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Bridging the Gap Between Gaming and Theatre: »The Dark Fortress – A Minecraft Adventure«

Summary

In the Norwegian National Touring Theatre's (Riksteatret) original production *The Dark Fortress – A Minecraft Adventure*, children with little or no prior experience in theatre entered a world where their gaming expertise was not only acknowledged – it was central. In my role as Game Master, I served as both guide and performer, bridging the pixelated landscapes of Minecraft with the embodied, collective space of live theatre.



Keywords: Minecraft; digital children's culture; interactive theatre; gaming; touring theatre

Introduction

This article examines how my role as Game Master enabled children to cross from their familiar digital domain into the unfamiliar terrain of live theatre, not as passive observers but as active *Actor Gamers*. At every tour location where *The Dark Fortress* was performed, a 90-minute workshop was given on the day of the performance to every group of *Actor Gamers*. Each child was given the tools to utilize their expertise to perform in front of hundreds of audience members. By the end of the night, children who had earlier expressed fear about standing before any kind of crowd stood confidently on stage, bowing to thunderous applause for their unique contributions.

The central question guiding this article is: *how did my role as Game Master bring children from the world of Minecraft into the world of theatre?* Drawing on my own rehearsal notes, photo documentation and reflective journaling, I aim to bring the reader along on the Game Master's journey as translator between cultural worlds – the digital language of gaming and the theatrically expressive – and show how this hybrid role has enabled transformations in the Actor Gamer's self-perception and creative agency.

The Play, the Actor Gamer and the Game Master

The Production

The Dark Fortress – A Minecraft Adventure was co-produced by the Norwegian Touring Theatre (Riksteatret), Teatret Vårt and Hålogaland Teater as an original performance for children aged 9 to 13. The play ran for 4 months in 2024 and was remounted at Hålogaland Teater in 2025 to run for 6 weeks. The play toured all of Norway's 15 counties and ran for a total of 108 performances. *The Dark Fortress* was written and directed by Norwegian directors and playwrights Frode Gjerløw and Håkon Dalsbø. Their vision was to reach youths by creating a hybrid format where the popular game *Minecraft* and live theatre could merge – not simply as a gimmick or backdrop, but as a fully integrated performance space. *The Dark Fortress* is not a play about *Minecraft* – it is a theatrical performance that also happens *in Minecraft*.

The Story

The story of *The Dark Fortress* touches on themes of identity, friendship, parental neglect and courage. Vegard, the story's protagonist, plays *Minecraft* – but the rest of his life is a struggle and his mother is unable to take proper care of him. An agreement with Child Welfare Services makes him leave his mother's house for the summer and move in with his older brother, leaving Vegard to fend for himself in a new place with no friends.

One day he meets Marah, a girl attending a nearby summer camp where they play *Minecraft* every night. Vegard is allowed to join the group, but he accidentally burns down their village in *Minecraft* and everything goes wrong. Off in the distance, a threatening, dark fortress begins to emerge in their *Minecraft* server.

Vegard realizes that he is being haunted by someone, both in *Minecraft* and the real world. Someone who knows him far too well and who will stop at nothing to ruin things for him.

Vegard must navigate trust, friendship and courage to find his voice and enlist the aid of Marah and the other children at the summer camp to face and destroy the darkness that is growing – inside *Minecraft* and inside himself. Marah and the group come through and help

Vegard destroy the darkness in Minecraft, giving him the courage he needs to face his mother and give her a second chance in the real world.



The Dark Fortress – A Minecraft Adventure (Riksteatret 2024)

Data from the National Touring Theatre's marketing and communication department shows that 20,602 tickets were sold during the tour in 2024 and the demographics indicate that adults brought children to see the performance (B. Kolset Apenes, personal communication, May, 2025). For every performance, six new local children were enlisted as Actor Gamers to

interact with Vegard and Marah in-game as they journeyed through the story, playing the roles of the other children at the summer camp in *Minecraft*.

Each performance followed a consistent structure across tour locations. The show was divided into three separate parts for the Actor Gamers:

1. The Actor Gamer Workshop – A 90-minute pre-show training session in which 6 local children aged 11-15 joined the Game Master at the theatre to learn the evening's performance. The Actor Gamers and the Game Master performed a »speed run« of the arc of the play as well as the tasks that needed to be completed during the performance.
2. The Performance – The Actor Gamers were introduced at the beginning of the performance, akin to an orchestra, and joined the Game Master in »the deck« – an area inside the scenography containing tablets and the Game Master's PC. From here, the Game Master and Actor Gamers performed their roles in the play within our custom-built *Minecraft* server. Prompts, guidance and commands were issued to the Actor Gamers during the performance, and they interacted with the actors onstage through their avatars in *Minecraft*.
3. The Final Bow – At the end of the show, the Actor Gamers emerged from the deck to take bows alongside the professional actors.

