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Opening up openings: Zooming in on improvisation in the Theater of Home

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative analysis of the opening section of an online improvisation session. The session, which was organized by the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, included an international group of musicians. It took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic where the participants were experiencing lockdown conditions. Phenomenological reflexive analysis and video elicitation techniques were utilized to develop a number of key themes related to the multimodal improvisation strategies identified as emergent in the session. The results highlight how technical, physical, and psychological constraints of online practice can facilitate new creative insights and approaches to improvisation. Particular emphasis is placed upon how an improvisation begins and the role of distributed and collaborative creativity within the overall process. The importance of the domestic environment, what we term *The Theater of Home*, is central to these new ideas, as is how particular scenarios/items function as psychological and creative *boundary objects*. The spontaneous multimodal integration of text, visual, and audio material within the domestic and virtual environment can be seen to support a new type of creative collaboration and one that draws out features of social improvisation.

Keywords

improvisation, online, starting, creative environment, analysis, ideas, collaboration, Theater of Home

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Social distancing measures put in place around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic led to long periods of isolation for many. Musicians,[1] like other professionals, were unable to meet and consequently faced the dual challenge of social isolation and economic insecurity (Carlson et al., 2021; Spiro et al., 2021). One project[2] that sought to tackle these specific challenges was developed by the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (GIO). It was initiated in March 2020 with musicians meeting online to maintain community and create new ways of working together. GIO is a large ensemble using improvisation to explore new work. In a recent paper, MacDonald et al. (2021) presented evidence that these sessions produced psychological benefits (enhanced mood, well-being, and sense of community) and significant creative developments in terms of new artistic practices facilitated by a move to online working. This article investigates some new artistic practices these online improvisations have afforded. We focus on how virtual improvising using Zoom software produces a unique creative environment (Zoomesphere), one that brings new understandings in the phenomenology of improvisation and specific insights relating to how studying improvisations speaks to the genesis of ideas and in relation to the concept of distributed creativity and its social/aesthetic consequences.

As discussed in previous work (MacDonald et al., 2021), the Theater of Home refers to how, unlike "in person," physically present activity, the online Zoomespheric "room" affords new possibilities for improvisation. These are linked to the visual display and audio features of Zoom. Because of the latency issue and because Zoom "selects" which audio input to prioritize, participants adapted by drawing the visual features of improvisation to the fore. As the months together progressed, the group can be seen to have gradually discovered and increasingly tapped visual affordances. The Theater of Home thus evolved as a new set of practices, afforded explicitly by the Zoomesphere (the unique constellation of technical, social, and creative features present when collaborating using Zoom) built around new possibilities for sharing, creating, and disclosure. These practices involved blending features of the domestic environment with ongoing improvised creative works. Domestic resources, such as household objects from the kitchen or garden tools, and personal items (books, photos), but also partners, children and pets now often feature, hence the emphasis on home and domesticity. The Theater of Home also highlights participants' often implicit understandings of the sacred and profane, or special versus mundane, features of their domestic environments, and it highlights how, at a time of social distancing, participants seemed eager to share these things with others in a kind of communal "show and tell." This show and tell has since become a staple of the creative process. It has led to a key finding in our work so far, namely that the Zoom environment affords a co-"furnishing" (DeNora, 2013) of the virtual and increasingly multimedia space.

This "furnishing" involves how a process of showcasing participants' private lives becomes a basis for collaborative play and how a creative identity plays a part in what it means to improvise. That process can occur both during real-time improvisation and outside of any particular session, furnishing a collective pool of resources and strategies for future improvisations. It is, in short, a new multimedia modality, one that the happenstance of Zoom has uniquely afforded. It was only possible due to the "close up" views afforded by the camera eye, the individual screen, and the fact that participants were socially distant, initially indoors and inside their domestic spaces. To this end, we focus on one segment of one session by examining the decisions made during a 30-min improvisation and consider the implications for distributed creativity that this type of collaboration brings to the fore. Of particular interest is how innovative practices emerge in negotiating the technical, social, and creative affordances in this new way of working across media (art, music, language, and dance). Through these innovative practices, we investigate the genesis and germination, the genealogy of ideas in combination with musicians' identities and their individual and group narratives.

