest Bend offers an array of events covering the gamut of axes as described above. Only a few are featured in this thesis and others are either only touched on or set aside in the interest of space. I largely set aside a number of improvised, fact-based, and public-facing events familiar to those who have visited similar sites elsewhere. These comprise the ‘seasonal’ events depicting the

bustling of Spring, a summer Pioneer Festival, an Autumn Harvest Fair and campfire cooking event. As more ‘typical,’ they are less analytically productive here. I chose instead to draw greater emphasis on the events which seem to set Forest Bend apart.

The first such event is the other ‘seasonal’ one—the Heritage Holiday held in December. This event, examined in Chapter 2, is emblematic of reenactment for reenactors. It is improvised, principle-driven, and while the public is invited, it would go on largely the same with or without them. In the event guests do arrive, Historic Forest Bend provides a ‘passport’ map of the site which the various personae will stamp—a new addition this year. Beyond this, the composite characters of sawyer, trapper, blacksmith, homemaker (derivative of Anna Wendell), traveler clad in fur (derivative of Peter), schoolteacher, and early Norwegian immigrant descend upon the site to do little more than go about their days. The Heritage Holiday is an example of site- or world-based reenactment because the site largely drives the goings on. Performers and characters try out new techniques and ‘fart around’ with new objects, interacting with one another—and, in this case, me—as they do. They shift in and out of character as they interact to solve problems. In terms of incipient games, the Heritage Holiday shows a particular ‘playfulness’ of ‘making do’ and ‘getting by’ which would be mostly absent in theatre’s account of it.

Another event provides a return to the more comfortable footing of theatre. The Spirit Walk, looked at in Chapter 3, is Historic Forest Bend’s answer to the Halloween season. During this event, a ‘docent’ guides a group of guests through ‘stations’ at the site providing historical context and information about the site and organization itself. Each station features a scripted (or, we will see, *mostly* scripted) vignette—ghost stories told by ghosts themselves. These character-driven vignettes are again fact-based, and they are for audiences. But this is not without its problems. Like staged theatre, the ‘success’ of the Spirit Walk as well as various elements within its vignettes are far more contingent than they first appear. By explicating this contingent quality,

we see that even the comfortable footing of theatre can shake, and that ‘games,’ in which contingency is more explicit, helps to reveal some of what theatre might miss.

The Whodunit is perhaps the most unusual event at Historic Forest Bend. I look at it in Chapter 4 because, having argued for a move from play to game in Chapter 2 and for the limits of theatre in contrast to game in Chapter 3, it is explicitly a game. Chapter 4 looks at the ‘mystery’ of process. The Whodunit sits near the center of all three axes further complicating the notion of reenactment as theatre. In the Whodunit, characters are built by an author rather than by reenactors. Reenactors (or actors) are given a ‘script,’ but not a script per se. Instead, they receive background information, a brief biography, motivation, alibi, and so on. From there, they improvise their role. The event straddles the line between fact-based and principle-guided reenactment. It is also as much for the audience community—who participate by questioning the characters in an attempt to solve the mystery—as a form of *puzzle*, as it is for the reenactors—who themselves do not know ‘who dun it’ and engage in their own form of role-playing *game*.

In addition to these three main events, I also draw briefly in the conclusion on an event known as Wendell’s Ice Harvest. Like the Whodunit, the Ice Harvest’s usefulness is in its difference. It consists of members of Historic Forest Bend in modern clothing and community members sawing blocks of ice from a nearby lake. The ice is then brought to the site where it is stored in an ‘ice shed’ and packed in sawdust to be preserved there well into the Summer months. The Ice Harvest is different because it is highly improvised but always draws on the experiences of past years and on historical accounts. It is unscripted but, in an important way, heavily rehearsed. It seems fact-based, but this reality gets muddled as adjustments get made to the structure of the shed and the process of harvesting over the years. Concessions of using chainsaws and pickup trucks are also made in the interest of a general guiding principle that cutting and storing the ice supersedes complete accuracy. Harvesting and storing the ice also blends both

reenactment for reenactors and heavy integration of community participation. As an event which is at once experimental, playful, traditional, flexible, reenacting, and remaking, the Ice Harvest touches many of the concepts of ritual, theatre, and game of concern in this thesis.

I mentioned above that readers may have visited similar sites elsewhere. While these three axes outlined can apply to any site, there are a number of ways we might attempt to classify historical reenactment sites, living history villages, or open-air museums.<sup>15</sup> Other sites compare in obvious ways such as size, periods (colonial, civil war, medieval) or topics of focus (agriculture, steam engines, a natural area, a religious group), or whether they are supported by historians or hobbyists. While it is not necessary here to categorize all reenactment organizations in this way, it is worthwhile to note the ways Historic Forest Bend is set apart. In the end, these ways are all related. Historic Forest Bend is intimate and grass-roots supported. Forest Bend is not a national landmark, state park, or government-funded institution. They are a not-for-profit sustained by a few dollars at a time in ticket sales or membership dues with occasional ‘large’ donations in the hundreds, and rarely thousands, of dollars from community organizations who wish to support them.<sup>16</sup> Reenactors, researchers, and manual laborers at the site (often one in the same) volunteer their time and energy. I will touch again later on their autochthonous narrative, but the Citizens and the community endure this work in part because of a local continuity which, they claim, fewer and fewer sites across the country have. That the house sits on its original location is important to them. The work is important to them. Lacking much of the funding, formal training in museums or history, or staff resources available to other sites and organizations, Historic Forest Bend must

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<sup>15</sup> Interlocutors have referred to Historic Forest Bend as all three of these terms and more in the time I have spent with them.

<sup>16</sup> A local gardening collective, for example, donated to support the ‘heritage garden’ and ‘butterfly garden’ near the house and school.

persist by means of what is here their most important distinguishing characteristic—much trial and error.

### **Just Churning Butter?**

Recent scholarship around reenactment and role-playing (Mochocki 2020:151-68) follows the line of reasoning around ‘world-based’ reenactment and sees ‘heritage practice’ as an ‘immersive’ experience. It does not, however, adequately address the contingent and incipient qualities of play and games which are the focus of this thesis. According to Adriaansen, “a systematic analysis of reenactment *as* play has yet to be written” (180-1, emphasis in the original). This thesis is my attempt at such a contribution.

A cartoon by Zachary Kanin satirizing reenactment ran in *The New Yorker* on August 17, 2020 (Figure 3). Amidst what appears to be period buildings two women sit on wooden chairs wearing bonnets, dresses, and aprons. A butter churn sit on the ground before each of them. A father and son can be seen walking behind them wearing ballcaps and showing little interest in what they are doing. A lighthouse in the background suggests the re-creation is somewhat like Colonial Williamsburg. The dairy maids grimace as they work their dashers. Via the caption, one asks the other, “At what point are we no longer reënacting churning butter and actually just churning butter?” The ultimate framework of this thesis is in support of a similar question—at what point are reenactors no longer reenacting and actually just acting, or, more aptly, actually just playing games.



*“At what point are we no longer reënacting churning butter and actually just churning butter?”*

Figure 3. “Reenacting Churning Butter” by Zachary Kanin.  
*The New Yorker*. Aug. 17, 2020.

# Chapter 1: Framework

## Restoring Behavior from Ritual to Theatre to Game

In order to approach this question, I turn first to a theatrical approach to examining collaborative social projects. This is both because a theatrical approach to such projects gets us part the way there from ritual to game and because the project of historical reenactment is largely—and, we will see, erroneously—construed as a form of theatre. In this chapter, I will begin to build on this theatrical basis beginning with Richard Schechner’s concept of restored behavior. Restored behavior does three things for us here. First, it shows how theatrical concepts like rehearsal and production— ‘taking up’ and ‘keeping’—can be applied to varied social situations. Second, in its application in such social situations, it goes *beyond* theatre. But third, it does not, in doing so, specify *where* to go beyond theatre. Where, I argue, is in extending the arc from ritual, to theatre, to game.

Victor Turner can be seen as making such a shift *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) largely as a means to describe how societies managed social conflict. The “*redressive machinery*” of institutions (10) manage a “Social life... characteristically ‘pregnant’ with social dramas” (11). What social dramas produce, then, are an established order along with the means to avoid its undoing. Richard Schechner (1985) derives an approach to theatrical behavior which retains the established order but without a connection, necessarily, to conflict. Instead, human activity is said to simultaneously work to establish and draw from an ‘order’ of any kind—much in the way improvisation and rehearsal beget theatre (36). In behavior, actors as much rely on established behaviors as they do construct new behaviors through their use and recombination. Schechner called this re-use of what came before “twice-behaved behavior” or “restored behavior” (35-6).

For Schechner (1985), restored behavior is “the main characteristic of performance” (35). It is that:

Performance behavior is known and/or practiced behavior... either rehearsed, previously known, learned by osmosis since early childhood, revealed during the performance...or generated by rules that govern the outcomes, as in improvisatory theatre or sports. (118)

Schechner's concern (after Turner's "process") is the 'performance sequence' (33). He breaks performances into those which are 'transporting,' 'transforming,' or some combination thereof but acknowledges that the "difference between these kinds of performance may be more in labeling, framing, and cultural expectations than in their performance process" (127). In short, the performative process consists of context-dependent "strips of behavior [which] can be rearranged or reconstructed" (35). Anthony Giddens similarly notes the use of "interaction strips" defined by context as well as their "reflexivity to influence or control the flow of interaction" (1984:282). As a result, "performance behavior... never wholly 'belongs to' the performer" (Schechner 1985:118) it is "behavior that is 'put on'" (121) at least in the sense that it relies on "how properties from the outside [social] world are selectively handled within the [performance] encounter" (Goffman 1961:33). On one hand, Schechner notes, "Restored behavior is 'out there,' distant from 'me.' It is separate and therefore can be 'worked on,' changed, even though it has 'already happened'" (1985:36). On the other, it is a "feeling for history" or history's "serial character" (Giddens 1984:132). Simply put, theatre, through its employment of rehearsals in producing a performance, makes explicit the sequence, strips, process, or 'taking up' of elements in a way largely, invisible though felt, in ritual.

Versus theatre, ritual presents situations as molded or cast as derivative from an ideal. A die stamps one ritual as it does another and variations are little more than consequential flashing to be trimmed. To be sure, errors in reproduction can be put to use and produce social change over time. Treating social reproduction—the practical goings on of social systems—as performance takes up what treating it as a ritual misses, and a rather more accurate view of social life uses a

different kind of mold entirely. After Malaby (2020:23-4), the mold of reproduction under a performative approach better resembles a dress form. While designers build upon the shape of the ‘mold,’ no two reproductions, despite best efforts, can be entirely the same, illustrating the power—and, more importantly, the chance at failure—of institutional constructions. And what are these metaphorical dresses built of? Materials are drawn from a repertoire of available resources. Strips of fabric, like strips of behavior, are ‘restored’ from a previous state. They are drawn from a pool of institutional memory. Institutions can still attempt to control variation, but it is messier than they let on or than they know. In this way, “Contextual and historical circumstances make even the exact replication of a scored/notated original different than the original” (Schechner 1985:50). As we will see, even scripted events like the Spirit Walk contain an element of this messiness or uncertainty.<sup>17</sup>

Where theatre reveals this sort of messiness, games put it to use. Schechner speaks very little to the role that the uncertainty in social systems (Falk Moore 1978) must play in what is restored. Had he done so, I can only imagine his examinations of rehearsals in terms of ‘play’ (Schechner 1985:110, 280-301) would have brought him to similar conclusions as those presented in this thesis. Schechner instead gives us restored behavior in the context of theatre foremost as part of a larger project to move beyond the structured confines of ‘ritual.’ Theatre takes a step in the right direction as an art which draws on flexibilities in the act of ‘play’ to

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<sup>17</sup> There are limits to the term ‘uncertainty’ as it implies a certain level of conscious information or lack thereof. Elsewhere, particularly in the context of game, I reach instead for the term ‘contingency.’ ‘Indeterminacy’ or ‘unpredictability’ might serve just as well. For the purposes of this thesis, all of these terms can be taken to mean ‘without guarantee’ regardless of whether or not those guarantees are seen to be a part of conscious or unconscious processes. For example, I cannot guarantee a die will roll a one any more than I can guarantee readers will take these terms as I mean them (see Malaby’s [2007] discussion of contingencies as summarized on page 93).

produce a performance—a play. But new ways to talk about the going-on of reenactment as *game* by drawing further on this concept of play opens the concept even wider.



If all behavior is restored, then where is it restored from? Anthropology has not been able to shake ‘culture’ as an answer even having re-dressed it over the last century. But *culture is done*. I mean this in two senses. To a lesser degree, I mean “culture” as a term in anthropology since Boas has been done to death. Culture’s death is significant because concepts like restored behavior rely on something like it. Regardless of the damage so far done to terms, societies, collective consciousnesses, communities, structures, systems, institutions, and so forth on which we rely are ‘there.’<sup>18</sup> It is a ‘what’ like ‘culture’ and a ‘where’ like ‘out there’ in society. It is the place from which restored behavior is restored. To a greater degree, I mean that culture is *conducted*. It is ‘out there,’ but it is also *carried out*. It is *done* in the way a game is *played*. Put simply, humans *do* culture as much as they *have* it. In these two senses, the culture of twice-behaved behavior and of games, is behaved but is also the source.<sup>19</sup>

Social imaginaries are a viable alternative to ‘cultures,’ but I do not take this up directly in this thesis for two reasons. The first reason is practical. There simply is not the space to devote to the distinction (if there is one) between social imaginaries and cultures. And to do so is largely beside the point. Regardless of whether we approach restored behavior as derived from culture, society, social memory, social imaginary, or something else does not alter the larger project. The aim of this thesis is to explore, through reenactment, the incipient quality of games and other social forms as *collective social arrangements*. In looking at these arrangements and constituent

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<sup>18</sup> Perhaps so far as being *the* ‘there’ of ‘there-being’ or *dasein*.

<sup>19</sup> I am playing here with the phrase “culture is done.” Credit with regards to the latter more original sense of the phrase is due to my personal communications with Thomas Malaby.

parts as restored, taken up, and so on, employing social imaginaries as a concept would be *petitio principii*.

The second reason is semantic. This ethnography deals in historical reenactment, theatre, and games—as alluded to at the end of the introduction, each of these domains asks ‘participants’ (performers, audiences, players) to ‘imagine.’ As we will see, reenactment asks guests, often implicitly, to imagine themselves in an historical context. Employing actors in a contemporary replica of that context often makes the task easier. In theatre, the suspension of disbelief required for the double-negativity of restored behavior (described below) requires imagination but not necessarily an imaginary. Certainly, the audience must be able to imagine the actor as Hamlet and often shares a set of ideas about what that means. But at the level of the social imaginary, the question is much more a definition of theatre to begin with.<sup>20</sup> Games—and of particular importance here, role-playing games—pose the greatest risk to conflating *imagination* with *imaginaries*. In this thesis, I will occasionally flirt with this boundary between the ‘social imaginary’ and ‘collective imagination,’ but this is only because the imagination required for games is largely collective.

For my purposes, behavior is restored from *semi-bounded social systems collectively arrived at* either across an iterative process (like in rehearsal) or in moments of creation themselves (like in certain kinds of games). Rituals and theatre are examples of iterative processes. Chapter 3 looks at such a case in the rehearsal and performance of ghost stories. Similar cultural forms emerge instead from a mangle of un- or only semi-structured behavior, playfulness, or, as is the case of Chapter 2’s Heritage Holiday, “farting around.” They are still collectively arrived at, but in a largely undirected way and without discrete iterations. Games

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<sup>20</sup> That there *is* a social imaginary ‘of theatre’ is why Grotowski’s *teatro povero* or Brecht’s alienation effect gain traction.

become a helpful lens in part because they account for cases in which the ‘iterative processes’ are largely latent until a form emerges. As Schechner puts it, “The structure of [a thing]... shapes and interrupts the process of playing, imposing endpoints requiring further starting points. Playing left to itself would go on forever. Playing—the processual template—is a continuous bending, twisting, and looping of... that for which I can find no appropriate name, so ‘action’ will have to do” (1988:15).

Having moved a conceptual lens from ritual to theatre to game, Chapter 4 moves back again and looks at the reenactors engaged in what is not only ostensibly but in all actuality a game—a whodunit-style mystery event. While the lens of games is valuable in part because it accounts for ‘play’ and in part because it recognizes contingency, this comparison is only possible because it shares the central mechanism of restored behavior. Just as games help us see what is missed in looking at something as purely ritual or theatre, looking back to ritual and theatre helps keep a tendency to treat games as freer, easier, and less formalized in check.

#### *History’s Double-Negativity: Authority, Abstraction, and Authenticity*

Restored behavior also requires the “double-negativity” of performance in which a performer is at once both and neither their character and them self. For Schechner, all “*effective* performances share this ‘not–not not’ quality: Olivier is not Hamlet, but also he is not not Hamlet: his performance is between a denial of being another... and a denial of not being another” (1985:123, emphasis mine). Where, then, does the reenactor draw her line, as in Kanin’s cartoon, between churning butter and reenacting (or not not) churning butter? And what does it mean for a reenactment to be ‘effective?’

What we restore and how we behave have a bearing on history itself. To address this “‘problem of order’... the ‘stretching’ of social relations across time and space” (Giddens 1984:35)

is to ask as Paul Connerton does, “how is the memory of groups conveyed and sustained?” (1989:1). The answer is that social systems produce history not by collecting discrete accounts but through abstractions derived from accounts. In Schechner’s terms:

History so-called is not ‘what happened’ but what has been constructed out of events, memories, records: all shaped by the world view of whoever—individually or collectively—is encoding (and performing) history. To ‘make history’ is not to do something but to do something with what has been done. (1985: 50-1)

The performative present with respect to history is the work of historical reenactment. What is “constructed” is done so rather literally. Giddens reminds us not to forget both the apparent “consistency of conduct” as well as “lack of fit” (1984:35) of ‘taking-as’ over time. Because “past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experiences of the present [and reach] into the most minute and everyday details of our lives” (Connerton 1989:2), the ability to manage the abstractions to be ‘taken as’ becomes a hallmark of institutions—perhaps especially those founded on the management of history. The difference in churning butter and reenacting churning butter is in whether an *abstraction* of butter churning is being deployed.

Habits are the mechanisms by which abstractions correspond to the individual ‘strips of interaction’ to which they apply. Such strips “can readily be prised open to indicate how what seems a trivial interchange is profoundly implicated in the reproduction of social institutions... by the tacit *invocation of institutional features*” (Giddens 1984:330, emphases mine). Schechner recognizes this as “action and stasis [coexisting] in the same event” (1985:36) between what Falk Moore deems the processes of “regularization” and “situational adjustment” (1978:39). This means that no behavior is ever fully original. Rather, “What we call new behavior... is only short strips of behavior rearticulated in novel patterns” (Schechner 1985:114). The implication of this is that restored behavior draws from the past but projects forward to the future. Connerton’s

version is that “All beginnings contain an element of recollection” and that “There is a measure of complete arbitrariness in the very nature of any such attempted beginning” (1989:6).

“Perception... depends on spatial and temporal continuity” (Giddens 1984:46) and to “name” something is to typify it, classify it, and “talk about it correctly” (47) but this also means that the ‘affordances’ of named things—as Giddens says after Gibson: “all the uses or activities which objects make possible” (47)—have a unique ability to come into and go out of consciousness with use. Restored behavior is ongoing and makes appeals to continual and named ways of being, but can also emerge into conscious (we will see, reflexive) behavior. Abstractions are critical in performance in this way because, as Goffman tells us, “Instead of having to maintain a different pattern of expectation and responsive treatment for each slightly different [situation, one] can place the situation in a broad category around which it is easy for him to mobilize his past experience and stereo-typical thinking” (1959:26). Likewise, Connerton argues that we too often treat memory as recall of discrete events when, in reality, it is a truer “habit-memory” which accounts for “the capacity to reproduce a certain performance” (1989:22-3). We do not need to ‘recall’ a particular time we churned butter in order to churn again, nor is it necessary to pinpoint the time a different tactic succeeded for the habit of using that tactic to materialize. In this way, “butter churning” is embedded as a sort of category in our own social memory.

Consistency among similar techniques and technical categories across memories account for institutional or cultural memory. Schechner notes that “Because [restored] behavior is separate from those who are behaving, the behavior can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed” (1985:36). Something like churning butter is essentially the same regardless of who does it, but that is not to say two people cannot churn butter differently. Schechner describes this as “one way of preserving a varied culture pool” (1985:114). By drawing repeatedly but differently each time from the same pool, restored behavior alters not only the end result, but the individual strips or

instances of behavior themselves. Thus, despite their many differences in reality, a Monday is a Monday is a Monday (Giddens 1984:120-1) and Hamlet is Hamlet is Hamlet. Is, then, a butter churn always *just* a butter churn?

After Heidegger, for whom *historicity* was *authenticity* or an awareness that past ontological securities were ‘simultaneous’ with the present, Giddens notes an ongoing “awareness of the ‘progressive movement’ of society shaped by that very awareness: the ‘feeling for world history’” (1984:203). On a large scale, institutions come to recognize—consciously or not—the power in naming and further defining things (Mondays, Hamlets, what actually counts as butter churning, and all the various features of Being itself). Schechner sees this, too, in that “Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive... the *hardening into theatre* of social, religious, aesthetic, medical, and educational process” (1985:36, emphasis mine). A similar hardening is visible in rituals, but theatre recognizes a greater potential for variation as in Chapter 3.

In the context of ‘history’ Giddens adds that “Information control... depends upon information storage of a kind distinct from that available in individual recollection, in myths or story-telling or in the practical consciousness of ‘lived tradition’” (1984:200). But, while ‘authority,’ ‘author,’ and ‘authentic’ share etymological origins, not all ‘symbolic order’ should be taken to deal in words. As Connerton notes, “our experience of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past, and that our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order” (1989:3). Mauss suggests “one of the reasons why [series of actions] may more easily be assembled in the individual is precisely because they are assembled by and for social authority” ([1935]1973:85).

At Forest Bend, time and again guests and reenactors alike referred to “authenticity,” but never really pinned down what they meant when they said it apart from “something to do with whether it’s actually correct” or “really the way it would have been.” A few reenactors did refer to

authenticity in terms of a somewhat standard scale of ‘authenticity’ ranging from “farbs” to “stitch-counters” (usually in order to demonstrate Forest Bend is at neither extreme).<sup>21</sup> Farbs are willing to forego accuracy for ‘the fun of it.’ The standard example is wearing costumes which *look* correct, but are made of polyester or other modern materials. Stitch-counters, as the name implies, go to the other extreme.

As these terms imply, the question of authenticity often deals directly with the accuracy of materials and objects. This is corroborated in the literature around reenactment experiences (Agnew et al. 2020, Daugbjerg 2014, Roth 1998, Wang 1999). Mads Daugbjerg (2014), in particular, traces experiences of the holistic project of reenactment to the experience of objects through touch. But, as he points out, going beyond representation means touch is just part of a larger, enacted, experience. In this way, authenticity extends beyond the materials of reenactment into the performative aspects of reenactment itself. Put another way, restored objects are one thing, restoring the behavior about them—and claiming the authority to do so—are another.

Restoring ‘authorized’ behavior restores its authorization. Schechner identifies “four variables operating in every performance” (1985: 132). I will return to these in the conclusion, but for now these are the performance’s efficacy, the status of its roles, the status of those playing the roles, and the quality of the performance itself. Each of these aspects of performance are bound up in what we might handily consider the ‘authority’ of those engaged in the performance or the ‘authenticity’ of the performance at hand. Authority and authenticity are part and parcel of ‘effective’ reenactment. Mauss notes in line with Schechner that, “It is precisely [the] notation of

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<sup>21</sup> For “farb” see Anderson 1984:141 and Hadden 1999:211n6, 219. For “stitch-counter” see Hadden 1999:224; other terms include “progressives” and “hardcores.” “Typical” or “common” reenactment are interlocutor terms describing the middle ground between “farb” and “stitch-counting.”

the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorised, tested action *vis-à-vis* the imitating individual that contains all the social element” ([1935]1973:73-4).

