



# Agency and Intra-textual co-creation in Punchdrunk Enrichment's Immersive Story Worlds for Children

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Accepted: 18 May 2023 / Published online: 15 June 2023  
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## Abstract

Recent immersive theatre practices being developed by UK theatre companies invite children to believe that a book story has come to life and is really happening to them within their school environment. The thrill of being able act within a story motivates children's embodied agency to physically explore an immersive set installation and acts of creative writing performed during the story experience, which allow children to co-create the narrative alongside the adult practitioners. These acts are fictionalised into the narrative frame of the children as heroic story writers, offering new perspectives on how child co-creation of adult narratives can be enabled intra-textually, within the bounds of the adult-initiated story, rather than extra-textually after it has finished, as is the case with fan fiction. However, it raises questions about the nature and limits of this co-creative agency the experiences purport to elicit from their child participants, especially in terms of their critical agency to manipulate fictional devices presented to them through such a hyper-real aesthetic. Drawing on theories of children's literature and participatory performance, this article argues that it is the way these immersive productions uncannily overlay real and fictional temporalities that enables the child participants' critical agency within them. Approaches for further participatory, practice-based research in this understudied corner of children's reading universes are suggested for harnessing the potential of immersive story worlds to generate research data from within children's first aesthetic engagement with stories.

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**Keywords** Children's literature · Immersive theatre · Agency · Embodiment · Participatory research · Co-creation

## Introduction

Immersive theatre gives its participants the feeling of being alive within a story as it happens to them in real time and space (Machon, 2013, pp. 142–143). One of the leading players in the development of these practices has been the UK company Punchdrunk, founded in 2000, known for their site-specific productions for adults that bring to live theatre some of the player agency of video-games as participants explore the sets—often in old, abandoned buildings—manipulate objects, or interact with actors (Biggin, 2017, p. 73). In 2008 the company established Punchdrunk Enrichment<sup>1</sup> to take their practice into schools to power learning objectives of reading, writing and speaking, by inviting children to be the “heroes” of a fantastical adventure that seems to be really happening to them in their school environment (Higgin, 2018a). Their productions for pupils aged 6–11 include *Under the Eiderdown* (2009), in which a magical bric-a-brac shop appears within the school containing objects from the children's imagination to inspire their creative writing, *The Lost Lending Library* (2013–ongoing), which sees an enormous library teleported-ings into a broom cupboard in search of more stories for its shelves, and *A Small Tale* (2016–ongoing), where two characters escape from a book and the children must write stories to entice them back into the pages again.

These productions draw on traditions of process drama, in which practitioners set in motion a fictional situation that focuses and motivates children's learning as they explore it from the inside through roleplay (Heathcote, 2002, p. 2; also Machon, 2018, p. 15). Other influences include older participatory performance forms like pantomime, (M. Taylor, 2007, p. 123), performance/live art practices that explore “public space and its uses” (Peters, 2017, p. 3) through artworks created by the artist and participants together (Roms, 2022), and table-top roleplay, where players wield agency within the established rule-system of a developing story game (Cover, 2014). Immersive theatre differs from process drama in that the children remain as themselves within the fiction, rather than assuming the role of a different character, which Punchdrunk argue increases the children's engagement with the story come to life (Higgin, 2018a, p. 101). There is division in the field between those who suggest some children do come to believe in the production as real (Bowtell, 2015) and those for whom the children “perform” belief together as a group in order to unlock the affective power of the experience (Colvert, 2018, p. 58). This fascinatingly mirrors similar debates in children's literature studies about whether children's agency can be elicited through stories that coerce them into passively believing in their fictional events as “inevitable”, like the functioning of the real world, rather than as narrative constructs that have been crafted to work their effects on them (McGillis, 1997, p. 132).

<sup>1</sup> Subsequently referred to as Punchdrunk, although they are now independent companies.

Many of these productions use “books as starting points” to emphasise the power of reading to children (Machon, 2018, p. 101).<sup>2</sup> This creates a long-demanded channel of communication between children’s literature and theatre for young audiences studies (Gubar, 2013, pp. 452–453; Schwebel, 2016, p. 278), and aligns with calls for a wider definition of children’s literature that situates child readers “not just as recipients of adult-produced texts but also, sometimes, as coproducers and enactors of child-oriented texts” (Gubar, 2013, p. 452; also Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer, 2022, p. 259). Such interdisciplinary sharing of knowledge can open new perspectives on the nature and limits of adult and child agencies in their shared story experiences. Reading, after all, has its own, participatory, performative and immersive characteristics in its “dynamic interaction” between the text and the reader’s “performance” of it in their mind, which creates “the impression that we are involved in something real” (Iser, 1979, pp. 61–68).

## Agency in Children’s Literature and Participatory Performance

A persistent notion runs through children’s literature studies that children’s books and child reading practices are “circumscribed by an inherent power inequality”, in which “children rarely have any input in producing these books, are often influenced by adults in choosing what to read, and are subjected to the text and its demands on their reading practice” (Waller, 2010, p. 279). Such power inequalities are intrinsically linked to questions of agency, defined as the actions of a person “that exerts power or produces an effect” (OED), and the limits of adult-child agency have been said to be the defining focus of all children’s literature (Nikolajeva, 2009, p. 8). In the field’s traditional methodology of the close-reading of texts, child agency has often been analysed through textual representations of agential children on the page as adult authors seek to reverse “the existing order of things” and “elevate the fictional child to a position superior to adults” (2009, p. 42). Such agential lessons through fictional representations have been problematised as they are delivered through enjoyable stories that invite the child reader into a “voluntary, spontaneous surrender” to the aesthetic power of adult narrative devices, leading many to believe that their aesthetic and didactic aims are necessarily mutually exclusive (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994, p. 76; also Rose, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1994; McGillis, 1997; Beauvais, 2021). This reveals another conception of child agency, located not on the page, but in the mind of the real and implied child reader in their critical agency to free themselves from textual devices during the aesthetic moment of story engagement enough that they can become aware of how those devices are positioning them as subjects (Stephens, 1992, pp. 80–81).