The uncertainty of how a free improvisation will start (and end) is a defining feature (Feige, 2017). It applies both to the improvisation as a whole and to improvised themes, passages, or moments within it. The study asks explicitly,

"How does the genealogy of the idea(s) that start an improvisation allow new types of contributions with which to 'furnish' an online (Zoom) space?"

This research intersects with many well-recognized themes in the field of improvisation studies (MacDonald & Wilson, 2020; Onsman & Burke, 2018) and other studies of real-time, ongoing and emergent interaction (e.g., conversation analysis; collaborative prototyping). It includes questions about how topics are negotiated and changed from within ongoing improvisation and how—within the Zoomespheric situation—visual and textual/verbal cues advance that work. The research also includes a focus on how participants maintain the "life" or a narrative of an ongoing improvisation, how they ensure that there is always something seeming to be said (continuation and sustaining), and how musicking in this online paradigm is a form of giving and receiving from both human beings and the machine that is bought together by the performance (Small, 1999). These questions allow us to consider how and why some topics or themes lend themselves to greater participation and are more easily sustained. This is also a question about where resources and materials for ongoing development come from. Furthermore, these questions point to how and why particular materials and themes are offered (introduced—initiated) at particular moments and by whom, which is a question about collaborative cultures and distributed creativity: how they are generated, developed, and sustained.

Methods

Musicians met weekly using Zoom software. Participants understood they could use any means available to engage artistically. Over 36 months, these sessions involved over 100 musicians from around the world, all experiencing situations of lockdown. All sessions were recorded and subsequently edited for inclusion in festivals and online events. This piece under examination, outlined below, was selected for four specific reasons:

Firstly, four of the five authors (R. L. B., M. S. D., R. B., and R. M.) were participants in the GIO session, resulting in their memories and reflection (Burke & Onsman, 2017) of interactive decision-making, providing a resource that could be explored and used to contextualize data analysis. The fifth researcher, E, was not present at the time and, therefore, could pose questions to the other four about process and creative moves in the emergent passages. We discuss this strategy below.

Second, this session was chosen because of its particular and overarching organizational strategy: On this occasion, it was agreed (by members of GIO) that ideas would be proposed in the Zoom "chat" facility and then acted upon by participants. The proposal, suggested by Author M. S. D. was,

> Use the chat function on Zoom and send directions to each other during the improvisation. You can be specific to people, or anyone can give instructions to the group, anything you want, you can tell individuals to do something, or whatever, everyone is involved.

So, for example, a member would type in something like "all sing or play together" or "Beatles' Song" and all members would then seek to render that idea in sound and/or image. This format allowed the performers to see ideas being proposed, negotiated, or modified in chat and being rendered, modified, and developed (or not) in the actual improvised session. Overall, the session

produced multilayered meanings and nuanced moments regarding the implications of live prompting in improvisation and the kinds of responses possible within this setting. Initial ideas were revised, developed, and often blended into each other as new "directions" proliferated and were taken up by different members at different times within any moment of the ongoing flow.

Third, this session was chosen because it presented a pivotal moment in the creative development of the ensemble's online sessions, which exposed the many multimodal (textual, sonic, visual) ideas that were possible to explore in the audio-visual realm, which are examples of shifts in improvisational practice that happened over a short space of time.

Finally, because we wished to consider the "furnishing" of the session in terms of sometimes split-second acts and creative choices, we needed to choose material amenable to this "slow" form of observation/analysis. A full recording of the session can be viewed at https://youtu.be/cliD0h847zg. This recording was used throughout our analysis and is referred to below.

