I Cast "Fireball" at the Gallery Wall: Gaming Through the Archives. A collection of thoughts on gaming as a practice and "9 Evenings for Theatre and Engineering" as an TTRPG campaign

by Sara Szostak, 2025

You find yourself in the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City on the evening of October 16, 1966. The massive drill hall echoes with murmurs of anticipation and confusion. Most of the audience doesn't know what they're about to witness. This isn't your typical night at the theater or an art show after all.

You are Lucinda Childs, dancer and choreographer, standing backstage in the final moments before your performance "Vehicle" begins. Your stomach tightens with that familiar mix of excitement and terror. Engineer Peter Hirsch gives you a thumbs up — the Doppler sonar device appears to be functioning, at least for now. Its ultrasonic beam will translate movement into sound, creating a landscape of swirling audio triggered by objects passing through its invisible field.

Nearby, Per Biorn makes final adjustments to the Ground Effects Machine — that six-foot-high Plexiglas cabinet equipped with two Hoover vacuum cleaner motors that create a cushion of air beneath it. Inside stands Alex Hay, ready to deliver the three swinging buckets — what you've come to think of as your "dancers"— that will cross the sonar beams and generate the performance's soundscape. William Davis will guide this hovering contraption manually across the Armory's vast space during the performance.

The three buckets wait, fitted with lights that will cast dramatic shadows against the screen behind the central scaffolding. Additional lights positioned on the floor will amplify this effect, creating a play of illumination that complements the sonics.

You take a deep breath. Tonight is about more than dance — it's about creating a non-static state where inanimate objects might be observed in increased dimension as they interact with light and sound triggered by radio signals. The TEEM system (Theatre Electronic Environmental Module) hums with potential and unpredictability.

The lights will soon dim. The audience waits. Roll for initiative. Your performance begins now.

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My relationship with narrative-driven RPGs has evolved from guilty pleasure to intellectual framework - a trajectory I have only recently begun to acknowledge in professional contexts. It is not exactly

something you can easily talk about with art-world colleagues. For ages, I've carried this weird intellectual guilt, like I was harboring some shameful secret every time I fired up another 80-hour narrative adventure. Discussing xenofeminism over lukewarm prosecco is sophisticated; mentioning your Skyrim save with about 100 mods, a cheese economy, and Thomas the Tank Engine instead of dragons is decidedly not.

Yet the thousands of hours I have (somewhat embarrassingly) surrendered to these digital worlds have quietly formed a parallel education. Each late night spent agonizing over dialogue choices in Mass Effect or navigating moral spirals in Disco Elysium wasn't just entertainment—it was unintentional training for understanding participatory frameworks in a way that traditional art theory barely touches.

In RPGs, whether digital quests or analog adventures around kitchen tables, you step into someone else's shoes, navigate their limitations, and make choices that ripple through intricately designed worlds. And with each narrative branch explored and consequence negotiated, a realization has crystallized: these interactive architectures access dimensions of meaning that usual curatorial methods struggle to approximate. That carefully composed wall text suddenly feels about as dynamic as a fossilized footprint compared to the messy, living knowledge emerging from well-designed narrative systems.

Though I confess I used to hesitate admitting this while chit-chatting at gallery openings, those supposedly "wasted" hours navigating narrative systems have reshaped my understanding of cultural engagement more profoundly than several seminars in exhibition theory ever could. Both spaces were teaching me different languages of engagement. One with its theoretical frameworks and critical discourse, and the other, the virtual with its embodied experiences and participatory storytelling. Two sides of the same cultural coin.

The digital experiences eventually pulled me into the physical realm of tabletop RPGs and LARPs. There, collective storytelling becomes tangible, with rules that both constrain and liberate. Like that first time someone handed me character sheets, the questions haunting my practice became increasingly insistent: Can these narrative-based game methodologies transcend entertainment to become legitimate curatorial tools? How might we deploy rule systems, character embodiment, and collaborative world-building to reconstruct or reinterpret artistic moments?

These questions followed me to Sweden, where, while deep-diving into the local context and quite prominent history of art-technology collaborations, I encountered documentation of "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering", that revolutionary 1966 series where ten artists collaborated with Bell Labs engineers(with Billy Kluver as the swedish connection being one of the originators of the idea) to create performances that challenged every conventional boundary between art, technology, and audience engagement. Staged at New York's 69th Regiment Armory, these performances marked one of the first substantial marriages of artistic vision and technological innovation.