In their 1997 ethnography of Colonial Williamsburg, Richard Handler and Eric Gable dissect the ways in which “truth” is constructed by the managing institution. At the core of their research is the notion that “facts alone cannot determine which alternative narrative is more valid” (137) and so individuals or the larger institution must continually make those determinations. In making “the meaning of history” (23), they argue, reenactors must decide between *constructionism* and *objectivism* (57-58). Here, these are the ways in which the uses of objects are restored along with the objects. In ‘interpretation,’ reenactors either use materials ‘objectively’ based on what they know—such as a two-man saw to cut the end from a log—or ‘constructively’ based on their (playful) experiences and the wider affordances of those materials—such as doing so to produce chunks of wood as souvenirs for visitors.<sup>22</sup>

A similar account of affordances appears in a shift in thinking from ‘place’ to ‘space’ in which ‘space’ is meant much in the sense of gaps, wiggle room, or flexibility. Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2003) reconceptualizes ‘space’ in this way as a “social capacity” similar to De Certeau’s (1984) notion of space as “practiced place” (117). In Jiménez’s terms, “it is space—not just landscape or place—that has capacity... if landscape or place are a predicate of our actions it is only because our actions are constitutively spatial” (2003:150). Ning Wang (1999) refers to this shift from either objectivist or constructivist “object-related” (or place-related) “authenticity” around “toured objects” (350) to guest experiences more broadly as “existential authenticity” centered around intersubjective experience (351).

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<sup>22</sup> These activities are in reference to Chapter 2.

It is this sort of intersubjective experience that leads Stacy Roth (1998) to question whether reenactment is in fact theatre. In order to redirect this thinking around objects, space, and authenticity to restored behavior and its bearing on games, I quote Roth here at length:

[Richard] Schechner and [Stephen Eddy] Snow provide valuable insights into the theater-inspired side of first-person [reenactment]; however, they emphasize extraordinary spectacles and celebrations rather than the ongoing interactions with visitors that comprise the meat and potatoes of day-to-day interpretation. They overlooked or side-stepped interpretive styles that fail to fit a dramatic formula. Commonalities abound between first-person and theater, but some methods of interpretation emphasize alternative strategies and downplay performance.

Admittedly, theater and roleplay converge indecipherably at times... [and] reflect the blurred genre described by Schechner and Snow. The public, too, unfamiliar with the concepts of heritage interpretation, does not distinguish interpretation from performance. Still, it seems theater-centric to proclaim it all “theater.” (51)

She goes on to say:

[A different] type of interpretation encourages a much different interaction from its audiences than does theater. Audience response and participation affect mood and energy in both, but first-person commonly adjusts content to visitor interests. Can the same be said of theater?

Authenticity of setting, clothing, and accoutrements also sets first-person apart from theatre. Roleplayers often perform with living scenery and working props that illustrate historical material culture... Activities and reactions take place in real time, regardless of the audience’s schedule... Many actors, of course, realize the value of real-time experience, immersing themselves in situations similar to an unfamiliar new role. (54-5)

Roth’s discomfort with calling all reenactment ‘theatre’ is not merely an outcome of too narrow a definition of theatre. I am drawn to the passages quoted above because they so aptly capture what I observed over the course of my fieldwork. Forest Bend, like the other first-person reenactment which is Roth’s focus, is largely concerned with interaction over spectacle. Their use of materials which “sets [their reenactment] apart from theatre” is in keeping with Wang’s (1999:350-2) notion of *existential authenticity*. Real-time, immersive, and—critically—quickly-adjusted, nature of reenactment reveals the problem of “hardening into theatre” (Schechner 1985:36) that which, even beyond reenactment, is shaggy, flexible, and adaptive. Where symbolic

acts are hardened into ritual and past and present behaviors are hardened into theatre, play, trying out, and making do are hardened into game.<sup>23</sup> As the ethnographic cases to follow reveal, reenactment is much more the latter.

### *Incipience, Play, and Games*

The core argument of this thesis is largely a response to a sensation I had during fieldwork which paralleled Stacy Roth's assessment above of reenactment as something other than theatre.<sup>24</sup> I conclude that game, rather than an exceptionalist other, is needed to make something of reenactment beyond theatre. While reenactment is my focus, my hope is that, by arriving at a games-based approach by way of restored behavior, it becomes clear how a similar approach might be valuable in examining other cultural products.<sup>25</sup>

I seek to draw out an arc like that described above from restored behavior to what I deem the 'incipience' of games: their beginning or emerging in the 'taking up' of play. I will return again to the notion that a key feature of restored behavior is its being restored 'from' something like a rehearsal. Another feature is that these restorations are mutable over time. Such mutability, flexibility, and (my preferred term) plasticity adequately describe play. It is therefore, I argue, useful to conceive not only of restored behavior in terms of *incipience* but also of the cultural forms to emerge from it in game-like terms.

Those familiar with James W. Fernandez's work on metaphor (1974) or Michael Herzfeld's work on anthropological detail (2015) may question the use of the term *incipient* over

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<sup>23</sup> I use 'game' here in a sense meant to capture 'games' and 'game-like forms' as a broad category much as 'ritual' and 'theatre' in the previous clause. I shy away from saying 'a game' as that overly concretizes the form (just as 'behaviors' are hardened into 'theatre' and not 'a play.')

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it is both not theatre and not-not theatre.

<sup>25</sup> Large and small: from "agriculture," to media, to works of art, to the construction of a particular potsherd.

the term *inchoate*. I find incipient the more productive term here for several reasons. First, ‘inchoate’ has something of a negative connotation related to immaturity or being of rudimentary quality while ‘incipience’ indicates an ‘initial stage’ which can be seen as developing into a ‘type.’ Similarly, to be inchoate is to not be fully formed while, though open to change over time, incipience is more readily applied to fully formed, identifiable, features—like games. Inchoate (as a legal term) signifies preparation of a further act. In contrast, the incipient can be seen as an end in itself. Finally, the etymologies of the words themselves offer the most important distinction here. *Inchoate* derives from the Latin *inchoare* meaning “to begin” (not yet with ‘cohesion’). With little modification, this offers a sense of existing *ex nihilo*. Compare this to *incipient* derived from the Latin *capere*, or “to take” (as ‘capture’) in a much more active way. Given my focus on game as a form of ‘taking up’ or coalescing, hardening, and ‘taking together’ play (especially in engaging—that is captivating—ways), incipience better *captures* my aims.<sup>26</sup>

This incipience, or capturing, appears in Schechner’s theatre, as in the whole of social life. Be it in game or performance, “From all the doing, some things are done again and again; they are perceived in retrospect as ‘working,’ and they are ‘kept’” (Schechner 1985:120). Others are rejected as ‘broken.’ Thomas Malaby notes that, as a result, “games are, like many social processes, dynamic and recursive, largely reproducing their form through time but always containing the possibility of emergent change” (2007:104).

While there is a long-standing danger in relegating play and games to childhood pleasure, fun, or leisure only (viz. Malaby 2007:98-9), this version of incipient game is captured well in examples of children developing games of avoidance or variations on ‘tag.’<sup>27</sup> Consider children

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<sup>26</sup> See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “inchoate” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/93447> and s.v. “incipient” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/93490>.

<sup>27</sup> See Hwang 2018 on childrens’ construction of ‘folk games.’

mulling about on a playground. In play, they not only have enjoyment (part of the reason we conflate play with leisure), but they play, that is to say experiment, with ideas. In time, these ideas—‘You’re “it,”’ ‘That tree is safe,’ ‘If you touch the woodchips, you’re out!’—come and go. Many times, these game features (what game designers interchangeably call mechanisms or mechanics) emerge as answers to asking, “how about...?” I know this in part as a resident “how-about-er” among my peer group growing up. A game emerges from the plasticity of asking ‘how about’ when ideas coalesce into something ‘players’ agree upon in continuing to play the game. The ‘rules’ of the ‘game’ are emergent, *incipient*, and collectively arrived at. At some point, the answer to ‘how about’ is, at least tacitly, “Yes.”

In such a way, a game is an emergent project with some traction—even if very little. That traction is only possible because there exists a level of collective agreement, social consonance, cohesion, or consensus. Despite contemporary connotations, I use the terms *consensus* elsewhere to refer to this generalized source of traction characteristic of collective social arrangements.

Part of why this thesis is a necessary contribution to the literature around games is that while games themselves are ubiquitous, clarity as to the degree to which they are a productive lens to understanding social realities is rarely there. “Games” are taken to be many things—and often not as I mean here. Because of their seemingly obvious character as competitive, economic, ‘for fun,’ or as a form of functionalist ‘release valve,’ the use of ‘games’ as a lens can feel forced onto a given case. Not so for incipient games. It is the work of this thesis to peel away these perceptions of game and demonstrate instead that existing terms like ‘ritual’ and ‘theatre,’ while valuable in their own right, are ultimately inadequate for understanding some cultural phenomena—such as historical reenactment.

Seeing game as emergent, not altogether differently than ritual or theatre, prevents a mistaken “exceptionalist position: that games are play and therefore set apart” (Malaby 2007:97)

and allows us to instead see a new version of restored behavior which, through play, is in fact integral to all we do. Just as Connerton notes of social memory, “what is remembered... is something *in addition* to a collectively organised variant of personal and cognitive memory” (1989:71, emphasis mine). It is as a result of the vast potential for variability in carrying out any given role that a cultural form is greater than the sum of its parts (or pieces). Treating reenactment as game allows us to avoid, as Stacy Roth (1998) fears, an altogether limiting “theatre-centric” account and instead see the performances of reenactment as greater than the sum of its parts (or roles).

### *Method(s) Acting*

Roth is referring to *method acting* when she notes that “Many actors... realize the value of real-time experience, immersing themselves in situations similar to an unfamiliar new role” (1998:55). In the course of my field work, I was time and time again reminded of this host of rehearsal techniques in the style of Stanislavski used to identify with and understand a character’s experiences. Method acting emphasizes inner motivation and emotion. Some actors go so far as to ‘live as’ their characters outside of performances in order to gain this level of intimacy and understanding.<sup>28</sup> In conversation with interlocutors at Forest Bend, a repeated refrain was that of being able to “really experience what it was like” both for performers and for guests. With respect to the distinction between written and embodied authority, it is worth noting despite lacking space to expand on it, that statements like this were regularly paired with a contrast to “reading about it” or even “just in presentations.”

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<sup>28</sup> “Method acting” has entered popular consciousness through Hollywood given the extremes to which actors such as Marlon Brando, Daniel Day-Lewis, Dustin Hoffman, and Kate Winslet have taken it.

The primary method of my fieldwork was participant observation. I have come to see this practice as its own form of *method acting*. While I did not take on a period persona for the Spirit Walk or Heritage Holiday, I engaged in many other aspects of the existential authenticity produced at the site finding myself at times wielding a crosscut saw, chuckling at ghostly puns, “farting around” with a reconstructed tin oven, sweating my way through a mystery, or buried elbow-deep in sawdust. I have worked with Forest Bend for over a dozen years. As a result, I have developed a rapport and “cultural intimacy” and “assurance of common sociality” (Herzfeld 2005:5) with the reenactors. While I touch on this here and there throughout, I examine the wider implications of this further in Chapter 4.<sup>29</sup>

Along with participant observation, I engaged in informal interviews with participants. These consisted primarily of reenactors, especially a group of about six ‘regulars,’ as well as a small number of guests. With the understanding that an increase in the intensity of my interest in reenactment would influence reenactors’ performances,<sup>30</sup> I limited my interview questions when reenactors were in character to those I felt ‘typical’ guests might ask such as “How does this [object] work?” Or “How are [these objects] made?” When reenactors were out of character, I asked more questions related to reenactment itself. The ‘test’ for a good question, in this case, was whether a new or prospective reenactor might ask it. In this context, I would ask questions like “How do you develop your character?” “How did you get involved at Forest Bend?” Or “What do you say when you don’t know the answer to someone’s question?”

In order to cover a wide array of event types (see *The Reenactments: Making Do* beginning page 15) while keeping the data manageable, I limited myself to participating in the Heritage

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<sup>29</sup> See, in particular, *The Reveal within the Reveal: Familiarity* beginning page 115.

<sup>30</sup> Recalling Roth, it is common practice for reenactors to “[adjust] content to visitor interests” (1998:54).

Holiday, Ice Harvest, Spirit Walk, and Whodunnit. For the other events, I relied entirely on interlocutor accounts of them.

### “Rehearsal”

Schechner tells us “The work of rehearsals is to ‘re-present’ a past for the future (performance-to-be)” (1985:51). Allow me to rehearse what follows.

#### “*You Meet in a Tavern*”

There is a long-standing trope in tabletop roleplaying games<sup>31</sup> that a game-master<sup>32</sup> begins a campaign by telling players, “You meet in a tavern.” Among contemporary players, this has become something of a cliché if not mere ammunition for internet ‘debates’ over ‘good’ gameplay.<sup>33</sup> As YouTuber Matthew Colville<sup>34</sup> puts it, this “traditional” technique for beginning a campaign has developed a reputation for being “the laziest possible way to start” as it lacks backstory or a particular goal or direction for the narrative to develop. Colville, though, is not nearly as cynical as the critics he identifies and instead argues “it is virtuous to start in a tavern” because “a tavern is a microcosm of the world,” a hotbed of different walks of life which can serve to “feature [a campaign’s] central tension.” Taverns, he argues, are thus places (more accurately, *spaces*) for

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<sup>31</sup> The popular example being *Dungeons & Dragons*.

<sup>32</sup> The organizer and arbiter of the game. Typically, a form of narrator establishing elements beyond player control.

<sup>33</sup> An intriguing account of the role of a ‘tavern’ in ‘good’ (democratically agential) gameplay can be found throughout Pedro León’s dissertation *Why We Write: How Dungeons & Dragons Subverts and Democratizes Narratives and Authorship* (2021).

<sup>34</sup> I return to Colville later to reference aspects of tabletop roleplaying because a broad explication of roleplaying is beyond the scope of this thesis. Colville is an especially valuable resource for this purpose because his series on “Running the Game” is meant to “demystify [running a campaign] and show [new players] it’s easy and awesome” (“Intro: Running the Game,” February 21, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-YZvLUXcR8>). These guides tend to provide just enough detail to accomplish this.

players to be re-active rather than pro-active and “get [players] thinking about where they stand on the different issues that are relevant in your campaign.”<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps it is truly apt, then, that the endeavor of Historic Forest Bend over the last four decades began *with* a tavern. Today, through their reenactments in and around “Wendell Tavern” and its contemporaries, the citizens of Forest Bend seek to similarly present a “microcosm” of historic life. This is a thread which will follow us throughout this thesis revealing that the “microcosm” they create is not fully limited to this time and this world but in fact serves, via the restored behavior of incipient games, as a microcosm *across* time.

### *Taking Up “Taking Up”*

Throughout this thesis I have taken care, as in any academic writing, to marshal evidence, define my terms, and remain true to interlocutor accounts and larger scholarly conversations around ritual, theatre, and game. Despite this, as a thesis largely about the value of play and ‘taking up,’ it is one of its own playfulness—I am taking up ‘taking up’ as a central project. As foreshadowed by the prologue, readers may feel themselves here and there disoriented by an account, in the dark on details forthcoming, or even left to draw their own conclusions. This is willfully so. Play is inherently messy. In this respect, the playfulness of this work is its own commentary—its own sort of microcosm of my larger point: that there is as much value in examining the shaggy mass of experience that is *play* as there is in examining the incipient *games* or other cultural forms it ultimately generates.

As I am principally “taking up ‘taking up,’” I am setting down much of what remains in the interest of space. There is most certainly a broader context in which the study of reenactment

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<sup>35</sup> Colville, Matthew (@Matthew Colville), “Let’s Start In A Tavern! | Running the Game,” YouTube video, 19:24, September 14, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPbMicg8yqM>

becomes important vis-à-vis not altogether disconnected questions of whiteness, indigeneity, power and dominance over the landscape, colonialism, the language of authority as touched on above, and even notions like the “frontier” and “wilderness.” With the exception of a few places where I am moved to comment on the particulars of conceptions of landscape, narrative, language, and ‘authenticity,’ I largely set these weightier issues down throughout the body of this thesis returning to them again in the conclusion.

In Chapter 2, I offer an account of the Heritage Holiday event—a ‘reenactment for reenactors’ which is broadly improvised as a means of looking more closely at *play*—that which comes before (and is ‘restored’ by) game. In Chapter 3, I examine the Spirit Walk. While it is a scripted and well-regulated ‘reenactment for guests,’ contingencies which emerge serve to reveal the limits of ‘theatre’ as a lens for understanding reenactment and point us to game as a more suitable perspective. Through the Whodunit—an event which is explicitly game-like—Chapter 4 doubles back to more directly unite the notion of reenactment as playful and the lens of games. In doing so, I devote significant space to a process-based approach to understanding the incipience between them. Finally, the conclusion of this thesis returns to some of the wider-reaching implications of this approach vis-à-vis power and authority described above and looks again at restored behavior to invite its usefulness in applying a game-like lens in doing anthropology more broadly.

## Chapter 2: Playing in the Past

### “Farting Around” and Cast Iron(y)

“Dammit!” comes a grumble followed by the clink of what sounds like spoons hitting the floorboards of the French trapper’s cabin.

Despite the Heritage Holiday rubric, this bearded figure, a dead ringer for Coca-Cola’s Santa Claus portrays instead someone very different at Forest Bend. He is hunched over a stone hearth in the French trapper’s cabin. The smell of a recent hearth fire cuts the crispness of frosty air. He has been here long enough today that the fire has burned to a perfect bed of coals for cooking. He smooths down his white beard as he hoists a cylindrical steel box from the hearth onto the large hardwood table in the center of the room.

He offers me a bowl of hazelnuts, toasted in advance, along with a flat river rock with which to crack them open. Sometimes, the simplest solutions are the most elegant. I am taken aback by the interactivity and the tactility of such a simple snack. “I bought those from the store.” He confesses, “But we planted some bushes with the master gardeners, so we should be able to collect our own before too long.” I crack open another. The sweet earthen smell of them is uniquely comforting making the cozy space even more so.

“It’s an original *Dutch* oven.” He grins. Given the number of cast iron Dutch ovens around him to which this object bears virtually no resemblance, the joke is lost on me. The steel box is a half-cylinder with feet, so the open side faces out like the face of a microwave. The whole thing resembles a soup can laid on its side and cut in half lengthwise. A hatch swings open on the top half of the curved back. There is a hole on either half-moon end and a square rod goes through these holes across its width. An L-shape on one end of the rod makes its function a bit more obvious. “It’s a rotisserie.” He confirms. It does not look altogether different from a modern toaster oven either. Just take away all the knobs and electrical workings behind them (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A modern re-creation of a tin kitchen. The “Dutch oven.”  
(Source: <https://www.dixietinworks.com/ovens.htm>)

“It’s nice and shiny now,” he adds, “but it’ll patina nicely as I get it figured out.” The open side is meant to face the fire and the hatch on the closed curved side is to regulate temperature and to access the rotisserie food inside for basting and seasoning. It is a “tin kitchen” or “reflector oven.”

“Dutch oven?” I ask.

The trapper shows me an inkjet printer copy of Gabriël Metsu’s 17<sup>th</sup> century painting *The Cook* (Figure 5) and an accompanying article from a reenactment magazine. They are tucked into a plastic binder sleeve and on display for yet-to-be-seen passing guests. The painting depicts a woman holding a skewer standing in front of a box just like the one on the table before us. The trapper tells me he has another painting by the same title, with even the same woman, but a different style of oven. “This is the one for an open hearth like this. The other one goes on a kitchen stove more like what they have in the house.” He gestures toward the Wendell Tavern. The article is about just such a re-creation of the hearth version in the painting.



Figure 5. Gabriel Metsu's *The Cook* (17<sup>th</sup> century).

The Metsu might as well be an advertisement for the thing. A plucked duck, a slab of beef or lamb, two large fish, and a peeled orange all appear along with the titular cook suggesting its broad usefulness. Forest Bend's trapper has not been so lucky. A tray of bread dough melts sadly near the hearth.

"I thought I could use the skewers as a sort of grill." He plays with the pieces as he is talking. The skewers look like oversized sewing needles. He is trying to put the pins through perforations on the rod and have them balance on the bottom edge of the back hatch, but they are not sturdy enough to support anything. "There's got to be a way you're able to do this not as a rotisserie." He adds. "I might just go over to Ivan and see what he can put together for me. We'll get this bread baked one way or another. I might just take it over to the house. I think the ladies have got the stove heated up to make gingerbread."

I cannot help but notice he uses the blacksmith's persona name rather than that of the reenactor's colleague and friend. I ask if the blacksmith made the reflector oven.

“No, oh no.” He chuckles. The idea is laughable. Ivan, I learn, is a blacksmith exclusively. He would make the spit and the skewers, not the oven, which is tinned steal, not iron. “I dug up this here article and thought it’d be something fun to fart around with out here. So, I started looking around to see if you could get one. You can get one at Townsend and Sons, of course,<sup>36</sup> but they want five hundred and fifty bucks for the thing! So, I got in touch with Jim down at Dixie Tinworks in Janesville. They ask two hundred, but I told him I’d use it out at the site so I think he did it for one-fifty.”

I ask if this sort of thing would have been common around here in the 1800s. I am told they were pretty popular for about three centuries. The design did not change much because they were made from dimensional tin. That feature is part of how they have been able to work out just how to make one. While they were rather common, they would have been less so on the ‘frontier’ portrayed in this particular cabin. With that in mind, though, this is the only hearth they have on site where it would work. The house and the bunkhouse both have stoves. And it would not make much sense in the schoolhouse or the blacksmith’s shop. “Anyway, it’s good to learn by doing.” The trapper adds “like were doing here” indicating the mess we have made of skewers and spit rod. We are learning from our mistakes if nothing else.

“Out here, cast iron would have been more common.” He gestures to the pots around. “I think most of these are five quarts or so. And people like it.”

I ask if he means people in the nineteenth century preferred cast iron cooking.

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<sup>36</sup> An entirely separate thesis could be written on the relationship reenactors have with Townsends and organizations like it. According to their website, “Jas. Townsend & Son Inc. is a manufacturer and retailer of quality reproduction 18th and early 19th Century clothing and personal accessories. [Servicing] the living history community, historic sites, museums, and theatrical, motion picture, and television production companies” (<https://www.townsend.us/>, accessed February 28, 2022). They even have a relatively successful YouTube channel. For many interlocutors, the organization has “sold out” towards a financial “bottom line.”

“No, oh no.” He chuckles again, my ignorance showing. “We do a campfire cooking demonstration out here. People love *that*. And normally today I would have some kind of a stew going. Different things. People still cook with cast iron, you know, but people really seem to like it out here. Especially the kids.” He recounts what is clearly a favorite story of his.

A group of Boy Scouts some years ago, “God,” he recalls, “must be ten years ago, now, or more,” had done an overnight stay in this cabin. He was there to show them some of pioneer life but also, more or less, to chaperone—and to cook for them. “So,” he pauses. His eyes close and a grin emerges on his face. He leans forward, his elbows on the table to draw me in. Over the years, TED has become an expert storyteller both in and out of character. He is building tension. Then he says slyly in a low voice as if delivering the twist to a ghost story, “Corned beef and cabbage.” He shakes his head. “They ate it. And they liked it. Devoured it one bowl after another. I don’t think they’d ever have tried it. It was just fun.” He shrugged. “It was *different*.”

I nod jotting his tale and imagining just the type of “kids” he thought these were. Boys like my brother otherwise ‘too cool’ to spend the night in a recreated trappers cabin and unwilling to admit, however true, that they had enjoyed the experience. He waxes “dad” long enough to explain why he feels that sort of experience is good for kids. It is about how it is different—what it is different *from*. “It’s out doing something to *survive*, not video games. It’s corned beef and cabbage or venison, not TV dinners or McDonald’s.” I cannot help but see the very ‘playing it out’ I had seen to that point in the day emerging between the lines out of everything he is saying. Before I can follow up, the trapper moves to the next thing.

“Have you seen my safe?”

The confusion on my face must be obvious. He points me to a massive camp-style Dutch oven next to the fireplace. The thing is so pronounced as to be invisible—like the appliance it is. It was only once he pointed it out that I realized I *had* been looking at it. This is, after all, a man

whose hobby of two dozen years or more it has been to read gazes and respond to them as means of capturing and holding interest.

Carrying at least a dozen quarts, “the thing is just too damn heavy to actually use.” It is what TED bought for himself one Christmas when given an “outdoorsman catalogue” by his daughter and asked to “pick one thing, whatever you want, no matter the price.” He tells me how he used it once or twice when he first got it and how quickly it became impractical.