After watching the full session repeatedly and independently, we held a collective meeting to determine sampling criteria and segments for further micro-analysis and transcription. In what follows, we report on one of four chosen segments. The criteria employed (recognizing that other criteria might yield different insights around matters such as group culture and interrelationships—we return to this matter in the discussion below) were the following:

(a) that the segment contained a topic or idea, suggested in chat, was sustained and developed and,

(b) that the segment contained moments, events, features, and/or strategies that held, sustained, or developed ongoing improvisatory processes and group focus on ways that, as it were, kept the balloon afloat, albeit were outside of traditional improvisational approaches usually implemented by the group.

To prepare for group analysis and write-up, each author watched the chosen four segments repeatedly. This initial process was guided by accounts in the methods literature of phenomenological reflexive analysis Finlay (2011), and with descriptions of empathic resonance with data in ways that led us, initially as individuals and later collectively to "linger" over, that seemed to speak to us as individuals—for varied reasons.

In addition, we sought to tap the involvement of the four of us who were party to this session—informed by van Manen's (2023) notion of hermeneutic phenomenological method of drawing the resonances that particular moments or actions in the session held for its participants through interpreting actions. To this end, we employed two forms of "interview." First, Author T. D. (the non-participant at the time of this recording who later joined the group and is now familiar with its members and practices) "interviewed" the other researchers around the recall of how they came to do a particular thing or employ a material at certain times in the segments (e.g., Author R. M. "How did you come to pick up that [e.g., pack of cards, miniature bagpipe] here?" or Author M. S. D. "How did you come to have an image of Frida Kahlo there at that time?"). Second, the research group watched the segments together using an informal version of video elicitation techniques (VET).

VET employs video footage of an actual past event as a prompt to elicit participant commentary. This method, though time-intensive, is useful for eliciting the "inside" of action because participants often "relive" the event while watching it replayed on video. Prompted by the video, they are often more easily able to retrieve their original associated feelings, thoughts, and orientations experienced at the time of the activity, and with heightened and spontaneous reflexivity (Henry & Fetters, 2012; Jarret & Lu, 2016; Paskins et al., 2017). VET can, when used with

care, enable some of the participants' "inner" experiences during an event to be relayed to an interviewer without the need for explicit prompting or questioning (which carries risks of leading the participant to re-remember events and to depict experience in terms that may not be ecologically valid because they formulate experience in relation to terms provided by the interviewer rather than by participants themselves) allowed us to integrate interview data with real-time video data of the session. This is not to overstate the capabilities of VET, since recall is never "pure" or perfect, but always, to some degree, is culturally and situationally mediated.

Results

How an improvisation begins is important because beginnings set up frames, resources, moods, identities and potential roles, and—in general—because players may refer back to things that happened earlier in a session or previous session, they invoke prior histories of improvisation for the present work-in-progress. The conventions of beginnings also vary according to genre. For example, Berliner (1994) and Monson (2009) have observed that, within jazz improvisation history, starting points are mostly formulaic and orchestrated conventionally; most typically, the drummer and bass player initiate proceedings. In jazz improvisation, in other words, beginnings involve conventionally designated roles. Becker (2000) calls these roles, "agreements" which he defines as practices that "keep some things fixed and vary others made it possible for a group to sound like it knew, collectively, what it was doing: . . . to have some idea of what might be coming next, to interpret what the others did as hints of a direction the collective effort might take" (p. 173).

The GIO segment on beginnings we have chosen for analysis exhibits both similarities and differences with the jazz improvisation tradition, a product of both the open form of free improvised practices of a group primed to explore at the margins of genre descriptors and due to the novel setting of networked music production. Similar to an improvised jazz setting, there is a reliance on gesture and banter, a certain amount of leadership, and instruction as orientational devices for reaching the kind of agreement and choices made that will underpin the generation of an idea. Nevertheless, unlike jazz improvisation, there is, in the case of GIO in the Zoomesphere, an open-endedness that is afforded by the Theater of Home, the visual, Zoom's acoustical structures and effects, and the GIO online ethic (agreement) of fully inclusive sound and noise. There is also an unspoken agreement that the improvisation can start at any point, notwithstanding some light touch instructions (duration, group sizes, occasional guides re: type of material). We now "Zoom in" at the start of the session, which totals 2:02 min of the entire improvisation of 36:20 min.

