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The Anti-Immersive Theatre of Role-Playing Games

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Abstract

This paper examines anti-immersive theatrical aesthetics (Brechtian epic theatre, Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed) in relation to the game play experience of tabletop role-playing games. In contrast to claims that immersion is the basis for a meaningful experience of interactive narrative in an interactive entertainment medium, this paper argues that a role-playing game aesthetic based on anti-immersive defamiliarization offers role-players a meaningful game play experience with additional critical possibilities and more favorable ideological implications.

Introduction – Immersion and its Consequences

Non-digital tabletop role-playing games offer a distinct play experience from their digital counterparts, though the grounds for this distinction are neither obvious nor clear. This is a distinction that is not exclusive to role-playing games as a genre, and the question of what separates the respective experiences of analog and digital play can be asked about any game that has been adapted for both types of play. Janet Murray offered one early interdisciplinary answer. in her seminal work on interactive narrative and the potential of digital media to deliver and expand on the interactive narrative form, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Murray argued that digital media offered a more immersive experience of a fictional world, and with that, a more meaningful experience of the narrative that underpins the events in that take place in that world:

> [t]he dungeon [in *Zork* (Infocom: 1980)] itself has an objective reality that is much more
> concrete than, for instance, the jail on the Monopoly board or a dungeon in a tabletop game
> of *Dungeons and Dragons* [(TSR: 1974)] – or even a dungeon in a live-action role-playing
> game – because the words on the screen are as transparent as a book. That is, the player is
> not looking at a game board and game pieces or at a *Dungeons and Dragons* game master
> who is also in his or her algebra class or at a college classroom or campsite in the real
> world. The computer screen is displaying a story that is also a place. The slamming of a
> dungeon door behind you (whether the dungeon is described by words or images) is a
> moment of experiential drama that is only possible in a digital environment. (Murray,
> 1997, p.82)

Immersion, for Murray, is metaphorically analogous to the physical experience of being submerged in water, and is defined by her as: "[t]he experience of being transported to an

elaborately simulated place [...] the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different from water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus." (98) The idea here is that the absence of such distractions as places (a classroom or campsite), people (a game master who is in your algebra class) or physical game apparatus (a game board and game pieces) that refer to the fictional world rendered by the game but are not of that world allows for this sensation of being surrounded by another reality. The presence of such distractions, by contrast, ground us in the world of everyday social reality rather than the game-world. In such a position, Murray argues, we would not be able to experience moments of experiential drama with the degree of immediacy that digital environments would provide – without those distractions to ground us in the everyday social world, we would immediately experience the game-world, leading to a more meaningful experience of interactive narrative and by extension, game play.

This definition of immersion is not without its problems. With immersion cutting off the participant's grounding in the social world, there would be no distance from which to address the immersive experience critically. More recent research on immersion, following Brown and Cairns (2004), has tended to split immersion into three progressively more immersive experiences; engagement (the player invests time and effort into the game), engrossment (the player becomes emotionally involved in the game), and total immersion (the player feels/becomes present exclusively in the game world). Engagement and engrossment do not suffer from the problem of a lack of critical distance, but this problem still remains with respect to total immersion, which is seen as the end-goal of the design of immersive environments. The concern here is that consumers of immersive media would be susceptible to the ideological content of the media's programming without having the distance to engage critically with it. In

spite of the interactivity that the game medium affords, the player's experience would still be largely passive in relation to the game's ideological content.

This paper examines role-playing games as a performance medium. It argues that like with theatre, a role-playing game aesthetic based on participatory interactivity (as per Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed) and anti-immersive defamiliarization (as per Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre) offers role-players opportunities for meaningful game experiences without recourse to immersion. These game play experiences would be political, with different and more favorable ideological implications than those they would find in immersive digital role-playing games.