Adult anxieties about the potentially overwhelming nature of story power over children have been argued to pattern the temporality of children literature in book form in the way that it leads adult authors to elicit a future child agency necessarily

<sup>2</sup> Not all of their productions follow this practice. *The Oracles* (2017) begins with the children playing a video game before visiting a set that brings it to life immersively.

beyond their reach in the child reader's return to real life after the reading experience has finished. Clementine Beauvais describes how the adult didactic discourse, through its "time- and experience-related authority", appeals in this way to the future "might" or potential of the child (2015, p. 4). "Throughout the book by applying pressure and release onto the child's actions in time... the adult attempts to create what it envisages as the perfect 'readiness' for agential action on the part of the implied child reader. The ultimate release, it might be said—that of the closure of the book—is strategic: it should occur at the moment where the implied child reader is constructed as most 'ready' to act upon it in the future" (2015, pp. 57–58). As Punchdrunk adapt the book stories into immersive productions the future-bound temporality of the adult call to agency is refocused into the here-and-now of the present aesthetic moment of the story, where the child is elicited into acting out agency in the presence of the adult authors and child participants.

Just as in children's literature in book form, immersive theatre practitioners elicit this agency by pre-writing the fictional experience to some degree. Gareth White calls this their "procedural authorship", through which they establish different "frames" that set the rules and conditions for participation (White, 2013, pp. 31–32). They consist of "theatrical frames" of writing scripts for the actors or instructions for the class teacher, planning how the immersive performance will take place within the school and constructing the set installation, as well as the "narrative frame" of the developing story world that also scaffolds and encourages the children's participation. These frames contain various "overt", "implicit", or "covert" invitations to participate, such as a direct instruction issued by a performer or teacher; an implicitly understood invitation, where a convention for participation previously exists, like a button to be pressed; or a covert invitation, which leads people into participating without them realising it is happening (2013, pp. 40–42). That adults initiate through their procedural authorship is accepted practice, as the experiences depend on the invitation to treat the narrative frame as real, which can be taken up by the children more powerfully if the initial planning and staging logistics are undertaken by someone else.

Up to now, the frames of procedural authorship might remind of the frames of book authorship that establish the "horizons" of the readers' imaginative participation, and, indeed, much of White's terminology is derived from phenomenological reader-response theory (Iser, 1979, p. 67; White, 2013, p. 61). However, the call to agency of the procedural authorship must be realised through a more physical deployment of agency by the child participants; stories become "story worlds"; a term used to convey this sense of being able to act within the story with some of the agency of real-life (Machon, 2018, p. 239). This is most obviously exemplified by how the children enter and explore a theatrical set, and importantly distinguishes these immersive experiences from children's book reading, in which, despite engaging children in active, participative meaning-making, "the physical response of a

child is not necessary” (Rudd, 2004, p. 8).<sup>3</sup> Punchdrunk’s procedural authorship seeks to maximise the potential of this embodied participation: the children’s experience of the story world through their bodies in the presence of other “performing and perceiving bodies” undergoing the experience alongside them (2018, p. 278).

Theories of embodiment expand conceptions of agency from the purely cognitive freedoms of interpretation or conscious decision-making to an agency emerging out of our physiological dispositions, mood, reflexes, and the unconscious intuitions of our body (1945/2012, p. 90), as much to do with “our perceptions of those around us” as it is to do with the mind of the individual (White, 2013, p. 129). As such unpredictable and intuitive participation demands a tailored response from the adult practitioners, authorship and agency become shared, “passed back and forth between” all involved (2013, p. 31). This will be described through the terminology of co-creation to illustrate how the child participants contribute to and maintain the immersive theatre experience through their embodied enactment of agency (Colvert, 2018, p. 21).

Astrid Breel ranks such co-creative agency into “reactive”, “interactive”, “proactive” and “creative” agency in terms of how much the procedural authorship structures and manages to respond to participant actions (2022, p. 406). Lower-order or “reactive” agency enables participants to exercise choice within narrow, highly structured affordances offered by participatory frame; with “interactive agency,” participants are issued “a specific request” for participation but “the options for responding are open”; higher levels of “proactive agency” are exhibited where participation is self-initiated and unsolicited by the procedural authorship and can be potentially subversive of the experience, even risking its collapse as actions “move too far from the narrative or performance structure” (2022, p. 406). “Creative agency” is also a form of higher-level pro-active agency, exhibited “where a participant contributes something that did not already exist..., but which remains appropriate to the context of the work and therefore can be easily incorporated” (2022, p. 406).

The children’s co-creation can consist of any discernible embodied participation that the performers and co-participants can respond to, such as movements, gesture, speech, exclamations, facial expressions, or the creation and manipulation of objects, props and costume. However, Punchdrunk strive to further harness their creative agency by encouraging the children to co-create the story world through their own acts of creative writing by fictionalising heroic acts of story writing into their narrative frames. This recalls the dynamic of fan fiction, usually defined as “extra-textual stories, written by fans, that focus on the characters or world of an established narrative” (Barnes, 2015, p. 70; also Thomas, 2011), in which young readers “reject key plot points, morally invert the original story, change the emphasis the author has placed on different story elements, or refuse to accept two-dimensional portrayals of supporting characters” (2015, p. 76). Punchdrunk’s productions constitute interesting examples of how children’s co-creative agency can be elicited,

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<sup>3</sup> As soon as a book is read aloud the imaginary experience begins to equally depend on the embodied reactions of others as participants put on voices and interpret characters in “the inherent spectacle” of being read to (Krebs, 2014, p. 584).

not *extra-textually*, beyond the adult-written fiction, but *intra-textually*, within the children's first aesthetic experience of the story world. This should be of interest to children's literature studies as renewed attention is being paid to the possibility of child-authored or co-created children's literature as a window into children's fictional experiences (Wesseling, 2019, p. 94; also van Lierop-Debrauwer and Steels, 2021).