Start number 1: "have we started yet"?

During the VET or, "watch party" as we called it informally, Author R. M. began by noting that the start of most improvised music is characterized by a strong historical, "ceremonial" approach where, generally, there is an agreement from the musicians to a starting point that is followed by a moment of silence before sounds are produced. In this instance, there is a new type of liberalism at the start of the improvisation, a kind of implicit understanding that "anything goes" given the wide range of potential choices that the musicians have available within the Theater of Home. The session begins, in time, with an initial period of tuning in. Author R. M, as convenor, is using a particular manner of talking to explain that we will be improvising based on instructions we—all of us—choose to type into the chat function. The process of adding directions and comments in chat to guide the improvisation is a new experience for GIO and

so that manner that displays a kind of both agreement to directions and tentativeness (for example, he repeated words, deliberately hesitates, and interrupts himself, to signal a desire for not being seen to be overly directive, and for allowing space in case others wish to interject). "There is a lot of back chat, a lot of 'OK's. These are both spoken and in chat, and they are accompanied by jokes from Author R. M. e.g., 'go away'"). This "tuning in" seems to come to a natural closing point right after Author R. M. (who was convening the session) says (less tentatively): "But use the chat . . . does that sound ok?" to which Rob (performer) replies and effects closure in by saying, louder, and firmly, "sounds good" (time there is 4 s).

Two seconds pass. Then, at 6 s, there is a sense of inertia, and then 18 s in, Author R. L. B. says, "Are we starting?"

Author R. L. B.'s question is intended as a joke, and that it is a joke is reflected in the grin on his face. Other participants also grin. Author R. L. B. knows perfectly well that the improvisation has already begun and that the participants are quite comfortable with taking their time. In a sense, he is challenging the traditional conventions as starting points in music performance. In the video elicitation interview, Author R. L. B. describes the event:

> Author R. L. B.: As an improviser, I knew the improvisation had already started and that it was "a kind of a joke," "stating the obvious," and "a lot about improvisation is—just saying things and having the agency to say it". This is a very different experience for me—there is much more scope to improvise outside of my instrument—I can say and write things that trigger responses.

As a further consolidation of "the beginning," Maggie (performer), who sometimes takes on a matriarchal role in the improvisation, says, in a full, "cheerful" voice, "I love that we can get loads of instructions at one time makes a little laugh", "hehumng" and says, "I'm gonna do one" (in what might be perceived as a sort of jaunty and sporty tone and reinforcing to the group that this is going to be a positive experience). Maggie's commentary continues into the opening. Twenty-five seconds in, she says, "now how do I do that . . . find the keyboard" to which Rachel responds with one word, also in chat—"lovely" which endorses the activity so far. Maggie's verbal contribution raises the question again, namely, "have we started yet"? Is she taking on or developing the moment with the performers as they busily adjust their strings, chairs, reeds—check their volumes—finish their lunch, etc. Maggie's self-commentary adds to this starting point as a prep talk reaffirming her matriarchal role and, in a way, is an improvisatory prelude to the first main theme. For Maggie, these opening improvised, shepherding statements are part of her "improvisational toolkit": her way of creating tension before the release. They provide a kind of call to the ensemble to focus on the upcoming possibilities, much like a starter's gun for an athletics race, with the tension released when a new theme or possibilities are introduced. Enter the second beginning and the "meow."

Start number 2: riffing on a meow

Twenty-eight seconds in, Author M. S. D. types the word "meow." Initially, this word overlaps with Maggie's "find the keyboard" motif. In the video elicitation interview, Author R. M. says,

> The first meow, it's a more standard way of thinking, "oh, that's the start" you know there's something almost ceremonial about that first meow. You might way, oh, conventionally, that might be the starting point, but when Maggie says, "Oh, I'd love it if we'd get lots of instructions, there's a kind of performative aspect of that as well, and it's so Maggie to fold in the informal discussion into the performative . . . ."

And Author M. S. D. says,

> I think I thought it had already started but meow was another fun thing to add, to that thing that was already a fun start. Rather than, say, "play long notes" which would be too—severe for the, like, playful, social opening.

