Collaborative Theatre Project
Task 4

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Introduction

My IB Theatre class is small, so we decided to do the collaborative as one group. Our team included myself, Kate, Jazsmin, Lexi, and Ellie. I focus on technical theatre, specifically lighting design, and the other four in my group focus on performance, but Kate also does costumes, and Jazsmin does make-up, so we decided to keep our respected theatre areas in mind from the beginning.

Investigation

When we started, we had no idea what our topic was going to be, so we went in search of theatre companies with open minds. We each decided to find a theatre company. I found Subversive Theatre (a troupe based in Buffalo, NY). They specialize in plays as political statements, mainly Marxist in tone. However. the group found them too politically motivated. Ellie researched a troupe that most of us were familiar with: Starkid Productions based in Chicago. Ellie, Kate, and I had already seen some of their shows, and we liked the idea of emulating them, so we got on their YouTube channel and the five of us watched (or rewatched) some of their shows. StarKid performs on theatre stages, videotapes it's plays, and then publishes them on YouTube. Our favorite one was *The Trail to Oregon,* which is a musical based on the popular video game of the same name.

We liked that they used audience participation, and that it was inspired by one of the video games that we had grown up playing. We tried to think of other games we had

all played. I suggested Super Mario Bros, but after discussing it, we realized that game was too simple to write a piece of theatre about. Lexi suggested The Sims, and all of us thought that was the best choice. The Sims is a sort of role-playing simulation game, where you get to create little people, called Sims, and have them do normal human things (or not so normal human things.)

We also knew that our audience was going to be our peers and their parents, which contributed to us choosing The Sims, as most of our generation grew up playing that game, and their parents would remember it, too.

So, with Starkid Productions and the starting point of The Sims in mind, we began to write our script with the intention to share the thought that we are not in control of our own lives.

Preparation

Our original idea for the story was two girls playing The Sims on a computer, two Sims onstage, and 'God'/voice of god. Ellie and Lexi were going to play the two girls, Kate and Jazsmin were going to play the two Sims, and I was going to run the tech, and be in the booth with a microphone reading the lines for the voice of god. We began to write. However, we had to rethink our plot and what we had of our script when Kate was accepted into the Memphis in May student exchange program to Colombia. We realized that her trip there would interfere with the date we were set to perform. She was doing costumes, but she needed another role since she couldn't act in the show, and we had to figure out how we were going to fix the script to only have three people in it.

Ellie suggested that I step in and play the fourth role in the show, but I couldn't because then the show would have no tech (as we didn't have anyone else to run the light and sound boards or projector), and our idea required a lot of tech. I re-wrote the plot so that the voice of God was more prevalent in the show, cut the characters down to two girls and one Sim, and suggested that Kate play the voice of God, and record her lines before she left. We agreed that this was the best way to fix our problem. We also changed the plot to match.

We decided to have both girls get stuck in the Sim world, and have the Sim, Jazsmin, break out of the Sim world, and at the end of the show, it would be revealed that the Sim was 'God'. We wanted to convey the idea that people think they are in control of their own lives, but sometimes their lives are controlling them.

Exploration

Once our script was completed, we did several workshops in order to prepare for the show. I led a workshop on color theory and lighting design as methods in theatre to convey a message. We went through different gel colors, and I asked them to explain how each color made them feel. We then talked about how different colors and lights could be used in any theatre piece and specifically our Collab.

After the workshops, the actors began learning their lines, and I designed the set and started shaping my ideas for the lights and the projector. In order to involve the audience like Starkid Productions did, we wanted to let the audience pick the name of our Sim, and then include her name in the rest of the show. We also wanted to let the

audience pick her clothes, because designing the character is a big part of The Sims game. We decided to have three options in each category: jacket, bottom, and accessory. Jazsmin would start off backstage in a tank top and leggings, and she would put on whatever clothing the audience chose. We wanted to have a Sim that looked like Jazsmin projected on our theatre's screen, so Kate and Jazsmin designed her, and then Kate picked the clothes out she wanted to use on the game, and then found matching items from our theatre's costume closets.

The problem then was how we were going to have the audience's choices show up on the screen. My original idea was to screenshot video the Sims game we had downloaded for making the character, and go through each of the combination possibilities. Then, I was going to choose the possibility in the booth by changing the time on the video, 'fast-forwarding'. However, I realized that it was not going to work, because (though the math escapes me now), 9 choices would be too many combinations. So, I decided we would need to download The Sims game on a computer that would connect to the projector. The game would only work on Windows computers, so we could not use Ellie's, Lexi's, or my laptop. Kate was going to be gone, so her's was out, too. All of our school laptops are Apple Macs. We ended up borrowing our friend's Windows computer, that was also in Theatre. We set up the Sim on his computer so that during the show, in the booth, I could change the clothing items to the ones the audience chose.