The documentation is extensive: scores, diagrams, photographs, videos, and firsthand accounts, practically enough to reconstruct the events with precise accuracy. Yet something remains frustratingly

elusive, like examining the skeletal remains of a once-living, breathing creature. Perhaps it's absurd to say, but it reminds me of the strange dimension between experiencing the Travis Scott concert in *Fortnite* firsthand versus reading about Woodstock '69 in a history textbook - one feels lived, the other merely studied.

What would happen, I wondered while clicking through yet another PDF of an archival material, if instead of approaching these historical moments through the ossified relics of documentation, we were to reanimate them through the dynamic frameworks of gaming? Could role-playing systems offer a more phenomenologically honest understanding of events that were, at their core, about experience, interaction, and productive failure? Or maybe could its recreation lead to an alternate storyline altogether - not a perfect historical recreation but a new narrative branch that history never got to see?

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I have hinted at this before but I really believe that if you were caught with a D&D Player's Handbook or a Nintendo Switch at a gallery opening, you would get some funny looks. There's this unwritten hierarchy in cultural spaces where theoretical frameworks are legitimate intellectual pursuits, but game mechanics are somehow… lesser or too ludic. You really notice it in how art institutions treat anything game-related with these peculiar velvet gloves. Shows involving gaming are invariably marketed toward "younger audiences", or they're wrapped in exhaustive historical context, like it somehow needs to be legitimized as an artistic practice. But at the same time let's not forget that games are being more and more often recognized as texts of culture and there is a growing legitimization of game studies as an academic discipline. In 2020, Poland's Ministry of Education included *This War of Mine,* a survival video game developed by 11bit studios, focusing on civilian experience of war in its official school reading list for high school students. There are also quite a lot of established artists incorporating gaming in their practice like Cory Arangel or JODI. TTRPGs and LARPs seem to get slightly more cultural grace, especially in performance art circles, though they're still expected to come with their own user manual for the uninitiated.

I believe that for these reasons, for a long time I maintained this bizarre double life. By day, I was the composed cultural worker navigating the delicate politics of institutional spaces, nodding thoughtfully at discussions about the ontological implications of whatever-the-hell. By night, I transformed into an enthusiastic dungeon master, a grimdark commander of meticulously painted plastic legions, a hardcore gamer lost in virtual worlds. These personas existed in separate chambers of my psyche. This phenomenon isn't unique to art curators, of course and it's something that you start to discover once you start opening up more about these interests to others. It's like we're all secretly multiclassing but afraid to admit it on our professional character sheets. Sure, it's nerdy, but you develop a unique skill set, and besides – who really cares?

The pandemic was a kind of turning point in more acceptance towards virtual worlds. It was then, that suddenly the white cube became digital and everyone was scrambling for ways to create some meaningful engagement through screens. Sure, plenty of people quickly grew tired of virtual exhibition

spaces and yearned for real-world interaction. But those pandemic experiments have resulted in a more thoughtful blending of these two worlds.

For me, this convergence manifested in several live-action role-plays I curated, including an immersive exploration of more-than-human relations and speculative cyberpunk futures. The framework invited artists and visitors to embody various roles – from post-anthropocene survivors to non-human entities reclaiming urban ruins. Think about it: RPGs have these elaborate character creation systems where you choose your class, background, and distribute skill points. Now imagine this, but in a museum setting, with participants actually embodying different perspectives rather than just reading about them on some drywall text.

The results were mind-blowing in curatorial terms and felt like unlocking an entirely new skill tree I didn't know existed on my professional character sheet. People engaged with complex conceptual frameworks in ways that traditional wall text - that sanitized institutional voice-of-god that curators deploy like protective spells - could never achieve. Visitors who normally skimmed exhibition materials were suddenly deep in character, debating ecological ethics from the perspective of sentient mycelia networks or discussing resource allocation as representatives of future governance systems. Theoretical positions transformed from abstract assertions into embodied arguments; aesthetic conflicts evolved from intellectual exercises into visceral confrontations. The white cube became a theater of embodied narrative.

This successful experiment has me wondering: what if we pushed further into tabletop RPG territory? What if the structured rules and chance operations of something like D&D could be applied to the reconstruction of ephemeral art events? The idea seems particularly fascinating for dealing with archives. The dice, after all, introduce an element of productive uncertainty that mirrors the contingency of live performance – particularly apt for the technical mishaps and improvisations that characterized much of "9 Evenings for Theatre and Technology."