Here, Author M. S. D. points to how she was seeking to offer a topic (not an instruction but a topic) that would possibly facilitate collective agreement (necessary to get the improvisation off the ground and in full interactive swing but also open-ended enough to allow participants to specify how that topic could be configured). This "offering"—the meow—can be seen as a "generous" way of kicking off the piece. She is not seeking to configure or "tilt" the floor of the session toward any particular type of sound production that might be her specialty or what she might prefer to play but rather offers something that (importantly), in its very "silliness" allows for numerous, and contradictory appropriations—or indeed, could also be allowed to pass unnoticed (it does not). So here, Author M. S. D. is operating in a standard way—improvisers hold a deeply ingrained notion of the need for agreements, and this notion lies at the very heart of how musicians think when starting improvisations—but also in a novel way that opens out what counts as an opening-gambit in a session.

The gambit is adopted and developed. There is a brief period (roughly 7 s) where the participants seem to be settling in and processing the "meow." Then, Author R. M. repeats the word "meow" in a falsetto (playful? cooperative?) voice, and Author M. S. D. replies 1 s later with a conversational-sounding second meow.

The improvisation, and within it, the meow theme, now gains momentum as additional participants pick it up. Six seconds later, at 42 s into the piece, percussionist Stuart elaborates the (now) animal theme with a duck call. This (second) start has now been thematically defined; it is possible that Stuart's (performer) duck call can now be heard (and was heard by the three author-participants), not just a development, but as an ironising or self-parodying gesture, since the duck sound is on one hand clearly in keeping with "animal calls," but also, and go stereotypically, humorous, in a playful, vaudevillian sense. As such, it also undercuts any otherwise-possible seriousness that might have been attempted at this point. (It is worth noting that Stuart often takes on the role of "disrupter" in these sessions.)

The genesis of the meow theme possibly originated from a previous GIO session or could have been a part of Author M. S. D.'s Theater of Home, as B's cat had made previous appearances on her screen during improvisations. In addition, her cat could have been in her line of sight, which triggered the "meow": the genesis of a theme (more on this question in our discussion below). Nachmanovitch (2006) describes this as drawing on improvised activities in our daily lives, such as music that we have heard or "feelings that are present in our lives" which "coexist with the present moment of our real-time artistic creation, and they are available for us to draw upon" (p. 4). This idea is highly relevant in the Theater of Home, in the intersection of musical instruments, the affordances of Zoomesphere, the things in our rooms (and mental rooms), and how all of those things come to be braided with improvised activities in our lives, that is musical improvisation but, more broadly, our daily, and constant, social improvising. This braiding points to the moment of improvisation as the "zero hour" (DeNora, 2014, p. 20) of social action and interaction, the "temporal location . . . where realities are brought into being and into focus in ways that matter—to us . . . the sources of the self, the person, identity, relationship, even of individual sensation . . ."

It is important to note that not all players engage in the meows for various reasons; some are patiently waiting to play their instruments, or just listening to what happens (there is an ethos

of being able to just listen in GIO online—the [sound] space is only one component of the overarching contribution in Zoomisphere). But at 1 min 17 s, one of the pianists raises a stuffed toy cat to the camera. Stuart responds again, this time with noises made from a toy kazoo. The cat noises continue to develop. By this time, there have been over 30 meows interacting with different sonic textures when, and in contrast, a "woof" sound appears. This reinforces the idea that it is also possible to do something different that is generative and divergent and highlights intuitive strategies of an experimental ensemble in this unique improvisatory space, one that is also "hearing" and viewing what the others have been doing informing the temporality of the moment and future actions.

Meanwhile, Rachel (performer) types, "—OOOOOOOooooo kkkk k. Kkkk kkkk aaaaaai-yyyy," which is offered from within the role of observer but placed in the chat where directions for the composition are also placed. The "woof" is continued in different timbres. Up until this point, no instruments have been played. So far, all sounds are verbal.