For the lighting design, I had to keep most of the lights I had up for our spring musical, because it ended shortly before our performance date, and I didn't have time to

re-gel/re-focus all of them. I did redo the lights on our two electrics (the battens above the stage) so that each furniture item in my set design had a fresnel set to spot with a green gel on it. This way, when the girls 'clicked' something on their laptop prop onstage, the item they were clicking would light up just like in the Sim game.

My other main lighting plan was making it obvious where the 'real world' (the one the girls were in) and the 'sim world' began and ended. I wanted to keep their separation crisp, so I put ERS lights on the 'real world' gelled slightly blue, to symbolize illusion, and I kept their lens tubes in, so that their would be sharp lines where the lights ended, instead of a soft fade. I used the shutters on the lights to create a sharp diagonal line on the stage separating the two 'worlds'. After that, I liked the way the line looked when lights were only on the 'real world', but when the rest of the stage lit up (the 'sim world'), I thought the lights blended too much. So, I used the LED lights that still had up from the spring musical, and made the Sim side of the stage slightly red. The red contrasted nicely with the blue, and the line could be seen again. I also realized I could use the LEDs for the scenes where the two girls try to break into the 'sim world' (I planned on having red lights flashing as a siren blared), and for the end when Ellie ends up in the 'sim world', and Jazsmin ends up in the 'real world', so that Ellie's side went to blue to, again, symbolize her illusion of control. I also used the LEDs for the green glow that the actors used to move the scrim onstage.

We had a scrim leftover from our spring musical, so I figured I'd use it somehow. At first I wanted it to be the 'tube' Jazsmin uses to be transported into the 'real world', but we realized it wasn't worth the five seconds of that, so we staged a fight scene

between Jazsmin and Ellie behind the scrim, ending with Ellie being pushed out, and Jazsmin winning. I wanted to use a strobe light behind the scrim, but I didn't want it to spill over too much, so I ended up clamping it to the top of the scrim's wooden frame, and running its power cord to an extension cord offstage. Our plan was to have Lexi, who had died at this point in the show, plug it in backstage so that I didn't have to run the extension cord all the way up to the ceiling.

When looking for gels, specifically the green ones I used for the furniture, I found two sheets left over from the musical: Roscolux #89 Moss Green and #388 Gaslight Green. I wanted the furniture to be a bright green, and I thought #388 to be too subtle when put in a light, so I used #89. However, while picking, I had an idea to use #388 for the plumbobs, the light green diamonds that float above the Sims' heads in the game. My idea was to take the gel sheet, cut 3D diamond shape out, hot glue it together, and attach it to a headband with wire. Originally I wanted to put tiny battery operated lights in each of the plumbobs, so that they sparkled like they do in the game, but I realized that was more trouble than it was worth, so I cut that idea. Ellie helped me make them, and when they got on stage, the stage lights made them sparkle in the manner that I had wanted them, too, so I was glad I hadn't wasted time putting the lights in, anyway.

Tech

I ended up in the booth with a lighting board, a sound board, a computer for Kate's lines, a computer for the Sims game, microphones for the wind effects, and the projector controls. Among all of these things, I ended up with 60+ cues, and I realized

our first tech rehearsal that I was going to have to do the job of three people. Our first

tech rehearsal was terrible. I was frustrated trying to get all of the cues out; many of

them were three together. I had written the cues in my script, but I had stapled it instead

of putting it into a binder. I couldn't flip through it fast enough, so I took the staple out

and flipped it on the two chairs in the booth. Then, in my panic of trying to play a sound

cue, change a light cue, turn the projector off, and put the screen up, I knocked all of my

script pages off the chairs, and they flew all around the booth. At the beginning of the

piece, on The Sims game, I could not get through the clothing pieces or type the name

fast enough because the actors spit through their lines incredibly quickly, so I had to

direct them to slow it down, and ad lib comments about the items so that I could keep

up.

During this rehearsal, I had to turn one of the mics on and had the actors go

back over and over again so that I could get the cues right. After putting my script in a

binder, and running through each of the cue sequences several times, I finally got the

hang of it.

Among my light cues, I had the 'real world' by itself, the 'sim world' with the 'real

world', a light on a platform offstage that was the Sim 'market', flickering lights that got

faster for when the girls break the computer, red flashing lights for when the girls broke

into the 'sim world', the green lights on each of the pieces of furniture, the strobe light on

the scrim (though, it wasn't a cue for me), and the blue lights on the 'sim world' at the

end. These added up to about twenty light cues.