The particular nature of adult-child agency in such immersive theatre experiences will now be examined further in the context of three Punchdrunk Enrichment productions, *Under the Eiderdown* (2009), *The Lost Lending Library* (2013–ongoing), and *A Small Tale* (2016–ongoing).

## Methodology

Researching these productions is challenging; after the schools finish running the experiences, there is little trace left of the set installations or the children's participation for researchers to access. Punchdrunk kindly provided the teacher's packs for *A Small Tale* and *The Lost Lending Library* that comprise their procedural authorship, detailing how the teachers and the practitioners work together to scaffold the children's participation. The pack for the older *Under the Eiderdown* no longer exists in complete form in their archives, so its procedural authorship had to be pieced together from secondary sources and the company's website. The analysis of agency will be conducted largely through a close reading of these texts, supplemented with excerpts of the children's writing and glimpses of their embodied participation in images and videos Punchdrunk have captured, as well as interviews with the company's practitioners undertaken by the researcher. This necessarily situates this methodology more towards practitioner intention than real child response, what kind of agency they are *seeking to elicit* from their child participants, rather than the children's actual experience of that agency. It should be kept in mind, however, that Punchdrunk hone their procedural authorship through extensive piloting of their productions with schools before launching them more widely (*Case Study*, 2018). Directions for future research will be suggested that might access the children's participation within these productions more directly.

## Under the Eiderdown (2009)

The experience begins when Punchdrunk's practitioners enter the school to guide a workshop with the children, during which they read aloud *Who are you Stripy Horse?* (2007), a picture book about a toy horse's quest to find out who he is during one night at Mr Weevil's bric-a-brac shop. In book form its future-bound elicitation of child agency could be interpreted as follows: when the horse locates his label and reads, "Stripy Horse. Hand wash," (2007, p. 26), he realises he is a toy and finally knows his name. He thanks his lampshade friend, Muriel, for all her help. "Handwash," she replies, "That's what friends are for" (2007, p. 28). The didactic adult discourse sets up the agential lesson that self-realisation and identity are social

processes that depend as much on others as they do on ourselves. The last page reads, “The stripy horse looks out of the window. It was going to be a beautiful day” (2007, p. 29). Turning from the setting of the story, out into the non-represented real world beyond the window, the character reorients the child away from the reading experience to deploy the agential lesson through future action in the world full of opportunity that awaits them (Beauvais, 2015).

As book authorship becomes procedural authorship, the adult call to enact agency is refocused within the present aesthetic moment of the fictional experience. The reading of the book aloud with the children creates the first frame for participation; “a narrative frame”, in which “a story is told or introduced” (White, 2013, p. 32). It might be argued that the children have little agency here as the source-texts are chosen ahead of time by Punchdrunk (Machon, 2018, p. 223), and the overall narrative arc of the experience—that the shop will appear, the children make contact with the Weevils and nourish the shop through their writing—is also pre-planned. However, the practitioners soon make “an overt invitation” to the children to exercise their embodied agency (White, 2013, p. 40) by asking them, “What objects would be in a bric-a-brac shop?” and instructing them to generate suggestions via movement, gesture and sound, while the company’s set designers take notes (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016). Here, the children exercise “interactive agency” as they can freely express themselves in answer to the invitation (Breel, 2022, p. 406).

Over the following weekend, Punchdrunk enter the school and build a set of Mr Weevil’s bric-a-brac shop in a disused corner of the building. A participating teacher explains:

All the staff have been briefed not to say anything, so if the caretaker’s asked he’ll say, “Well, I don’t know what it is,” and if the dinner ladies are asked they’ll say, “Well, we don’t know what it is,”... We didn’t ever explain to (the children), we didn’t say this is a theatre company this is Punchdrunk, this is what they do. It was just Mr. Weevil’s junk shop” (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016).

The next week the children arrive in class to find a wax-sealed letter waiting for them from the Weevils, inviting them to visit the shop. Discovering that it has magically appeared within their school, the children enter the dimly lit space, wandering through its shelves filled with their own ideas (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016). The children’s participation has produced a change in the performance event through the incorporation of their suggestions into the set-building, potentially giving them the perception that their agency has been meaningful (Breel, 2015, p. 375). This set then opens a further frame for their embodied participation, establishing the boundaries within which the children can explore the experience physically (Fig. 1).

Inside the shop they meet an actor: “Ah, hello there, I’m Mrs. Weevil, and this is my bric-a-brac shop. Do you like it?” (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016). The performer does not know what kind of response she is going to get from her invitation to participate as it is dependent on the intuitive embodied reactions of the children as a group (White, 2013, pp. 133–138) as they explore how they might unlock the most powerful affective experience from the procedural authorship together with their co-participants (Alston, 2016, p. 3). They might express awe through exclamations and body language, performing belief strongly in the story world together, as suggested in the

**Fig. 1** A child participant of Under the Eiderdown leaves the Weevil's bric-a-brac shop. Image by Rob Logan.



glimpses of teacher observations and child participant feedback (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016). But the children might also engage in more “proactive agency”, where participation is unsolicited, unknowable and potentially subversive (Brael, 2022, p. 406). Practitioners who have worked on these productions confirm that this can sometimes be the case. As actor, Fran Moulds, explains, “often the children would say, ‘This isn’t real!’ and then you’d deal with this absolutely hideous behaviour from them, abusing you... and trying to prove you’re not real. And then they would go away... and do the most incredible writing and... be buzzing and talking about it in the playground” (2020).