Imagine approaching art history not through slideshow presentations and academic papers, but through carefully crafted campaign modules where participants roll for historical contingency. Picture this: "*You're an engineer of Bell Labs. You find yourself in the 69th Regiment Armory on October 14, 1966. Robert Rauschenberg's 'Open Score' is about to begin, but the wireless system is malfunctioning. Roll a D20 for your engineering check to see if you can fix it before the audience grows restless.*" It sounds absurd until you realize it's probably a more honest engagement with what actually happened than trying to decode these events directly according to their archival records. Carefully guided narration based on the scores and documents, almost perfectly mirrored conditions, yet with a certain space for unpredictability. You just have to trust the process and go along with it.

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But the dice rolling? That's not just some quirky side note, it might be the most honest curatorial tool I've ever encountered. I remember sitting one evening in my office in the tower of a meticulously

reconstructed 17th-century castle (yes, a literal castle. The irony of discussing experimental art in what amounts to a pre-built D&D setting is not lost on me). Surrounded by exhibition plans and budget spreadsheets - those bureaucratic constellations that often eclipse the art they're supposed to support. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead with that particular quality of institutional indifference that anyone who's stayed late at work knows all too well – like the building itself is sighing, "Really? You're still here?".

I impulsively pulled out a d20 die from my pocket. It was one of those sparkly galaxy-patterned ones that looks like it contains an entire universe inside. For me, that well-worn d20 serves as a kind of amulet against the crushing certainty of institutional protocols and the decision fatigue that plagues modern existence. My die is my secret weapon against that paralysis when faced with problems like choosing between seventeen identical-looking font options for the exhibition poster. The die doesn't care about institutional politics or your career ambitions - it simply provides an external system for navigating impossible choices.

"Should I include theoretical framework citations in the text I'm working on?" I thought to myself one evening. "Difficulty 12," I decided, establishing the parameters of this impromptu skill check.

The die tumbled across EU grant applications (the ones requiring seventeen partner organizations from at least five countries, where you promise impossible "innovation"as if you're pitching to venture capitalists). It came to rest on exactly 12 - a success, but so barely that it practically teased failure.

I laughed aloud, startling myself in the empty room. "But wait," I reflected, "I've only skimmed half the source material, and what I did read was mostly filtered through three vodka tonics at that opening night after-party. I have a vague recollection of nodding enthusiastically while someone in architectural glasses deconstructed the text. That's definitely a -2 penalty for performative comprehension."

I think almost every curator knows this moment, the urge to engage with texts you've barely processed, the theoretical conversations maintained through elaborate social cues rather than genuine understanding. We become expert performers of comprehension, masters of the thoughtful nodding sequence, the strategic deployment of "problematic" and "interesting tension." Our entire field sometimes feels like one elaborate LARP where everyone's afraid to break character.

Yet, the die was consulted; the theoretical framework would remain unquoted. The text would stay mercifully accessible, free from the obligation to genuflect toward whatever theoretical framework currently enjoys fashionable status in the field - a small victory for actual communication.

This ridiculous moment, a secret ritual of actual dice-rolling in a supposedly serious institutional setting, crystallized something profound: games introduce not just productive randomness, but a framework for acknowledging our own intellectual limitations and blindspots. The dice, in their indifferent tumble across mindlessly filled buzzwordful grant applications, force a confrontation with the contingency that our often commanding curatorial voices so often conceal.

They are tiny plastic monuments to the hubris of curatorial certainty. Each roll whispers: "You don't know everything. You can't control everything. Your theoretical framework isn't as comprehensive as you pretend. Your role as a curator is partially performative." These aren't signs of professional negligence but rather pragmatic recognition of the limits of rational decision-making in complex systems. In a field built somehow on expertise and authority, there's something wonderfully subversive about surrendering decisions to chance operations - an acknowledgment that sometimes the random algorithm produces better results than the carefully considered curatorial position.

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But let's come back to the question: what if we designed a tabletop RPG specifically to explore "9 Evenings"? Not just as a quirky side project, but as a legitimate methodology for understanding historical contingency and embodied experience? What if we could actually *play* through art history instead of just reading about it?