I place an emphasis on 'immersive' in the previous sentence. This paper does not echo Peggy Phelan's assertion that live performance has a greater capacity for being political, critical or oppositional as a feature of its ontology. (Phelan, 1993. p. 146) Anti-immersive media aesthetics, I argue, allow for such a capacity regardless of the type of medium, but these can simply be more easily implemented in live media at the present time.

Role-Playing Games as Performances

Jane McGonigal argues that "all game play is performance." (McGonigal 2005, p. 1.) Games entail performance because the players do not act within the limits of the roles prescribed in their everyday experience. Play, as Huizinga characterizes it, is "not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own." (Huizinga, 1955. p. 8) In order to understand what is taking place in game play, players must adopt a new referential frame that takes into account the features of play that separate it from ordinary experience. These features include, as Caillois noted, separate spatial and temporal conventions governing the play activity, a set of inviolable rules outside of everyday behavioral codes that accompany it, and "a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as

against real life." (Caillois, 1961, p. 10) In a game of chess, for example, the spatial and temporal conventions and the rules of chess coincide in large part: the game is played on a board with squares arranged in an 8x8 grid. The squares are occupied by pieces that move in ways prescribed by the rules, and the game ends when certain conditions have been reached (a player is checkmated or stalemated, a player resigns, the players agree to draw the game, a player runs out of a pre-arranged amount of time to play his moves). These rules and conventions only apply when a game of chess is being played, and not in everyday life. The make-believe aspect of chess is fairly straightforward and not relevant to the way people would play a game of chess. It is a nod to the pretense of chess representing two kings maneuvering their armies in a winner-take-all battle on a level playing field.

Some types of games, however, are more performance-based than others. Role-playing games are a prominent example of this. Role-playing games involve the player taking on an additional role and referential frame to the player-role, namely the role of a character in the fictional game-world. (Fine, 1986; Mackay, 2001) The actions taken by the players in their respective character-roles affect the game-world as a setting as well as the plot of the game's narrative. Unlike chess, and most other games, the fictional setting presented in role-playing game play is central to the game play experience.

The performance involved in role-playing games entails constant shifts from one of these three referential frames to another. These frames form the basis for the variety of interactions at play in the role-playing game, as well as determining what is being performed, and by which aspect of the participant who is always in a liminal state between person, player and character. Dennis Waskul notes:

[P]articipants play fantasy personas, and in more than one frame of reality; participants

bestow their characters with symbolic personas that are fashioned in the liminal boundaries

between fantasy action in a fantastic world of dragons, goblins, valiant swordsmen, sagely

wizards, and epic medieval warfare and interaction with other players. Although the

thematic setting will vary from one game to the next, this liminal condition is generic to all

fantasy role-playing games and obligates participants to actively negotiate distinctions

between persona, player and person. (Waskul, 2006, p. 20-21)

These liminal negotiations are fairly frequent and apparent. For example, in-character play in

the game-world frame (participants' character aspect) is often interrupted by the need to

adjudicate a situation by applying the game's rules to it. This involves a shift to the game-frame

(participants' player aspect), as the game rules are a part of that frame and not a part of the game-

world frame. After the rules are adjudicated, the players may return to character and the game-

world frame, or perhaps discuss something else in the social frame (participants' person/social

actor aspect) before returning to playing the game. These shifts are at odds with Murray's

concept of (total) immersion, as they frequently and temporarily remove the participant's

perceptions, thoughts, and actions from the game-world frame in which the participant would be

constantly immersed during the game.

Spect-actorship

There are some fairly major differences between role-playing games and traditional theatre,

perhaps the most significant of which being that role-playing games are *participatory* and

interactive. (Mackay, 2001. p. 4-5) It would be difficult to speak of there being spectators in the

traditional sense in a role-playing game. Unlike in theatre where there are actors and spectators

participating in the same event in different ways, during a role-playing game the group of actors is also the group of spectators for their own performances.

Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of political theatre that is predicated on using interactivity to bridge the gap between the actors and the spectators to foster social and political awareness and action. For Boal, the key to theatre is occupying both roles at once, in the theatre as well as in social life because we are always social actors and social observers:

> Xua-Xua looked for answers by looking at herself. In this moment, theatre was discovered. At that moment, she was at one and the same time, actor and spectator. She was spect-actor. In discovering theatre, the being became human. This is theatre – the art of looking at ourselves. (Boal, 2002. p. 15)

There are two forms of Theatre of the Oppressed that this concept of spect-actorship is essential to, namely Invisible Theatre and Forum Theatre.

Invisible Theatre is "public theatre which involves the public as participants without their knowing it." (Jackson, 2002. p. xxiii) The spectators can interact with the action of the performance, which usually consists of "an unexpected subversion of normal behaviour[,]" (Jackson, 2002. p. xxiii) in any number of ways – arguing with the actors or other spect-actors, a physical intervention into the scene et cetera. Typically, Invisible Theatre is geared toward provoking debate surrounding the subversive behaviour exhibited, a way to encourage social critique through a performance that the spect-actors are immediately experiencing (it being indistinguishable from everyday life), but with the possibility of critical distance maintained. Boal offers the example of an Invisible Theatre piece staged on a Paris subway car in which the company staged two successive incidents of sexual harassment on the train – one of a woman by a man, the second being the converse. The other passengers in the car intervened in the scene, which resulted in a lively debate over gender norms and perceptions.

Forum Theatre is different in a number of ways. Primarily, Forum Theatre is a game. The game is presided over by a figure called the Joker, who teaches the audience the rules and makes sure the game runs smoothly. (Jackson, 2002. p. xxiv) The backdrop for any Forum Theatre piece is that a social problem, typically involving relationships of oppression between a group of oppressors and an oppressed protagonist. A scene is played out in which the oppressors 'win'. The scene is then played again as before, but this second time members of the audience can shout "Stop!", take the place of the protagonist, and try to triumph over the oppressors. (Jackson, 2002. p. xxiv) The objective of any given Forum Theatre exercise is to empower the participants politically as well as to generate debate and discussion around the different ideas that the participants propose on-stage to deal with the scenario's problem.

Boal positions the experience of Forum Theatre as different from Aristotelian drama, where the audience remains firmly rooted in the theatrical frame of being spectators in order to experience *catharsis*, which occurs when the audience gets immersed in the events on stage and experiences an upwelling of "pity and fear [that] effect[s] the proper purgation of these emotions." (Aristotle, 1998. ¶ 4.1) The difference, Boal argues, is that

> When an *actor* carries out an act of liberation in a normal play where intervention by the audience is not allowed, he or she does it in place of the spectator, which event is thus, for the audience, a catharsis. But when a *spect-actor* occupies the stage and carries out the same act there, he or she does it in the name of all the other spectators, because they know that, if they don't agree, they themselves can take up the stage and show their opinion – and the event is thus for them not a *catharsis* but a *dynamisation*. (Boal, 2002. p. 25)

Boal's theatre allows the spectator the ability to control the play's content and how it is delivered as an analogy to their ability to control the conditions of the social world. If immersive aesthetics were operative in Boal's theatre, that sort of analogy would seem to collapse as the navigation of the theatrical scenario and world would take precedence over connecting it to something outside the fictional world.

Role-playing games resemble Forum Theatre scenarios in a number of ways. The Game Master takes on an informing and adjudicating role in a very similar way to the Boalian Joker. Role-players relate to the game in a similar way that Boalian spect-actors relate to a Forum Theatre piece: they occupy multiple referential frames in relation to the performance. Role-players and Boalian spect-actors maintain their position as social actors in the social frame, but also assume the positions of game/theatrical players in the theatrical game frame and of characters in the performative game-world frame. The mechanics of the games are fairly similar, with less emphasis on rules in Forum Theatre with one notable exception: Role-players typically have one fixed character each to embody and any number of Boalian spect-actors have just the one oppressed protagonist as an available role. The content of the story differs across these types of performances. The Theatre of the Oppressed is exclusively concerned with power relationships and oppression. While these may be significant themes in a role-playing game narrative, a game can just as easily have nothing to do with them.