Her observation also highlights how the procedural authorship is attempting to harness the co-creative potential of the children’s embodied agency to encourage the children’s creative writing. The shopkeeper explains to the children that “every object in the world has... the potential to tell many stories” and “it is stories that keep... the shop alive” (Machon, 2013, p. 13). The children generated the ideas for the shop’s objects through their embodied exploration in the initial drama workshop, and that agency is connected directly to their writing as they “are entrusted with the job of looking after the shop for the next two weeks by writing stories about its objects” (2013, p. 13). As 9-year-old participants, Jett, Charlie and Jessica explain in a blog post they wrote about the experience, “As we were leaving the shop we were given a mysterious envelope... To our surprise it was a BUTTON! We then had to write a story about who could have owned the button before us” (‘Our Fun’, 2009).



But in seeking to elicit children's co-creative agency, the procedural authorship generates for itself the same anxieties that permeate children's literature in book form. How is it possible to both motivate the children through a story-to-be-surrendered-to-as-real and at the same time demand that they take up the reins of authorship themselves? Such co-creation implies a critical agency to understand the workings of the fiction that the story world's hyper-real presentation seems to deny the children. It has been argued that the children's performance of belief does maintain a critical awareness of "their role and significance in maintaining the fictional frame" (2018, p. 56). The real-structure of the Weevil's shop is, upon not-so-close inspection, obviously brick-effect wallpaper (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016). It is an *invitation* to adopt the subject position of belief in a magical bric-a-brac shop having appeared in the school, in the same way as Punchdrunk's secrecy around their set installations and refusal to explicitly state that the experience is a staged fiction are also such invitations. They are, in a sense, an expression of trust in the children's critical agency to intuit the rules of the fictional game without having to explain it to them. However, apart from subversive plays against the procedural authorship, which the children often refrain from engaging in to stop "disbelief, or the desire not to suspend it, from having a chance to set in" (Tims, 2016, p. 53), they cannot demonstrate this critical agency *except* by performing belief in the story world effectively. Just like the silence of the child reader, this heightens adult anxieties about whether they might *actually* be believing in events as real, even if their effective performance of belief should amply demonstrate their critical understanding of how the procedural authorship works and must be realised through their participation.

This anxiety patterns the procedural authorship in two ways. Firstly, it motivates its quest to elicit the children's intra-textual co-creation through their creative writing. While this is also linked to its curriculum learning objectives to improve writing, on another level it can be seen as a way for the children to prove their critical agency through visible demonstrations of their capacity to manipulate the story devices that might subject them, and in a way that does not threaten the performance as they can "be easily incorporated" through the narrative frame of heroic story writers (Breel, 2022, p. 406).

Secondly, faced with the inability to reveal its fictionality to the children directly, (without spoiling the alluring aesthetic of a story come to life) this anxiety drives the procedural authorship to maximise sensations of the uncanny that foreground fictionality, while allowing powerful immersion to continue (Machon, 2018, p. 284). Uncanniness describes an "experience, where something is seemingly familiar yet alien at the same time", resulting in "a sense of disquiet... (that) brings to the surface that which was hidden, repressed or unnerving at a subconscious level" (2018, p. 284; also Freud, 1919). It is linked to duality, of things having different natures that co-exist at the same time in uneasy tension, which "can create threat or be pleasurably exhilarating" (2018, p. 284). In immersive theatre, the uncanny works both to unleash powerful experiences of affect for participants that "heighten the senses and increase levels of perception" (Higgin, 2018b, p. 101), but also to draw attention to its own processes, so that, even in the most intense state of immersion, participants maintain "an uncanny recognition" of their own participation (White, 2013, p. 63). This builds on the potential for uncanniness inherent in audiences' embodied agency

in participatory performance as “the performance emerges from our own body, and is sited in our body, the same site from which we ‘watch’ the performance... Thus, the participant is simultaneously *the performer*, the one who enacts the performance through choice, *the performance* that emerges from their own body and *the audience* as they view it” (White, 2013, p. 161).

In *Under the Eiderdown*, the procedural authorship’s striving to maximise the uncanniness of the children’s embodied participation can be seen as they enter the shop to see dark objects looming out at them from the shelves, objects which will be strangely familiar to them as they are their own suggestions taken physical form. Mrs Weevil welcomes the children to “her shop”, but how much *her* shop can it really be, after all, if it is stocked with the children’s own ideas? (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016). Snippets of the children’s intra-textually co-created narratives reveal the uncanniness the experience evoked (Fig. 2).

It is an astute and skilful evocation of the powerful dualities of the uncanny, how the “normal day” of school was interrupted by the strange appearance of the shop.