The Actor Gamer

Children's cultures are increasingly hybrid, spanning physical and digital spaces, structured institutions and autonomous peer networks, commercial games and educational projects. Within this landscape, *Minecraft* occupies a distinctive position. Originally released in 2011, the game has become a near-ubiquitous part of contemporary childhood. Of the over 600 Actor Gamers involved in the project, almost all mentioned *Minecraft* as one of their top five video games. Selection bias aside – *Minecraft* was crowned game of the decade in 2019 by several publications (Kain, 2020) and remains the best-selling video game in history. Its open-world sandbox design allows for exploration, creativity, collaboration and social performance – all qualities it shares with theatre. *The Dark Fortress – A Minecraft Adventure* situates itself at this intersection, bringing together two seemingly disparate domains: the rule-bound freedom of a game world and the embodied, ephemeral world of live performance.

Minecraft is not simply a game – it is a platform, a digital playground, a social space, and increasingly, a pedagogical tool. Studies in children's digital play (Marsh et al., 2018) highlight how games like *Minecraft* are part of children's meaning-making processes. Within these virtual worlds, children negotiate identity, agency, social roles, and narratives. In that sense, *Minecraft* is already a form of informal theatre, albeit with a different set of materials and audience expectations.

More importantly, the game's modularity and open-endedness allow children to play not only within the game's rules but also with the rules themselves. The concept of the »modder« or »builder« in *Minecraft* culture parallels the artistry within theatre production, especially within devised theatre traditions. Thus, when our Actor Gamers stepped into the *Dark Fortress*, they were not passive consumers of a digital script. They were literate participants in a world that rewards improvisation, collaboration, and invention.

In the tradition of participatory and devised theatre for and with young audiences, children are not merely audience members but are invited into the dramaturgical process. This notion

challenges adult-child binaries by foregrounding the competence and creativity of young participants. Within this framework, performance becomes a dialogic act, not a transmission.

By engaging children as Actor Gamers, *The Dark Fortress* both respects and activates this capacity. The novelty lies in translating the concept of theatrical participation into a digital theatre-game hybrid, and my role as Game Master became a central figure in maintaining this bridge.

The Game Master and the Workshop

The role of Game Master was far more vague than any conventional role I have inhabited in my career as an actor and even as a drama pedagogue. It was also clear that I could not approach this role in a traditional way since the Game Master needed to live equally in both the real and the digital world, elevated from the action of the play, while simultaneously being *in* the pulse of the play. There were no clues, cues or stage directions for the Game Master in the script – only descriptions of actions in *Minecraft*. It quickly became clear that it needed to be the Game Master's job to trigger these actions. Furthermore, it was within my responsibilities as Game Master to devise the 90-minute Actor Gamer workshop that all the participants needed to go through before joining us on stage. The workshop was first thought to be a classical »theatre camp« – bringing the Actor Gamers on stage to do ensemble exercises, present the play through a series of games and finally »testing« them in *Minecraft* with simple mini games similar to the tasks they would be doing in *Minecraft* during the play. This concept quickly fell apart after our first test run with the Actor Gamers. Director Frode Gjerløw describes: »I had some ideas on where to start, (...) that's why we called it a workshop, because we knew that whatever ideas we have now may completely transform the minute we start working with children, and that's exactly what happened.« (F. Gjerløw, personal communication, January 2025). The drama pedagogy-based approach engaged the Actor Gamers physically, making it difficult for them to home in on the task at hand and the play itself. The mini games in *Minecraft* were not completed – instead, the Actor Gamers immediately began exploring, testing the limits of the games and ignoring instructions. It became clear in our evaluation that we had missed our target audience. Our goal was not to bring gamers into the theatre through drama pedagogy; our goal was to bring their inherent expertise into the performance. We needed to cater to this expertise. The decision was made to instead try structuring the workshop as a LAN party (gathering several people with separate devices in the same room to play a game together), and I leaned much more heavily on my knowledge as a gamer than a drama pedagogue. I designed the workshop structure in collaboration with the directors, with the final concept scheduled below, as printed in my rehearsal notes in January of 2025:

16:00 – The workshop begins. Actor Gamers are offered pizza. During the meal, I introduce myself and ask the Actor Gamers:

- What is your name? (write down)*
- How old are you? (write down)*
- What games do you like to play? (write down)*

I explain what is going to happen over the next four hours, tell the story of the play and finally explain our roles in the story.