Using the Theatre of the Oppressed as an aesthetic or a guide for role-playing gaming, role-players could have rich opportunities to make social and political interventions through their game play if the situations governing the game's story could be tied to social and political issues. Role-players, as they currently do, would negotiate the scenarios the game presents and the possible courses of action for their characters, in multiple frames – in character and out. These negotiations would open up a broader awareness of social and political issues.

One example from my own role-playing game experiences illustrates this, in spite of none of the people involved being aware of Boal's aesthetics at the time. In Montreal in the Spring of 2006, I was playing in a *Changeling: The Dreaming* game run by Luc Bougie.

As a very brief summary of *Changeling*'s overarching storyline, the game takes place in a world like our own, except populated by supernatural creatures as well as people. Changelings are fragile fae (as in Gaelic mythology) souls reborn into human bodies. Changelings are indistinguishable from humans except to other changelings and those enchanted to see their true forms, and they have an array of supernatural powers. A quirk of the rules and setting is that the fae aspect of changelings is empowered by experiences of awe and wonder and harmed by experiences of bleakness and the depressingly mundane.

In this game, I was playing a teenaged changeling named Lyle. An NPC changeling named Eva (played by Luc) was Lyle's love interest. A major point in the romantic subplot to the game's main story was that Eva lived with her abusive mortal family and was the target of so much abuse that it threatened to obliterate her fae aspect, leaving her just human. (How tragic!) Over the course of the game, one goal that I settled on for Lyle was to extricate Eva from that situation. Eva, on the other hand, loved her family in spite of the abuse and had resolved to stoically endure it as long as she could. One session of Luc's game saw an intense discussion between me (as Lyle) and fellow player Jon Keane (as his character, teen-aged changeling Andrew) about what the boundaries of appropriate conduct in such a situation are. This started in-character. For Lyle, the basic social and ethical problem was one of whether he should (as he perceived it) help someone he loved even if it was against her will, while also knowing that this was at best presumptuous on his part and unwanted on hers. This was further complicated by the supernatural consequences associated with the situation. As the discussion continued, it began to spill out of character more and more frequently – examples from our personal experiences were brought up, and direct personal address was used. Topics such as child abuse, legal emancipation, feminism, and gender roles in the social world were brought up in this discussion,

which never got resolved. Jon and I never reached a conclusion before the session ended or after the fact, and the game folded before the storyline reached a point where Lyle had to choose what to do. What this episode did make for was a wider debate of social issues through the role-playing game in both the social and the game-world frames. The game-world scenario reflected phenomena in the social world that the players were all familiar with (if only in the abstract). This enabled us to relate the scenario to the social world and facilitated a critical discussion and examination of this set of social and ethical issues. The situation was never resolved, denying me or the rest of the group any sort of *catharsis*, but we had a dynamisation instead.

Brechtian Epic Theatre and Alienation Effects

While Aristotle positions *catharsis* as delivering a psychological and spiritual corrective to theatrical spectators by way or purging excesses of negative emotions, it can also be argued that *catharsis* can serve as an ideological corrective. In that line of argument, *catharsis* functions as an Althusserian ideological state apparatus would, interpellating the immersed spectators and imposing values upon them. (Althusser, 2001. p. 115-20, 123) Given that "[immersion] is characterized by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increased emotional involvement in what is happening[,]" (Grau, 2003. p.13) these values would be imposed at a moment when the spectators would be least able to engage critically with them. How problematic this is depends on the value being presented – we may not object to the affirmation of a normative value like "cold-blooded murder is bad," though we may take more issue with "you are free to do as we tell you."