I envision a system where players would assume roles based on the original participants: Robert Rauschenberg with his wired tennis rackets (or actually Frank Stella and Mimi Kanarek playing them) that translated the impact of the ball on the racket (definitely some kind of bard/artificer multiclass); John Cage with his Variations VII that attempted to capture "all the sounds there are" (clearly a chaotic neutral wizard specializing in divination); Yvonne Rainer with her dancers receiving instructions via walkie-talkies (movement-based ranger with high dexterity and wisdom scores).

Engineers from Bell Labs would form another character class, with special abilities for technical problem-solving but potential communication penalties when translating artistic visions into technological implementations - like in D&D playing as the artificer character in a party that keeps trying to use magic items for purposes they were never designed for.

The TEEM(Theatre Electronic Environmental Module)system wasn't just equipment, it was essentially a custom-built tech stack specifically designed for artists. Reading Billy Klüver's description and seeing the diagrams feels like uncovering hidden lore from some legendary campaign setting: "amplifiers, transmitters, receivers, tone decoders, tone encoders, SCR circuits, relays." You can almost picture these components housed in burnished aluminum cases with analog dials and flickering indicator lights. The design specs feel weirdly familiar to anyone who's ever followed tech evolution: "each unit was to be as small as possible and battery-powered." They were essentially creating the first portable computing systems for art when most computers were still room-sized behemoths that required dedicated cooling systems and teams of operators in lab coats. "A sufficient amount of units was to be available for quick replacement" - they weren't just building hardware; they were creating an entire support infrastructure with redundancies and hot-swappable components. These engineers understood the chaos of live performance and they were trying to run the prototype for almost every tech-driven art installation, combining that perfect storm of artistic ambition meeting technical reality.

Each artist's specialized equipment designed by the engineers reads like cracking open a dusty player's handbook from an alternate 1970s where modular synths powered role-playing adventures. Lucinda Child's Doppler sonar? Clearly the ranger subclass with bonus tracking stats. Deborah Hay's remote-control platforms? Some kind of analog techno-druid summoning spatial entities. And Steve Paxton's loops—bard class, heavy on chronomancy.

And then you hit Oyvind Fahlstrom's list - chemical reactions (okay, alchemist, makes sense) and wait... "anti missile-missile"? The Cold War really was a different time. Looking at these descriptions feels like archeology, uncovering artifacts from that brief, magical moment when the technological and artistic avant-gardes collided - before tech became corporate, and when art was less institutionalized - when both still felt like wild experiments conducted by slightly mad pioneers who didn't know what was impossible because nobody had told them yet.

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So again picture this: "*The space echoes with anticipation and confusion - most of the audience has no idea what they're about to witness. The TEEM system is showing signs of instability after yesterday's partial failure during rehearsal. Roll a Perception check to notice potential issues before the performance begins*" The Game Master slides those archival diagrams across the table - actual schematics from 1966 with their beautiful technical drawings and handwritten notes in the margins. Your palms get sweaty as you pick up the d20, because suddenly this isn't some distant art historical footnote: it's happening right now, and you're responsible for making sure Rauschenberg's piece doesn't crash and burn in front of 500 increasingly restless New Yorkers.

Imagine rolling for an Engineering check to quickly swap out a malfunctioning SCR circuit while performers pace nervously, tennis rackets in hand, the distinguished audience murmuring as minutes tick by. "I need a 15 or higher to fix this before the house lights dim," you whisper, shaking the die between cupped hands. This high-pressure scenario, where technical knowledge meets improvisation meets public scrutiny, is exactly what traditional art history flattens into a sterile footnote: "The performance experienced technical difficulties."

While TEEM was the mothership, the introduction of elements such as subsystems like the proportional control system that enabled artists to dynamically control sound and lighting intensity rather than simple on/off switching. According to the documentation it was successfully used by Cage, Tudor, and Hay, and therefore becomes a fascinating mechanics challenge in game terms. But what would that "success" look like as gameplay? How do you represent Cage's philosophical embrace of chance as playable mechanics? Would his character sheet include special abilities like "Embrace Indeterminacy" that convert failed rolls into unexpected artistic breakthroughs? His famous line "I have nothing to say and I am saying it" could be a legendary action that silences all other sound-generating powers but amplifies environmental audio.

These wouldn't just be character sheets with technical stats. They'd quantify philosophical predispositions. Cage gets advantage on randomness checks but disadvantage on control attempts. Rauschenberg's collaborative instinct grants +3 bonuses to team skill checks. Klüver's engineering pragmatism functions as a technological stabilizer that prevents critical failures on technical rolls but imposes penalties on "artistic vision" saves.