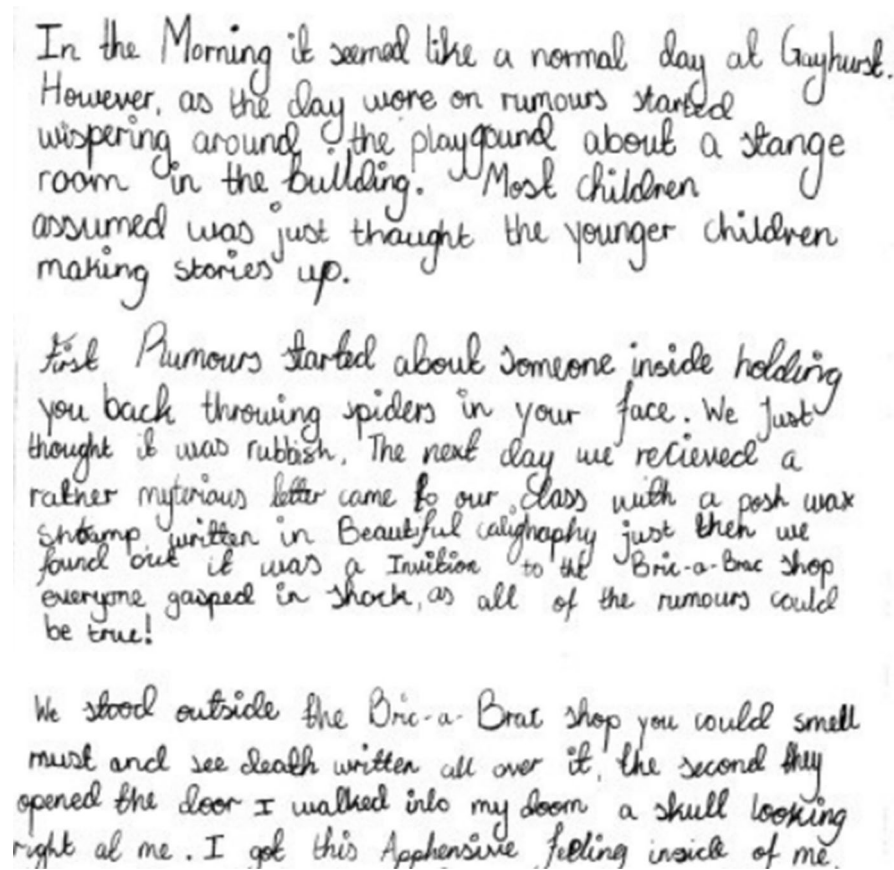


Fig. 2 A year 5 pupil’s creative writing during *Under the Eiderdown* (Gayhurst Primary School, 2010).

The tense co-existence of awe at the “beautiful calligraphy” and trepidation at the Weevil’s invitation that caused the class to gasp “in shock” (Did they really? Or are the children performing belief through their creative writing in the presence of their classmates?). The jarringly dual emotions seem to sharpen and centre the writer in the vivid moment of participation as they stand outside the shop door, ready to walk into their “doom”. It reveals a child participant who is fully aware, if only intuitively, of the uncanny textual devices the adult authorship is employing as they experiment with them in their own writing.

Uncanniness can be seen as the procedural authorship’s way of making peace with itself, allowing it to powerfully engage the child immersively by making the living, breathing story world as real as possible, while at the same time somehow inoculating the child against its potentially totalising power by laying bare through jarring strangeness its own fictional workings. In important ways, this uncanniness is related to the present-bound temporality that immersive practice imbues into the book stories, evident in Punchdrunk’s next work.

### **The Lost Lending Library (2013)**

In the weeks before this production begins, the teachers read the book *How to Live Forever* (1998) by Colin Thompson with their classes. It tells the story of a boy who lives with his family in a library containing “every book that has ever been written” (1998, p. 2). Every night the “shelves come to life. Doors and windows appear on the backs of the books, lights come on and the sound of voices drifts out between the pages” (1998, p. 6). The boy goes searching for a missing tome, eventually finding the Ancient Child who has hidden it away because reading for too long prevented him from growing up. Again, the final page urges the implied child reader into real-life agency beyond the fictional experience as the Ancient Child admits the boy is wiser than he was and leads him “back to the world” (1998, p. 29), so that they might act on the lesson that reading can open new horizons for us, but that we must in the end choose to live in the real world, rather than just imagine our future.

The immersive theatre starts when a new librarian called Petra, actually an actor, is introduced to the children by the head teacher (*Teacher Pack*, 2021, p. 5). Over the next weekend, Punchdrunk’s designers enter the school and build the set in Petra’s room, then clean up any sign of having been there, “so that when the pupils come in on the Monday morning, only the door to the room will look different—a book shelf will appear in its place” (2021, p. 6). When the pupils arrive, they find ancient locked books in their classrooms, which Petra explains are the keys to the Lost Lending Library, a gigantic library that transports itself around the world in search of new stories (2021, p. 8). The teacher’s notes state, “Do not mention Punchdrunk Enrichment/theatre company/performers etc. It is essential that the story is maintained by the school at all times” (2021, p. 6). Punchdrunk even changed the name of the library to “The Library of Everything” to prevent the children from finding the production on the internet (2021, p. 2). Each class visit the library and meet Peabody, its custodian, who invites them to become apprentice writers to fill its shelves (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** Peabody, the custodian of *The Lost Lending Library*, meets the child participants. Image by Paul Cochrane

The assigning of a role and task within a story world reflects techniques from process drama, in which adult practitioners set in motion a fictional situation that motivates children's learning through the role they have been invited to act out within it (Heathcote, 2002, p. 2). Importantly, Punchdrunk's productions exhibit a different relationship to time than process drama. Any theatrical adaptation of a book story must deal with the change in temporality that embodiment confers, as the "fictional time" of the story world becomes bound to the "real-world time" of bodies physically acting out the fiction (Peters, 2017, p. 143; also Genette, 1983). Process drama relaxes this relationship, encouraging participants to pause the performance, so that they can discuss together, out of role, how the situation might continue (O'Neill, 1995, p. 56; also P. Taylor, 2000, p. 45). Punchdrunk, however, invite the children to live the story through the rushed temporality of their school day. There is no stepping out of role as the children are playing themselves within the fiction. This increases the aesthetic power of the hyper-real story, but superimposing fictional time onto real time creates rich opportunities to uncannily juxtapose these different temporalities. The library's vastness, suggested by sound effects of creaks and groans within the set, and its appearance over a weekend challenge the children's sense of space and time. One participant questions, "How did they make a big classroom into a small room and have one thousand floors?" (*Lost Lending Video*, 2016). Punchdrunk deliberately crowd their sets to make it look as if they have existed for a long time (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016). How has something so seemingly established appeared so quickly, *if not* through the narrative frame of a magical library travelling the world in search of stories? Yet, while the children's minds are being enticed off into the unfettered temporality of fiction, they are still their real-life selves as schoolchildren, experiencing the library in real-time through their senses. The company punctuates their experiences with temporal markers like blinking lights or ticking clocks (*Eiderdown Video*, 2016),



**Fig. 4** A child participant explores the set of *The Lost Lending Library*. Image by Paul Cochrane

which draws real and fictional temporalities into closer juxtaposition. This creates a “felt sense of time-play” as “temporality itself becomes experiential” (Machon, 2013, p. 96) and the uncanny sense of “the participant’s physical body responding within the imaginative experience”, “a defining feature of immersive theatre” (2013, pp. 67–68) (Fig. 4).