It was this sort of concern that motivated Bertolt Brecht's break from Aristotelian dramatic aesthetics and spurred him into developing his own dramatic aesthetic (epic theatre) based on

anti-immersive principles to foster critical involvement on the part of the spectators. The objective of Brechtian epic theatre is,

> [i]n short, [to give] the spectator the chance to criticize human behaviour from a social point of view, [with] the scene played as a piece of history. The idea is that the spectator should be put in a position where he can make comparisons about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave. (Brecht, 2001. p.86)

Brecht views the immersion that occurs in Aristotelian drama as total and shutting out critical engagements. The spectator would be unable to view the events from a social point of view (a social frame of spectator as social actor) because immersion would sweep the spectator into a theatrical point of view (a theatrical frame of spectator as spectator and not as social actor). He would be present in the play's world:

> In Aristotelian drama the plot leads the hero into situations where he reveals his innermost being. All the incidents shown have the object of driving the hero into spiritual conflicts. […] The individual whose innermost being is thus driven into the open then of course begins to stand for Man with a capital M. Everyone (including every spectator) is then carried away by the momentum of the events portrayed, so that in a performance of *Oedipus* one has for all practical purposes an auditorium full of little Oedipuses, an auditorium full of Emperor Joneses for a performance of *The Emperor Jones*. (Brecht, 2001. p. 87)

In order to maintain critical distance, Brecht's theatre relies on the use of alienation effects (*verfremdungseffekt*) to create distance at critical points in the play's plot. Alienation effects consist of showing things that would ordinarily be taken for granted (particularly social relations) as unfamiliar objects that merit inquiry. When the objects we perceive are defamiliarized, argues

formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, perception (like spectatorship) becomes a conscious and engaged process:

> If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. […] The process of "algebraization," the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example – or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition […] And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*. (Shklovsky, 1965. p.11-12.)

Alienation effects force us to adopt this mode of perception which stands in contrast to our everyday, semiotic, representational perception of abstracted objects which shows us what an object represents, stands in for, or serves in terms of function. This stands in contrast to phenomenal perception, which lets us see objects as they are in spite of the representational codes surrounding them. Unlike phenomenologist critics of the theatre, such as Bert States, Brecht does not want to go around these representational codes to see objects as they are, but rather to see the representational codes themselves as they are (as social contrivances). Brechtian

perception would enable the spectator to see the social world as it is constructed and to struggle for political and social change, which is a large benefit for the cost of immersion.

The debate that Jon and I had during and after that session of *Changeling* seemed to exemplify parts of Brecht's aesthetics as well as seeming to stand in opposition to others. Some part of how Luc, in his capacity as game master, framed the scenario encouraged Jon and I to look deeply at it from a social point of view (out of character) rather than to take it for granted as a part of the storyline (viewing it only in character). My supposition is that Luc constructing the scenario by pairing a set of (sadly) everyday social issues with a supernatural theme was what made the scenario alien, difficult to take for granted and an object of inquiry. To help that discussion along, Luc also added to the out of character debate, asking for clarifications and suggesting counter-arguments at times, making it necessary for Jon and me to respond to different and at times unfamiliar perspectives. The in-character part of this discussion seems like something at odds with Brecht's aesthetics. Assuming that Jon and I got sufficiently involved in in-character play to feel as though present in the game-world (though given our shifts back and forth between in and out of character argument, that premise is debatable in itself) it would seem that we were doing something wrong from Brecht's point of view. I would argue that this was actually not the case because Brecht himself used immersive techniques as a way of setting up more impactful alienation effects to lead to social examination and critique. The recantation scene in Brecht's *Galileo* is an example of this: Galileo's companions await the result of Galileo's hearing with the Pope to find out whether he recanted his heliocentrism or not. When word of the recantation is late in coming back, the companions rejoice that he did not recant, drawing the audience into a similar emotional involvement with the on-stage action. This immersion is then reversed when the word comes that Galileo did recant, prompting emotional

dismay but also questioning as to why that was the case. (Brecht, 1966. p. 113-4) Luc employed a similar method in setting up this scene, and that it was justified from a Brechtian perspective by the argument and exploration of the social issues presented in the scene long after the game itself stopped running.