As previously mentioned, not all participants are active at this stage, so silence is also important. Some may not feel comfortable making meow noises, some may not be, or want to be, the sort of musicians that are mimics and indeed, within GIO there is an ethic or agreement, in general, of not copying ideas but doing something different. Indeed, there is a kind of comfort within GIO in the silence: a sort of certainty within uncertainty and a sense of just being, knowing that something will emerge. This often happens and they are quite beautiful (and typically collectively acknowledged) moments—silence and trust knowing that even if you don't have a sound to make right now, somebody will very soon and the silence of the moment is still beautiful and is integral to both the tension and release and the orchestration of the improvisation. This valuing of silence is connected to a second GIO value—the notion of adding to the momentum or "growth" (Burke, 2021) of the idea and the general improviser aesthetic/ethic and values within GIO about not wanting to mimic unless you do it deliberately. At the same time, there is, for the moment, a meow consensus. If not for much longer . . .

Discussion

Where do motifs come from?

We hope that by now it will be obvious that the question of "how many starts were there" or "which one was the real beginning" is, while possibly of great interest to members as part of their various attempts to define situations and values, of less interest analytically because any attempt to draw a boundary between "before we started" and "now we've really started" is artificial. Matters linked to "the start" may extend far back in time from the previous improvisations that day, or "before" people even gather for a session. Some improvising musicians "see" music from a large dimension (Burke, 2021) through years of experiencing and listening to improvisation based on the intersection of composition and improvisation. In a sense, the large dimension view brings an element of the composer to the improvisation where the improviser is not only focussed on that improvised moment but is put into the context of a broader picture of the improvisation. Seminal jazz pianist Fred Hersch describes this as "it's like you've got a third ear that oversees the whole business" (in Berliner, 1994, p. 207). The in-the-moment improvisation is also informed by what Sarath describes as a "temporal projection" where that moment is "conceived from any moment in a work to past and future time coordinates." Sarath (1996) adds that "[h]eightened consciousness is characterized by experiencing the present both as a localized point in a past-present-future sequence and as an overarching span, in which the sense of past-present-future is subsumed within an eternal sense of presence" (p. 1).

We explore this set of thoughts in relation to the "second" start described above—the "meow," in particular considering the question of how it came to be proposed as a theme and what insights consideration of that question reveals for the broader topic of distributed creativity and—from there—aesthetic/social consequences of the Theater of Home.

That historical dimension in turn lets us consider how in any given session we can speak about a narrative "backstory" for each action or act of "furnishing." We know from previous literature (Hargreaves, 2012; Pressing, 1984, 1987) that improvisers subliminally assess/understand the origins of sounds and ideas/learnings from the performers that they are playing that Pressing describes as a part of "cognitive formulation." Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (1974) describes this phenomenon as involving a composition–improvisation relationship where "special techniques whose frequent occurrence in improvisatory styles is characteristic" (p. 10). The Theater of Home extends Nettl's narrative in the sense that the motif extends beyond the learning of the musician's musical expertise on their instrument. In this case, the arc of an impulse that leads to the "offering" of a topic, such as the "meow" extends beyond what can be observed in the session, on the video, or perhaps even in the interview about the session. The "meow" is a case in point and a useful one since it followed a sequence of activities linked to the development of a theme—animal sounds. But what it raises are issues that are of interest to all researchers who focus on the question of where cultural actions originate, the genesis of a meaningful act—where it comes from and how it is produced as meaningful in context. This question draws together cultural sociology, anthropology, social psychology, sociolinguistics, and, of course, performance studies.

The term "boundary object" is useful here—in other words, an object or practice that can maintain different meanings in different social worlds and yet retain enough common structure to be recognizable across individuals and sites (see DeNora, 2014, pp. 89–90; Star & Griesemer, 1989). In addition, boundary objects are things that are bounded or clear enough to hold the sense of shared meaning but also permeable and ambiguous enough to allow for different interpretations and appropriations, especially in the case of enhancing an idea (Fox, 2011). The "meow" is a case in point of such an object; it acts within a point in the temporal flux in a way that allows the whole ensemble to attend to it. It is a familiar sound that not only has domestic or wider-world associations for participants but also local, GIO associations from previous sessions. And because it was meaningful and familiar as a theme, participants could resonate and enjoy the theme even when not actively contributing. The meow, as a boundary object, then also became a shared representation (Bergman et al., 2007) with the literal meaning of association with the cat being transformed by the ensemble's collective improvisation and additionally, the experience informing future improvisations.