16:20 – I show the Actor Gamers around in our custom server in Minecraft and explain:

- PvE (Player Vs Environment) unless instructed to PvP (Player Vs Player); no trolling, griefing or troublemaking. There is almost nothing you can do to »ruin the performance« if you play by the rules.
- Three commands I will whisper while we are playing, along with hand gestures: »Freeze«, »Meet Up«, »Follow Marah«



The Game Master (top left) instructing the Actor Gamers in the hand gesture »Freeze«, indicating that they are to place their tablets in their laps and hold up their hands. Photo from pre-performance backstage workshop. (Riksteatret, 2025)

- Game-specific rules – if you die, respawn immediately, don't wait. Never relog without asking Game Master first. Do not sleep in beds – they are for show purposes only.
- 16:40 – I give them their in-game task to be completed: »The One Chest Challenge«. All players are given a chest of building and crafting materials. All players have the same materials, and the same amount of materials. During the performance, the players are to craft all the gear needed to fight and defend themselves against mobs and other players, as well as build a structure of choice in the village.



Actor Gamer using oak wood to build a bridge between houses in the village. Pre-built house made of darker spruce wood also visible (far right). The One Chest Challenge task was designed to give the Actor Gamers an extra creative challenge for the down time between scenes and another opportunity to have a real-life effect on the play: the other actors and the audience could see what the Actor Gamers built in the village. My choice in building materials for the »One Chest Challenge« contrasted the materials otherwise used in the village buildings, thus giving audience members (especially the trained eye of those familiar with Minecraft) yet another opportunity to take in and sense the Actor Gamers acting in real time. (Riksteatret, 2025)



Smiley face created by an Actor Gamer during a performance (Riksteatret, 2025)



Redstone railway with redstone lamps (Riksteatret, 2025)



A bridge between two characters' houses in the village (Riksteatret, 2025)

16:50-17:30 – Speed run. All players are given a tablet and we perform a speed run of all the scenes in the play in Minecraft. They are familiarized with the arc of the play, the different locations on the server, and what tasks are expected of them in the different scenes.

17:30 – The Actor Gamers ceremonially receive their Actor Gamer hoodies and are escorted on stage by the stage manager. I quickly cast all players after assessing them throughout the workshop. The avatar roles are Emmy, KimSalabim, UmarMrNoofy,

LucasCrazyBanana, LeahWtfIdk and IdaEliseChihiro. I join them on stage. The other actors join us and we all greet each other. We then rehearse the start of the play and the curtain call with the Actor Gamers.

17:45 – bathroom break, talk Actor Gamers through tasks to be completed in Act 1

18:00-19:00 – Act 1

19:00-19:20 – intermission. Use intermission to check in with Actor Gamers, bathroom break, and talk through tasks to be performed in Act 2

19:20-20:00 – Act 2, curtain call

Performance: All Elements in Action

During the performance, the Actor Gamers were drawing upon their knowledge as gamers. My fellow actors were drawing upon their experience as actors. An elaborate network of rhizomatic connections needed to be crafted anew for each performance to facilitate all these elements coming together. In the execution of my role as Game Master I drew upon my own experience as an actor, gamer and pedagogue all at the same time, functioning as the bridge between the world on stage and the world in *Minecraft*. In this section, I will present an example from the play and attempt to unpack the layers that came into action for that short, seemingly simple moment.

Below follows a translated example from scene 7/B. In *Minecraft*, Vegard gets lost inside the dark fortress maze for the first time and encounters monsters and players while inside. Text in *boldcursive* is my own rehearsal notes, hand-written descriptions of actions that must be performed by the Game Master in-game at exactly the right moment.

Fly invisible from the village to the maze.

VEGARD: – I can hear lava... This place is dangerous.

(He rounds a corner and suddenly at the end of a corridor he sees several skeletons, zombies and spiders.)

Hover above monster corridor. Check difficulty EASY. Spawn monsters in corridor, immediately fly down to drop hole.

VEGARD: – Oh, no no no!

(He places blocks in the corridor, blocking himself off from the mobs and leaving himself safe.)

VEGARD: – What should I do now? Maybe I should just go back where I came from.

(He tries to find his way back, but all the corridors are so similar that it's impossible to tell where he needs to go.)

VEGARD: – Okay... It looks like I'm lost. This isn't fun. What – what's this?

(He arrives at a dead end with a hole in the ground. The hole is so deep that he can't see the bottom.)

Teleport player IdaEliseChihiro to me – right behind Vegard by drop hole.

(He turns around to go back, but suddenly IdaEliseChihiro is standing right in front of him. On stage, Vegard jumps. He hurries to put his headset back on. On screen: IdaEliseChihiro takes a step closer to him.)

IDA ELISE: (Her voice dark and twisted) – Why did you destroy everything?

VEGARD: – *I didn't mean to destroy anything. I was just trying to clear space so I could build next to you.*

IDA ELISE: *(Her voice dark and twisted) – You don't belong here.*

(On screen: IdaEliseChihiro pushes Vegard into the hole.)

If player doesn't hit Vegard – step forward and hit Vegard. Immediately teleport player IdaEliseChihiro back to village (they can't follow Vegard into the hole).