“We’ve got a mice problem in here, of course.” He says. “So now I keep all the dried peas and things I use for school group demonstrations in there. I call it my ‘safe’ because the lid’s too heavy. No mouse is ever getting in there.”

I ask how much use he thinks the tin kitchen will see. Taking another try at balancing the tray of melting bread dough within it I add, “provided you can get it set up.”

He says it is hard to know since, like he said, half the fun is in trying something new. Of course, it is not quite what folks expect coming into the trappers’ cabin. It is more the cast iron or a spit right over an open flame they are looking for from a voyageur. He takes a brief aside to show me a spout on the bottom of the device for pouring off the juices that collect. The rotisserie, it turns out, is fun to play with, and to show people. But the real advantage to the rotisserie over cast iron? “You can talk to people when they come in without having to babysit.”

I ask what he means by that and he chuckles once more. “With cast iron, it gets hot and stays hot. It’s great for making a stew, but if someone comes in and asks you a question, you can’t pay attention to your venison.” It is my turn to chuckle. Speaking to what makes this chapter one of the strange, I cannot help but note something of an irony to this cast iron problem. Ostensibly, the entire purpose of cooking the venison is to learn from that experience. In turn, the purpose of that learning is to share it with the guests—the very ones who interrupt the experience by asking questions of it. In this sense, the vast majority of the Heritage Holiday spent *without* guests

around is the best-case scenario for reenactors—at least reenactors at play. This sort of trying things out, or, as TED puts it, “farting around” is the focus of this chapter.

As I leave, I ask whether I will see the trapper at other events. He says he will “be at the ice harvest, but head up north after Pioneer Fest.” He uses his reenactment talents to read my mind again as I am thinking through this ‘playing around.’ He adds, “These days I stick around for this kind of thing, then I get out of here and get out of doing any of the hard work during the Summer.” The tines slip again. “Dammit.” He looks briefly at the woman in the Metsu as if she is holding back the secret to it. Somehow, he does not see this sort of struggle as the hard work of reenactment.

### **Reenactment for Reenactors**

As Schechner tells us, “social behavior is never free and unbound” (2002:210), but sometimes the boundaries are ill-defined. The flora I described in the introduction as otherwise meant to divide the site are naked in Winter making this true in a physical, geographical sense. As we will continue to see in this chapter, the Heritage Holiday event—if it can even be so called—does much the same in a performance sense. We are met with the first complication of seeing reenactment as theatre. What can we say is being performed or reenacted when the performance is essentially ‘playing around?’

A significant portion of the Heritage Holiday event is just such play. With few if any guests present, it largely involves reenactment for reenactors. Performers slip in and out of their nineteenth century personae, often meshing them with their contemporary selves. They go about their “day in the life” upon the site despite a lack of audience, employ flexibilities, engage with period materials and with each other, and go about solving problems both period and contemporary.

I lead this part of the thesis with a chapter on a stranger case over a familiar one for three reasons. First, it helps to orient us to the project of Historic Forest Bend from a high-elevation view. It reveals the overall priorities of the reenactors. Second, from the standpoint of process, the guesswork, trying out, plasticity, and flexibilities associated with what I identify as play comes early on. One of those priorities is to work out how things were likely once done or might now be done in keeping with an historical reality. This plasticity is the foundational material that ultimately becomes the incipient cultural form which is the focus of this thesis. And third, in connection to the other two reasons, is because of why it is strange to begin with.

Reenactment for reenactors is different than what most people imagine if they think of living history. As we will see, this is true for guests at Forest Bend's Heritage Holiday. It is different, I argue, because of its playfulness. Reenacting for reenactors is also different than other forms of theater. We might, for example, be inclined to draw an analogy between what goes on during Heritage Holiday and a theatrical rehearsal. In fact, I do so myself. But rehearsal is often much less free and much more bounded even than what I encountered in this instance and others like it. Given this freer and fuzzier-bounded behavior, play becomes the better if not only way to look at what the reenactors are doing.

### **Playful Experience**

I am hesitant to even call the Heritage Holiday an 'event' because of the connotation the analogy to theatrical production creates complete with preparations and 'putting on.' Rather, the 'play' of the Heritage Holiday is more like the 'just doing' of everyday life. Appropriately so, as the key goal of Forest Bend reenactment is to depict the everyday lives of the mid-nineteenth century. As Schechner says, it is a question of "what contains what" (Schechner 1985:94). The answer is that reenactment at Forest Bend is a presentation of selves in *an* everyday life outside of

*everyday* life and yet within it. Restored behavior begins to make more sense of all this by reminding us that reenactors are drawing, at any moment, from their *own* (real life) experiences—even if these include extensive research into historical figures or practice of skills like blacksmithing. Even the method actor ultimately restores *their own* experience. They are never *really* able to ‘restore’ the behaviors of those they seek to portray. The exception, as we will see in this chapter, is the restoration of playfulness.

In terms of incipient games, play or playfulness are what come before. As Turner puts it, “Playfulness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance, and strength, in modes of simulation such as theater, and in controlled disorientation, from roller coasters to dervish dancing” (1986:168-9). Play is powerful in its potential. It is “volatile” and “explosive” because it is highly ‘active’ and unpredictable. It is to a degree in contrast to the product it generates. Because the product is better established, it is more predictable or, more accurately, its unpredictability is more firmly ‘bounded’ (Malaby 2007:96).

But it is not enough to say play is merely *any* human behavior which exists before a bounded or semi-bounded cultural form. Schechner is correct to note that “playing fast and free with play acts without framing them as more analyzable subcategories has precipitated much confusion in the name of theory” (1988:5). Instead, he proposes an approach to play in which those acts are: structural (they can be analyzed in terms of the relation of events), processual (diachronic), experiential, functional, ideological, and framed (there is some way means of knowing it when one sees it). More importantly, ‘playing’ can always be examined in terms of the degrees of each of these elements.

In recent scholarship (Agnew et al. 2020), the connection between ‘play acting’ and reenactment has gained new attention. Others have followed this trail starting from the opposite

end. Mochocki (2021:12-18), for example, explicates the links between reenactment, larp, and TTRPGs each as ‘heritage practice’ forms of role playing. But these connections from reenactment to ‘play acting’ and to ‘role playing’ have a similar conundrum to restored behavior taken by itself. They address the link between *actors* and *characters* but not between (human) *acting* and *play*.

Jean Baptiste Du Bay’s ‘farting around’ with the tin kitchen can hardly be understood entirely in terms of an actor in character. It was as much or more TED exploring the affordances of modern materials. Nonetheless, his engagement is marked by a structural arrangement—with a producer in Janesville and with me as an inquiring visitor, by a process of trial and error, an experience with the function of solving a problem, and in keeping with an ideologized desire to share that knowledge with others. An initial resemblance to theatre is due in part to the ‘acting’ of ‘play acting’ (Adriaansen 2020:178-82) and the ‘roles’ of ‘role playing’ (Gapps 2020:206-9), providing a ‘frame’ encouraging us to see ‘farting around’ as play.

We will see that this playful, flexible, plastic quality is not unique to TED or to Jean Baptiste Du Bay. Instead, this quality beyond theatre is visible in much of what reenactors do. What is more, the stakes of play associated with ‘making do’ for reenactors is relatively low, making it, for them, fun and enjoyable in a way many already associate with play. In contrast, the play associated with ‘making do’ for those they reenact was relatively high, making it, for them, a matter of survival.

### *Lumber Pirates*

As I walked up to them in front of the three-bay shed, MATT, the sawyer, and HERB, an amalgam of a period ‘frontiersman’ and Peter Wendell, were operating a two-man saw. A birch log about four inches thick was propped up on a makeshift sawhorse about waist height. A steel drum nearby hosted a small campfire where a frequent volunteer who did not reenact, ROMAN,

was tossing sticks and brush that had fallen around the site in a windstorm that had come through in the days prior.

“Any of this worth keeping?” ROMAN asked the woodcutters.

The sawing halted briefly. “No” MATT began to say. After a brief glance to HERB to confirm, he continued. “There’s a whole mess of stuff out that way if we need another one of these.” He gestured out passed the trapper’s cabin and then patted the birch log.

They commenced sawing again. After a few short strokes, the segment they had been cutting dropped to the ground. They had only lopped off about two inches. I could see they had done this at least once already because both sides of the new ‘puck’ bore saw marks.

MATT picked up the puck. It was a thing to manage with thick, lambskin-lined, leather mittens. He carried it over to a large log near the bay door which they used as a chopping block. But instead of picking up an axe, MATT grabbed a piece of charred wood sitting there. He used it to scribble on one face of the puck as one might do a rubbing of a gravestone.

“There!” He said proudly, showing HERB the end result. “That charcoal worked pretty good.”

I took a look. The side of the puck he had rubbed with charcoal showed the shape of a “W.” MATT read my gaze as the trapper had. “For ‘Wendell,’” he confirmed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Just a little something for folks to take with them from the site.” HERB said, “Kind of a paperweight or whatever. You could cut it thinner and make an ornament of it. You wanna do one?” He added with a smile holding out the two-ended saw. Of course, I did.

MATT picked up a mallet he had had laying on the chopping block. The head of it was brass. Gesturing for me to step back, I did, and he swung the mallet and struck the end of the log.

Removing a mitten long enough to run his finger over it, he said, “Yeah. That one came out pretty good.”

HERB pulled the log back up onto the sawhorse as it had shifted a bit. Then he and MATT put the saw up on the log in short order, again about two inches from the end. HERB stepped aside and I took hold of his end.

“The hardest part is getting it started.” MATT advised. “Then we just let the saw do the work. This one’s got teeth that’ll cut going both directions.” He led. I followed. The woof of about twenty strokes cut through the relative silence of the site. The saw stuck a little at the end and MATT instructed me to shorten our strokes having developed a feel for it over time. A few more draws and we were through. MATT repeated the rubbing with charcoal and handed me the result.

“Did you just come up with this today?” I asked.

“Well, we wanted something for folks to take home with them.” HERB said implying so.

“And we have this log-marking hammer.” MATT added, holding up the mallet. “It’s a real one.” I learned this meant they purchased it as-is rather than having one made. The brass head had a ‘positive’ W shape which created a corresponding impression when striking the wood.

The hammer, I was told, is a “W” for Wendell instead of an “FB” for Forest Bend because it is easier to find the ones with single letters. They came by the W and found that sufficient rather than having one made with an FB. These hammers were used to mark logs from a particular site as they made their way down the river so that when they were pulled from the water down river, the supplier could get paid. MATT recounted how the plain sans-serif W would have been more common the further back you went in time—closer to 1840. The later hammers got more intricate and featured multiple letters, fonts, numbers, and sometimes shapes like stars, triangles, squares, or custom symbols to form a sort of “makers’ mark.”

“Because it turned out to be so lucrative.” MATT explained. “The further along [in time or down the river] you got, the more chance there was someone’d come along that used that same letter.”

“And they had to start marking different parts of the log.” HERB noted. “They’ve found logs down in the river and they’ve resurfaced as driftwood after how many years, and you can see it. A lot of them have these marks on the end...”

MATT picked up where HERB trailed off. “You’d see marks in all different orientations.” He said. “It made it easier to tell at a glance whose was whose since the logs would roll and everything else.” A red pine timber log was serving as a temporary bench nearby. MATT took the opportunity to mark the end with the mallet in several such orientations. “Then over time people got to where they would poach the logs. They were basically a form of pirates. They’d take ‘em and saw off an inch or two and mark them with their own marks. So, [over time] you’d start to see logs marked all over so people couldn’t do that.” MATT used the butt end of the mallet to slough off a layer of papery grey- and copper-colored bark revealing a smoother inner layer. With a few whaps on this inner material he added, “There!” as if truly fending off these would-be lumber pirates.

What amused me about this example was the way in which a “readiness to improvise”—which adequately describes play (Malaby 2009:206)—produced an analogy between the lumber pirates and these modern-day reenactors. MATT and HERB improvised a souvenir for yet-to-be-seen guests to take home with them. This act demonstrates that there is something playful in the ethic of the reenactor. They set about on this project despite no guests being yet present, sheerly as an act of ‘figuring it out.’ The goal: have a souvenir for guests, drove the acts of ‘play.’ Play, here, is about making use of the plasticity (or affordances) of the materials around. At this early stage, this work is in some ways closer to a definition of mechanical play than of one of a childlike,

joyful, or gleeful play which may come more readily to mind. And purposefully so. The ability to ‘improvise’ need not be altogether pleasant but still relies on what is available to make do.<sup>37</sup>

The lumber pirates and their logging adversaries of the 1840s were playful in a similar way. While, again, their interaction may not have been an altogether pleasant one, the loggers and poachers were each motivated by an ethic of production.<sup>38</sup> Their resourcefulness, recorded in the material world, demonstrates their play. When loggers began stamping their product, lumber pirates took to sawing ends and re-stamping them. Even before that, too much confusion around similarities in stamps necessitated something new in the form of new stamps. When the ends of logs would not do, loggers began stamping them all over. In each of these changes is an especially critical stage of trying something new which can only be accounted for in the ‘slack’ of play.

What struck me in this particular improvisation was its resemblance to the history the reenactors described. While HERB and MATT never stated it outright, their creation of the souvenir replicated the act of the lumber pirates. Time and again they reenacted stamping the end of the log only to then turn around and saw off the stamp as the thieves would have done. This time, they employed the affordance of the act to produce a puck that served as a viable souvenir—making use of what would have otherwise been discarded. What they are restoring in terms of behavior, as in much of reenactment, is a recombination of behaviors for which the originals are not their own. They are stamping the logs like the lumbermen and sawing them like the pirates, but what they produce from the histories and affordances of the objects is altogether different. They are drawing on the act of pirates—sawing the ends off their logs—restoring behavior at once ‘frame-able’ as outside their characters, inside their histories, outside themselves, and inside the

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<sup>37</sup> The resolution of high-stress situations by employing novel uses of mundane objects depicted in the 1985-1992 television series *MacGyver* demonstrates this rather acutely (however unrealistically).

<sup>38</sup> In hindsight, I might even suggest a capitalist ethic at the expense of the natural environment.

materials at hand. What this means is that if what reenactment restores is some common feature of all these behaviors, what it restores is not the behaviors themselves but the play about them.

### Restoration and the ‘Method’ of Play

I said in the introduction that play refers here to the flexible and plastic qualities of behavior, recalling De Certeau’s place–space distinction. Learning the ropes of the tin kitchen and developing new uses for a birch log, saw, and marking hammer are signposts for the ‘play’ at the center of this thesis. Again, by play I here mean flexibility—the plastic qualities of behavior. This version of play has an etymological basis—a shared origin with the gleeful unlaborious version of more common usage. Almost every original sense of the word’s ancestors is connected to motion. The word’s most recent relative may be the Middle English *pleie* from Anglian *plæga* meaning ‘quick motion’ or ‘brisk activity.’ A Middle Dutch cognate *pleien* even combines the senses of joy and movement with a meaning of ‘to rejoice’ but, more literally, ‘to leap for joy.’ Even the sense of a play as a dramatic performance seems to share a mobile element. 14<sup>th</sup> century usage referring to staged “play” seems to refer not to the work itself, but the action of it. The mechanical sense came into use in the late 1500s and returned the word to its original ‘motion’ by referring to ‘slack’ or a workable gap. While we will see the way in which the joyful or ‘fun’ element emerges from it, this mechanical sense is much more important at this stage.<sup>39</sup>

‘Space’ is a useful term in describing mechanical play. It is no mistake, for example, that De Certeau uses the French equivalent *L’espace* (translated by Stephen Randell as ‘space’). Even more clearly in French, according to Dictionnaires Le Robert, *espace* means “*étendue qui ne fait*

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<sup>39</sup> See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “play, *n.*” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145474> and s.v. “play, *v.*” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145475>

*pas obstacle au mouvement*” (emphasis mine)<sup>40</sup>—“an area that does not impede *movement*” (my translation). It is the ‘play’—in that sense of slack or gaps—in places that make them spaces. The site itself is such a spatial place. And it is the same sort of play in materials which makes them ‘spatial’ or ‘playable’ for the reenactors.

In this sort of informal ‘trying out,’ play starts to resemble a rehearsal but even less concretely. Restored behavior is compelling as a concept because of the ‘trying out’ it adds in rehearsals. Rehearsals in theatre explain, by analogy at least, the “hardening into theater” (Schechner 1985:36) of all that ‘works’ and is ‘kept’ (120) across restored behaviors. But playing is not just rehearsing. In contrast to rehearsals, which have more clearly bounded iterations, it is hard to draw lines around the iterations of developing the wooden puck souvenir or attempts to bake breadsticks in a tin oven designed as a rotisserie. While each end lopped off the birch log and each time the baking tray falls seem to demark discrete attempts at something, much more is played with along the way. Incorporating the charcoal, for example, was an afterthought applied to a piece from several ‘rehearsals’ ago. And Jean Baptiste Du Bay ended up scrapping his breadsticks altogether. If theatre is what is kept, his playing—all discarded now—is no longer rehearsal.

In his appeal that historians remain careful under the ‘performative turn’ to see the difference between ‘framed’ performances like staged theatre, rituals, and festivals and ‘weaker’ performances of everyday life like speeches, Peter Burke notes that “The notion of a fixed cultural ‘script’ is on its way out, to be replaced by the idea of improvisation or, better, ‘semi-improvisation’” (2005:41). This, he says, represents a shift from “fixity” to “fluidity.” I think he is right that there is a real danger in applying concrete, formalist terms of theatre beyond a

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<sup>40</sup> See *Dictionnaires Le Robert* (Paris: SEJER, 2022), s.v. “espace” <https://dictionnaire.lerobert.com/definition/espace>

‘framed’ theatrical context. This is why I have misgivings about considering the souvenir-making or breadstick-baking rehearsals. But there is still a way to get from the “fixed cultural ‘script’” to “improvisation” without throwing the baby out with the bath water. It is in recognizing the role that play has in both.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the thread joining formalist ‘roles’ to the improvisational qualities of ‘play’ can be traced rather effectively through ‘role-playing.’ Marjukka Lampo (2015) makes this shift in her description of “larp ecologies” after Baz Kershaw’s “theatre ecologies.” She argues a larp ecology is “a comprehensive interdependent system where all the players and... other components of the game support each other” (1). Because of this interdependency, she argues larping is a form of “cultural improvisation” (2). Importantly, improvisations in this context are predicated on the ‘affordances’—the physical, social, or cultural possibilities of a player or other component—within a larp ecology. Lampo links the ‘strong’ sense of ‘performance’ or ‘framed’ performance (Burke 2005) with the ‘weak’ sense by showing that one of the affordances of the weaker sense for larpers is in fact to engage in a stronger sense. For Lampo:

The choice-making process in larp ecologies culminates in the embodiment of the possibilities that the players have decided to perform... They perform these actions by applying their bodily repertoire, such as gestures, postures, facial expressions, speech, and tone of voice, to the performance (7).

Naturally, she likens this selection from a ‘repertoire’ to Schechner’s own “strips” of restored behavior. Importantly, by zooming out to the level of an ‘ecology,’ Lampo demonstrates that the collective range of affordances is vast. So vast, in fact, as to be predictable only insofar as their physical and cultural constraints are understood.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Even still, as Steinkuehler (2006) demonstrates, attempts at establishing potential outcomes or constraining player behavior may be thwarted by affordances given the “mangle of play.”

In this way, the outcomes of role-playing are inherently different than the outcomes of playing roles in a well-framed theatrical context. The outcomes are different because role-playing is not rehearsed. Even if it is iterative, each time is an end in itself even if something is ‘kept’ or ‘hardened’ beyond it.

On site, during the Heritage Holiday, Ivan the blacksmith, MATT as the sawyer, and HERB weaved in and out of character and in and out of period practice in much the way Lampo describes ‘choice-making’ within an ecology. They did so not only with the birch log but also to repair the hinges on the icehouse door in preparation for the ice harvest a month later. We will see, come the ice harvest, that these hinges are still not yet complete (though they have settled on a design) in part because the affordances are vast, and the reenactors have played with so many different ideas.

### *Living History, Playing History*

Ole stood up when I stepped into his dimly lit bunkhouse. The table, about a meter, square was covered with nineteenth century pioneer paraphernalia: water skins, knives, candles made of wax poured into seashells, lead pellet ammunition. The room was well-warmed by the small stove on the far end, its long stovepipe radiating throughout the room. A cast iron kettle steamed there serving as an effective humidifier. In addition to the subtle smell of soot put out by the hot iron stove, a tin of pfeffernüsse cookies contributed a seasonally appropriate anise aroma.

KENNY adjusted the waist of his pants. In portraying an early Norwegian immigrant, he was especially concerned with the affordances of the materials and behaviors of pioneer life. “My character’s livelihood is hunting,” he said. It was a strange blend of character and actor. He was in character but said “my character” because of my role as not quite a ‘normal’ guest. He showed me

a rifle and a shotgun hanging on the wall and their corresponding ammunition on the table. “You give me a choice,” he said, “I’ll take the .11-gauge shotgun every time. It’s a muzzle loader.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Passenger pigeons.” He said. “It’s 1850. With a rifle, good for a goose or so, I’m lucky to get one. Passenger pigeons, you can spook a flock of ‘em and get fifty with one shot as they fly. You can get fifty cents a dozen in these days for pigeons. Even better money if you can corner [the market in] a logging camp. If you’re not selling to a camp, you smoke ‘em, brine ‘em, and send them back east in barrels. Now, of course, by the 1880s they’ll be over-harvested.” He used that last statement to slide out of 1850 Ole and back into modern KENNY with historical knowledge of the 1880s. “By then, there were so few pigeons left, they couldn’t even recoup the cost of the barrel.” But Ole made do anyhow. “About that time, though, I could start getting swan. Pretty much everywhere else, swan was against the law. You couldn’t kill it or sell it because swans were reserved for the royalty. Here, we didn’t have the royalty and had no issues killing a swan.”

This trend of uses, alternatives, and adaptations—centered on livelihood if not survival—continued throughout what KENNY had to share. He showed me a fishing-line leader made of silkworm gut which looked just like modern plastic. Along with it, he demonstrated the use of spade-end hooks. They were easier to make. Even a pioneer in the field could construct them from a thin strand of metal by bending it, sharpening one end, and flattening the other. This was in contrast to hooks with eyes. “And, in my experience,” he added, “the spade-end hooks, actually hold better.”

There was a cow’s horn, and a cup made from one, next to one another on the table. I was interested to know whether this coupling was intentional. He said that it was and was moved to share less obvious pieces of the cow horn set including a comb painstakingly carved and a “hornbook.” The hornbook was a small paddle made of wood with a leather strap at the handle. A

small piece of paper was crammed with the alphabet in lower case and upper case, vowels again, a few rows of vowels in combination with the letters B, C, and D, the Catholic trinitarian formula, and the Our Father. The sheet was covered with what looked like plastic in a thin brass frame held onto the paddle with tiny nails. The “plastic,” I was told was made from horn processed into a thin transparent sheet giving the ‘hornbook’ its name. Since books were often too expensive for immigrants like Ole, these easy-to-transport hornbooks were used to teach the very basics of reading—enough to *get by* in what little society they might encounter. I could not help but notice just how apt I found this reference to getting by thanks to something like ‘plastic.’

He also showed me a wasps’ nest with plenty of affordances that he had left in the rafters of the bunkhouse. He left it there because of its usefulness—and because Ole might have left it there for the same reasons. The papery nest makes great wadding for a rifle, an excellent ‘Band-Aid’ with natural antiseptic properties, and fire tinder.

Such “being able to make fire,” he said, “is the most important thing” in pioneer survival “I’ve tried lots of different ways. I, of course, always have my burning glass.” He held up a clear glass convex lens. “If there’s no sun, you can get good with a flint and steel. Either way, you’ve got to have something to light.” The most common were char cloth and char punk. He had some of each available for guests to see. Both are made by roasting the material in a tin while depriving it of oxygen. A “weep hole” is added to allow gasses to escape but not let oxygen in. The difference is the material itself. Char cloth, of course, is made of discarded rag while char punk is made of punk wood—soft, dried, rotted wood usually created by fungus. The key here is that the Norwegian was convinced, having tried them both, char punk is far and away the better material and thus much more likely what folks around here would have used. And yet, he pointed out, reenactors, “especially the hard-core Civil War guys always prefer char cloth.” I asked him why. Without hesitation he said, “I think they just like it for the look of it.”