*The Lost Lending Library*, although ongoing, is still a relatively early example of Punchdrunk’s work, and there remains a sense that these uncanny plays are still not enough to fully assuage anxieties about the children’s critical agency. The company can be seen, just like book authors, to look for ways the children might deploy that agency somehow temporally *away* from the intensity of their immersive aesthetic. Upon exiting the library, the children are escorted to a separate classroom for what Punchdrunk term “decompression time” (2021, p. 8), so that they can respond to the experience through an assortment of creative materials like paper, pens, crayons, and clay (*Lost Lending Video*, 2016). This reveals adult notions of how children’s correct deployment of critical agency “has a temporal dimension” (Joy, 2019, p. 26). “Time is required “to digest impressions, and translate them into substantial ideas” (Dewey, 1910, p. 37; in Joy, 2019, p. 27). Through their divided adult authorship (Beauvais, 2015) Punchdrunk work both to supercharge the immediacy of their sets, as well as to allow space for more deliberate, slower digestion of that experience. Their sets stay in the schools for a week after the actors’ performance, so that the children can revisit, “look around more and relish” them (Machon, 2018, p. 284). As their practice has matured, they have started to experiment with stripping away the need for a set at all, allowing the children to weave their immersion ever more intricately into their everyday school temporality, exemplified in one of their most recent works.

## A Small Tale (2016–Ongoing)

*A Small Tale* is designed to be run by the class teacher, independently of the company's practitioners, who never visit the school in person, with props delivered to the school (Machon, 2018, p. 260). The teacher reads the children a book called *The Adventures of Abe and Alba* (2016) that they say they found "in an old charity shop" (Teacher Pack, 2018, p. 8). Actually, Punchdrunk wrote the book themselves, creating an interesting example of a children's reading experience specifically written with the intention of it transforming into immersive participatory performance. It tells the story of tiny characters, Abe and Alba, who live in trees and play tricks on the big folk, until they read a book of wild adventures and disappear on one of their own in search of more stories.

At the end of the first day, the teacher leaves the book open on their desk, still halfway through the story. Returning to class the next morning, the children discover that Abe and Alba, and all the words of their story, have disappeared, its pages "now all blank except for some tiny footprints" that lead to a rope ladder dangling from the edge of the desk (2018, p. 10). This has all been staged by the teacher who switched the book for an empty-paged version, printed the footprints with an ink stamp and set up the rope ladder prop. If the children ask, the teacher is urged to "respond with according surprise and shock" (2018, p. 10) (Fig. 5).

The children find a letter from the previous owner of the book inside the cover, explaining that it contains a "kind of magic that allows its characters and story to break out and escape into our world" and how the children must track Abe and Alba through the school and write them stories to tempt them safely back into the pages (2018, pp. 34–35).

The outcome of the experience is pre-planned. The characters return to the pages again after the children leave their stories next to the empty book as bait, its pages



**Fig. 5** Abe and Alba's inky footprints on a school windowsill during *A Small Tale*. Image by Stephen Dobbie

propped open as a trap (2018, pp. 26–27). However, the children's intra-textual co-creation, in which they generate ideas about what Abe and Alba might be up to on their forays through their school (2018, p. 14), allow them to access higher-order creative agency (Breel, 2015, p. 70) that evokes meaningful change in the immersive event (Breel, 2022, p. 403), as the teacher adapts where to place the props next to meet or challenge pupil expectations.

As we have seen, Punchdrunk often use objects to uncannily draw real and fictional temporalities together through the children's embodied participation. In *Under the Eiderdown*, the objects are confined to the shelves of the Weevil's bric-a-brac shop; in *The Lost Lending Library* select props like the book-keys start appearing in the school outside the set. In *A Small Tale*, this use of objects can be seen to proliferate through the school. The rope ladder, the footprints, a hammock strung from the headteacher's bookshelf, a tipi in the branches of a playground tree (*Teacher Pack*, 2018), become temporal and spatial pegs, pinning the fiction to the real spaces of the children's everyday life (Fig. 6).

Rose Biggins argues that by siting immersive theatre in everyday spaces, the previous uses of the site come to "ghost" or "haunt" the minds of the audience (Biggin, 2017, p. 181). This further intensifies uncanny sensations of duality, of things belonging simultaneously to two worlds at once. The props of *A Small Tale* integrate everyday school objects, like pencils for the tipi frame or drawing pins to hang the hammock (2018, p. 5), which only serves to ghost the children's experience of these fictional objects with memories of their past mundanity. The prop of the empty-paged story book is a powerful "implicit" invitation to the children to harness this uncanny awareness to replace the adult authorship with their own stories in order to entice the two little people back inside.

After eight years developing their practice, Punchdrunk's procedural authorship exhibits a growing confidence in children's capacity to switch back and forth



**Fig. 6** The rope ladder prop hangs from a window in *A Small Tale*. Image by Stephen Dobbie



**Fig. 7** The children discover Abe and Alba's tipi in a tree during *A Small Tale*. Image by Stephen Dobbie

between critical and immersed stances, or even perhaps to maintain them simultaneously. No longer does the children's intra-textual co-creation need the quarantined temporality of a decompression room, but becomes intricately interwoven into the immersive narrative frame of the children's hunt for the little people through the spaces of the school. After the children break into the head teacher's office to discover their campsite, the teacher is invited to ask, "Where are they going next? We must act quickly; they move fast and we need to get them back to the safety of the book. Should we start writing them a story?" (2018, p. 15) (Fig. 7).