It reminds me of those early days of internet multiplayers, when the technology was barely holding together but the experience was transcendent precisely because of its precarity. Everyone who participated in "9 Evenings" was essentially playing the beta version of what would become new media art, complete with all the glitches, crashes, and unexpected moments of beauty that any good beta test involves. They were the original early adopters, figuring out the rules of digital art before anyone had written the manual.

The archive materials, those photos, diagrams, and firsthand accounts, are like finding a partial game manual for some legendary discontinued series. They give us the lore, the setting, some character descriptions, but not the lived experience of playing it. What RPGs excel at is precisely what we're missing: the feeling of problem-solving within constraints, the improvisational negotiations, the emotional rush of witnessing something unprecedented unfold in real time.

And what about the failures? We have firsthand accounts of technical difficulties that practically read like a critical failure roll waiting to be formalized. "*You roll a 1 on your Electronics check? It's a critical failure. The oscillator overheats, causing feedback that makes the audience cover their ears.*" We have photographs capturing moments of unexpected beauty amid chaos, like loading screens between the planned and the emergent. The documentation tells us what happened, but an RPG might let us experience *how* it happened, and more provocatively, how it might have happened differently.

I admit I am less interested in creating definitive historical recreations than in the methodological provocation itself: but will this approach collapse into a frivolous gamification of art history, or might it open toward a rigorous phenomenological investigation? Could it become a way of inhabiting the decision space that the original participants navigated, complete with their constraints, conflicts, and breakthroughs? Perhaps most intriguingly, might it reveal that the distinction between "frivolous" and "rigorous" needs serious interrogation? Isn't that binary suspiciously similar to the high/low culture divide that experimental art practices were actively dismantling in the 20th century? The same divide that makes us hesitant to admit we learned more about narrative pacing from Alan Wake than from that seminar on comparative literature? After all, weren't those artists themselves playing a kind of game - testing boundaries, establishing rule systems, kind of like rolling the dice on untested technologies? Maybe a game is exactly what we need to understand the experimentation that made "9 Evenings" revolutionary in the first place.

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An interesting case to consider in terms of gamification possibilities is David Tudor's "Bandoneon ! (a combine)". This is perhaps the most challenging performance to reconstruct through conventional

documentation, and therefore the most tantalizing candidate for procedural reinterpretation. Tudor's piece used the bandoneon (an accordion-like instrument) to generate signals that simultaneously modulated audio spectrums, generated visual imagery (through Lowell Cross's visual translation systems), and activated programming devices controlling the entire audio-visual environment. As Tudor himself described it: "Bandoneon ! uses no composing means; when activated it composes itself out of its own composite instrumental nature."

How might one translate this self-generating system into RPG mechanics? The central game mechanic would involve a cascading dice system where initial rolls (representing bandoneon notes) trigger secondary effect rolls (representing signal transformations), which in turn activate environmental change rolls (representing spatial modulations). It's like those elaborate combo systems from fighting games where one successful move opens up possibilities for others, creating chains of cause and effect that transform simple inputs into complex outputs.

Other players (perhaps controlling Lowell Cross's visualizer or Fred Waldhauer's proportional control system) would need to react to these cascading signals in real-time, making improvised decisions about how to translate, amplify, or modulate them through their subsystems. It's basically the tabletop equivalent of those multiplayer rhythm games where everyone's playing a different instrument but somehow creating a coherent whole - kind of like a Rock Band for the electro-acoustic set.

The GM (Game Master) or perhaps more appropriately, the "System Administrator," would introduce technical glitch cards at unpredictable intervals, forcing collaborative problem-solving among the player-artists and player-engineers. *"Your oscillator is overheating; you have three turns to resolve the issue before it affects the entire audio environment."* You're no longer passively reading about technical difficulties in a performance, you're experiencing the adrenaline rush of troubleshooting in real-time while a supposed audience watches expectantly.

What fascinates me about this potential reconstruction is how it transforms Tudor's proclamation that "Bandoneon ! uses no composing means" into a procedural truth. The RPG system itself becomes a meta-instrument that, like the original bandoneon, "composes itself" through the interaction of its constituent processes. Just as Tudor's performance emerged from the instrumental system rather than a predetermined score, the RPG reconstruction would emerge from the rule system rather than a predetermined narrative. Tudor wasn't just playing an instrument; he was designing a system that played itself, decades before procedural generation became a game design buzzword. He was the original procedural content generator, building rule-based creative frameworks while the rest of the world was still thinking in linear narratives.

