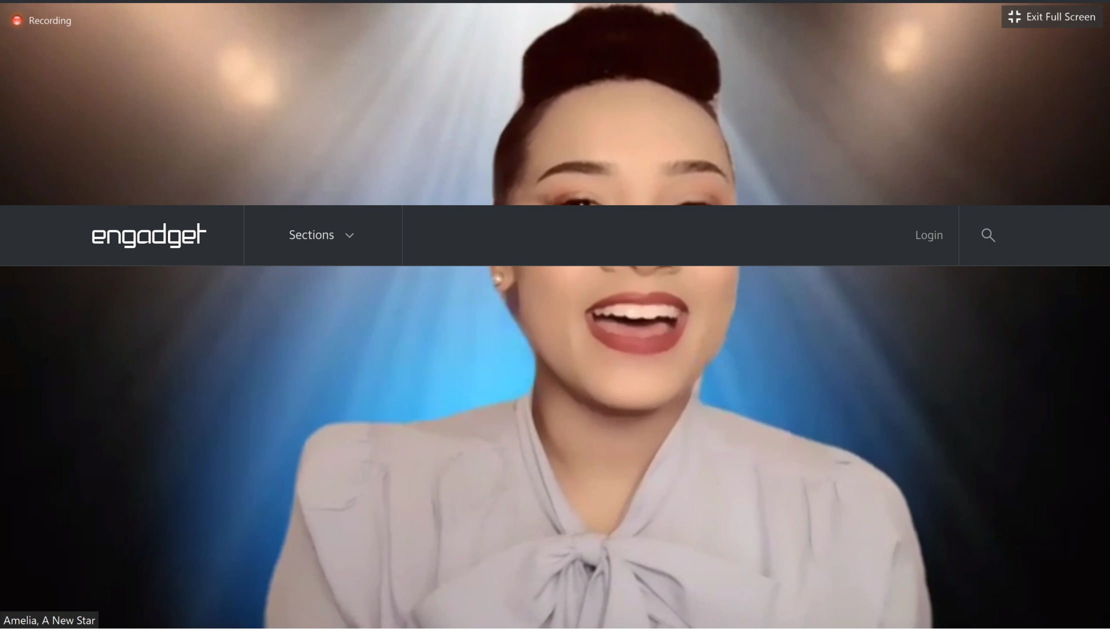

Seize the Show

Live theater over Zoom is better when it’s interactive

Having a chat room helps too.

K. Naudus
@krisnaudus
August 20th, 2020

Live entertainment has had a rough 2020, but perhaps none more so than theater, which has seen several major productions close and the Broadway season suspended until 2021. Unlike sports or music, there’s no acceptable virtual substitute right now and, while some shows like *Hamilton* have fared well on streaming, most recorded performances are locked away in library archives, unavailable to the general public quarantined at home.

The reasons most stage productions aren’t available via streaming are varied and arcane, but one argument you’ll often hear is that each performance is meant to be unique, and the performers often feed off the energy of the crowd. It’s what makes live theater different from TV and movies. However, a new theater company has managed to thrive despite the need for social isolation, not by emulating television or film, but another form of media altogether: video games.

In this article: interactive fiction, live theater, choose your own adventure, gamiotics, theater, live performance, seize the show, visual novel, feature,