An example, as noted by Author R. L. B. is that even though he was not verbally meowing, he was fully engaged in the improvisation at that point. He was smiling at the humor in the idea and reflectively drawing on his memories of cat sounds concerning the evolving mutation of meow sounds—so his participation may not have been immediately visible to others but was nonetheless engaged. This important type of "silent" yet supportive improvisational gesture has been highlighted as crucial in creative collaborative work (Wilson et al, 2012) and in mundane conversation where prosodic features, gestures, and "small talk" (which is often and by no means "small") are routinely used to promote what Goffman (2006) speaks of as a "working consensus" and to further relational proceedings (Coupland et al., 1992). In part, Author R. M. was smiling because, in this still relatively early session of online musicking, a move such as the meow was novel, and slightly surreal, or at least humorous, and it opened up new territory and possibilities for future improvisational topics, themes, and style (in terms also of what could count as a legitimate move). So, Author R. M. was liminally involved and

liminally supported the meow theme, part of, perhaps, the "back up" for the continuing development—to keep the idea afloat. Perhaps most importantly, the meow created, or "gave permission for" new experiences, styles, and personae in GIO interactions—it had social/aesthetic consequences. In particular, it advanced the aesthetics, ethics, and practice of the Theater of Home. And as such it also highlights how any given session plays a role in offering possibilities and lines of action for performers; it highlights the historical or longitudinal dimension implicit in any one improvisation.

We believe in this case that the "meow" and how it happens as a boundary object can be considered a portal: that is a passage between the multiple possible creative spaces within the Theater of Home. In particular, as we have described, it opens up "permission," early on in GIO's history, for the Theater of Home to be deployed and developed as a new and shared distributed creative practice. As such, it was a key moment in GIO's own collective, collaborative culture, a move that furnished the GIO Zoomesphere not only with cats and other animals but with a new convention and new set of potential practices of show/tell in musical improvisation. Music improvisation within GIO, in other words, was more firmly braided into social improvisation. Thus, the genesis and development of the meow, as a topic is itself a portal into the broader question of the interrelationship between distributive creativity, the historically imbued individual act, and the aesthetic/social consequences of the Theater of Home.

Conclusion

This article has considered the creative insights that are emerging from online improvising. Specifically, we have described how the constraints of online practice afford new formats for improvisation, notably through the spontaneous generation of new ideas as they are negotiated, moment-to-moment between participants. We have explored these features in relation to the opening minutes of a piece to highlight how ideas and temporal structures such as the "start" of the piece and the production of an opening are opened up to new understandings of what can happen in collective free improvisation, musicking and in particular the concept of Theater of Home and the sharing of features from participants everyday lives, and domestic environments. Within this way of working, the deployment of materials that function as boundary objects allows for inherent flexibility for the generation and sustainability of new ideas within improvisatory frameworks. We conclude that the specific constraints imposed by the online format (physical distancing, technical limitations, etc.) not only reduce the possibility of conventional musical interaction but also provide opportunities for new practices to emerge—new socio-creative structures and posthuman creative practices proposing examples of new futures for distributed creativities in digitally enhanced and globally connected artistic practices. Thus, the spontaneous multimodal integration of text, visual, and audio material within the domestic and virtual environment can be seen to support a new type of creative collaboration and one that draws out features of new notions of the social that are possible to explore in improvisation. Our future work will explore in more detail how the development of ideas is facilitated within this unique collaborative creative environment.

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Notes

1. The concept of musicians is professional in the sense that they are either independent artists, working at institutions in the field of music or studying at music institutions.
2. Historical practices of online music communities include the Second Life Orchestra and Telematic music.

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