Embedded in what he was saying and based on the follow-up conversation I had with him about what he meant was again the question of *authenticity* which is so central to reenactment. As I alluded to in the introduction, reenactors at Forest Bend seem to convert an older sense of authenticity as accuracy in materials to a newer sense which includes their interactions with these materials. For KENNY, having ‘played around’ with the various forms of char for fire starting has revealed to him that there is something behaviorally in-authentic in the use of char cloth, even though the *material* is accurate to the time.

But there is a problem: if play can draw on *all* the affordances within a reenactment ‘ecology,’ it has the potential to draw inauthentic employments despite entirely authentic materials simply because the modern understandings of reenactors are likewise elements of that ecology. Below, I will address this problem both in terms of authentic materials and in terms of reflexivity—an element of restored behavior—which helps resolve the pollution of modern thinking in reenactment. For Forest Bend, play is in fact required to act ‘authentically’ because play was a key element of the operation of the time reenacted. The trapper’s mouse safe, the pioneer’s wasps’ nest, and other uses of materials in novel ways are central to the question of authenticity not because they lack it but because what is most authentic is in fact the acceptance of certain novel uses.

### *Authentic Materials: Keeping Busy*

Whether it is particular to a bricolage required for survival on the nineteenth century Wisconsin frontier or true of all reenactment, authenticity in the reenactment at Forest Bend is inextricably linked to ‘making do.’ The citizens put very little emphasis on getting small details of the history “right” as long as ‘making do’ is done with the right materials. It is not about counting stitches, per se, but about the use of the right kind of needle, thread, and cloth. It is less about how

the *fictional* composite of a nineteenth century blacksmith *might* have made hinges and more about how *this actual* blacksmith has *learned* to make nineteenth century hinges.

When I entered the house during the Heritage Holiday, I was first struck with the smell of the pine boughs which had been strung up on the staircase. I was then struck by how strange it seemed to see *real* pine instead of the modern mass-produced alternative. Seeing full well she was stringing popcorn and cranberries on a thread, I resisted the urge to ask if she was counting stitches and instead plainly asked what the middle-aged woman in a period dress and apron was working on.

“My job today is mostly to get the house warm enough for people to visit. We’ll make gingerbread cookies a little later, that’s the dough ready over there. I made it at home.”

I asked her why she had not made it here. Her answer touched on the same problems I had heard elsewhere regarding ‘authentic’ experiences for audiences—it “just isn’t practical.”

“I’d love to do a whole day with kids out here where you say, ‘Let’s make a cake.’” She explained. “But it means all this with the oven.” She gestured to the stove which sat in the center of the room:

But it also means going out and milking a cow, churning butter, collecting eggs. And we don’t have a cow or chickens anyhow. Still. The wheat had to be harvested and ground how long ago. The point is, you can’t just run into town and grab what you need. You’ve got to figure it out. Maybe it’s a birthday cake. ‘It doesn’t matter what you want,’ I’d tell the kids, ‘You get what’s in season. Rhubarb, apples, this berry, or that nut. Depends when your birthday is.’

As I was taking this down, she added, “People don’t realize everything is made. We’ve been to workshops where they show you all different ways to make buckets or brooms out of this material or that. Again, depending on what you have, what time of year.” Then she repeated, “But you don’t just run to the store.”

I asked what she meant by “all this” with the oven. She continued to string popcorn and cranberries seemingly without giving it much thought. She gestured with her needle and thread as she talked pointing things out. What she described was a deeply kinetic quality to the stove. I, like the ignorant guest, largely imagined one started the fire and let it get hot, perhaps adding wood now and then when needed. She may have read my expression like Jean Baptiste, or maybe she was used to hearing people believe that version of things.

“You preheat it.” She said,

But you don’t just preheat it. It’s got a small wood-box and so it has to be stoked all the time. It’s not a bad thing, though. You get more control that way. It’s just more hands on. You come to know how and when to rotate the pans.<sup>42</sup> You move this to the top, this to the bottom. Just from how it’s shaped and in relation to where the fire is, you’ve got high, medium, and low sort of built-in.

She confirms a formal account I had heard elsewhere. Despite the slight anachronism, the stove in the house is a replica of one owned by Mary Todd Lincoln. The legend has it that the First Lady had gotten so acquainted to (embodied) its “quirks” that she requested to take it with her to the White House. She was of course informed that would not be necessary. The interlocutor went on to describe how she had come to learn these same sorts of quirks herself over the years.

“When you’re cooking,” she said, “you’re doing so much else.” I at first assumed she was referring, as the trapper had, to reenacting and interpreting at the same time. Then she continued in the reenactor’s present,

You’re heating water for dishes—maybe for bathing. You’re heating the house. Drying your socks and your boots. You’re making your bread, and your stew, and whatever else. You can’t get side-tracked, or you lose all of it altogether. But these women [homemakers] got so used to it. At some point you just do it. You don’t have to think about it.

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<sup>42</sup> What she is describing here and below is *embodying* its use. I simply lack the space to explicate the deeper connection between playing with the stove and developing this sort of ‘feel’ for cooking in this way.

I wondered if this sort of embodiment could help Jean Baptiste Du Bay not burn his stew. The homemaker continued to thread her popcorn.

I asked again about the practicality of that sort of work and how she managed to explain it all to groups when there was that much going on. She tied it back to everything it would have taken to make a cake and compared learning from a book to learning at the site. She noted that she herself was not “a big ‘book history’ person” and that “Hands on like this is just so much better.” Though she was sure to provide the caveat that “Of course, it’s not totally ‘that way’ [authentic]. It can’t be. But cast iron is still better than a Teflon cookie sheet. It’s so much more interesting.”

“A description alone,” she went on,

Can’t give you this. Kids in school groups come through all the time and say, ‘Boy. [Life then] must have been so boring.’ But absolutely not. Think about all it would take to do something you do without thinking every day. Like laundry. You’d always be busy. Collecting the water, heating it. You didn’t do a load every day. And that’s not even considering all it took to make your soap. You had to plan ahead way back to get lard when you butchered in the Fall.

The reenactors keep busy too. Both the homemaker and the Norwegian immigrant shared that their histories as reenactors started with Renaissance Fairs and the SCA. They each started out making costumes or objects for different reasons. “I got invited to a reenactment *dinner*.” The homemaker had said, “I didn’t know what that was, but I didn’t want to be left out, so I got out a sewing machine and some library books and figured it out.” For the Norwegian it was playing around having had some crafting experience in wood and leather, finding some article or interesting information about a thing, and seeing if he could replicate it. The next step for them both was volunteering for an event or two at the site such as a cast iron cooking event or school group when a friend of a friend thought they might be good for it. Over time, both their earlier playing around, crafting, and trying out translated to longer-term volunteering at Forest Bend

showing that the authenticity of objects and authenticity of play is a bidirectional relationship. As the Norwegian said of his table of artefacts,

I wanted to make all this stuff. You make a thing or two, then you make or buy this or that to go with it. You make new versions. You try new things. But I've been at it a while. I've made all this stuff and learned a lot about it. I think 'now what?' I might just sell it all and start over."

"Cast iron is better than Teflon" and "more interesting" even though it is not entirely "that way" (authentic) because it requires a deeper element of play. A cast iron pan, a pine bough, or a wasps' nest are easier to play with because they offer more affordances than their modern-day counterparts. Interlocutors and their guests learn more by 'doing' at forest bend because doing means playing and playing means figuring out. It means figuring out as much in present experimentation as it did in the getting by of the past.

### *Reflexivity: The Limits of Rationality*

Schechner tells us that "Restored behavior is symbolic and *reflexive*" (1985:36, emphasis mine). Reflexive can mean a lot of things, but each of these many meanings are qualities we might apply to Forest Bend's play. In the sense closest to what Schechner means, it is 'reflexive' in the sense that it happens without conscious thought. It is embodied. It is like the 'reflex' to yank one's hand away from a hot surface. But it is also reflexive in that it 'accounts for itself.' The restored behavior of play is reflexive because it is about playing with, playing within, and playing about playful people, affordant materials, and spaces with play as described above. It is playing (making use of) play (variability). Finally, it is reflexive in somewhat the opposite of the first sense. In this third sense, reflexivity deals with *reflection* or giving thought to something otherwise unconscious. I said above that reenactors run the risk of polluting otherwise authentic reenactment with modern thought, but, if modern thought remains reflexive in this way, the problem resolves itself. The homemaker reflected, however briefly, on the 'authenticity' implications of making her cookie

dough ahead of time and, upon that reflection, was able to discern the point of difference between the reality and the re-creation. She could well have made the same molasses cookie dough using the methods she described of the imagined intensive cake-baking session with school children. That she did not does not take away from the authenticity of baking them on a cast iron pan in a carefully managed nineteenth century wood-fired oven. In merging their reenacting and reenacted selves, reenactors are not only restoring their own behaviors but also attempting to re-restore the potential behaviors of the past. Chief among them is playfulness. And the trick is to know the difference.

Handler and Gable tell us that “facts alone cannot determine which alternative *narrative* is more valid” (1997:137, emphasis mine). Looking at reenactment as playful helps us look beyond narrative. For Forest Bend, the spectrum from constructivism to objectivism (Handler and Gable 1997:57-8, Wang 1999) dissolves away—the only ‘objectivists’ facts which can be amassed are those which were once ‘constructed’ as a product of play not altogether different than that of the present. Handler and Gable refer to Colonial Williamsburg as a “hybrid institution” because they must take positions as both an educational center and as a tourist business. Forest Bend is a different kind of hybrid—one of playing with the past and of playing in the present. While the reenactors at Forest Bend are reflexive, what they are reflecting on are not questions of objective correctness or constructive dilemmas. Rather, their reflection addresses the very problem raised above: whether their modern understanding of authentic material affordances should account for the way in which they were employed. The former represents an entirely rational approach to reenactment. The latter, represents its limits.

The limits of a rational approach to reenactment are not only the case for Forest Bend but of reenactment more broadly. Roth stresses the importance of “historical fidelity [driving] the choice of behaviors” (1998:54) of interpreters in reenactment improvisations. Good reenactment,

she argues, avoids making overly novel improvisations “for the sake of dramatic interest” emphasizing that reenactors must be well-familiar with their “history and related subjects” in order to do so. An understanding of whether a modern possibility was within the realm of possibility in its original context comes about through reflexivity and such familiarity.

The importance of this ‘fidelity,’ according to Roth, rests in the relationship between performers and their visitors—especially vis-à-vis their visitors’ *education*. While I lack to space to elaborate, it is worth mentioning that while the focus of this thesis is on the work of reenactors themselves, a great body of literature on museums and tourism emphasizes the relationship between that reenactment and visitor ‘consumption.’ Bagnall, for example, through his work at heritage sites in the northwest of England emphasizes the “key role of memory, life histories, and personal and family narratives in enabling visitors to relate the consumption experience to a range of experienced and imagined worlds” (2003:87) demonstrating that visitor reflexivity (or disposition for reflection) is as much a part of reenactment as that of reenactors. These two modes of reflexivity interact with one another. As Palmer and Jankowiak say of ‘spectacle,’ “It is through [reflexive] performances, whether individual or collective, that humans project images of themselves and the world to their audiences” (1996:226). To bring this back to Forest Bend in particular, reenactors and their visitors each contribute their own reflexivity to the situation and, in effect, play together.

What is created, then, in reenactment at Forest Bend and elsewhere, is not a facsimile of the *results* of play but of the nature of play itself. Such a relationship between participants, materials, re-creation, and improvisation has been described elsewhere. Hallam and Ingold, for example, suggest that

Copying or imitation... is not the simple, mechanical process of replication that it is often taken to be, of running off duplicates from a template, but entails a complex and *ongoing* alignment of observation of the model with action in the world. In this

alignment lies the work of improvisation. The formal resemblance between the copy and the model is an outcome of this process, not given in advance. (2007:5, emphasis mine)

This is simply to say, nothing can ever be entirely replicated because the process of replication always introduces change through reflection. At the same time, the potential for that change is so great that it is actually *more work* to create a complete replica than to create something new. As Schechner puts it, “some things are kept” (1985:120). And, it turns out, keeping takes work. Sally Falk Moore has referred to this work of keeping what appears to be ‘regular’ (1978:37-40)—or “given in advance” (as above)—as the “process of *regularization*” (39).

From a high-elevation view of the Project of Historic Forest Bend, a purely rational approach to enacting the past would be paralyzing because it does not allow for the ‘play’ required to be ‘authentic.’ In response to my noting the different ‘feeling’ of the Heritage Holiday as compared to other more scripted ones, HERB said he was afraid that “Sometimes in reenactment there’s just too much ‘*re*’ and not enough ‘*enactment*.’” When asked to elaborate, he explained that there is often too much focus on getting things ‘right’ and ‘accurate.’ Instead, he clarified, there is a sense in which whatever you are doing is “good enough” if you are in the right place, using the right materials, and “with the mindset of someone of the time.”

These sorts of comments reveal the priorities of the reenactors. There is as much “learning by doing” on their own part as there is learning by seeing or experiencing on the part of visitors. This is different than what most people imagine if they think of living history. As an example, a couple visiting Ole did not know what to do with the freedom. Even with the table of paraphernalia, they were unsure where to begin. KENNY needed to break the barrier by offering them pfeffernüsse cookies. Especially given their etymological origins, it is hard not to draw a link between authenticity and authority. People expect authorities in these roles—that they do as Roth says and ‘improvise’ with ‘fidelity’—because they are within an authentic space and amongst

authentic materials. The irony is that the most authentic way to embody a nineteenth century pioneer is not to be an objective authority at all—but simply to make do in the same way.

A side effect is that reenactors enjoy themselves. They find the exploration engaging. There is something in figuring something out like a tin rotisserie, an ice shed hinge, or how to use char punk which is fun for them. More-so at least than just knowing, as a studied authority might, the way it was “really done” and carrying it out. This aspect of enjoying the bricolage of reenactment speaks again to why play is so often confused for or oversimplified as ‘for fun’ or as ‘pleasurable.’ In contrast to this, if the account of the past offered at Forest Bend is to be taken seriously, play in the context of nineteenth century Wisconsinites, loggers and lumber pirates alike, was as much about survival as enjoyment. For today’s reenactors, it still is, but in the sense that reenactment may be about the survival of a type.

### *Having Figured it Out*

While I will return to this point again, I have come to understand reenactment at Forest Bend as a form of game from the perspective of a process not unlike theatre and not unlike ritual. In this process, the plasticity of play comes before a ‘hardening into game.’ It is important to have this picture of playfulness in hand first not only because it comes before but because it also exists around, and alongside games.<sup>43</sup> As in rituals, for which one must remember “[W]hatever is demonstrated in rites permeates also non-ritual behaviour and mentality” (Connerton 1989:44), play permeates non-game behavior. After all, “A coherent theory of play would assert that play and ritual are complementary, ethologically based behaviors” (Schechner 1988:5). The next chapter looks at the next piece to this process. Where play is about ‘figuring it out,’ I will look at a

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<sup>43</sup> Do not take this to mean the route from play to game is altogether linear, as play is ongoing.

more scripted event built of reenactors ‘having figured it out’ to examine what it is that all this playing generates, not yet in terms of game but in terms of theatre.

As ‘rehearsals’ of a sort, these cases of play are all part of an ongoing project of developing the site and its “citizens.” They also lead up to more scripted events for audiences by laying a foundation of fidelity, authenticity, and realism in the play which makes them up. Through KENNY’S playing with char materials for fire-starting, the Norwegian immigrant learned that char punk was the better choice—at least for him in this context. Its use emerged as a practice out of play and established him as a sort of authority on fire starting. This small example is a microcosm of what these reenactors do more broadly through play. Much like a sort of anthropologist himself, TED, too, spends his days with conversation pieces, reading gazes, and sharing history. “Have you seen my safe?” He asked above. Of course, I had, he only asked because he saw me looking. His asking this question generated a shared reflexivity between reenactor and visitor. In doing so, it captured both of our attention because we were engaged in the same piece of play together.

I will preempt the mystery game featured in Chapter 4, and play here with a trope of mystery itself. When it comes to the process of play and games, the proof, as they say, is in the pudding. But it is not so much in its *eating* as in its *setting*—not quite so hard as the hardening of theatre—in its formation from an earlier sloppier state.

## Chapter 3: Walking with Ghosts

### A Hundred Ways to Die

A large campfire burns in the ring built of river rocks in the clearing near the trapper's cabin. The evening is dark enough that it is the only source of light except for the lantern of our guide to illuminate the ghosts before us. One stands akimbo. The other is reclined casually on a log he has covered with a wool blanket. Both wear Breton hats.

The standing ghost speaks first. He begins with a long, sighing, "Aye. The life of a lumberjack is a dangerous one."

"Aye," echoes the recumbent spirit sitting up, "There must be a hundred ways to die." Their accents are as clichéd Irish one might muster.

"Drownin'!"

"Bear trap."

"Bear *attack!*"

"Freezin' water..."

"*Rough* water..."

They take turns, their litany continues half a dozen options longer—each coupled with a gesture. They set the scene and explain how the two of them have traveled down river<sup>44</sup> to this location for work.

"But these are *nothing* compared to how *we* died." The second ghost says standing up and addressing their guests, "Right, Seamus?"

"Right, Angus."

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<sup>44</sup> The river will be a consistent feature in this chapter. The river is in some way responsible for no less than a quarter of those deaths the ghosts list.

From here Seamus and Angus jeer one another playfully and, largely through a series of puns, reveal how they each are to have met their untimely ends. The first of infection—following a squirrel bite. The second from a fall—first for a woman and then from a tree. Or so he thought. The “woman,” the rodent-hampered ghost reveals, attracted the other with “big doe eyes” and broke his “hart” (he makes antlers with his hands). After a volley of “no your way is the dumbest way to die,” the two then put it to a vote. Angus, following a meagre show of five hands to Seamus’s two, earns the prize for, let us say, poor eyesight.



This exchange occurred as a part of a particularly comedic vignette during the Spirit Walk. Performed for a small audience of eleven visitors gathered around the firelight. The skit was put on by two well-known local actors—one of whom is also a playwright. The trope characters, classic clowning postures, traditional back-and-forth dialogue, and wordplay are used to establish the comedic nature of the skit. It is in that ‘comedy’ that we can see the first glint of indeterminacy flicker in what otherwise appears to be a well-rehearsed, scripted, *theatrical* vignette. Simply put, any comedic performance runs the risk of drawing too few laughs.

Whether groups voted was also hit or miss creating another case of what we might simply call ‘theatrical contingency.’ The performers ramped up the contingency by coupling the chance of missed laughs with their call for audience participation for which there was no guarantee. The ‘dumbest ghost’ sketch is clearly scripted and is here performed by experienced actors. I have come to know them both for their improvisational talents and so have no doubt that they were fully prepared should things have gone especially sideways. But, if my own time in theatres is any indication, nothing quite prepares you for the absence of engagement. My guess is that this is due

to the way engagement, as described above, emerges naturally in the doing of theatre. When it does not, something has gone awoul in process.<sup>45</sup>

A term like ‘theatrical contingency’ will do for now, but, as we will see in this chapter, such “uncertainties in situations” (Falk Moore 1978:39-48) are precisely the feature of reenactment that pushes it beyond theatre—even in its most theatrical forms.

### **Reenactment for Guests**

“You know, the River City mill used to make the paper for money back in the 60s, I think it was. Nobody knew it.” A volunteer for Historic Forest Bend tosses this into light conversation with a handful of others before guests begin arrive for the Spirit Walk—a tour on which the *Hundred Ways to Die* sketch is one vignette station. A campfire burns in a repurposed steel tire ring a few meters away from the shelter where the eight of them are gathered. The man sharing this history is a guide who will lead groups through the various site locations where reenactors are set to perform such vignettes portraying ghosts.

The unmistakable smell of that very paper mill settles on the site. To those unfamiliar, it is among the family of sulphuric smells which might be described as ‘rotten egg.’ To those accustomed to it, it verges there only on a bad day. On a better day, like this one, when the air is cool and calm, what settles in the nose is passably familiar to the end product resembling damp cardboard or a stack of pages still warm off a photocopier. A minivan rolls across the gravel parking lot on the other side of a thinning line of trees. Another guide contributes his own history: that another nearby mill produced proofs for centerfolds destined for adult magazines. He laughs as he describes the scrutiny of mill laborers with magnifying glasses ostensibly pouring over registration marks and the alignment of colored inks.

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<sup>45</sup> Typically, some version of audiences feeling “we didn’t sign up for this.”

It is difficult to place the printing of paper for the U.S. mint or centerfolds on the spectrum that stretches from historical reality to urban legend. In some ways, explored further in this chapter, that placement does not matter. What matters is that community memory takes them up in any event.

Contrary to the much more obvious playful experimentation we saw in Chapter 2, the Spirit Walk resembles the more familiar and ostensibly rigid cultural form of a staged theatrical production. I say ‘ostensibly’ because this is not to say such performances altogether lack playfulness. In saying at once “I am a ghost” through their character and “The river claims ninety lives a year, these days” in their dialogue, the Spirit Walk performer meshes the explicitly fictional with the historically accurate-enough. In fact, we shall see that the Spirit Walk is playful in its own way but that this play is different from the improvisation of the Heritage Holiday in how it engages with ‘facts’ on this spectrum of realities and fabrications.



The Spirit Walk is a “reenactment for guests” which represents the main alternative to “reenactment for reenactors” as described in Chapter 2. The event discussed in this chapter is a version of reenactment ‘theatre’ that a wider public sees. The focus is the second form of reenactment for guests, the stricter sense in which reenactors research personae and develop characters to deliver a scripted monologue or vignette.

As we will see in the Spirit Walk, these vignettes are largely place-bound, character- and sometimes dialogue-driven, and highly narrative to the degree that historical fact is largely secondary. These are very much like traditional ghost stories, but some are more educational, and some are comedic. The work of this chapter is largely an account and treatment of the Spirit Walk as theatre in order to better reestablish the role of restored behavior in understanding reenactment

as a ‘solidified’ cultural form following the ‘softness’ of playful reenactment explored in the previous chapter.

In the Spirit Walk, reenactors research characters in the style of what Stacy Roth refers to as “fictional composites” (1998:58) and develop a vignette. Each vignette is a ghost story told by its own ghosts. Compared to the other forms of reenactment at the site, these skits performed at various locations or ‘stations’ across the site are much more like a traditional, scripted, theatrical performance. Many of the reenactors for this event are also local community theatre performers. Guests follow a “lead guide” with a lantern who provides context on the site and time period and establishes authenticity in connection to the place. A “tail guide” goes along behind the group to help keep everyone together—and help deal with contingencies. Each location provides guests with a new discrete vignette performance while actors perform largely the same vignette for each group that visits them.

In this chapter, I describe the case of one group, their guides, and several of these vignettes in context at the site alongside the background of their associated reenactors.

### **A River Runs Through It**

It is dusk. I join the second group waiting their turn to go through the stations where the ghost story vignettes will be performed. Two women in modern clothing sit at a folding table with a simple cashbox, a notebook, and a box of pencils bearing the name “Historic Forest Bend: Frontier Schoolhouse.” As a now familiar “lifetime member,” I am tallied in the notebook in lieu of payment and handed a pencil and a yellow sticker with a “2” written on it in black Sharpie.

“You’re in group two.” One of them says in her typically plain manner. “You don’t need to wear this sticker or anything, it’s more for us to keep track of how many people we’re sending out in each group.”

“Yeah.” Adds the other, “Last year, it was a total disaster. This is just easier to keep track.”

As I wait for ‘group two’ to leave, I hear them explain the same unnecessary in a variety of permutations to several guests. I ask them about it, and they explain together that it can be a real challenge to keep the groups manageable because people come in all numbers.

“We like to keep the groups around eight or ten people. You’ll have a group of six ready to go and you want a couple to come up to put with them. Usually, then you’ll get a whole group of eight come up instead.” They prefer not to make the group of six wait but have to navigate having groups not too big and not too small. At the moment, group two comprises such a six: five other people and me. As group one coalesces and departs to make their guided way around the site, we are grateful Forest Bend coordinated the fire ring, some nearby seating, and hot apple cider. Nobody seems much bothered for it to be store-bought and drawn from a modern electric percolator into Styrofoam cups.

While we wait, guests strike up conversation within and across the groups with which they arrived. The first group is a younger couple and their son, perhaps eight to ten years old. The second is a couple near retirement age. As we talk, to the greeters’ apparent satisfaction, a group of five arrives and gets their “group two” stickers along with the short spiel that they need not wear or keep track of them. Our group, now at eleven people, just needs to wait a short time as they stagger our departure after group one.