For the miscellaneous sounds, I used a buzzer that was already set up in the booth for the sirens, I made a popping noise into a microphone when the girls broke the computer, and I rubbed two microphones together and blew into them when Jazsmin and Ellie were in the 'tube' going into the 'real world'. I used these things to avoid having to get another computer/phone to play them from. For Kate's lines, I had to play each one of them through Ellie's computer ran through the soundboard. She had about twenty lines, so that was twenty more sound cues. I also handled controlling the Sim game, turning the projector on and off, and putting the screen up and down.

Realization

I did not fully realize the potential of our piece until the last few tech runs. Before, I was too preoccupied on trying to get all of the cues done that I didn't have time to step back and look at the piece as a whole. Once I felt more comfortable with the cues, I got to watch what was going on onstage, which is one of the things I enjoy most about working in the booth (rather than onstage or backstage). Once it all came together, I saw how our ideas about control and life were fully conveyed, and I became excited to have an audience participate in that, and to hear their interpretations of it.

We performed our piece in our school's theatre during our production class' Night of One Acts. We were the second (and last) to go on Friday. I was very nervous about the beginning, as that was the section with the most cues put together. After the first two lines between Ellie and Lexi, the voice of God is supposed to play, but when I pressed play, it didn't make a sound. In my panic, I went through each of the pages on the

soundboard and turned everything up. I thought that I had plugged Ellie's computer into the AUX cord labeled "PC", but I had used the wrong AUX cord. I ended up finding it, and I played Kate's line from the beginning. It was only about ten seconds that it didn't work, and Lexi and Ellie covered it up extremely well. After that mishap, the show went on well. I was scared what the audience was going to pick for the Sim's name, as it was a crowd mainly of theatre students, but they ended up choosing 'Tanner Robbins' who is a student that graduated from our theatre program a few years ago.

Everything else in the show went fine until the scene with the scrim. While Ellie and Jazsmin were moving it, one of the extension cords became unplugged, so the strobe didn't work. I ended up putting a green glow onstage so the audience could see the fight scene while still maintaining some sense of mystery. Of course, that made the scrim null and void, which I was upset about, but the show went on. Other than Kate's voice at the beginning and the scrim mishap, everything went well.

Impact

At the end of the show we had a 'talk-back' with the audience where we asked each other questions, and we got to hear what they thought about our performance piece. It was definitely a unique experience getting to hear directly from the audience after the show, as that isn't something we get the luxury of in theatre, usually. I appreciated getting to hear their interpretations and Lexi shared our take on the piece to them. I got asked about the tech, so I got to explain my vision for that. One of our IB

counselors asked us about how we collaborated and we explained how we all came from different theatre backgrounds but working together made the piece that much more powerful. Unfortunately, I got asked (by a tech student, nonetheless) what the purpose of the scrim was, and I had to explain that there wasn't a light behind it because it got unplugged, but that it would have been super cool if it had worked. I also got asked about how I felt the piece would stand in time as a piece of art, and I explained that I thought that the piece was intended to convey a message about how we can't control our lives through a pop culture topic that our generation was highly familiar with. Putting the message with a little piece of our generation's history was what I thought would make the piece stick with the audience.

Overall, the Collaborative was a unique experience for me. Usually in theatre, there is one person in charge of each area (i.e. a director, a prop master, a lighting designer) and they discuss their visions, go off into their little corners and create their part of the show, then they come back together to form a cohesive piece. With the Collaborative, though, we had to work together the entire time. This, at times, was difficult for me, because I am used to working in theatre areas that involve 'go off into your little corner' jobs, but I am very glad that I got to get out of my comfort zone and work with four of my peers to create a beautiful theatre piece that fulfilled its intention to convey the message that 'you can't control your life', and served its purpose for the audience.

In my video submission, my first cut was of the projector being used to show the creation of the sim. I chose this because I felt that the way I did it worked, and it helped

fulfill our intention to make the audience feel involved. That clip also included the rising of the screen to reveal the sim house. It showed my set design, and my use of lights to separate the 'sim world' and the 'real world' with a sharp line in between and different colors on each sign. It also showed one of the plumbob 'hat' I made. My second clip showed the girls breaking into the Sim's house. I chose this because it showed my red flashing lights, sirens, and one of Kate's lines that I played. I think all of the things in this clip helped contribute to the creepy yet cheesy mood of the play.