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SEIZE THE SHOW
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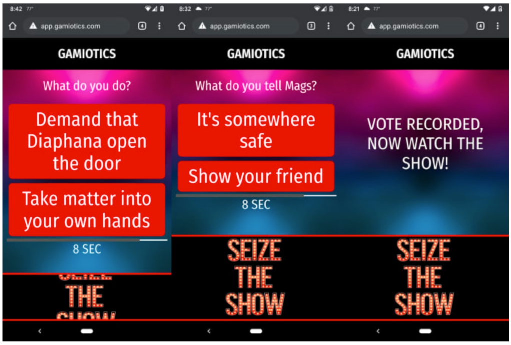
Seize the Show is the brainchild of producer David Carpenter, who also spearheaded a Harry Potter parody play called *Puffs* several years ago. That was a more traditional production, following a group of kids struggling to get through four years at a certain school of witchcraft and wizardry. But while he was working on that he attended an interactive show about a man on a date. The audience was given radio frequency remotes and asked to vote 13 times throughout the program. Carpenter liked the idea, but found the technology lacking, as it created too many barriers to entry. He enlisted the help of David Keene, an engineer who worked as a senior software architect on the PlayStation Network a decade ago. To make it as easy as possible to participate, they asked the audience to do something verboten: use their phones in the middle of a performance.

The technology, Gamiotics, works by asking the audience to visit a website and input that performance's special code. Throughout the show they're prompted at certain points to look at the screen and take some sort of action. Sometimes it's a simple poll; other times they're asked to put words in a specific order. And, possibly the trickiest challenge, sometimes they're asked to tap on the screen rapidly, with the entire audience's input added together and measured against a line. Sometimes they merely need to get above a certain number, but often the challenge is to keep it within a determined range.



Seize the Show

This probably sounds somewhat similar to the Jackbox Party Pack series, especially since no app is needed to participate and anyone can jump in as long as they have the code. But Carpenter finds Jackbox rather limited due to its automated system and the need for a console or PC capable of running it. In contrast, Gamiotics lives on a web server and is programmed almost entirely in Java.

Gamiotics was originally designed for a live setting, and the first show powered off the technology was a comedic Western called *The Magnificent Revengers*, penned by the same playwright (Matt Cox) who wrote *Puffs*. The play followed a pretty standard narrative structure, but the audience was prompted to make decisions along the way that influenced which characters would get involved and which might be left behind — or die. I attended a reading last year and enjoyed how much it reminded me of visual novels, a genre I love.

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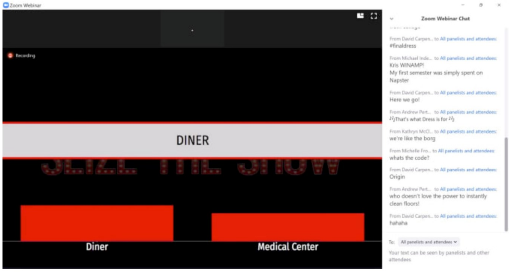
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SEIZE THE SHOW
Diner
Medical Center
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To: All panelists and attendees
Your text can be seen by panelists and other attendees

From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
#finaldress

From Michael Inde... to All panelists and attendees:
Kris WINAMP!
My first semester was simply spent on Napster

From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
Here we go!

From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
♫That's what Dress is for ♫

From Kathryn McCl... to All panelists and attendees:
we're like the borg

From Michelle Fro... to All panelists and attendees:
whats the code?

From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
Origin

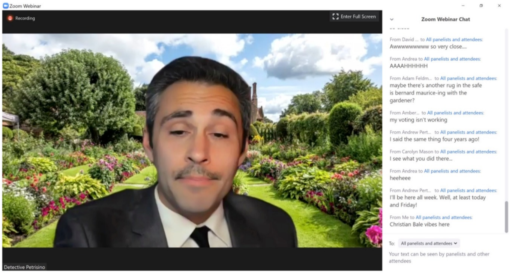
From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
who doesn't love the power to instantly clean floors!

From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
hahaha

Seize the Show

However, being subject to the whims of the entire audience can be frustrating, since maybe there were characters I cared about and wanted to see more of, or there were moments I wanted the protagonist to be kinder. If I were playing a game I could just save before a big decision so I can play both options and see which one I liked best. Here, I just had to go with the flow and hope for the best.

Unfortunately, the show never made it out of the development stage. Carpenter says it was “a wonderfully large, epic, brilliant, completely unproducible play.” The show was over four hours long. I sometimes saw audience members looking at their phone when there wasn’t a decision to be made, and I didn’t blame them. It dragged. So the production was shelved.