“Think you’re going to get scaaaared?” Teases the young father.

“Nah,” his son replies uncertainly. The dad lets up.

“We’ve never been to this ghost walk before, but we come every year when they do a thing during the summer.” The retirement-age woman is talking to the five new arrivals and me. I get the sense she is attempting to set the boy at ease. “It’s very nice. They do such a nice job. We

have done this sort of thing before. We love those cemetery walking tours! Have you ever done those?” She is not referring to a Forest Bend event.

Another woman among the newcomers, about her same age agrees emphatically saying, “There’s really no better way to learn history than to experience it!” She says so tossing her Styrofoam cup into a steel-grated wastebasket lined with a plastic bag. I then realized I had been drawn in by the flicker of the campfire and was contemplating the way it connected present, past, and prehistory. It felt a “real” ritual could emerge at any moment. My return to reality was met with amusement given the disjunct between this woman’s reference to experiencing the ‘period’ and her activity tossing a modern cup into a modern garbage can.

My focus is already on the past in the present when group two’s guide Tony illuminates his lantern and, in doing so, illuminates the present in the past. While it is made in the style of a traditional storm lamp, the lantern he holds uses AA batteries to power LEDs. At this stage, I am a familiar face to the guide and my interests at the site are known in at least a vague sense. As if to explain in this capacity, the guide turns to me and notes as an aside, “I like the kerosene, but it can be too hard to see. When we’re bringing groups through the site in the dark, we don’t want them tripping on things. Of course, it’s not totally authentic, but it’s a safety thing.” I nod appreciatively making a quick note. “We’re looking to get more of them,” he adds. His emphasis that the institution is behind him is not lost on me.

Given the time I have already spent at the site over the years, I can appreciate the struggle of modern safety concerns and conveniences against the demands of ‘authenticity.’ The group has struggled with similar questions since the beginning. The example I heard most often was when they added modern restrooms and a wheelchair accessible ramp to the schoolhouse. As one interlocutor put it, “the nineteenth century frontier wasn’t a particularly accessible place.” Our guide is given the go-ahead by the women welcoming guests. An iPhone between the two of them

beeps to signal enough time has passed since the previous group began their tour. “Group two! Group two follow me this way!” The sun has firmly set. Tony raises the lantern into the air. The vaguely blue, white light of his LED lantern leads us along the tree line north towards Wendell Road. It contrasts starkly against the fire pit now behind us where groups 3 and 4 have begun to collect. It does not even flicker.



Tony’s first order of business is again our safety. A brief pre-flight asks folks to watch their step and stick together as much as possible. Tony also reveals a signal he has developed. He turns his back to us and swings his lantern slowly side to side. “I’ll swing my lantern like this so you all know when I’m about to stop,” he says. “It’s easy to get distracted looking around out here and I don’t want any pileups.” He also asks guests to silence their phones adding, cheekily, that “we don’t want to disturb the spirits.”

Not just a ‘guide’ familiar with the route to take, Tony is a docent. He has done his own research and is a part of the larger production of reenactment here at the site. While he is not in period costume, or in character per se, he keeps more than the map. As we will see, his familiarity with the history of and at the site has bearing on the overall performance we are about to experience.

The way down Wendell Road is paved at first. Crossing the Wendell Bridge, it goes to gravel, offering a sense that one has left at least the fully modern age. That bridge, in addition to serving as a gateway to the past, operates as a point of pride to the citizens of Forest Bend. Tony tells us that the stone bridge was built in the 1870s by the Wendells. As we walk over it today, it is a piece of the landscape which stakes a claim to the authenticity of the site. While the lineage from Charlie Wendell to the present is anything but unbroken, you would never know it from the

formalized account. In this way, Wendell Bridge and the house it leads to—another ‘original’ feature—support a narrative of autochthony for Forest Bend.

Forest Bend’s autochthonous narrative, like many others, is one of stewardship. It is no surprise, then, that the next piece of information our docent provides is that the donation and acquisition of adjoining land over the last few decades has resulted in Forest Bend “getting back to forty acres.” As we stand under a large tree at the ‘back’ entrance of the house, we learn that the original site of the structure was itself forty acres and that over the years it was divided and sold off. The professional organization that runs the site is excited to be investing in future plans to get a forty-acre Forest Bend—though, strictly speaking, it is a *different* forty acres as mapped—back to something of what it once was. In a subtle move for recruitment, Tony notes Forest Bend does not have “the spry, young, thriving volunteer base that we used to,” confirming, as Janelle Wilson (2020) and Cheung et al. (2020) suggest, “nostalgia” is essentially a future-oriented sentiment.

I learned later that, unlike what goes on in the vignettes across the site, these guide monologues are more loosely scripted and not rehearsed (at least not formally). That said, they do the same work and equally contingently. Both the vignette performances and the guides’ monologues endeavor, through restored behavior, to take an image of the past, pull it into the present, and project it into the future—through engagement with concretized actions—in the form of new memory. In Tony’s prologue of the ghost tour, this means restoring period-public knowledge of the Wendells and their homestead as modern-public knowledge about the recreated Wendell site. Tony’s means of engaging us in projecting an autochthonous narrative into the future is to ground us in the landscape because he cannot fall back on costumes, materials, or period behaviors.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> He tells us they discovered an old well on the new land and are in search, again, of the volunteer labor to see if they can resurrect it. The road, the bridge, the well, and the house which now stands before us as our

Where the reenactors endeavor to project the past on the present, Tony's work is in some way to dissolve layers of the present on which the past might be projected. As a modern guide among a modern audience, Tony cannot restore the past into the present through a crafted persona. The tools of that sort of performance are not at his disposal. Instead, he takes up the theatrical project of restoration by establishing the frame of reenactment as situated in both the common and continual place and yet dual time of Forest Bend. The theatre of the docent is to project the past instead into the future by removing the membrane of 'how it is' which separates 'how it was' from 'how it could be.'

With the present dissolved, the reenactment we are about to witness is free to impress not upon a present reality but upon our own engagement with it. The attention of the audience through the "fourth wall" is directed by the other three boundaries. As Schechner tells us, "One of the big differences among performance systems is the framing made by the physical environments—what contains what" (1985:94). While reenactors operate in what Schechner calls the "subjunctive mood of restored behavior: the overlaying of two frames that cannot coexist in the indicative," he does so with reference to time: being in two centuries at once. Here, the two centuries are united not only by the subjunctive mood, but also by the place itself. By situating us in time and space, Tony effectively opens the door for the vignette in the house to take hold. As we approach the small porch leading into the structure, he thumbs the latch and does so literally. He shines his light over the threshold saying, "Watch your step." And the engagement has begun.

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first station in reengaging the past are, in the eyes of Historic Forest Bend, enduring evidence of that reality. The reminder that they need volunteers pads the space between vignettes which are in turn rooted in the same landscape.

*Hatters, Hags, and Heraclitus*

The look and smell of kerosene lamps in the house are unmistakable. A community theatre actor I recognize sits at the large oak table on the far side of the room. The house is separated by several planks laid out on the floor arranged to divide the far half where he sits from the half where we have entered. He mimes writing a letter with a quill and ink. I know instantly we are about to see the old stage technique in which a character recites his writing aloud. He does not disappoint. He reveals his role as an assistant. His employer, he reveals, is “not quite himself. The nights are sleepless and long as he starts and raves incoherently at all hours.” Humor is injected into the skit as he describes the employer’s belief that “brandy is the devil’s drink” before taking a swallow from what I imagine must represent brandy. The irony is itself humorous—the employment of the drink to tolerate ravings about the same. But the greater humor to a modern audience is that, while period appropriate, the performer is not of a modern drinking age. He speaks his signature, and we learn his name to be Leo.

Immediately, the skit goes for a startle, and we hear the “lunatic” foretold by Leo yell from the top of the stairs. About half the party reacts as intended. He babbles, “They are coming for me!” as he descends the staircase. We are drawn into the narrative as an audience when the employer, whose name we learn to be August, leans over the railing and says, “They’re back! Right here in the room with you! They’re there. Don’t you see them? They are just... watching us. Make them go away!” The plot twist is that, to Leo, *we* are the ghosts. At least for myself, the sensation is a reminder that we will all be as much ‘past’ as he is sometime in the future. He

scurries back up the stairs and creates a small ruckus before descending again.<sup>47</sup> Leo contributes this development to his letter.

The central narrative to emerge is that “the Great August Bennett” is a hatter, ostensibly with mercury poisoning. What is peculiar about this particular narrative is that it draws on the historical accuracy of hatters and mercury poisoning (of Alice in Wonderland infamy), but that there are no known hatters associated with the long history of this site. Despite this, the reenactors selected this as an engaging tale. They told me later they “just liked” the idea of someone going mad as a ghost story and that one of the more senior reenactors mentioned mercury poisoning as an avenue.

While the site lacked a hatter of its own, I never got the sense or indication that the organizers of the Spirit Walk were against the idea. They pulled it off, in any event, as a successful “fictional composite.” What is intriguing about this vignette was not that the hatter was out of place, but that he was *not* left out of place. Instead, a concerted effort was made to bring the river and other references to the location of the site into the narrative. Doing so legitimized the hatter’s presence. In reviewing his ‘books,’ August referenced several towns and individuals which I have come to recognize as local for the period. Leo likewise wrote in his letter and says aloud for our benefit that he wished he “had not followed August to this place on the river.” The river was used in this narrative almost as a supporting character. What is more, in its continued presence—still flowing beyond the door behind the actors here—it serves as an authoritative, eternal, witness.

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<sup>47</sup> While I lack the space here to explore it further, I am intrigued by the important role stairs and verticality seem to play in theatrical productions. Their use is a common request among virtually all productions for which I have worked. This seems especially true at the level of community theatre.

What before seemed only a few layers: past, present, future, and place has become much more complex. It can do so because each of these layers are more fluid than they initially let on. As Heraclitus so famously claimed, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.” Perhaps aptly, then, the river is precisely the feature of the landscape which emerges time and time again in the formalized account of Historic Forest Bend. From Tony’s account to legitimize a claim to forty acres on its banks in this particular location to its use to legitimize the presence of an otherwise entirely fictional hatter, the river has final say. The particular geological features associated with the river’s movement about the landscape even provided the name for the original site and today provides the basis for the name of the group which serves as its contemporary stewards.<sup>48</sup>

It was in another vignette that I noticed the tightness with which the river grips the through-narrative of Forest Bend. Set as closely to the bank as was safe in the dark, one of the ghosts wears a long black dress and black veil. She stands aside a desk that is quite out of place in the woods; it has been made over as a makeshift medical station. A small fire crackles on the ground to keep guests warm, but this is at something of a distance from her. She holds a candle and employs the trope of a crone or hag, explicitly introducing herself as such, but across the span of her tale we learn that she is a midwife.<sup>49</sup> Like the hatter and his assistant, the midwife blends the local and the broad. She incorporates period nicknames for areas of the river like “Devil’s Elbow” and “Boneyard Eddy”<sup>50</sup> as well as the names of women whose children she has delivered. These are names recognizable to those familiar with the local history. To this she blends Ojibwe

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<sup>48</sup> Historic Forest Bend is a pseudonym, but this holds true, perhaps even more so, for the actual names.

<sup>49</sup> She draws on the old notion of midwife-witch problematized by David Harley (1990).

<sup>50</sup> I learned later these were drawn from an historical text.

knowledge, a reference to the northern lights, and her very recognition of the hag as a trope audiences (modern and period alike) will recognize.

She provides the figure referenced earlier that, “the river claims ninety lives a year, these days.”<sup>51</sup> As a midwife, though, the story she intends to tell is of another killer: life itself. “One in eight women in Wisconsin Territory lose their lives in pregnancy,” she says. As “the only white women in this part of the frontier” the three women she names rely on Ojibwe medicine for comfort. Unlike the latter, the composite of the midwife is likely to represent real people if not real ideas such as the use of cherry bark tea to aide in a difficult labor. The river, and “her healing properties” features once again amongst the account. Much could be made of ideological–normative and orrectic–sensual symbolic poles (Turner 1973:1100-1) and of the presence of the fire, candle, set table, and our present relationship to the water featured so prominently in the narrative with respect to healing and death. But to do so would risk making this performance into a ritual. Though it is narrative and not ritual, there is certainly something of ritual to it and, in fact, to all established narratives.

It is through such common features and openness to conflation that Turner and Schechner were able to bring us from ritual to theatre and back again. Here, this is evident in the overarching parallel of “taking up” between them. Ritual takes up behaviors and symbols with an eye toward influence on a natural or spiritual sphere in order to generate an effective “stereotyped sequence of activities” (Turner 1973:1100). Theatre takes up, or “restores” behaviors and symbols in rehearsals and improvisations with an eye toward a performative or aesthetic sphere to generate a “drama” or “performance sequence” (Schechner 1985:16-7). To ritual, theatre adds, as we have

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<sup>51</sup> This seems to be an example of a modern figure transposed into the character for the purposes of teaching through reenactment. In other words, while the river was almost certainly known to be dangerous, it is unlikely a period individual would have cited it as such, but it gets included for educational purposes without much questioning.

seen so far, the cyclical and ongoing nature of taking up. If little else, the iterative process of rehearsal and improvisation<sup>52</sup> make explicit the taking up which is largely hidden (or forgotten) in the production of ritual.

Incorporating game into this scheme takes us a step further still. It helps to address the shortcomings of reenactment as theatre as Roth (1998) identified. In *playing* a game, all aspects of what was restored in its creation come to bear. Further, games operate on a form of social cohesion we might call consensus. I do not here mean that individual rational actors ‘enter into’ consensus to form games but rather that consensus is a necessary condition for the emergence of a game from its constituent parts—play.<sup>53</sup> Take my earlier example (in Chapter 1) of tag which emerges from ‘playing around’ with behaviors and their significances. Individual ‘players’ need not set out to establish one rule or another, and yet an assemblage of rules can be collectively arrived at and agreed upon. Behaviors and symbols are again redeployed and recombined. Their mixtures and remixtures are even more evident than in theatrical rehearsal. What is added between theatre and game is in the resulting cultural product. The game itself, resulting from the shagginess of play, presents its own relationship to indeterminacy and contingency. Where theatre makes obvious the taking up in its production in contrast to ritual, game makes obvious the contingencies of the result in contrast still to theatre.

The variation across each form, ritual–theatre–game, is in their treatment of contingency. A ritual makes outcomes ostensibly certain. What makes rituals engaging, then, is an investment in those certain outcomes. The outcomes of theatre are chiefly certain granting subtle variation.

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<sup>52</sup> Here I mean both ‘pure’ improvisation in the sense of the discrete theatrical style, but also the actor’s ability to improvise how a line is delivered, the ‘trying out’ of new movements with each delivery of the same line, a director’s ability to ‘block’ a scene on the spot, and so on.

<sup>53</sup> For at least those which are of concern here. I grant that there are many other senses of “game” employed, for example, by economics for which this is only in part true.

What makes theatre engaging is the ways those variations meet the audience's gaze. It is through the interplay of variations (what Schechner calls "modulations" [1985:11]) in performance (or the potential for them), and an audience's response to them, that "some kind of collaboration, collective special theatrical life, is born" (Schechner 1985:10-11). In a game, the outcomes, even if of an ostensibly limited number of possibilities,<sup>54</sup> are wholly uncertain or contingent. It is through the taking up of elements of play—which is flexible, variable, shaggy, open, and chaotic—that games contrive their contingency (Malaby 2007:96). You are what you eat even if you are a game. In at least one way, this is obvious in how we speak of games, theatre, and rituals. Games are made of play and get played. Theatre is made of playing and produces plays. And rituals comprise performances and get performed.

These cultural forms are backwards compatible. Schechner predicted it when he suggested "A coherent theory of play would assert that play and ritual are complementary, ethologically based behaviors" (1988:5). I mentioned that the placement of claims on a spectrum from historical to urban legend does not matter in comparison to their being taken up. This is only half the story as the other half is the form in which they are taken. Chapter 2 showed the reenacting at hand begins more in play than rehearsal. So, despite the resemblance to theatrical forms, and even to rituals at the scale of particulars, a treatment of reenactments as games is a fruitful lens and the one I seek to employ in the next chapter.

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<sup>54</sup> By this I imply that the outcomes are never truly limited. If I am engaged in a game for which there are only two ostensible outcomes and drop dead, I have generated a new outcome not accounted for. Nonetheless, by recognizing the two original outcomes, the game recognizes that the outcomes (of any number) are contingent.

## A Process Approach to Playing Theatre

I take the project of historical reenactment at Forest Bend as *theatre* in this chapter in order to set the stage for modifying that theatrical analysis, specifically restored behavior, in order to propose a processual approach to play and games as briefly described above. If an analogy can be drawn, it is between play as rehearsal and game as theatre. But there are two dangers in doing so.

The first danger is conflating the term ‘play’ in the sense of flexibility and improvisation—a thoroughly liquid behavioral state—with the product of theatre, ‘a play.’ A play, in contrast to *playing*, is more or less solidified. The solution is to recognize the significance of the qualifier ‘more or less.’ Where ritual is more solid still, theatre, while resembling ritual in many ways, accounts for soft spots. We can see such softness, or contingencies, across the Forest Bend productions in the form of small variations in each iteration of a performance or vignette, the use of tail guides to make adjustments, and the uncertainties associated with environmental and logistical factors. Where theatre accounts for such contingencies better than ritual, game makes them explicit. As we will see in Chapter 4, game (over ritual or theatre) productively links this explicit contingency to human engagement or investment in the cultural from under examination.

The second danger in drawing a direct analogy between play–game and rehearsal–theatre, is a functionalist one best illustrated by the description of both lead and tail guides. An early inclination in looking at lead guides is to suggest that they function to ‘set the stage.’ While they do do so, their position is not altogether functional. I argue, rather, that the guides are as much a part of the overall performance, theatre, or game of the event. By way of example, while we can see in Tony’s interaction with the landscape and with guests a particular account of legitimacy, this is not to suggest that this is Tony’s function. Instead, it is a natural product of the same origin in the production itself. Namely, an attempt at re-restoring the past.

Similarly, tail guides *appear* to function as addressing contingencies in the performance. Interlocutors said so rather explicitly. One said, “We’re just here to make sure everything is going right, to step in if [a performer] needs something between groups. We keep an eye on if performers are going long and let [the reenactors] know if we’ve got a big crowd or if things are dying down.” While even from their own perspective tail guides *do* function to handle such contingencies, that is not their *raison d’être*. This role is phenomenological, not ontological. Because any function, if there is one, is intrinsically defined by the unknown, that function cannot be adequately defined. Like lead guides, tail guides are engaged in the overall project of Forest Bend.

While the analogy may have its dangers, it is also the best one for the cultural form produced by Forest Bend. For this reason, we must arm ourselves against the dangers. Perhaps the greatest such weapon is a process-based approach. Approaching the emergence of ritual, theatre, and game as processes clarifies the strength of the analogy. For any such feature, a process, not a function, produces the more recognizable form. This escape is perhaps most elegantly rendered in Sally Falk Moore’s account of “The process of *regularization*, the process of *situational adjustment*, and the factor of *indeterminacy*” (1975:39) to explain what a group takes up in making do. We might take adjustment, indeterminacy, and regularization in turn for any process, but I confine myself here to the analogy of ritual, theatre, and game.

#### *Re-Restoration: The Show Must Go On*

For the time being, I will return to a theatrical frame of reference, but only to show that reenactment theatre is more contingent than the cultural form of theatre might suggest. Malaby defines contingency as “that which could have been otherwise” (2007:107) much as Giddens defines agency as “events” in which at any point one could “have acted differently” (1984:9)

including the ability to “intervene in the world [or] refrain from such intervention” (14).

Schechner likewise notices that “restored behavior involves choices” in that “an actor can say no to any action” (1985:37) and so what are ultimately played are what Goffman refers to as “realized resources” (1961:28)—that which is actually done among all that could possibly be done. But these choices are not free and easy—they are always supported or maintained by some social feature even if only, in the context of reenactment, their believability. Nor are they always choices per se. One cannot, *choose* whether the audience laughs at one’s puns. One can also hardly choose to be a mad hatter on the rural banks of the Wisconsin River circa 1850—without drawing on the authority invested in reenactors by the river to do so.

The vignette performances and the larger Spirit Walk event are more certain than a game and less certain than a ritual. The Hundred Ways to Die sketch contained the uncertainty of ‘falling flat’ but was still a largely repeatable product. It is not as if failure to make the audience laugh meant the theatrical production was any less theatrical. Nor did it mean participants failed to undergo some larger symbolic or physical change as in a failed ritual. And yet, by and large, reenactment is a process which integrates (Malaby [2007] might suggest “contrives”) contingencies in ways which push it beyond theatre. Participatory theatre (of a sort even beyond the voting encouraged by the lumberjacks) already straddles the boundary largely given these same contingent qualities.

Like theatre, games “blur temporal and causal systems, creating in their stead bundles of relations that attain only relative clarity and independence from each other” (Schechner 1985:62). Ritual, theatre, and games—each to their own degree—endeavor to produce such “relative clarity” when, otherwise, anything might happen. Given these contingencies, restored behavior, like games, maintains a “generative balance between the open-endedness of contingencies and the reproducibility of conditions for action” (Malaby 2007:106).

In the context of games, Malaby (2007:107-8) identifies four types of contingency which serve to make them “compelling” and which are the features of play that social systems seek to alter. We have seen each of these to varying degrees in the Spirit Walk despite its theatricality. “Stochastic contingencies” are those features of randomness like dice or cards one typically thinks of with respect to games. It also applies to less obvious random events like the environmental factors seen during the Spirit Walk. “Social contingencies” are those which result from “never being certain about another’s point of view”—something ghosts of a bygone age would struggle further with where they real. A “performative contingency” describes an “action... that may succeed or fail” such as whether the guests laugh at the comedic vignette. And “semiotic contingency” is based on the “unpredictability of meaning” which is part and parcel of the messiness of language.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the ongoing—often managed—contingencies of it, reenactment, like other forms of theatre, often contains a *feeling* for certainty which is hardly identifiable from within. Interlocutors at once explain how they have crafted their character incorporating a particular piece of research and then in due course comment on the impact of the weather, the pandemic, that they must keep campfires burning, the impact of variation in group size, and how best to ‘space out’ the groups because some actors ‘tend to run long.’ One performer is notorious for her tardiness. I heard from a number of members that the reality was simple. She operates on “ROBIN time.” For the Spirit Walk, the solution was basic enough—she played the schoolteacher and the group made the schoolhouse the last station of the tour.

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<sup>55</sup> While again featured in the puns of the Hundred Ways to Die sketch, I do not have space here to expand on the ways in which meanings of the word “authentic” are perhaps the best example of semiotic contingency at Forest Bend.

Another performer portrayed the ghost of Brigid McCaffary—the wife and murder victim of John McCaffary, the only man to have received the death penalty in Wisconsin history.<sup>56</sup> The actress had incorporated a scream in the middle of her story. Interlocutors around the site who heard the scream commented on its inconsistency—that she seemed to do so for some groups and not others. In discussing it with her later, the reason was decidedly simple. She knew the blood-curdling scream she was intent on creating would destroy her voice had she done it for every group. She also had reservations whether the scream would be overly frightening for younger children. She regulated whether or not she would scream based first on whether or not a younger audience was present but also elected to simply not scream at too many groups in a row.

As discussed above, reenactment ‘theatre’ is largely about dissolving the boundaries between restored and ‘re-restored’ behaviors. Reenactment for guests starts to look like theatre precisely because it falls somewhere between ritual and game. Reenactors are aware enough of contingencies to account for them but not so much that they come to ‘contrive’ them themselves in every case. The dissolved boundary is achieved in vignettes of ghosts because, like the river for the hatter, it is easy to imagine the present actor’s character as what it is—a ghost brought forth from the past.

The project of reenactment is to impress the connections of distant, past, and thus low-resolution fictional composites upon a concrete, present, high-resolution, local landscape. The mismatch between these resolutions is at once responsible for generating contingencies and for masking or making use of them. Attention can be drawn to areas where the low- and high-resolution pictures of past and present align despite the uncertainties around them. These

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<sup>56</sup> What is perhaps most interesting about this narrative is beside the point here. In her tale, young Brigid acknowledges her position in the present when she says, “He was the first and the last man to hang. In all the years I’ve walked this earth [as a ghost], not another man has hanged in the state of Wisconsin.”

commonalities are what is ‘kept.’ They are the means by which “each show—of theater, sports, ritual—is a palimpsest collecting, or stacking, and displaying whatever is, as Brecht says, ‘the least rejected of all the things tried’” (Schechner 1985:120).