This approach doesn't just gamify art history, it reveals how certain art forms were already games in all but name, complex systems of rules and interactions generating unpredictable but meaningful outcomes. In reconstructing Tudor's performance as an RPG, we're not imposing foreign logic onto historical material but recognizing the playful, systems-based thinking that was already there, hidden beneath the serious façade of avant-garde experimentation.

I am, of course, very much aware of the irony here — using non-technological means (dice, character sheets, verbal descriptions) to simulate technological art. But perhaps this translation across mediums is precisely what makes the exercise valuable? There's something beautifully paradoxical about gathering around a table with analog tools to recreate what was, at its time, cutting-edge electronic experimentation.

The constraints of the tabletop medium force us to consider: what is the essential nature of Tudor's work? Is it the specific technologies employed, or the procedural relationships between them? Is it the particular sounds and images generated, or the systemic conditions that generated them?

The RPG reconstruction, in its necessary abstraction, might reveal conceptual dimensions that literal reenactment would obscure. Though honestly, I'm already dreaming of a hybrid approach — imagine a table where players roll physical dice that trigger digital sound generators through microcontrollers and sensors, creating a kind of meta-performance that bridges 1966 and today. Playing as Tudor while actually generating sounds through randomized inputs feels like the kind of weird feedback loop these artists would have quite likely appreciated.

The game mechanics would necessarily incorporate chance and contingency, not just to simulate the documented technical difficulties of the original performances, but to honor their improvisational spirit. After all, what is a dice roll if not a formalized encounter with the unknown, a ritualized surrender to indeterminacy? In TTRPGs often critical failures lead to the most memorable events of the campaign. The original "9 Evenings" emerged from a collision between artistic vision and technological limitation, between careful planning and spectacular failure. Any worthy reconstruction must preserve this productive tension between intention and accident, between control and surrender.

It would be disingenuous to pretend there's nothing humorously incongruous about translating avant-garde performance art into the idiom of dungeons and dragons. I can already envision the skeptical glances of readers or the barely suppressed smiles when I describe character classes of "Experimental Composer" and "Bell Labs Engineer." Yet this incongruity itself seems productive - a reminder that historical reconstruction always involves translation across contexts, and that all methodologies, no matter how seemingly rigorous, involve elements of playful speculation. After all, what are historical narratives if not retrospective rule systems imposed on chaotic events? What are archival processes if not a kind of procedural magic that transforms ephemeral happenings into manipulable artifacts? The RPG framework merely makes explicit what conventional historiography often disguises: that our access to the past is always mediated through systems of representation with their own constraints and affordances.

The gap between the blinking lights of 1960s experimental technology and the polyhedral dice of fantasy role-playing isn't actually as wide as it might first appear. Both are technologies of imagination, tools that extend our capacity to simulate, to speculate, to collaboratively imagine alternative possibilities. Both create structured spaces for human improvisation. Both generate unexpected outcomes through the interaction of rule systems with unpredictable human choices.

In the end, maybe that's what makes this approach feel right - not despite the methodological whiplash, but because of it.

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This approach isn't without precedent in the digital realm. Remember when Second Life was supposed to be the future of everything? Before Meta tried to make "metaverse" happen, artists Eva and Franco Mattes were already using those virtual worlds for their "Reenactments" project (2007-2010) and they weren't just documenting performance art, they were respawning it in digital form.

Using Second Life's janky physics and uncanny-valley avatars, they breathed new digital life into works like Marina Abramović and Ulay's "Imponderabilia" or Vito Acconci's "Seedbed". These weren't just art history slideshows, they were transformative acts that gave canonical performances new procedural life. Think about it: as pixelated avatars replicated those naked bodies standing opposite each other in a virtual doorway for "Imponderabilia," the whole work gained new meaning about embodiment and presence. Is your avatar "really" squeezed between those other avatars? You don't feel the awkwardness of the situation the same as you would IRL, right? Does virtual nudity carry the same charge as physical nudity?

What fascinates me about the Mattes' project is how it transforms documentation into active engagement. Their reconstructions function similarly to a game-master's sourcebook - providing structure for experience without dictating every detail of its unfolding. The proposed RPG approach to the archives would extend this transformative logic further, moving from visual reproduction to systemic exploration, asking participants not just to see what happened but to inhabit the decision space that produced these events.