The next day, when the children follow a trail of pencils to find the tipi prop the teacher has planted in a tree, they are carrying their half-finished stories with them on the hunt, and hastily "return to the classroom to continue writing the characters a story as they seem to be wandering further from the school" (2018, p. 19). "Abe and Alba are in danger!" the teacher is suggested to exclaim. "I hope no one has seen them! What do all good stories need? Where will our story be set? Who are our characters?" The children are even invited to physically place their stories "out in a trail" to draw Abe and Alba in, so that their intra-textual co-creation itself becomes a physical prop that deepens the immersive power of the experience's finale as the characters return to the safety of the book again (2018, p. 23).

## Conclusion

In these immersive theatre productions, Punchdrunk adapt book stories into immersive story worlds that elicit different orders of child agency within a story come to life. The adult procedural authorship retains agency in initiating the experiences, setting the frames for the children's participation, and in the logistics of their staging in schools. This is due both to the need to replicate their staging across many schools for them to survive as a commercial endeavour, but also to open up for the children



the subject position of being able to perform belief in the fictional events as really happening, which motivates their learning and necessitates to a certain degree that someone other than them scaffolds the experience.

By inviting embodied participation that must be responded to within the present aesthetic moment of the fiction, authorship becomes shared between the adult practitioners and the child participants undergoing the experiences. The adult practitioners attempt to harness the co-creative potential of this embodied agency by weaving into the experience opportunities for the children to extend the story world through their own creative writing, performed intra-textually, within the developing narrative frame. This causes the adult procedural authorship anxieties about whether the children can achieve a critical agency to understand the workings of fictional devices during the power of their first aesthetic engagement with story, leading to it striving for uncanny plays of temporality that allow it to resolve these anxieties by both maximising the children's immersion in a hyper-real story, while at the same time calling their attention to the fictionality of the experience.

These book-based immersive theatre productions offer intriguing new perspectives on the relationship between the aesthetic and didactic aims of children's literature, supporting arguments against their mutual exclusivity (Meek Spencer, 1988; Joy, 2019). Just as its book authorships imply child participants actively and alertly engaging their critical agency during story engagement "as a united kind of work and play" (2019, p. 59), Punchdrunk's procedural authorship equally implies an immersion in the aesthetic moment of fiction that involves a "heightened consciousness of the here-and-now and not merely escape into alternative worlds, a form of awakening and not a shutting down" of the child's critical agency (2019, p. 53). Punchdrunk's practice, however, sheds new light on the nature of this agency and its aims within the aesthetic of story. Rather than being deployed in a conscious cognitive endeavour to decipher the meaning of the experience, similar to that of adult critics in their analytical close reading of texts (2019, p. 45), it suggests children deploy this critical agency during their first engagement with a story more intuitively through their "physiological dispositions, mood, reflexes, and the unconscious intuitions" of their bodies (Merleau-Ponty and Landes, 1945/2012, p. 90), as much to do with their perception of others undergoing the embodied experience alongside them as it is to do with the conscious mind of the individual (White, 2013, p. 129). The aims of that critical agency seem less to uncover textual meaning and more to explore how their participation in the fictional experience can unlock powerful latent affect from the authorship through their performance of belief in the story (Colvert, 2018, p. 58; see also McGonigal, 2003, p. 4). This has implications for notions of child critical agency that see it as leading to freedom from subjugation to textual devices (Stephens, 1992, pp. 80–81), suggesting instead that children deploy their critical agency in order to entangle themselves more effectively in the aesthetic, to make the immersive game of story work *more* powerfully upon them.

These conclusions have been reached through a focus on the procedural authorship of these productions with only brief glimpses of the children's participation within them, on how child agency is elicited, rather than how it is explored by the child participants. Future research could try to access and

incorporate that real child participation to further test these findings. In their allowance for embodied participation and intra-textual co-creation, these immersive story worlds open a fascinating window onto children's first aesthetic engagement with fiction. As the limits of child and adult agency within them are foregrounded for all involved (White, 2013, p. 74), they suggest themselves as potential participatory research arenas into such engagement with children, offering a promising addition to the growing spectrum of methodologies exploring how children might "become peer researchers whose contribution to generating knowledge about what they read has an intrinsic value similar to insights offered by adult readers" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016, p. 217; see also Deszcz-Tryhubczak et al., 2019; Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer, 2022; Joosen, 2019).

Such immersive participatory research would respond to the call to allow for children to "sometimes have abilities that adults lack" (2013, p. 254) by suggesting that perhaps children are expert precisely at intuitively potentialising the power of stories in the evolving present moment of aesthetic engagement. It would allow children to contribute research perspectives *from within* their thrilling engagement with a story world, overcoming children's disempowerment and intimidation by adult academic processes (Hodges, 2009; Tatar, 2009, p. 6; Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016, p. 225; Charwar et al., 2018, p. 116) by harnessing precisely the sphere adults have crafted to transfer children agency in the face of their overwhelming real-world authority—that of story. The enjoyable aesthetic of fiction is an attempt to secure child consent to intergenerational learning into the limits of our agency. If we engage in participatory research with children beyond enjoyment, we might be ignoring the important lesson of children's literature to always bind didactic endeavour to an engaging story to ensure such consent. Immersive theatre continues a rich tradition of working with children within a developing fictional experience, so that they engage with learning only "as long as they are intrigued by it" (Heathcote, 2002). Expertise from its sister field in child fictional engagement can guide children's literature studies in its participatory turn by highlighting how stories can be conceived, not only as something finished, but more as evolving workshops, flexible and responsive research experiences, elicited by adults, but transformed and taken in new directions through the participation of children.

The presenting of such stories as real might seem to complicate such questions of consent, but the child's critical agency to intuitively understand the rules of the fictional game and how it depends on their participation should be trusted. Nevertheless, the child safeguarding procedures of schools and research ethics committees should be followed, as should the evolving practice of immersive theatre companies for "manag(ing) emotions carefully and ensur(ing) participants are protected" (Higgin, 2018a), negotiating participants' withdrawal of participation (Higgin, 2018b; Reason and Heinemeyer, 2016) and establishing relationships of trust with their child participants (White, 2013, p. 75).