This scripted form of vignette reenactment recognizes contingencies—even if performers do not identify them themselves. It allows for continual adjustments in a way even theatre cannot do. This is again why Stacy Roth has difficulty accepting first-person reenactment as a form of theatre. Instead, the scripted vignettes, arranged across the landscape, begin to lean towards ‘game.’ Even the docents end up participating in this game-like form as a result of how their own authenticity is constructed. Like any performance, their ‘localizing,’ appeals for membership, and so on *can* fail. Like laughter in response to a comedic vignette, the results of these efforts are heavily contingent, as in games—but, as in ritual, it is not for lack of trying.

Versus “the least rejected of all things tried,” the most rejected are likely to be those most volatile. In evidence is the colloquial W.C. Fields recommendation that actors “Never work with children or animals” due to their unpredictability. In this way, where the process from play to game may be seen as contriving contingency (Malaby 2007:96), the process from rehearsal to theatre is one of confining it. With no denying that contingencies abound, reenactment for guests—and reenactors’ attempts to manage those contingencies—falls somewhere in between. The Whodunit event in the next chapter is less ambiguous.

## Chapter 4: Mystery among the Reenactors

You have probably seen the fliers about town: “Calling all able-bodied men and women of a strong constitution. Mr. Peter Wendell and the citizens of Forest Bend request your services to solve a mystery of great importance.”

The otherwise quiet town of Forest Bend has seen an influx of visitors this month. A lieutenant in the Union Army came to town, first, on a campaign to recruit soldiers. About that same time, a theatre troupe came to town to perform a show called *Catharine and Petruchio*. It was the event of the summer, and folks came from the surrounding towns to see the performance. Misfortune didn’t strike until after the show when Ada Turner, a wealthy woman from upriver, was mugged! The perpetrator made off with her jewelry.

A couple days later, the sheriff managed to capture a local ruffian named Fergus and, though he didn’t get a confession or recover the jewelry, managed to toss him in jail for the mugging. Where it gets interesting is that the next day, while digging around their property to repair some fencing, the Wendells discovered a dozen glass jars buried there. This alone would have been odd considering that all the jars were sealed—and all were empty save for one. As happens in Forest Bend—it gets weirder. Despite the jar’s having been sealed and buried for years, the only contents were none other than the very jewelry stolen from Ada only days before!

How could this be? Just what is going on here? It’s up to you to find out!



This time around, it is 1863. News of the Battle of Gettysburg has reached Forest Bend and rumors have begun to fly.

The citizens have gathered in the schoolhouse. Half a dozen people sit in desks. One takes a bench as he adjusts a handkerchief tied around his neck. Two men with canteens of water stand off to the side. They will need them in today’s heat and humidity. Not one of the characters, a man in modern clothing stands at the front in place of the period teacher—herself one of those at the desks.

“How much do we know about this ‘*Catherine and Petruchio*?’” the sheriff asks, thumbing the tin star pinned to his shirt. “Is this a play that’s widely known—is it like an equivalent of a famous new movie that’s out? So, what I’m asking, I guess, is, would folks who weren’t at the performance still know something about it?”

The man at the front nods. “It’s a retelling of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. Most people would at least know that. It’s not like the new James Bond movie or something, but it wouldn’t be unknown either. There’s been a fair amount of buzz around town at least. And, remember, this sort of thing doesn’t happen much in Forest Bend. Even folks who don’t ‘know about’ the theatre would go. Think of it like a festival or a carnival or something like that. It’s a traveling troupe. Folks go just to do it.” He is the author, answering the actor’s questions before guests arrive to question them.

“I know *I* have been talking it up around town,” adds Anna Wendell, ever the socialite. “It’s thrilling for a little village like Forest Bend to have a *professional* theatre troupe visit!” She puts her hand to her chest with the word ‘professional’ and flutters her eyes feigning humility. “I do have one question,” she transitions, coming out of character as quickly as she entered. “How much should I emphasize ‘no harm done’ now that Ada has the jewelry back? That seems like it’s mostly to say Fergus is just a hooligan, so it’s not a big deal. But if I say that too much, I start to look guilty since Peter and I *found* the jewelry. Then we’re trying to make it not a big deal.”

Peter is nodding along.

“That’s entirely up to you. You can play it up or down and even do it differently for different groups—but watch out, then, if they start to talk to one another. The important thing there, for everyone, is that Ada does have the jewelry back, so you can all use that—however makes sense for your characters.”

Rose Turner chimes in next. “Speaking of that, are we allowed to point the finger at someone who’s not around? I know [my husband] Fred’s off fighting the war. And we don’t have Ada here, even though she’s sort of the victim.”

“Some of us, like Anna, have it in our bios, too, to cast aspersions one way or another,” Peter adds referring to his printed script, “and I think hers even says Fergus and he’s not around.”

The actors do not know which one of them is portraying the culprit.

“You’re right, HERB. Fergus is one. Ada is another—if you think it’s all staged. Maybe it’s a Murder-on-the-Orient-Express-situation and it was all a big conspiracy act within an act. These are all okay ideas. In Fred’s case, he wasn’t around, but you know me, he could have been orchestrating the whole thing by post.” A quick scribble in the author’s notebook commits this as a possibility for future Whodunits. “Any other questions?”

### **The Long Event**

If the distinction between ritual, theatre, and game is in their treatment of what comes before (action, rehearsal, and play respectively) and in their treatment of contingency, then where do theatrical games fit? By theatrical games, I do not mean games played in theatrical rehearsal, but theatrical productions which are themselves games. One example is that explored in this chapter. In the previous chapter, we saw a theatrical production which was game-like. In this chapter we see a theatrical production which is a game in its own right. The exploration of this event serves as a foundation for further understanding the process alluded to at the end of the previous chapter as well as the similarities in that process across the forms of ritual, theatre, and game.

The exchange above is a snapshot of the second phase in the long-form event of Historic Forest Bend’s Whodunit—the phase is the closest thing they have to a rehearsal. I call it an ‘event’ instead of committing it here to ritual, theatre, or even game because, while it serves foremost as an example of game for my purposes, it does so because it blurs the distinctions

between the three. I will argue that any ritual, theatre, or game can be treated similarly. In terms of Schechner's question of setting (what contains what) the long event is a ritual containing a theatrical production forming a game—and demonstrating the complex relationship between the three forms. I break the Whodunit<sup>57</sup> into four phases detailed here: a radio interview, the gathering or rehearsal described above, an investigation conducted by guests (the gameful performance of reenactors), and “the grand reveal.” These together make up the ‘long event.’

The event is ‘long’ in that it takes place not in the span of moments, hours, or even days as other events like business meetings, masses, discrete staged productions, rites of initiation, or gaming sessions, but rather across months of planning and production. It is also long in an older sense of the word, that of ‘distance’ or ‘remoteness.’ While it has many of the hallmarks of ritual in its repetition, predictability, and regularity, these are remote—or *longus*—from the inner working of a process itself. The process or long event of the Whodunit is like one of any number of religious ‘rituals’ for which its structure and manifest functions remain largely the same while the materials within it are altered. In initiation rites, for example, the initiants are of course different while the rite itself stays the same. A Catholic mass, similarly, seeks to confine its effects to a particular outcome while the readings change based on a calendar and a homily varies in accordance with those readings and what goes on in the world beyond the ritual. Put another way, in ritual, the frame or scaffolding of the event are well-defined, but the contents vary. In this way, theatre is in some ways actually *less* contingent than a ritual. In a standard, staged, theatrical production, the contents of the event do not change, but their presentation or frame do based on their delivery, reception, and so on. In other ways, as we saw in Chapter 3, theatre is far more contingent than ritual.

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<sup>57</sup> Several are treated in this chapter as a synoptic case.

Through their deployment as ‘long events,’ all processes change with use. Schechner too uses the ritual of the mass as an example to say of the performance process that “What happens over years and centuries to the various church services happens much more quickly during rehearsals” (1985:52). Likewise, “Games can change as they are played” (Malaby 2007:102). Games, versus theatre, offer a slightly better analogy for what is happening in restored behavior by way of playtesting. To explain what is going on, what is being brought out, and what is being put to use in a ‘rehearsal’ requires extra conceptual labor in part because resemblance makes it difficult to separate what is done in a performance from its rehearsals—as many stage actors can confirm, directors tend to give notes as though all performance were rehearsals. Playtesting operates in a similar but more overt fashion. Every playthrough of a game demands an on-the-fly assessment of actions’ consequences—consciously or otherwise. As a result, just like Turner’ or Schechner’s theatre, “games are grounded in (and constituted by) human practice and therefore always in the process of becoming” (Malaby 2007:103). No such change would be possible were it not for the various locations of contingency—or space for play—in ritual, theatre, or game. In turn, these are in what is swapped out between a repeated frame, the indeterminacies around the frame itself, and in what is embraced, accepted, or consciously integrated from the outset as contingent.

Applying a term like “long event” is a way of saying “ritual” or “theatre” alone are inadequate in describing what is going on despite a clear resemblance to these better understood forms. Here again is where game sheds light. Theatre is apt because the process of reading, rehearsal, and performance remains in the same ritual-like pattern regardless of the script to be enacted and of its final outcomes. Game is apt because, in its ‘taking up’ of play, an eye is kept on contingencies through every stage of the same sort of process.

In looking at what is swapped out in or around the frame of an event, all phases of the long event of the Whodunit are open to and, in fact, require such replacement. An interview on a local AM/FM radio station with the author and one or two key reenactors always provides what is known as “the teaser” for the crime to be solved. These resemble the call to action which opens this chapter. In the next phase, the author then completes the “script” for the actors. A member of Historic Forest Bend organizes the event and ‘casts’ the reenactors on a volunteer basis. The author adjusts the plot and script to account for who is available. The script consists of more detailed background information, instructions, a props list for clues, and individual character biographies and motivations. Reenactors take this information and develop their personae. The next three phases in the long ritual, which come in quick succession on the day of the event, are the focus of this chapter.

### **Who Duz It?**

“Whodunits” of this type might be familiar to readers in the form of the murder mystery dinner party. There has been a marked increase in recent years in the availability and popularity of these ‘kits’ available for those who want to host such an event. These “out of the box” productions usually contain a set of instructions, invitations for guests with biographies and hidden information for their eventual characters, props, and clues. These sometimes come in sealed envelopes which the instructions dictate the host open at certain points. In several cases, it is one of these envelopes which triggers the death which is to become the focus of “investigation” the rest of the night. As it is a dinner party after all, some box sets even include recommended recipes for keeping with the theme of the narrative: wild west, roaring 20s, Victorian, and so on. Character-player-guests are encouraged to attend in costume. They are to go about the party largely, or at least marginally enough for the desired effect, “in character.” Of course, the extent of

this varies by group. In order to accomplish this, participants are given backstories, motivations, goals, and other special instructions to draw upon throughout the night.

As mentioned briefly above,<sup>58</sup> one of my interlocutors was invited to such a party among gaming friends long before she knew Forest Bend existed. It having a “loosely renaissance theme,” she said she “didn’t want to be the odd one out and not have a costume,” so she found herself at a sewing machine rifling through books on period clothing she had checked out from the local library. From there, she went on, following immense improvements to her clothing over time, to attend renaissance fairs. She later intersected with the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) which eventually led her to the Citizens of Forest Bend. This sort of route through inherently game-like activities like larp and tabletop roleplaying games through the SCA and into more formal reenactment is a relatively common account.

Another route, though hand-in-hand with this one in at least two cases, is that a general interest in history—especially genealogy—leads people through specific ‘local history’ materials. While there are a half dozen communities each founded around this particular relationship to the river, Historic Forest Bend is really “the only game in town” when it comes to its own specialized period. Though municipalities and the local library have their own records of the past, Historic Forest Bend has cornered the market on “life” at the time. While municipal records (as far back as they are able) can say who, when, and where people were settled, married, born, and died, they do a poor job of showing why and how. Forest Bend effectively fills these holes in history with a heuristic of the past. While a twice- or three-times-great grandmother’s diary may not survive, one can gain a real sense of what she may have impressed upon its pages if only they can see how she may have lived.

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<sup>58</sup> See page 67.

These interests, either in filling gaps or more explicitly through role playing games, certainly seem to gain steam rather than lose it once individuals find themselves engaged with the site. At this stage, then, Historic Forest Bend's interest in putting on a whodunit event is anything but surprising. As we will see, this event repurposes and recombines the meaningful symbols and practices of Historic Forest Bend and reenactment practices into a ritual-like production. It also calls on performers to develop, embody, and perform characters in a somewhat reliable (that is to say rehearsed) way as a form of theatre. Still, what is put on at the Whodunit is entirely too contingent to be considered purely theatre to the degree that a theory of "game" becomes critically important.

### **The Investigation**

Following the 'rehearsal' phase in which reenactors ask questions and negotiate aspersions, guests begin to arrive at the site. Ads in the local paper and the AM radio foretold what the small sign at the gate confirms. After a small admission fee—" \$5 for adults, \$2 for students and seniors, members and preschoolers are free"—guests are given a 'guidebook.' The guidebook is made of a few sheets of plain printer paper. Depending on the year, it has been printed either at a volunteer's home via inkjet printer or photocopied. I never got a clear answer where they got photocopied but got a real sense that it involved "misuse of company resources" somewhere, as Historic Forest Bend does not have their own photocopier. In any event, the printouts are folded in half to form a booklet. There have only been a couple of years when budget allowed in which Historic Forest Bend elected to have a local print shop make the booklets resulting in a staple at the crease.

The guidebooks contain the teaser established earlier on as well as some brief historical information, if required, and greater background of the crime to be solved. Unlike murder mystery

dinner parties (discussed in greater detail above), in which a character is liable to turn up dead midway through, the Wendell Whodunit works on the premise that the crime happened “recently” and investigators must ‘get up to speed.’ Ostensibly, they must because the local sheriff is always a trope-of-a-sheriff. He is either entirely incompetent or, more typically, too crooked to be trusted—the sheriff is a suspect as much as anyone. Enough background is provided to get guests up to speed on the timeline and goings on of the day.

A brief sentence or two of biography is included for each character. This is nothing in comparison to what the characters themselves get. Rather, keeping with the example, the sheriff’s biography typically says something like “The local sheriff. Politician and ‘law around here.’ He’ll tell you what you *need* to know... if the price is right.” Other recurring characters include “Mrs. Wendell: The innkeeper’s wife and town gossip” and “Sam Krzysztof: Village blacksmith who would rather keep to himself.” A small amount of space is left for guests (investigators) to make notes about each one. The guidebook also contains a map of the site. It was created by a volunteer using “ClipArt.”<sup>59</sup>

Armed with background information, biographical fragments, and a map, guests set out free to move about the village and question the residents. “Regulars” (the event has been held in this format for over a decade) come with their own notepads and pens.

One such regular is BRANDT. A portly man in his fifties, BRANDT is usually seen at Whodunits in a flat brimmed straw hat, crisp summer shirt, and khaki shorts. He is a rather skilled semi-professional photographer, former local newspaper journalist, and these days, real estate agent. He is a man who commands attention. Were he not interesting enough, he is also an immigrant from the United Kingdom. Be it his exotic persona or his embeddedness in the

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<sup>59</sup> This is not the map shown in Figure 1 (page 4)

community, including as a supporter of the community theatre with which Historic Forest Bend shares a fair bit of overlap, BRANDT has become something of a favorite at Forest Bend's recurring events both among performers and other guests. The Whodunit is no exception.

Of more critical importance here, BRANDT is a fan of the mystery tradition in the style of Agatha Christie. This is very much the format of Historic Forest Bend's Whodunit. In fact, several plots have borrowed elements and mechanisms from the Christie playbook.

BRANDT is onto them. He makes it known in his questioning often asking "whether there's any chance the victim had a twin brother? Perhaps just a close friend of a similar stature willing to stand in for him?" Or "But wouldn't that put you at the other side of the village at the time of the murder?" And he is not the only one. Many visitors are rather comfortable 'grilling' characters or even 'metagaming' (described below) to a degree that they put a character's actor in a tight spot.

The author and actors in the Whodunit refer, for example, to "the Scooby-Doo Effect" as shorthand for the tendency to think that the newest character is automatically the culprit. The term is of course borrowed from the 1969 Hanna-Barbera animated series *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* in which a group of teenagers (and their titular talking dog) regularly happen upon solving mysteries. It is famous for its story formula in which someone—usually the first or only new character in the episode—is 'unmasked' (quite literally) in the end.

A similar trope gets called out whenever there is a character serving a 'support' role. The trope recycled is new versions of "the butler did it." The butler usually instead takes the form of a Civil War secretary or postal worker. When the butler-type character is also a new one, it becomes a perfect storm of finger-pointing.

### *Metagaming and the Fourth Wall*

Youtuber Matthew Colville provides an adequate definition of metagaming as “when your *character* acts on information that you as a player have but that the character does not.”<sup>60</sup> For the purposes of this situation, the ‘character’ of the guest is that of ‘investigator’ and the character of the reenactor is their persona. Both are considered players. The metagame happens as guests begin to discern ‘out of game’ who is butting and who is new. The regulars arrive at this conclusion more quickly. The metagaming also happens when guests formulate that the opposite of the obvious must be true. Namely, the author gave them a butler or Scooby-Doo villain to make them *think* they are the culprit. This is metagaming because characters, including that of ‘investigator,’ should generally have no awareness there *is* an author to their reality. The usual sequence is something like this dialogue between guests as they move out of earshot of a character and thus potential suspect.

“I really think the secretary did it. She’s covering *something* up, I can just tell.”

“Maybe. But I think she was sleeping with the blacksmith. Right? We know he checks out. She just doesn’t want to admit that she was *with him!*”

“But he’s here every year.”

“So?”

“They wouldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be one of them.”

“But it *could* be!”

There is usually an appeal here as well to a line included in the guidebook every year saying *everyone* is a potential suspect.

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<sup>60</sup> Colville, Matthew (@Matthew Colville), “Metagaming | Running the Game,” YouTube video, 7:56 (42:04), March 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IyWfaMmhrM>

Similarly, those who know the author or actors—and largely come to support them in their hobbies—will try to ‘game’ the game by breaking the fourth wall and asking questions of actors rather than their characters. They forget, or do not know, that the actors are not privy to any inside information. Failing that route, the metagaming begins, often with an attempt to include the now demonstrably equally unknowing actor in their reasoning.

These moments are almost always short-lived and always occur with a tone of ‘wink and nod.’ Actors good at *being* in character do remarkably well at *staying* in character, while those who struggle with the middle-ground flexibility of the game become particularly susceptible to metagaming. In preparation for a discussion of middle-ground flexibility, let me provide a couple of examples.

The actor who usually plays Sam the blacksmith<sup>61</sup> is something of a curmudgeon—and he prefers to portray Sam in a similar way. His responses are short, brisk, and sometimes evasive. This usually leads guests to assume one of two extremes. Either he is “obviously guilty” or that his guilt is “too obvious” and so he must be innocent.

As mentioned above, Anna Wendell is something of a ‘socialite.’ Unlike the blacksmith and his actor, this is a difference between character and performer. RUTH, the actress who plays Anna is by no means a gossip and prefers not to make hasty judgements. Her characters are well-researched because she prefers not to fall back on assumptions. This poses a challenge to guests who wish to metagame with her—but they endeavor to find a way around it. RUTH is also committed to her character when audiences are present. When investigators pick up on this, they begin to bring her “out of game” information under the guise of in-game gossip—something Anna revels in even though RUTH does not. This happened in the example of the secretary and

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<sup>61</sup> Sam is the Whodunit blacksmith character. The same reenactor plays Ivan, a standing fictional composite during other events.

blacksmith recounted above. Investigators concluding, out of game, that the blacksmith could not have done it, bring this information to RUTH, by way of Anna, in the form of the rumor that he and the secretary were “together” that night.

MATT, with his grey ponytail and gaunt appearance, plays the untrustworthy sheriff. This untrustworthiness is a necessity for his character because, in this semi-scripted context, MATT is liable to foul up in the ‘middle-ground’ flexibility. I asked him who he thought investigators thought did it and whether he felt he had solved it himself. On more than one occasion, his reflection on these sorts of questions prompted him to reveal “Oh, I think I messed up.” This messing up for MATT usually consists of giving out an incorrect name, misplacing a point on a timeline, or saying he is not familiar with something his character would know full well. Untrustworthiness is thus a valuable piece of his character because it is easy for audiences to instead chalk MATT’S errors up to the sheriff’s *willful* deceptions.

During the Heritage Holiday, I asked MATT about the “openness” of that situation—what it felt like to be both MATT and, in that case, the sawyer persona—one where ‘messing up’ was less likely and less consequential. One of the many community theatre transplants who belong to Historic Forest Bend, MATT drew connections and contrast to that experience as well as to the Whodunit event.

“We went to a demonstration out at Grand Portage that was really inspiring. They had this big setup and it was all so organized. They really know what they’re doing out there,” he started to say. I asked what it is that they *are* doing. “Well, they’re reenacting.”

I asked what makes it different. “Aren’t *you* reenacting *now*?”

“Yeah. But it *is* different.”

I could sense that what he could not put his finger on was exactly what I had so far observed. My suspicion (or perhaps wishful thinking) was that the Grand Portage event he was

referring to was, in fact, more like theatre, well-rehearsed, and perhaps more scripted even than the Spirit Walk. I did my best to point this out without putting words in his mouth, asking, “So Grand Portage was just more finalized?”

“Yeah!” He replied, picking up the thread. “It’s more planned out, they know everything they want to say about what. They’re better set up to answer questions.”

I pressed him. “But you and HERB don’t have any trouble answering questions. You just told me all about the hammer they used to mark logs and all that.”<sup>62</sup>

“Well, sure. But we just came up with that today. And it’s not quite first-person.”

I asked him to tell me more what he meant by ‘first-person’ in this case. That’s when he brought up the Whodunit.

“Right now, I’m first person, but I’m MATT. When I’m doing interpretation,<sup>63</sup> it’s so hard not to break character all the time. You want to clarify things with a modern explanation or comparison all the time.”

I tease him a bit knowing full well the answer to my next question. “What’s so wrong about breaking character?”

“It really takes people out of it, you know! Being out here and interpreting is so different than community theatre. It’s like breaking the fourth wall all the time. When you do that on stage... Boy. I remember this one time I felt so dumb. There was one line. A really simple one. Gosh. I can’t remember it now, something like, ‘What a fine mess we’ve got ourselves into,’ and boy was it. I could have said anything like that. I knew that line all through rehearsals and then I just went totally blank. Blank. It’s not that I froze, that I was nervous or anything. It was just...

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<sup>62</sup> See a more detailed description of this exchange beginning on page 55.

<sup>63</sup> See the glossary for an explication of ‘interpretation’—what reenactors call an in-character performance whether rehearsed or off the cuff.

gone.” He formed a duckbill with his thumb and forefinger, places it to his temple and flicked it open and outwards to show a thought escaping. “Anyway,” he went on, “when you do that on stage, it’s real hard to get the audience back sometimes. But boy does it get their attention. Sometimes more than whatever you were *supposed* to say.”

I asked what happens when one forgets something in interpretation.

“Well it still gets people. But, here, it’s almost a good thing. There have been a few times, you know this, doing the Whodunit where I totally blank on a character’s name or just plain get something wrong. It’s kind of like getting your line wrong, but if you know the character well enough and can give them something historical instead, it saves you.”

I asked for an example and he told me of a time he avoided providing a clear answer to a question he did not know by instead saying he “couldn’t remember the details.” This, he said, was where he was breaking the fourth wall and blending MATT and Sheriff Falk.

“I think I recovered it pretty well,” he concluded, “but it was *me* that couldn’t remember the answer, not my character.”

MATT’S experience of engaging audiences or guests through breaking the fourth wall hits the nail on the head, but there is certainly more to it. It is not just that goof-ups or glimpses of how the proverbial sausage is made are inherently engaging on their own. Rather, they are engaging because they reveal the contingencies and unpredictability of the situation. We get invested in the tightrope walker not because she walks the tightrope, but because there is always a chance she may fall.