Zoom Webinar
Recording
Enter Full Screen
Detective Petrisino
Zoom Webinar Chat
To: All panelists and attendees
Your text can be seen by panelists and other attendees

From David ... to All panelists and attendees:
Awwwwwwwww so very close....

From Andrea to All panelists and attendees:
AAAAHHHHHH

From Adam Feldm... to All panelists and attendees:
maybe there's another rug in the safe
is bernard maurice-ing with the gardener?

From Amber... to All panelists and attendees:
my voting isn't working

From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
I said the same thing four years ago!

From Carolyn Mason to All panelists and attendees:
I see what you did there...

From Andrea to All panelists and attendees:
heeheee

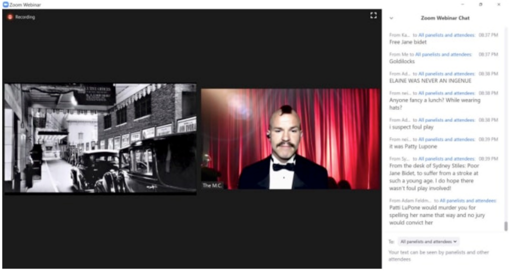
From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
I'll be here all week. Well, at least today and Friday!

From Me to All panelists and attendees:
Christian Bale vibes here

Seize the Show

The idea was revived in 2020, largely thanks to the pandemic. While Carpenter originally planned to take Gamiotics to the festival circuit, those plans had to be put on hold. Instead, he decided to give Zoom a try. He quickly rounded up a cast and crew and put on a show for a small live audience. The project didn’t take long to prepare; the cast didn’t need to memorize their lines since they could keep the 70-page script in front of them, just off-camera. And Zoom’s virtual backgrounds obviated the need for sets. Each show was also kept short, at around 40 minutes each. Carpenter likened them to radio plays, since they’re heavily dependent on dialogue.

However, the branching narrative of the plays meant a little more effort had to be put into the show’s direction. While the stage manager works in the background, switching cameras between actors and keeping an eye on the technical aspects, a lot of work falls to the show’s host, Jacob Thompson. To the audience, Thompson serves as a narrator, addressing them directly, walking them through the story and prompting them to use their phones at the appropriate times. But Thompson is also responsible for ensuring the story runs smoothly. If an actor reads off the wrong page, it’s his job to get the story back on track with what the audience voted for without them noticing. It’s very similar to being a dungeon master in Dungeons & Dragons, which Thompson also has a lot of experience with.



From Ka... to All panelists and attendees: 08:37 PM
Free Jane bidet

From Me to All panelists and attendees: 08:37 PM
Goldilocks

From Ad... to All panelists and attendees: 08:38 PM
ELAINE WAS NEVER AN INGENUE

From nei... to All panelists and attendees: 08:38 PM
Anyone fancy a lunch? While wearing hats?

From Ad... to All panelists and attendees: 08:38 PM
i suspect foul play

From nei... to All panelists and attendees: 08:39 PM
it was Patty Lupone

From Sy... to All panelists and attendees: 08:39 PM
From the desk of Sydney Stiles: Poor Jane Bidet, to suffer from a stroke at such a young age. I do hope there wasn't foul play involved!

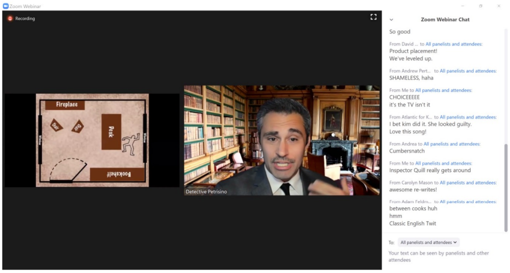
From Adam Feldm... to All panelists and attendees:
Patti LuPone would murder you for spelling her name that way and no jury would convict her