Participatory research through immersive story worlds holds the potential to make visible some of the hidden mental processes of children's story engagement that have proved so elusive to adult research (Tatar, 2009, p. 10; Schwebel, 2016, p. 283; Hodges, 2009, p. 183). The children's embodied participation through movement, gesture and facial expression during their exploration of the sets and props, constitutes the first kind of research data it might generate. Collaborative research projects between theatre companies can allow researchers to observe and take notes on this participation (Colvert, 2018). Video has been suggested as a way it can be captured (Nelson, 2006, p. 113) that might be extended to children recording their own participation as a means for research to incorporate how "children perceive and act upon the world" (Green, 2016, p. 292).

The children's intra-textual co-creation through their creatively written stories constitute more visible story data that plays to the close reading strengths of our field. While there have been calls for more research into child-authored children's literature (Chapleau, 2007; Wesseling, 2019, p. 94; Lierop-Debrauwer and Steels, 2021, p. 219), such writing has often been imagined as stories children write alone (Chapleau, 2007). This ignores the value of children's literature as a shared exploration of the limits of adult-child agency (Cumming, 2008, p. 109; also Nodelman, 2008, p. 149). Intra-textual co-creation entangles the adult procedural authorship and the child-authored texts in ways that preserve this mutual endeavour. As the children choose which parts of the narrative frame to extend or subvert through their own writing, they might guide the adult critical gaze towards what has been most important to them in their story engagement, offering a new approach to childist research that seeks closer approximation of children's point of view (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González, 2022; Hunt, 1991). As Angela Colvert advises, it would be useful to further "explore how children's use of media arts such as film making, animation, digital music and illustration might be used to support the children's own authorship practices" (2018, p. 45).<sup>4</sup> How much can children be encouraged to take over the reins of that procedural authorship themselves, so that they might start setting research questions for other adult and child participants? Immersive story worlds offer a fascinating participatory research arena in which to further examine such questions, and in a way that thrillingly engages children in the process (Fig. 8).

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<sup>4</sup> For an early example, see my own *Storyhaven* project (Hasbun et al., 2022). A full account will be submitted as a practice-based PhD thesis at the University of Bristol in 2023. For more information go to <https://storyhaven.app/school>.

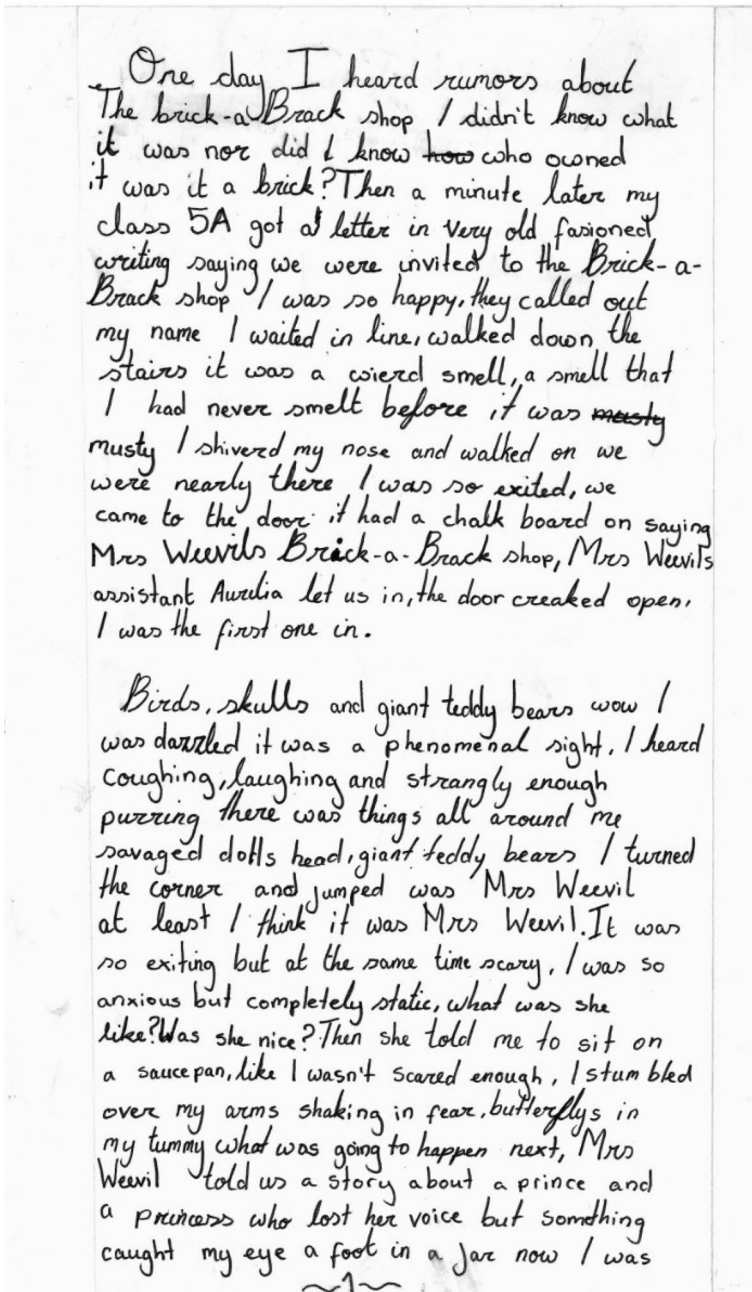


Fig. 8 A year 5 pupil's creative writing during *Under the Eiderdown* (Gayhurst Primary School, 2010).

**Acknowledgements** This research has been funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/R012776/1] through the South, West & Wales Doctoral Training Partnership; a Trailblazer Grant from Bristol and Bath Creative Research and Development; and the University of Bristol's Temple Quarter Engagement Fund.

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