In the context of metagaming, I mentioned ‘middle-ground flexibility’ with the promise of returning to it. Such flexibilities are rooted in this engaging quality of contingency MATT picks up on. These flexibilities exist in a ‘middle ground’ because they are somewhere between the free and open play of the Heritage Holiday and the seeming confinement of a theatrical script MATT was

more familiar with in the context of community theatre. What MATT recognizes, however, is that neither mode is fully sufficient for explaining reenactment—even in scripted cases like the Grand Portage reenactment or Forest Bend’s Spirit Walk. There is too much confinement to be fully play. But there is likewise too much play to be fully theatre. The telling feature able to resolve this dilemma for us is in the confusion and discomfort MATT and others have in the move from theatre to reenactment. The confusion and discomfort stem from the ease with which reenactment gets conflated with theatre despite being better understood in terms of game.

### *Live-Action Role Puzzles*

Reenactment is more game- than theatre-like because of where and how it situates contingency. Taking Malaby’s definition of game as a “semi-bounded domain of contrived contingency” (2007:96) is a helpful one for our purposes here. In ritual, the domain is rather firmly bounded while agents endeavor to eliminate contingency rather than create it. Theatre, in contrast, is semi-bounded. Contingency—as in MATT’S case of the possibility he might forget a line—is present, acknowledged, and often regulated to the extent possible through rehearsal and the like but is rarely explicitly contrived.

The exception is participatory theatre in which the audience serves as an only partly predictable—highly contingent—driver of the production. It is no surprise, then, that participatory theatre has elsewhere been seen as especially game-like. One popular sub-genre of participatory theatre is, in fact, a variety of murder mystery (dinner) theatre much like that put on by Historic Forest Bend.

There is, however, a slight hang-up in porting the notion of participatory theatre as contingent and therefore game-like to the Forest Bend Whodunit event. Participatory theatre is contingent because audience decisions and behaviors have an impact on the larger outcome of the

performance. It is contingent because anything can happen. In contrast, while guests ‘participate’ by asking questions at the event, the outcome of the Whodunit is largely predetermined. In this sense, the Whodunit is actually more like a large puzzle than a game—at least for guests.

Recall that the contingent quality of forgetting one’s lines as part of theatre translates into the Whodunit in novel ways. While the guests’ perspective of the Whodunit may be puzzle-like, the contingency-based aspect of the event that makes it game-like sits with the reenactors much as it sits with players in an RPG. One Whodunit actor, for example, likes to avoid ‘solving’ or attempting to solve the mystery on his own based on his own read of the background they are given. He instead chooses to form an opinion as *his character* agrees or disagrees with the interpretations of investigators, to the extent he can glean them, as they come through. He is open to influence as one or more narratives emerge across the afternoon. In contrast, RUTH who usually plays Mrs. Wendell likes to ‘solve’ it as best she can through *Anna’s* lens first. Who would Anna say did it? (She has, in fact, asked this in ‘rehearsal’ when she could not decide.) In this way, Anna’s contingent perspective is not which opinion she will formulate but rather how her established opinion will ‘play’ with the opinions of guests.

In order to make sense of the game of the Whodunit, the reenactor’s investigation of their characters—and the contingencies embedded in ‘playing’ them—is equally if not more important than the investigation carried out by guests. How reenactors go about engaging with the contingent aspects of their characters is what solidifies the Whodunit as a game in which they are the players. This is a point missed by Michał Mochocki (2021) in his examination of role-play as heritage practice. Mochocki picks up on the uncertain qualities of characters given an “indefinite” quality to “storyworlds” (2021:154-5), but—seeking to link historical larp, tabletop RPGs, and reenactment—he focuses on how “imagined environments are designed, co-created, represented, and collaboratively enacted in playful interaction” (2). In examining games in terms of “spaces,

objects and living beings” (2), his concern is with a version of ‘authenticity’ much like the material one explored in the introduction and Chapter 1 here. Mochocki’s version of ‘game’ is one concerned with ‘immersion,’ not one defined by its contingency—a feature the reenactors at Forest Bend demonstrate is in fact central to immersion of any sort.

### **The “Grand Reveal”**

The heat of July bakes the clover-covered open area between the Forest Bend buildings. A dozen or so guests rest at picnic tables in the shade of a large pole tent put up for this type of event. They fan themselves with their guidebooks when they are not busy referring to them. Pairs and small groups, some who came together and others who formed along the way, debate the alibis, motives, and means of the villagers interspersed with more casual conversation. They compare notes, revealing additional untruths—or were they mistakes in delivery? Some, like BRANDT, metagame again.

A large wooden box with a slit at the top is stenciled with the word “BALLOTS.” A stack of pink scraps of paper sits before it held in place from the wind by a rock gathered from nearby. A box of number two pencils sits at the ready. They are a hodgepodge collected over the years from a natural foods store, local pharmacy, real estate agents, and, of course, “Historic Forest Bend’s Frontier Schoolhouse.”

Guests are encouraged to write down “who” they think “dun it,” but the ballots have no bearing on the outcome. There was once a small prize for the first ballot drawn to get it right, but this practice stopped when Historic Forest Bend realized it was ‘the thrill of the chase’ that brought people in. Today, the author uses their guesses to better understand their thinking and craft future whodunnit stories.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Another example of how games change over time.

At about five in the afternoon, the slow chatter is interrupted by a far-reaching clang. The citizens have constructed what they call “the gong”—a piece of steel pipe perhaps five inches in diameter onto which they have affixed a handle. It is rung with a mallet. The noise produced is highly effective at gathering attention. MATT rings it as he crosses the plain towards the tent. It signals that the reveal is forthcoming. Reenactors and guests begin to emerge from their respective locations and make their way over finishing their last-minute enquiries as they do. Guests hurriedly scribble final guesses on pink slips of paper and drop them into the box before taking seats at the picnic tables. There are now close to fifty people under the red and white canopy. They share theories and visit. The reenactors line up just outside the tent.

Finally, HERB speaks. He is something of the face of the organizations as one of the longest-and most-involved members. He makes an announcement that it is time for the “grand reveal” and thanks the audience for coming out. He introduces MATT, the current organization president, who shares information about upcoming events and makes an appeal for volunteers. He likewise thanks folks for coming out and, less of an orator, hands it back over to HERB who then introduces himself and asks the cast to introduce themselves. In turn, they each share their real name, character name, and short bit of biography—such as their home town or that they are a part of River City Community Theatre.

While HERB and others call it a “grand reveal,” there is nothing grand about it. In fact, this whole pomp is for very little circumstance in which the author will read a ‘solution’ to the puzzle the audience is here to solve. I enquired explicitly about the term later. According to interlocutors, there is “really no reason” for calling it the “grand reveal” other than that they started doing so “and it stuck.” It stuck, it would seem, because there was a desire for the grand reveal to be grand. Since even this explicit game resembles a ritual in some ways, it requires a closing or resolution phase common among such events.

“Let me begin by telling you,” the author reads, beginning the phase by taking on a character of ‘investigator’ all his own, “in cases like these, it’s important to start with the facts, and then determine which of those facts are truly most important...”

### **The Reveal within the Reveal: Familiarity**

This thesis requires something of a reveal of its own at this point. It may have felt out of place for me never to have mentioned ‘the author’ of the whodunits by name or provide a thorough description. This is not to avoid confusion across synoptic cases, but in fact because I *am* the author of the Whodunit “scripts.” This is the reason it may have felt odd to leave ‘him’ largely peripheral to otherwise significant ethnographic details about the radio interview, writing process, rehearsal, and, now, the reveal.

The aside required here is that this produced for me a version of cultural intimacy and a shared “familiarity with a base of power” (Herzfeld 2005:3). For my purposes, it is sufficient to say that my fieldwork has been privy to nods and winks indicative of how the proverbial sausage gets made. To a degree, this is because I helped make the sausage in the case of the Whodunit. But this familiarity carried over into other activities and domains.

On the one hand, this level of familiarity can pose a real challenge. While the data are good and insightful in their own right, revealing, if nothing else, such cultural intimacy, interlocutors often assume a familiarity beyond that which I do have. My involvement, with only a few exceptions, has been exclusive to the Whodunit over the past twelve years. Only over the course of my fieldwork have I expanded that involvement into the other events associated with the site. Interlocutors rarely recognize this distinction. Instead, they handily translate my familiarity in the one context to virtually all others. An added challenge is that this local group is *deeply* local. As with any group, there is a significant tendency to refer to places, individuals, objects, and practices

by insider nicknames or terminologies. This poses little issue in the case of “a meet in Edgerton” or “buddy in Janesville” in which the specificity is not critical. In still other cases, a little research clears up jargon like “stitch-counters.” When insider language presents a challenge is in interpreting the significance or discerning the relevance of “BIG TIM from River Concrete,” “DR. ROMBAUER’S project in the 1980s,” or, simply, “DONNIE.”

On the other hand, interlocutors were willing to acknowledge errors consciously hidden from view. The earlier discussion about creating a wheelchair accessible bathroom at the schoolhouse is one example. Another comes from my Heritage Holiday conversation with the French trapper. Along with his explanation of the house being on its original foundation, he explained that, in his time here, they have since had to replace the roof. “It would have been just as expensive do real cedar shingles,” he said, “and more labor. We got a deal on fiberglass, which’ll last longer—longer probably than me—and looks just as good. We got the right color and it weathers nicely. We don’t have folks climbing up on the rooves anyhow.” He pointed up in the cabin. “This one. This one *we* did. It’s real wood, but it’s treated, so that’s not totally authentic either.”

During the ice harvest, a conversation around saws and sleds turned into something of a contest over who was the biggest ‘hoarder.’ This went on to a discussion of who had spent the most in one fell swoop on historical pieces. Along the way to a decision on that fact, a retired couple who has been with the group for over a decade noted a missed opportunity to take this particular prize.

“I saw this *beautiful* enamel cookstove at a meet in Edgerton,” said the wife.

“Ack!” The husband added with an emphatic nod in confirmation.

She continued, “I should have known to snatch it up when we had the chance, but I wasn’t sure how we’d get it home! They were asking a couple thousand [dollars] which was really a steal. Of course, we moved on, and then, by the time we decided on it, it was too late.”

MATT walks up as they are speaking. “Wouldn’t enamel have been too late?” and a short debate followed. The ultimate consensus was that it was probably more modern than they would prefer, but technically fit within the span of about twenty years (plus or minus a decade either way) they sought to interpret.

“It might have been fun to be able to draw comparisons,” HERB noted. “To show people how the technology did develop over time.”

Returning to the matter at hand, they concluded that the steepest purchase was in fact likely the woodstove in the inn—the replica of Mary Todd Lincoln’s favorite cookstove which ran them between three and four thousand dollars.

It is hard to know why the reenactors were comfortable not only to have this discussion with me present or, for that matter, include me in it. At one point, they went so far as to ask if I had any favorite flea markets—a question for which I had no good answer. It may well have been the overall informality of the ice harvest and that they would have had the same conversation with anyone and not just the curious anthropologist. It may also have been in my willingness to operate as “one of them” as evidenced by the sawdust covering every inch of me as a symptom of having packed away my share of ice blocks. It was probably some combination. As author of now a dozen of their Whodunit events, they recognized me as ever before engaged in the same project as—or at least one akin to—their own.

Further, as with Tony in the previous chapter or HERB’S appeal for new membership above, there is a sense of urgency to this willingness for integration. By taking on my

anthropological project<sup>65</sup> looking at what it is they are doing, their concerns, and their associated values, I have made my investment in them rather obvious. The population of Historic Forest Bend is aging faster than its passions. HERB likes to joke that “the average age of our citizens is quickly approaching seventy.” And so, any opportunity to show a potential ‘new guard’ how the sausage is made is taken up without hesitation. I am in many ways humbled by this realization.

Having engaged with these data, however, I am hardly surprised. To argue as I do that their passion is largely ‘figuring it out’ is inherently drawn, like opposite poles to the same magnet, to my own passion for play. And here I am, after all, trying to figure out their figuring.

### **The Magic of Process**

So just how does this ‘figuring out’ demand an approach to historical reenactment as incipient game? The proud answer is magic.

I take Sørensen’s definition of magic as “changing the state or essence of persons, objects, acts, and events through certain special and non-trivial kinds of actions with opaque causal mediation” (2007:32) and apply it not to magical acts among the reenactors, per se, but rather as my own means of understanding the changes which seem to occur between the stages of a given process. In this way, Sørensen’s definition speaks volumes to an understanding of process broadly. To “persons, objects, and events,” we may add ‘ideas’ and ‘behaviors.’ Namely here, there is some ‘magical’ intervention by which the ideas and behaviors of play undergo “non-trivial kinds of actions” as they get taken up in the “state” of game or game-like form.

To be clear, I do not intend to argue that reenactors or anyone else engaged in game sees themselves as partaking in a magical act as one might when engaged in a ritual proper. Rather, and more simply, the incipient process by which play coalesces into game is one by which

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<sup>65</sup> The citizens of Forest Bend are fully aware of this activity.

behaviors and ideas do ‘change state.’ This said, games are not an exceptional form somehow distinct from ritual or theatre. Rather, by their ‘magic’ quality, I mean they evoke a quality of engagement in and between their constituent materials not unlike the ‘magic’ proper recognizable in change within ritual or as a more general sense of ‘magic’ in theatre’s ability to transport or transform audiences (Schechner 1985:117). The magic of game is such because of its power to engage, because of its evasion of explanation, and because of its nonetheless observable effects in the world.

Before we proceed, it is important to dispel the assumption those more familiar with games may make given the rubric of magical change in state given the context. The ‘magic’ embedded in incipient games is not Huizinga’s “magic circle” (1949:10-12). The magic circle describes the area of play set apart from ‘real life’ by the rules of a game. While this ‘space’—either physical or imagined—is permeable, it is nonetheless poorly linked to the everyday life around it. This may be a useful, though limited, way of looking at how games operate once they exist, especially when concerned with virtual worlds (see Castronova 2005:147), but the world built here is by no means virtual. The magic circle cannot fully account for what we are after: why the circle containing the play ultimately contains the play it does. The state-changing magic I propose, which manages to better describe the shift from ‘trying out’ to ‘taking up,’ comes not from the games side of reenactment itself but from its theatre.

The sense of theatrical magic which is most helpful is Konstantin Stanislavski’s “magic if.” The ‘magic if’ is a rehearsal technique whereby actors ask ‘what if’ questions about their characters which cannot be answered directly by the script or other background. Whether they are aware of it or not, the reenactors do this for the Whodunit during their brief ‘rehearsal’ with me—often literally asking “what if” questions. Commonly, “What if someone outright accuses us of the crime?” There is of course a playful, contingent, flavor to the ‘magic if.’ It is in this ‘what-if-ing’

that the similarity between a reenactor and RPG player comes into sharp relief. Not only is there vast potential for ‘what if’ questions, but, given one question or another, actors (players) have a subset of viable responses based in their characters. For a time, this subset is virtually infinite, but, in the “non-trivial kinds of actions” which are used to build a character, they come to be limited, contriving the contingencies of the incipient game. From my perspective, something magical is responsible for the change in state between play and game, but it is much more of ‘magic if’ than ‘magic circle.’

The manifest function of the ‘magic if’ is something akin to another theatrical principle in William Gillette’s “illusion of the first time” (1915) According to Gillette, the goal of theatre is to make a “fresh” performance—at least on the surface—with each rendition or show. Such intentionality around the appearance of newness or emergence is something one would see as a detriment to a ritual which ought to be the same in every iteration and should bear the feeling of having always existed as such. The ‘magic’ of theatre, on the other hand, as a ‘long event,’ is that it *should* feel emergent in order to remain engaging despite its ritual-like composition. The problem with achieving the illusion of the first time is captured by restored behavior. By definition, what is performed is never for the first time—hence it *is* only ever an illusion.

Game, again, takes us the last necessary step for making sense of the situation. Not only does a game *feel* emergent as the illusion of the first time, but it *is* emergent. Every game (or session) played of a game is *both* emergent as its own game and yet the same game. Put another way, play does the restoring, leaving *a* game to be emergent from the play of *the* game. As an example, every ‘game’ of poker is a single emergent experience. That it is the ‘first time’ is not an illusion. At the same time, every game of poker is united under poker ‘*the* game.’ Each session is a sort of re-restoration. What is ‘restored’ in game(s), rather than the restoration of prior *games*, is

the restoration done in the *playing* which came before. In overly simplified terms, rituals *look* established, theatre *looks* new, and the incipient quality of games makes them both.

Reenactment contains a similar non-illusory first time. Each ‘interpretation’ is recognizable as a novel event, playfully emergent, and yet, it can only succeed if it is linked expertly to previous interactions or, in the ideal case, to an historical reality. A character’s journey in a Whodunit is a microcosm of the reenactor’s larger project—a move from play, ifs, and contingent shaggy trying out to an established but largely uncertain performance both fresh and reproduced. Reenactment is a ‘game’ both in that it emerges from play and in that it contrives contingency from the other direction.

The Whodunit is not the only reenactment event to do this. The same shift occurs more subtly in other cases. Recalling my preferred example of an emergent or incipient game of tag, the playing during the Heritage Holiday, for example, is more like “how about” than “what if”—though such a distinction is hardly consequential. Also recall the small changes made to ghost stories based on audience reactions, adjustments to keep fires burning, and the like. As scripted scenes, the vignettes of the Spirit Walk were, of course, attempting an illusion of the first time, but, given the tweaks and adjustments required, they *were* fists inasmuch as they were re-emergent with every group. We will see still another example of re-emergence with iteration in the conclusion by way of the Ice Harvest, another long event.



This chapter was about mystery. As I have done with other terms, I cannot help but play with this one. The obvious “mystery among the reenactors” is of course the one which serves as the plot of the Whodunit. But, in a second sense, mystery relates to the magical quality of games and reenactment described above. This latter sense is in line with a sacred mystery—a truth which

is either held by a select group or one which is widely known but cannot be rationally described. The magic-like quality of the shift from play to game and from a game to iterations of it may be more in line with this latter sense. That it is such may be to our benefit because, less concrete as they are, such mysteries, like the former, demand investigation.

Take, for example, features like the autochthonous quality of the site, the continuity of water, and the role of the forest, sawing, timbers, lumber, and sawdust across the lifeways of Forest Bend. Local paper mills in the modern day combine the latter two in support of the first. Highlighting a thread like this is key to understanding any given project and the objectives of those carrying it out. Seeing the projects of Forest Bend as theatre (or worse, ritual) runs the risk of treating these threads as mere, and often all too concrete, symbols. If the Heritage Holiday, Spirit Walk, and here Whodunit are any indication, however, reenactment is not adequately described as ritual or theatre. Rather, the mystery of play calls for deeper interrogation. Seeing the inner workings of reenactment, the incipience approach offers a glimpse of the mysterious, magical, process of transforming play to game. Mystery solved? Never.

## Conclusion: Incipient Games

### The Ice Harvest

The ice harvest takes place during a local fisheriee on a lake off-site. The popularity of that event made parking a challenge—a deed which was likely already comedic as my Chrysler Pacifica minivan crawled amongst 4x4 pickup trucks and the trailers they had used to haul ice shacks and other materials out for the ice fishing contest. My hand and foot warmers began to kick in as I made my way through trails cut into the woods surrounding the lake and towards was a boat landing in the summer months. Fresh powder dampened virtually all sound. Aside from the crunching of my boots through the snow—and admitted panting having underestimated the distance—the woods were silent.

Not so as I emerged at the top of a hill which descended alongside a parking lot leading to the boat landing. As I came over a shallow ridge, I could see pop-ups, shacks, and an assortment of ATVs and four-wheelers peeking out of a sea of white. A cable and extension cords run from a shelter on the other side of the parking lot out to a small peninsula where a trailer had been outfitted with a pole and three loudspeakers arranged to broadcast in all directions. A recording of the Eagles finishing *Peaceful Easy Feeling* was interrupted by a microphone rustling followed by a man's voice reminding those competing that "northern need to be twenty-six and a half or longer" and that someone would be "comin' around in a red [Polaris] Ranger and can drill a hole for ya. Just flag 'em down."

Just beyond that peninsula, an area on the ice about half the size of a tennis court was enclosed with orange plastic snow fence about a meter high propped up by wooden stakes driven into the ice. Within it, a square gaping hole exposed the lake below. Temperatures hovered just below freezing. Despite this, the dozen or so individuals gathered around the sloshing void were unseasonably underdressed in outfits like flannel shirts and Carhartt pants. Shed layers hung from

the posts supporting the snow fence. I found out why when I was invited to cut my own block of ice from the geometric work at the center of the production. In short order, I shed my own coat, hat, and gloves and began to regret wearing long underwear.

As I worked the saw one way, another volunteer operated perpendicularly. Together, the grid of our progress generated blocks roughly fourteen inches square and eighteen inches tall—a measurement determined by the thickness of the ice. I was brought up to speed on what had been done already. Earlier in the week, volunteers had come, shoveled the ice, and constructed the temporary fence. Earlier today, HERB and ROMAN had come to drill starter holes at two corners. Since then, a chainsaw had been used to mark out the fourteen-inch grid about an inch deep into the surface of the ice. We used this grid to guide our cuts.

The blocks had begun to pile around the opening in the ice. One volunteer was in charge of shifting the ones on top of the stacks to prevent their freezing back together. HERB informed me TED, the French trapper, was on his way with a pickup truck to take this second batch of blocks back to the icehouse at the site several miles away. Almost as he said so, the well-used red pickup emerged from the other side of the park shelter and made its way onto the ice. TED backed it to an opening in the orange fence, turned off the ignition, and climbed out.

“I almost hit a dog.” He said first. This got everyone’s attention and he explained that while hauling the first truckload, a dog had run out in front of him. “It’s awfully hard to stop,” he said, “on a slick road when a ton or more wants to keep moving, but I got her. The dog ran off unharmed, thank God.” He took a drink from his coffee. The behavior seemed something of a reset. “Alright,” he shifted matter-of-factly, “Looks like we’re about ready for another round.”

He opened the tailgate and pulled a ramp made from two old oak boards from it. The bed was lined with grey paver bricks. “Those add weight,” he said patting them, “but they work great

for sliding the ice, and it's good to have some weight in there all the time with the roads like they are. We figured it out a few years ago, now these ride around with me every winter.”

Volunteers took turns individually or in pairs testing their strength dragging eighty-pound blocks up the ramp and into the truck bed. TED coordinated this activity and, when the bed was full, said “I think MATT’S looking for about thirty more.”

“That’ll be about perfect,” HERB noted taking inventory of the blocks which were cut and bobbing in the water, stacked nearby, and still in the process of being cut. Leaving ROMAN in charge of operations here, HERB hopped into TED’s truck. “See you out at the site?” He asked me as he did. I confirmed. “Yeah,” he added, “you’ll like how we’ve got it set up.” I had no doubt. As we talked, I could not help notice a clay jug with a cork propped in TED’s passenger-side door amongst a bulky flashlight and some folded up papers. I wondered if this was meant for impromptu improvisation sessions—or if maybe TED had just gotten so accustomed to it that he preferred it to modern alternatives. I only wish I had remembered to ask him about it later in the day.



Out at the site, the doors of the three-bay shed were opened as was the “ice shed.” In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an *icehouse* would have been a stand-alone building something like a well-insulated barn. What the citizens refer to as their ice *shed* is in fact more like a closet with six-inch-thick walls, a roughly six-foot-cube, built into the corner of the first bay. The door of the box had been removed like the entrance to a tomb, the hinges begun at the Heritage Holiday not yet complete. TED backed his truck to the open doors. He left his truck there and caught a ride with another volunteer back to the lake.

HERB, MATT, a couple other community volunteers, and I unloaded the ice. All the while, MATT explained the changes they had made to the design of the shed itself over the past few years—including changes to the sawdust source and ‘recipe’ and the addition of some modern materials here and there. HERB recounted how volunteers come and go year to year, how Forest Bend started matching up with the Fisheree, and different ways they have found to use the ice. Across the afternoon, a new idea for an ice-carving competition emerged from ‘how abouts.’

In unloading the ice, we used the same ramp we had used to load them. Cast iron ice tongs, as it turns out, are like mouse traps—as good or better as any modern attempt made to replace them. MATT, another volunteer, and I took turns in the box on the receiving end of the plank arranging the blocks in layers with sawdust everywhere in between and raising the end of the plank onto each layer as we completed it. As it turns out, I was the youngest and leanest of those present. When it came to the final layers, I was the only one who could fit through the door between the blocks of ice and the ceiling of the shed. As I spelunked into the cavity, more sawdust than human, I remember thinking, “Not every anthropologist, in the course of field work, has the privilege to climb into a six-by-six-foot shed full of ice and sawdust.” The only word I could use to describe it is ‘authentic.’