(Gjerløw & Dalsbø, 2024)

The layer not visible in the example above is my physical presence onstage with the Actor Gamers. I was whispering commands to the Actor Gamer playing IdaEliseChihiro, preparing them for the moment they were to be teleported, reminding them of the task required, and making sure they did not follow Vegard into the hole after striking him in-game.

In this particular performance, the Actor Gamer moved their avatar backwards after being teleported and thus had trouble striking Vegard. I had to reach over to their tablet and move the character within striking distance myself. Analysis of this moment highlights the omnipresence required in the role of the Game Master:

The »actor brain« is present in the scene, maintaining a sense of timing and tempo

The »gamer brain« is watching the screen, anticipating the moment and intuitively ensuring the Actor Gamer is teleported within striking distance of Vegard in-game

The »pedagogue brain« is keeping an eye on the Actor Gamer in the physical space, facilitating the child's contribution



Image from inside the deck during performance – The Game Master (top left), seen reaching over to the Actor Gamer's tablet to assist their avatar in moving within striking distance of Vegard's avatar in-game. (Riksteatret, 2025)



Upstage projection showing avatar *IdaEliseChihiro* suddenly appearing behind *Vegard* in-game. (Riksteatret, 2025)

Another element not immediately discernible from the above example is how the Actor Gamer's in-game actions affected the real-life actions of the other actors on stage. When I teleported the Actor Gamer in *Minecraft*, the real actor playing Vegard started and made a noise in the physical space. When *IdaEliseChihiro* struck Vegard and he fell in the hole in-game, the real actor once again reacted to the push on stage with fright and anger.

The task given to the Actor Gamer playing *IdaEliseChihiro* was not foreign to the player – we had already covered this scene in the pre-show workshop. As a gamer familiar with *Minecraft*, the child already possessed the necessary understanding of the terms »teleporting«, »no items in your hotbar« and »be careful—we will be in survival mode and on easy difficulty«.

This moment in the play illustrates one of many moments where the actions performed by the Actor Gamers in-game physically affected the performance happening on stage. The Actor Gamers could both see, hear and feel their in-game actions having real-life impacts on the performance.

Post-Performance Reflections and Conclusion

Journaling on my experience as Game Master over the 108 performances I did with *The Dark Fortress* has aided me in retaining invaluable impressions and observations. The journal entry from April 14th 2025 below is a post-performance note describing the observed impact of the play on audience members:

»Had another opportunity to be in the foyer after the performance tonight. The local newspaper interviewed the Actor Gamers and I, and I stayed behind in the foyer for a time to observe. I am beginning to see similarities between the different venues indicative of our performance's impact on the Actor Gamers and the audience. Repeated observations

- *The appreciation and reverence received by the newly graduated Actor Gamers in their crisp, black hoodies. Their body language has changed noticeably since their first entrance to the theatre space – they are open, smiling, taking longer strides. They are gesticulating and explaining excitedly to the people around them about their experiences. »This is the greatest experience of my entire life«, one Actor Gamer was overheard saying to a family member.*
- *The young audience members with Minecraft merchandise and wearing Minecraft clothing, attired as if they were attending their favorite band in concert.*
- *Children reversing the entire post-performance dynamic as audience members; it is not the adults asking the children if they enjoyed the show or if they can reflect on the deeper themes in the play. It is the children themselves excitedly explaining to the adults how symbols, actions and elements in Minecraft affected Vegard's story – the children have taken the lead in helping the adults understand our performance on a deeper level«.*

(Reflection journal 14.04.2025)

I chose to include this specific entry as it is a concise description of my experience in theatre foyers all over the country. The performance was seemingly speaking to its target audience and the Actor Gamers gained confidence and renown in their local communities based on their ability to play, create and act in *Minecraft*. As later summarized by an employee at one of the tour venues; »It was amazing to see groups of 10-to-14-year-old boys coming to the theatre on an evening in May, with their fathers tagging along. That does not happen often. « (B. Kolset Apenes, personal communication, May, 2025). In this article, I have attempted to explore and exemplify how my role as Game Master in *The Dark Fortress* has impacted young audience members and handed creative agency to our Actor Gamers within the performance framework of live theatre. *The Dark Fortress* suggests that interactive theatre for and with children and youths has much to gain by recognizing them as creators also in digital space. The role of the Game Master emerged not as a novelty, but as a necessity—a hybrid mediator fluent in *Minecraft* logic, acting in theatre and didactics. In bridging *Minecraft* and theatre, we invited young gamers to co-create meaning in real time, speaking their own language. In the end, it was not I who led the Actor Gamers from the realm of *Minecraft* into theatre, but rather the Actor Gamers and their peers in the audience who expanded our understanding of performance by bringing us into their cultural domain—a world where creativity, collaboration, and courage are just as present in digital environments as in the traditional architecture of live theatre.

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Biografi

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