To: All panelists and attendees
Your text can be seen by panelists and other attendees

Seize the Show

Seize the Show has put on eight different productions since April, usually only running for a handful of free Zoom performances. The idea is for the team to learn as much as they can about what works and what doesn't. As of this month, the lineup encompasses three broad genres: adventures, murder mysteries and, most recently, a game show format. The game show is the easiest to produce since it only requires one performer, Jacob Thompson, with the contestants drawn from the audience. Four contestants are eliminated one by one in a series of trivia challenges, with the winner getting a $100 gift card. This is the show most similar to Jackbox's titles, as the contestants can call on the audience for votes and assistance. The purpose of the game show is for the company to have something to put on while the next full production is being prepared. It's still in its early stages, with a lot of kinks to be worked out.

The adventure shows are akin to a Choose Your Own Adventure title, where the audience makes decisions that culminate in just one of multiple endings. It isn't as simple as a branching path, though. Carpenter explained that it works on a points system, with the audience decisions being added up one by one, and then the most appropriate ending for that particular group of viewers is performed. One of such shows I attended, *Dungeon High*, placed the audience in the role of a new student at a school for mythical heroes like Theseus and Medea. You might be assigned the role of a warrior, magic user or rogue — and then struggle against that assigned part to forge your own destiny.



So good

From David ... to All panelists and attendees:
Product placement!
We've leveled up.

From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
SHAMELESS, haha

From Me to All panelists and attendees:
CHOICEEEEE
it's the TV isn't it

From Atlantic for K... to All panelists and attendees:
I bet kim did it. She looked guilty.
Love this song!

From Andrea to All panelists and attendees:
Cumbersnatch

From Me to All panelists and attendees:
Inspector Quill really gets around

From Carolyn Mason to All panelists and attendees:
awesome re-writes!

From Adam Feldm... to All panelists and attendees:
between cooks huh
hmm
Classic English Twit

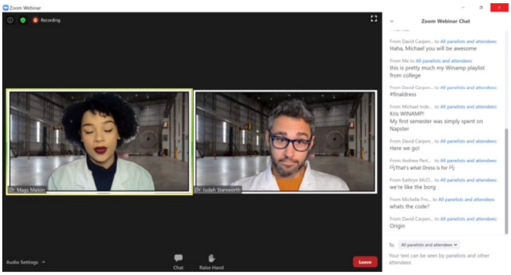
To: All panelists and attendees
Your text can be seen by panelists and other attendees

Seize the Show

The murder mysteries are self-explanatory, but the amount of investigating the audience can do is limited by the format. Instead, the host asks the audiences to make decisions on what to investigate, and to complete mini challenges to get suspects to reveal more information. The murderer is actually decided early on through seemingly innocuous audience choices. It's up to the viewers to pick up on the clues dropped and, when prompted, choose the correct murderer at the end. The last show the company put on, *All About Evil*, had five different possible murderers but I only saw two of them in the four performances I watched.

It seems like trying to solve a mystery can be frustrating when you're but one in a sea of anonymous voices, but this is where Zoom shines. Seize the Show keeps the chat room active during the performance, so the audience members can talk to each other while the show is unfolding. Sometimes this is used for color commentary and cheering on the performers but, as the months have gone on, the performances have picked up some regular viewers, and they're starting to work together.

In the murder mysteries this means calling out the clues in the chat room and posting the answers to the trivia questions. In the adventures it might be begging other players to vote for a specific option so they can see that part of the narrative. And there's just a lot of good vibes and cheering each other on — as well as discussing where the story should go next, and speculating who the murderer is.



From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
Haha, Michael you will be awesome

From Me to All panelists and attendees:
this is pretty much my Winamp playlist
from college

From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
#finaldress

From Michael Inde... to All panelists and attendees:
Kris WINAMP!
My first semester was simply spent on
Napster

From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
Here we go!