In lieu of those hinges, the day ended by ‘inserting’ the door into its opening. A slight chamfer and rubber lining to its edges ensured a snug fit. Two crosspieces screwed to the face of it extended beyond the sides. It was by these extensions that HERB, MATT, and I carried it and hoisted it into place. Looking like pallbearers, we could not help but joke in turn, “It’s a lot of *dead* weight,” “We barely knew ye,” and “At least he was known to be an a-*door*-ing husband.” After wedging the would be casket into the tomb’s opening, MATT unceremoniously drove eight lag bolts through the crosspieces and into the outside of the ice shed.

HERB razzed MATT saying, “MATT. I think it’s crooked. Look. That side’s all popped out.”

“Patience, HERBERT.” MATT answered. His Milwaukee Tools power drill clicked as the clutch disengaged with each bolt. He puts his back into it. “It’ll go.”

### **The Lens of Game**

The Ice Harvest is something of a microcosm of the playful and gameful process of reenactment recounted across this thesis. Like the Heritage Holiday, the Ice Harvest is exceedingly experimental. Reenactors, reflexive as they are, are no strangers to playing with affordances past and present alike for this particular event. The use of chainsaws and 4x4s couple with hand saws and cast iron ice block tongs. The design of the ice shed couples modern lay-engineering, pink insulation foam, and rubber lining with traditional blacksmithing, sawdust, wood planks, and historical knowledge of ice storage. All this play has hardened into a particular form of well-orchestrated ice harvesting game.

Over the last two decades, one objective of that game has become to see just how long the ice will last into Summer. This year, the citizens are convinced they have achieved a configuration that will cool beverages even into the Fall. With this objective in their sights, their play involves trying new techniques for loading the box, cutting different sized blocks, new formulations of sawdust, and so on. The formation, coordination, and continuation of such a game requires orchestration based in past collective experience at least on the level of theatre. Such orchestration can also be seen in how, like the Heritage Holiday, the event is open to the public (audience), though they are by no means required. There is no cost to admission. Despite this, the work of the event is connected to the community that supports Forest Bend. They are welcome to cut the ice, haul it to the site, pack it, or just “hang around and watch.” Embedding the ice harvest in the fisheree event put on by a local organization adds to the orchestration’s visibility—and, thus, one might even say, theatricality.

But, of course, as with the Spirit Walk, contingencies abound to the degree theatre is no longer a sufficient lens. The weather is the foremost uncertainty.<sup>66</sup> It may be too hot for the ice or too cold for harvesters or onlookers. Other indeterminacies surround every step in the process. The carburetor may crack on the chainsaw, as happened to MATT this year. Someone at the lake may cut their blocks to small or too big—hence the need for said broken chainsaw.<sup>67</sup> Someone may fall in. I was assured this happened only once in the organization’s long history of ice harvesting and that the man was “a real team player” who “stripped down, dried off, got a change of clothes, and came right back to cut some more.” Again, all this is not to say that ritual or theatre altogether lack contingency but only to suggest that these contingencies are not inherent to the theatrical product as they are in the product of game.

In short, the Ice Harvest is a ritual in much the way a festival is a ritual. It is a ‘long event’ in that its ‘structure’ remains despite iterative (here annual) changes in given components. Because of these iterative changes resembling ‘rehearsal,’ there is certainly theatre—and restoration—to it. There is something to the hand saws on ice, as a particular example, which draws attention in a theatrical way—even if those drawn in are largely wayward fishermen toting beer cans and curious foremost about “how much one of them blocks weigh” or “what d’you *do* with ‘em?” But, as we have seen with reenactment more broadly, to stop at theatre misses something at the center of their work—something playful.

I asked in the introduction why reenactment was so central to what Forest Bend does despite the fact it is not in their mission. The answer seems to be in that playfulness. Taking ritual-theatre-games as a whole, it is about what is *kept*. In order to steward this place—to *keep* it

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<sup>66</sup> In the two years prior to my field work, the COVID-19 pandemic proved the exception superseding the weather as primary source of uncertainty.

<sup>67</sup> MATT’S solution was to handsaw a few inches into the ice and then split the blocks the rest of the way with a “breaker bar.” This produced a crystal clear cleavage which was something to behold.

in active social memory—they must restore the past into the present. An overly rational approach might be the formation of a ritual, but Historic Forest Bend is ultimately discontinuous with the Wendells despite their narratives. A ritual would be disingenuous and fall as flat as Bartok’s funeral.<sup>68</sup> Attempts to manage the past to such a degree—to ‘keep’ it (more as one might bees)—would lose all credibility and authenticity. For one, little or no ‘actual’ dialogue, objects, materials, or techniques are known of Forest Bend—only ‘composites.’ What *is* known about these, however, is the degree to which they could and would change, readapted over time. What *does* link both the lives of the Wendells and the Citizens of Forest Bend is an abundance of uncertainty. Then, as now, every means of engaging with the environment was indeterminate and required learning as well as constant re-learning. This process is why reenactment is not only more than theatre but part and parcel of play.

Herein lies the value in using the route from play-to-game as a lens. Reenactment is but one ‘theatrical’ case in which the emergent quality of games from play gains traction. In fact, all forms of theatre—and, for that matter, the whole of social life *resembling* theatre—can be looked at as games. This is because games are not in some way set apart. The conceptual shift from ritual to theatre to game is a spectrum not a series. Reenactment, in the playfulness of its production and of its focus brings this especially to light. Due to its plasticity, reenactment play is less concrete rehearsal.

It is not only that reenactment is a form of theatre which starts to look more and more like game because of its deployment of role-playing in events like the Whodunit or because of wider resemblance to larp (Mochocki 2021:73-4). Instead, reenactment complicates theatre as a lens (Roth 1998:54-7) by what it demonstrates of play and institutions. Reenactment blurs the

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<sup>68</sup> Susan Gal’s 1991 article “Bartók’s Funeral” demonstrates, through a semiotic analysis, the ways in which ‘forced’ forms—those which do not emerge through an incipient process—are likely to fail.

manifest functions of theatre, and game—to entertain, to educate, to transport audiences, and, most importantly, to ‘firm up’ variable, shaggy, and often arbitrary human activities (rehearsed or played) into institutionally-defined cultural forms. Herein lies the productivity of game as an analytical lens for examining cultural forms—particularly when ritual and theatre are insufficient.

Schechner tells us his “model [of restored behavior] offers ways of comparing performances... [and] is meant to provide guideposts in a dynamic system” (1985:54-5). As with game, it is important to avoid appeals to a formalist version of the way restored behavior *appears* to cordon itself off from daily life. We must realize that, in part due to its reflexive quality, restored behavior can be brought forward or cast back from consciousness into unconsciousness by the mere act of observing. This happens in the double negativity of performance all the time; it is why there are so many techniques for actors. Olivier can feel as though he is Olivier *as* Hamlet, he can feel as though he *is* Hamlet, and he can—at any moment—reflect on his performance and develop his own awareness that he is at once *not* Hamlet and *not not* Hamlet. All that can be said of Olivier and Hamlet is as true of KENNY and Ole. Perhaps for the latter pair, this quality of double-negativity is even more true given the playful qualities connecting the two persons.

We can also see the importance of an institutionally-defined ‘hardening into.’ My invitation is for anthropologists to look closely at the projects of their subjects in play- and game-based terms not only because play and game are largely missed despite their ubiquity, but also because to recognize that ubiquity is to recognize the instruments of institutional projects. Put another way, because there are limits to the reflexivity actors can achieve, there is reflection left to be done around the goals, interests, and values of a given production—be it ritual, theatre, or game. Of these, game is my preferred lens because, as the playfulness of reenactment demonstrates, “why take up one thing over another?” is so difficult to answer because something like agency—meant to explain that taking up—is not itself rigid. As a point of fact, agency is largely un-rigid by

definition when contrasted to an alternative like being “stuck.”<sup>69</sup> ‘Rational actors’ need not be rational. The value of seeing change as play-based and therefore play-like is that it recognizes the ways in which such agential change is often arbitrary.

### **Authority Revisited**

But the decisions made in play are not always arbitrary. When they are not, questions of authority loom larger. This can be seen in what goes *unrestored* at Forest Bend. Topics like slavery, relations with First Nations, and a pervasive ethos of westward expansion are addressed marginally at best. As such, valuable topics like authority, power, colonialism, whiteness, and so on are all worthwhile places to set our sights as we continue to look through the lens of games. This lens reveals that social life is always in the making and allow us to interrogate that process of construction. There will, of course, be no clear-cut answers. But if ‘the making’ is what we are after, the incipient nature of games certainly has us looking in the right direction.

Schechner (1985) derived his approach to theatrical behavior to retain Turner’s (1982) ‘established order’ but without the baggage of social conflicts. Instead, “restored behavior” meant improvisation of a sort, knowing, practicing, and “double-negativity” to create “effective” (theatrical) performances. Theatre, through its employment of rehearsals in producing a performance, makes explicit the sequence, “strips” (Schechner 1985:33), process, or ‘taking up’ of elements largely invisible (though felt) in ritual or everyday life. In the context of a “feeling for world history” (Giddens 1984:203), *authority* and *authorship* can largely be captured in an analysis of what institutions ‘recognize’ as *authentic*. Authenticity often deals in material accuracy, but, given their affordances, restoring objects becomes as much about restoring behaviors as about objects themselves. Doing so relies on the ability to claim authority to do so.

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<sup>69</sup> See Graeber and Wengrow (2021:215).

Just as mechanical play, ‘wiggle,’ ‘slop,’ and the possibilities in places make them spaces, so too do the affordances in materials make them ‘spatial’ or ‘playable’ for reenactors.

I also promised in the introduction to return to Schechner’s “four variables operating in every performance” (1985:132): the performance’s efficacy, the status of its roles, the status of its performers, and the quality of the performance itself. This is worth returning to because each of these elements are part and parcel of the ‘authority’ and ‘authenticity’ of the performance.

The efficacy of a performance refers to its impact on ‘ordinary life.’ These are often its ritual aspects. A wedding, for example, makes a legitimized change based in the performance. While there was space only to nod to this in this thesis, here there is something to the change brought about in a learner given the context of educational experiences for audiences and performers alike at Forest Bend providing a natural vein for further research.

The ‘status of the roles’ at Historic Forest Bend is in contrast to roles like priests in religious rituals or coveted characters (like King Lear) in historical dramas. At Forest Bend, the roles are those of ordinary people. Forest Bend reenactors do not attempt to re-create battles in which characters, fictional or non, are often put on pedestals as folk heroes of one kind or another. Again, only touched on here, this elevation of figures goes hand in hand with highly ritualized, that is to say scripted or heavily regulated, performances. In contrast, Forest Bend emphasizes an investment in ordinary people by ordinary people. It is in this emphasis that variability and play come to be built into their performances.

In reenactment, the hope is that the status of those playing is one of trusted historical experts. In fact, this notion is supported at Forest Bend largely by that same variability and play, not only with historical sources, but also, largely, with the site and with materials. Through specific references like “Boneyard Eddy” and key local (Peter Wendell), regional (Jean Baptiste Du Bay), and national (Mary Todd Lincoln) figures and ongoing exploratory engagement with

materials like the Dutch oven, saws, the making of artefacts, and construction projects like the bunkhouse and ice shed, audiences are able to see the status of ‘historical experts’ couched in ‘lived’ experiences.

The quality of the performance “measured by the mastery performers have over whatever skills are demanded” (Schechner 1985:133) is the variable most interestingly impacted by the lens of play and game. In a ritual, quality may be defined by the motion or speech of an authority or participants and by whether the ritual went as orchestrated. In theatre, it may be defined by whether actors were sufficiently ‘method,’ felt ‘natural,’ appeared ‘fresh’ in Gillette’s terms, or offered believable pratfalls or stage combat. But what defines the quality of a game? There seems to be no clear analogous element beyond whether players engaged in the ‘rules’ as set out by what was collectively arrived at. The skills demanded are determined by the playing itself. Some exceptions in the reenactment context of course include woodworking and blacksmithing. But these are skills irrespective of the reenactment containing them. The trapper’s tin oven or Ole’s char punk are better examples. In these playful reenactments, the quality of the performance is determined by whether reenactors are willing to ‘figure things out’ much as those before them did.

Examples of why one thing is nonetheless not ‘rationally’ better than another and yet gets taken up abound in the reenactment context. The Ice Harvest contains seemingly random appeals to hand saws over chain saws when ‘authenticity’ is never in question—nor even the rational objective. During the Whodunit, actors appealed seemingly arbitrarily to their written script, historical knowledge, and even the influence of visitors when casting aspersions. Some actors during the Spirit Walk created comedic vignettes which are counter to historical accuracy and to the ethos of ghost stories. And ‘players’ during the Heritage Holiday drew on tinkering and ‘farting around’ with the unknown at the site rather than the ostensibly legitimized purpose of reenacting the known as an educational medium.

The challenge with “hardening into theater” (Schechner 1985:120) is that even the end product of reenactment is quickly adapted in real time and points frequently back to its shaggy, flexible, and adaptive origins. Games look at what is taken up. Play looks at what could have been otherwise. But still to be answered is why take up one thing or another? In the introduction, I identified three axes of reenactment used to describe the various events at Forest Bend. These were whether the event is scripted or largely improvised; whether the event replicates ‘actual’ events, techniques, and outcomes or whether the reenactment is done according to a general guide or principle such as entertainment or financial gain rather than (or above) facts; and the intended audience from reenactors themselves to a wider public. Of these, the second is the axis on which authority, privilege, and power are most sharply revealed.

Take, for example, whether we might see the general principle of one reenactment group or another—consciously or otherwise—as a colonialist one based on latent notions of ‘the frontier,’ whiteness, indigeneity, autochthony, or property in a traditionally liberalist sense. A base reflexivity of reenactment, required by restored behavior to assess ‘accuracy,’ in which the reenactors check whether modern knowledge is too much influencing their behavior is likely insufficient to overcome the larger problems embedded in such a project.

In contrast to larger, state-funded, endowed, or even ‘commercial’ open-air museums directed by well-defined organizations, Forest Bend is a reenactment village which is grass-rooted and highly local. They are an authority-*generating* institution as opposed to an authority-*actualizing* one, and are left to ‘figure it out’ for themselves. This figuring it out includes these ‘harder’ conversations. As a result, their version of the ethic behind the reenactment—of preservation and authenticity—grows along with them and reveals the limits to rational approaches to enacting the past.

## Implications for Anthropology

Restored behavior, through its “strips of behavior” (Schechner 1985:35) and “double-negativity” (123) demonstrates the way in which what is ‘rehearsed’ is “hardened into theater” (36). Before the hardening of rehearsal into theatre was the hardening of behavior into ritual. And what Forest Bend reenactors revealed since is the hardening of play into game. Any sharp distinction between the ‘rehearsed’ and the ‘hardened’ is an illusion. As Schechner says in the context of theatre “The difference between performing myself... and more formal ‘presentations of self, is a difference of degree, not kind” (Schechner 1985:37). Like Zachary Kanin’s cartoon about churning butter, I first sought the point where historical reenactors are no longer re-enacting and actually just acting. This distinction turns out to be rather arbitrary because both acting and re-enacting are play in motion.

So, here is the problem: if human behavior is restored or twice-behaved, what separates the affordances applied the first time around from the affordances applied in reenactment or reconstruction in the present? Schechner tells us that restored behavior is also reflexive. It happens without conscious thought and, in a seemingly contradictory sense, it involves reflection. What reenactors are reflecting on, then, are neither questions of objective correctness nor constructive dilemmas (Handler and Gable 1997:57-8). Rather, their reflection addresses the very problem—whether their contemporary-world understanding of authentic material affordances should account for the way in which these objects are—as well as the way in which they were—employed. By seeing enacting and re-enacting as well as creating and re-creating as each based in the affordances of objects, and that the deployment of those affordances in behaviors is both spatially and institutionally defined we can begin to reveal that ‘play’ is the shared, linking, substance of intersubjective experience.

The key challenge thinkers like Schechner are up against is a formalist one. Just as games are still too often treated elsewhere, “theatrical reality is marked ‘nonordinary—for special use only’” (Schechner 1985:117). But, armed with a contemporary understanding of games as process and by treating reenactment as such, we can begin to blur the line between ordinary and nonordinary performance and game alike. The only thing stopping Schechner from arriving at similar conclusions and applying these wider implications of his concept<sup>70</sup> is that he establishes out of the gate (1985:3-4) that his concern is with the theatrical side of the anthropology–theatre relationship—the very frame which Susan Roth (1998:51-5), and now I, ultimately note cannot account for the *full* picture of reenactment.

The methodological task is to prevent appeals to play as the ultimate explanation for any given observation, but this is no truer for play than for restored behavior or for ‘ritual.’ In any case, these frameworks should not be treated as formalist black boxes into which all observations ought be stuffed. In contrast, the incipience of game from play provides a better environment in which to raise our data for interpretation because it acknowledges that “To consider regularity... as the product of a consciously laid-down and consciously respected *ruling*... or as the product of an unconscious *regulating*... is to slip from the model of reality to the reality of the model” (Bourdieu 1977:29). Especially so when the incipience of game is supported by the reflexivity of restored behavior. This requires both the emic reflexivity of reenactors as we have seen but also the etic reflexivity of anthropologists concerned, as I am, with ‘taking up.’

As play is put to use in what is done, anthropologists must do the legwork to get past the official account (Jenkins 1994:436) of the doing. Fortunately, we can all but guarantee that ‘subjects’ draw on the “institutional order” because “there is no other way for participants in

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<sup>70</sup> Schechner does develop an interest in ‘playing’ a few short years later (see Schechner 1988).

interaction to render what they do intelligible and coherent to one another” (Giddens 1984:331). Through the Heritage Holiday, Spirit Walk, the Ice Harvest, and even the Whodunit game, HERB, TED, MATT and others never described any of it as play.<sup>71</sup> Rather, they see it all as reenacting and, in some senses, theatre. In order to get at the doing of a social system, an anthropologist must work to make actions likewise “intelligible and coherent” to themselves. As Schechner notes, this already happens—even the fieldworker’s position is one of restored behavior as they share a double-negative relationship with both “performer” and “spectator” (Schechner 1985:108). This is not to say there is *an* “indigenous perspective or view or set of rules which anthropologists will in time gain” (Jenkins 1994:445), but we can still attempt to enact our own ‘strip’ of the social system which produces the *variety* of perspectives within it—insofar as Branagh, Jacobi, Olivier, Peake, Plummer, Tennant, and on have done for Hamlet and as the Citizens of Historic Forest Bend have done for Forest Bend.

That ‘variety’ highlights the importance of diversity in generating the affordances of plasticity and play. And yet there is always a semblance of cohesion in playing games together. As I have outlined, play even generates a cohesion from 1840 to 2022 which goes beyond the place and the materials in it. When we ask questions at the center of incipience, like “what if?” and “how about?” we are looking for consensus of a kind. We have seen that a game emerges from play only in cohesion or coalescence. Otherwise, it largely remains ‘farting around.’

Schechner recognizes the emergent, cohesive, or coalescent, quality of gameful theatre but eschews what he sees as associated *forced* “spontaneous communities:”

[Theatrical] ‘playing around with’ [describes] the experiments Grotowski made in ‘paratheater’... [but such experiments] rely on the I-thou immediacy, what Turner labels ‘spontaneous communities,’ to generate the rules of the game, and they depend on ‘group creativity’ to come up with the elements... Without the benefit of

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<sup>71</sup> MATT is the exception which proves the rule referring twice to a sense not meant here, that he ‘plays’ a character in a way similar to as he did in community theatre.

a worked-out, culturally elaborate theatrical system... the participants are thrown back on their own ‘sincerity,’ their own ‘personal truth.’ This truth is but a version of [a] radical individualism... all too often a combination of clichés of intimacy, unexamined cultural fact, and romantic distortions of preindustrial religious experience... Yet the underlying tendency of this kind of experiment is, I think, valid: to restore to performance, or invent anew, that quality of mutuality so powerfully present in [certain forms of theatre]. (Schechner 1985:141-2)

Rightly so.<sup>72</sup> I use the term ‘consensus’ despite its failings because the term is better than ‘agreement.’ Agreement moves in the direction of a ‘social contract’ which I wish to avoid—both on philosophical grounds and because it implies that the ‘rules’ of games are written down. On the contrary, what people *do* is critical because to restrict ‘history’ to what people *say* (or write) is severely limiting. Connerton notes that institutional memory means authority that does not have to be written down, or even spoken, and that a “model [of written history] has its origin in the culture of the ruling group” (1989:9). He also notes that writing down ‘rules’ does not prevent institutions from side-stepping and relying instead on ‘as they remember’ when it is more convenient (1989:18)—a key reason why language can never capture the full ‘ordering’ of social life (Jenkins 1994:452-3). Schechner opens a wide door for the “non-written-down theatre” examined here which is “learned as part of its actual use in performance” (1985:23) rather than in its rehearsal from a prescribed structure or script. He emphasizes that “Aristotle was closer to being right when he identified ‘action’ at the core of performance” (22-3) and looks to world theatre to demonstrate that it is primarily ‘western’ theatre which is concerned foremost with language over doing. Within the west, we can turn to reenactment as the mode of performance which puts ‘action’ (enactment) at its core even given its nod to written history.

Because words and language do not produce a full picture, the importance of ‘enactment’ in reenactment’s treatment of history—typically reserved otherwise for text- and language-driven

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<sup>72</sup> See again Gal 1991.

forms of social memory—cannot be over-stated. Often, history is by definition written down—the reason one interlocutor identified as “I don’t really like doing history, but I like doing reenactment.” More flexible scholars make allowances for oral traditions, but the problem with either case, as Connerton puts it, is that: “one of the limitations of documentary evidence is that few people bother to write down what they take for granted. And yet much political experience will have been built up about ‘what goes without saying’” (1989:18). Jenkins agrees by articulating that “the [written or spoken] account leaves out the obvious, taking for granted all that goes without saying” (1994:437). Schechner himself notes that the challenge is that “Writings are more easily recognized as interpretations than are restorations of behavior” (1985: 63). Even the ‘*definition* of the situation’ after Goffman is language laden. Rather, the *nature* of the situation is built through enactment or reenactment.

Nonetheless, as a result of their mutability, ‘defining’ and ‘enacting’ take on a feeling of pastness, but the past of restored behavior “is one that is always in the process of transformation” (Schechner 1985:40). Appadurai notes this future-looking quality to culture when he suggests that “culture is a dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions” (2004:84). This quality is also why Schechner associates restored behavior with Victor Turner’s “subjunctive mood” (Schechner 1985:37)—the sense in which the results of a behavior are a ‘*maybe*’ or, at best, a ‘*probably*,’ but in which a certain reliability has to be *established somewhere*. This helps to dissolve, as Jenkins recommends, the sense of behavior as “made up of rule-governed response to stimuli” and instead see it as “constructed or improvised upon the basis of [habits]” (1994:439). In terms of mechanical ‘play,’ de Certeau notes explicitly how “Ways of operating... create a certain play in the machine through the stratification of different and interfering kinds of functioning [and] *ways of using* the constraining order” (1984:30).

The ‘maybe’ quality of behavior is the seat of indeterminacy and is the driver of the ‘rules’ of the game. As Jenkins (1994) reveals, however, these rules are less concrete than a ‘traditional’ view of games suggests. In some ways, when we are ‘playing’ a game, we are actually no longer ‘playing’ because a game firms the edges of the play which produced it. Yet, play is ongoing. In other words, even game—a softer form still of ‘constraining order’ than ritual or theatre—is subject to change in playing over time (Malaby 2007:102).



Reenactment presents nested and complex phenomena. Small features like a reflector oven, the potential for a comedic vignette to fall flat, and the ritual-like reveal to a puzzle in which game-players form the pieces begin to loom large when we are invited into the ‘game’ of reenactment. When we look at its process as gameful and not just theatrical, we can see with greater resolution that reenactment is about making do and getting by. Aptly so for Historic Forest Bend where what they reenact is the Wisconsin ‘frontier’ in the mid-nineteenth century—a period which leaves no doubt was itself about making do and getting by. The official account is one thing, the actions of interlocutors and their resulting projects are another. Still another thing is the playful experience of an anthropologist among subjects. If there is one thing reenactment as game reveals for anthropology it is that *you learn things out here only by doing, and then, only in time.*

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