The tension between digital and physical reconstruction methods feels like choosing between analog film photography and digital restoration. Digital platforms provide that seductive visual immediacy, a simulated embodiment where we can "see" the reconstructed performance unfold in three-dimensional space. Yet this visual richness often comes at the cost of flattening the underlying decision structures, rendering performances as pre-programmed animations rather than live negotiations.

The thing is, this doesn't have to be the case. The real magic happens when digital reconstructions embrace rather than erase those messy human negotiations. A good analogy would be early multimedia CD-ROMs from the 90s let you click through different pathways of a documentary. They were clunky but revolutionary because they revealed the construction process itself. Therefore, trying to digitally archive performances like those of "9 Evenings" would not only be about showing us what happened, it would be about exposing the chaos behind each technical decision, each artistic compromise. It's like how the director's commentary on a DVD could sometimes be more illuminating than the film itself. Digital platforms at their best don't just preserve the final product; they create navigable ecosystems where we can explore the fascinating web of cause-and-effect that led to those breakthrough moments. We can model those layers of decision-making digitally, showing both the polished surface and the

tangle of wires underneath, revealing how Rauschenberg's tennis match or Tudor's bandoneon performances emerged from that delicate dance between artistic vision and technical possibility.

Physical tabletop play, by contrast, offers impoverished visual representation but enriched social dynamics - actual bodies in actual space collectively imagining historical contingencies. In the case of "Reenactments" in Second Life there is of course also a social aspect, but it hits different - disembodied and virtual. For me, it doesn't mean one is better than the other. It is just different.

What makes this "9 Evenings" RPG concept particularly appealing is how it mirrors the original event's own experimental, collaborative nature. The performers and engineers of 1966 were essentially playing their own improvisational game, with real-time problem-solving and unexpected technical glitches shaping the outcome. The tabletop reconstruction wouldn't just represent their art - it would recreate the conditions of its emergence. Like those nights when your D&D party completely derails the DM's carefully planned storyline and inadvertently creates something more interesting than what was in the module.

In both 1966 and today, the magic happens in the space between the plan and its execution, between the rules and their unexpected applications. After all, isn't that liminal space between intention and outcome precisely where both games and experimental art live?

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To cast the die is to invite chance into the domain of certainty -a subversive act not unlike what those artists and engineers attempted in the Armory space so many decades ago. There's something similarly thrilling about reimagining art history not as a passive consumption of authoritative narratives but as an active playground where past events can be collectively reanimated.

Growing up with my Eastern European sensibilities (though I was born after the political transformation), I inherited my parents' complicated relationship with "official" histories. Their childhoods were filled with mechanically recited narratives while entirely different stories circulated in hushed kitchen conversations over steaming cups of tea. This upbringing left me hyper-aware of how history itself is a designed experience and who gets to be the designer matters enormously.

In places where authoritative narratives were imposed rather than collectively generated, where archives were deliberately curated to conceal as much as reveal, there's something profoundly liberating about the distributed storytelling of RPGs. It reminds me of those early internet forums where anonymous users could construct elaborate alternative histories outside official channels - except RPGs make this process transparent, collaborative, and deliciously tactile.

RPGs offer a model for democratic engagement with historical materials where multiple perspectives can coexist and where authoritative interpretation becomes a negotiation rather than a declaration. What's particularly powerful about game mechanics is how they formalize partiality - dice rolls remind us that outcomes are probabilistic rather than predetermined, character sheets acknowledge that every

perspective is necessarily limited, rule systems make explicit that all interactions are mediated by structures that both enable and constrain.

The gap between documentation and lived experience is never simple, but it's especially complicated in performance art, where the ephemeral magic of the original event confronts the stubborn materiality of its records. The archive promises access but delivers distance; it preserves traces while inevitably transforming their significance.

Rather than treating this slippage as some methodological problem to be solved, the RPG approach embraces it as a conceptual opportunity. It invites us to explore how archival materials don't function as transparent windows into past events but as rule systems guiding our contemporary engagement with historical traces. We can never truly experience "9 Evenings" as it happened in October of 1966, but we can create conditions for meaningful engagement with its core dynamics through structured play.

The dice rest on the table now, character sheets await their players, filled with abilities both documented and speculatively assigned. The archive has been transformed into something playable, and history itself stands ready to be performed anew. Who will join me in this summoning of "9 Evenings" through rule systems and collaborative imagination?