Conclusion – Engineering Criticality – Brechtian and Boalian Aesthetics as Game and Scenario Design Principles

As the example of this critical scene in the *Changeling* game showed, moments of enhanced critical awareness can be brought about in tabletop role-playing game play through the use (conscious or otherwise) of Brechtian and Boalian theatre aesthetics. There seem to be several preconditions for these moments occurring from social and design perspectives. Socially, the players need to be willing to go along with the exploration. The scene in *Changeling* could have just as easily not occurred had Jon and I decided that making these critical interventions would interfere with the game play and our enjoyment thereof. Setting up a situation that the participants will want to make social explorations of is partly a matter of artistry in crafting the scenarios in which these critical moments would occur.

Many digital games, role-playing games and otherwise, use alienation effects, but without the Brechtian connection to social and political issues. *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (Kojima, 2001) contains a prominent example of this in the "Fission Mailed" sequence. At this point in the game, an extremely jarring moment of alienation disrupts the fourth wall between the player and the game-world when the game begins to behave as if the player's avatar has just died. The game play screen shifts to one resembling the game over screen, but in lieu of a message of "Mission Failed" and a box in the top-left corner showing the cause of the avatar death, the message reads "Fission Mailed" and the game play continues in that box before reverting to the regular game

play screen about 20 seconds later. Designing critical game experiences based on alienation, in analog or digital milieux, would require these alienation effects to be linked to social and political phenomena. One obstacle to this and a subject worthy of further investigation in research on criticality in general is that there is a reluctance to mix the didactic and the entertaining in game design that is only beginning to be overcome. Far from being a mutually exclusive dichotomy, these two capabilities of entertainment media can be mixed, and should. As Sir Philip Sidney argued in his "Defense of Poesie" (1595), "Poesie therefore, is […] [a] speaking Picture, with this end to teach and delight." Brecht argues along these lines that "[t]heater remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse." (Brecht, 2001. p. 73)

Another part of involving the participants in social explorations as a result of game play is allowing the participants to alter the game experience in meaningful ways. In live role-playing games, this comes about through the participatory negotiations between the players and the authority on the fictional world, the game master. In digital games, by and large (with some multi-user dungeons providing exceptions), there is no viable method for this process of negotiation and feedback to take place because of the constraints of the game system and the technology used to render it. While live role-players can explore (in a Boalian fashion) the manifold possibilities of any scenario limited only by the imagination and quick-wittedness of their play group, digital role-players are also constrained by the coding of the game. While Eric Zimmerman argues that "constraints are the raw material out of which games are made," (Zimmerman, 2004) there is a distinction to be made here between the constraints provided by a game's rules and the constraints that are a feature of media technology. In order for digital role-

playing games to realize the same critical potential that live role-playing games have, these technological constraints would need to be eased.

This is a challenge that game designers are beginning to address in a number of ways. Gonzalo Frasca suggests a few possibilities to allow players to construct digital game experiences akin to live role-playing experiences in terms of critical engagement. Frasca suggests opening up a game's code to hacking and modding, as well as employing a participatory design process for small-scale games based on single Boalian scenarios. In effect, rather than making one game encompass these multiple perspectives, designers would make multiple iterations of smaller games that would encompass one point of view. (Frasca, 2001. p. 97-101) Extending any of Frasca's proposed design principles to large-scale commercial ventures is very difficult. The commercial viability of many of these productions depends on proprietary coding and delivering one developed product. Opening up the digital gameplay experience to enable these critical aesthetics to function is a difficult problem for game designers. While it would be difficult to predict how they would be able to design for this purpose, one thing is clear. With respect to delivering critical game experiences, game designers will need to look back to the theatre – be it the proscenium or the gaming table.

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