From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
🎶That's what Dress is for 🎶

From Kathryn McCl... to All panelists and attendees:
we're like the borg

From Michelle Fro... to All panelists and attendees:
whats the code?

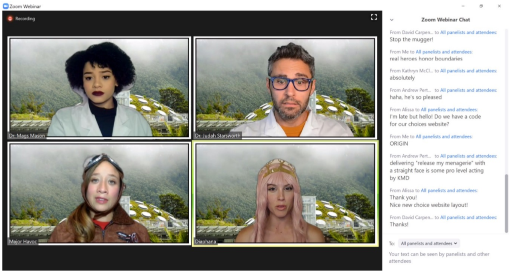
From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
Origin

To: All panelists and attendees
Your text can be seen by panelists and other attendees

Seize the Show

This happened organically, with no input from the cast or crew. But Carpenter is happy with this behavior, as he thinks that audience members, even in a live show, have always wanted to communicate with each other. He'd actually like to see more collaboration between viewers, given that the choices are being made as a group. It's something that future shows might take into account. I asked him if he thought there might be a split between people who actively participate in chat and those who don't, and he said there's always been people who don't want to play. He likened it to the popularity of Let's Play clips on YouTube, whose viewers are content to sit back and watch others play video games. They just want to enjoy the story.

Audience collaboration will likely be key to future productions as they grow more complex in structure and ambition. Tonight marks the official debut of Seize the Show's first multi-part narrative, *Empowered*. It's a superhero story (no relation to the Adam Hughes comic) that will continue through three plays a la the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but the choices that the audience makes for each individual performance will be averaged out and used to write the next installment in the saga. It's similar to how the story in a Telltale game would carry over, though Carpenter likened it to something far more old school: Sierra adventure titles from the '90s like the Quest for Glory series.



From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
Stop the mugger!

From Me to All panelists and attendees:
real heroes honor boundaries

From Kathryn McCl... to All panelists and attendees:
absolutely

From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
haha, he's so pleased

From Alissa to All panelists and attendees:
I'm late but hello! Do we have a code
for our choices website?

From Me to All panelists and attendees:
ORIGIN

From Andrew Pert... to All panelists and attendees:
delivering "release my menagerie" with
a straight face is some pro level acting
by KMD

From Alissa to All panelists and attendees:
Thank you!
Nice new choice website layout!

From David Carpen... to All panelists and attendees:
Thanks!

To: All panelists and attendees
Your text can be seen by panelists and other attendees

Seize the Show

The move to Zoom has made Gamiotics a lot more flexible and easier to experiment with, leading Carpenter and his team to expand the model beyond what they'd be able to do in a traditional live theater performance. Adapting the technology for Dungeons & Dragons is a possibility, as are dating shows and bar games. Carpenter would also like to make the technology available to other theatrical groups for free so they can put on their own productions, as well as licensing it for business and educational use.

He also hopes to expand his own team so the company can develop more shows and put on more performances each week. And, of course, there's the monetary aspect of it: Right now the cast and crew aren't being paid a living wage. Seize the Show hasn't completely given up on live performance either. But right now, the Zoom model at least means they're no longer dependent on the fortunes of the theater scene in New York or any other location, and it's accessible to a lot more people.

'Empowered' premieres tonight (August 19th) at 8PM ET. Performances will also be given August 25th and August 27th at 8PM. Sign up for all shows here.

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Tony
20 August, 2020

Shame they're all American time. When you do online, you can break down these narrow mindsets on delivery. I went to a UK show that did timings to suit Europe, Americas and APAC audiences broadening their reach.

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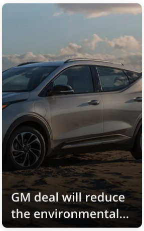

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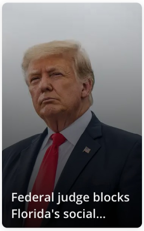

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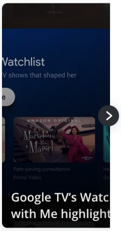

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